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The real scandal for Opus Dei and the church

by Nicole Sotelo

Is there a murderous Albino monk in Opus Dei? Hardly.

Are its basic members power-hungry radicals who seek control of the church? Not that I have met.

The scandal surrounding Opus Dei brought about by Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code* was an inaccurate, tall-tale representation of the prelature, or institute, whose members, like many Catholics, are drawn to dedicate their lives wholly to God. The real tragedy within Opus Dei, however, mirrors the scandal that pervades much of Catholicism today: its abusive treatment of young people.

Last week in France, a young woman came forward with a lawsuit against members of Opus Dei, alleging abuse of labor laws and practices that were psychologically and physically harmful while she served as a Numerary Assistant within Opus Dei.

She claims that she was forced to work from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week and, like many within Opus Dei, her salary was returned to the community. Beginning at the age of 14, she was encouraged to distance herself from her family for 15 years and during that time grew progressively ill.

In 2001, her parents intervened and helped her to recover after a doctor said she should not return to Opus Dei for the sake of her health.

The scandal is not just that one young woman experienced unjust labor practices disguised as a religious vocation, as tragic as that is, but that her story is not unique.

There were approximately 4,000 Numerary Assistants worldwide as of 2005, according to *Opus Dei: An objective look behind the myths and reality of the most controversial force in the Catholic Church* by NCR's John L. Allen, Jr.

Opus Dei's 1950 Constitutions term these members as "servants" and only later was the label replaced by the less controversial term "assistants," or "auxiliaries," when Opus Dei was named a personal prelature by the Vatican in 1982.

What's more, these Numerary Assistants comprise the least educated class within the hierarchy of the institute and hold little to no decision-making power within the ranks. Instead, they are to work in a spirit of "full submission," according to the Constitutions.

Perhaps not surprising to those who recognize the structural sin of sexism within Catholicism, equally reflected in the hierarchy of Opus Dei, Numerary Assistants -- those with the least power -- are only allowed to be women, most of whom were recruited when they were young.

These women begin their experience of Opus Dei starting when they are of high school or college-age by entering one of the prelature's "hospitality" training centers. It is in these centers that they are educated in the finer points of laundering, cleaning and cooking and go on to serve in Opus Dei residences or retreat centers.

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This would be dignified work if done in freedom and supported with a living wage, but as the lawsuit contends, this is not the case.

These training centers, often drawing women from economically and socially disadvantaged families, are located in numerous countries across the globe, ranging from Brazil to Ireland. The United States' training center is based in Chicago. While a few schools admit men, they are predominantly women-only or their student body is primarily female.

As this court case came to the attention of news media last week, the pope was visiting his native Germany. During a meeting with the Central Committee, a council of lay Catholics, Benedict claimed the greatest crisis in the Western Church today is a crisis of faith.

I believe, however, the real crisis for the church, including Opus Dei, is not that Catholics have abandoned the faith.

The real crisis is a lack of credibility in any structure of church leadership that is responsible for the cover-up and abuse of young people. As there should be, there is a lack of trust in a religious system that values secrecy over the well-being of its members, that values preservation of institutional power over the inherent dignity of its youngest adherents.

This is the greater scandal. This is the greater sin.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates www.WomenHealing.com. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.]

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