

# **Response to BBC World Service radio documentary “Seeking Justice from Opus Dei”**

Following the broadcast of the BBC's documentary Heart & Soul, on 25 October, in which former members of Opus Dei shared their experiences, we would like to offer some context around some of the social, institutional and personal issues discussed.

04/11/2024

We are very saddened to hear of Raquel and Adriana's experiences while they were in Opus Dei. Where it is true that we have failed them, today's organisation wishes to sincerely apologise and seeks their forgiveness.

Opus Dei is part of the Catholic Church and is composed of people who have a strong faith and a deep desire to do good for the greater wellbeing of society - but clearly as ordinary human beings we are not exempt from making mistakes, no matter how unintentional. We know we must be ready not only to apologise but, just as importantly, to do what we can to make amends. To this end, offices of healing and resolution have been established in every country where Opus Dei is

present, aimed at addressing any negative experiences that any current or former member may have encountered. Naturally, where recollections differ, in fairness to all involved, it is only right that allegations would be investigated and that we set the record straight.

Raquel describes two different aspects of her life. First as a student at Zunil School in Guatemala and second after choosing her vocation within the Catholic Church.

Zunil School is a non-profit educational initiative supervised by the country's state authorities. Through a scholarship system, this hospitality school provided hundreds of girls with the opportunity to continue their education instead of going directly into the workforce at a young age, something which was common at the time. It was designed as a force for good, furthering

education and providing meaningful prospects for students. In Raquel's case, attendance at Zunil School equipped and enabled her to later go on to university.

**Students at Zunil School were not workers.** As part of the curriculum, students had supervised practical sessions and work experience which allowed them to put into practice what they learnt in their classes. Given their age as in any similar educational institution, there was supervision regarding what students could watch on television or read, according to what in those days was considered appropriate for the age of the students. Both parents and pupils were aware of these school rules and, by choosing to attend Zunil School, freely accepted them. As an Opus Dei-inspired boarding school, families were considered very important and communication with parents was always a priority.

The second period Raquel describes concerns her later vocation.

Assistant numeraries are women in Opus Dei who, like all other members, aim to love God and others and demonstrate this through their work and daily lives. Assistant numeraries' chosen work is to care for people and the centres in which they live, within a family environment that Opus Dei is designed to provide. Raquel had an employment contract and her work was paid in accordance with the employment laws of her country (Guatemala). We are indeed very sorry to hear that Raquel now feels disillusioned about her years as an assistant numerary notwithstanding the fact that her work contributed directly to the wellbeing of many people and to the expansion of the apostolic and social work of Opus Dei in Guatemala. Many of those who lived and worked with her remember her with great affection

and recall many moments of laughter and fun and the shared experience of working for a great ideal. They would be very happy to reconnect with Raquel if ever and whenever she would like to do so.

With regard to Adriana's statements, we believe that specifically linking Opus Dei to the onset of mental health problems is speculation and does not reflect reality. Society as a whole has become increasingly aware of, and sensitive to, mental health disorders. This development has made it possible to better recognise, understand and support people facing these challenges and the situations that may trigger them. The reality in Opus Dei is no different from the rest of society. It is true that in the past mental health issues might not have been so readily recognised and hence there could have been delays in people receiving the help and support they required.

But in common with the rest of society there is now a much greater awareness and the support that can be given to people is likewise better.

As in any family or relationship of trust, it is not uncommon for people to ask for and receive advice on recommended specialists, but the person is always free to attend the medical practitioner of their choice. When a member of the Prelature accompanies someone to a consultation or for treatment, this is done with the sole purpose of offering support and companionship in a situation that many find stressful. Not unreasonably, the acquiring and taking of medication and, if necessary, scheduling follow-up appointments, are the responsibility of the patient and the attending professional - though if asked to assist we believe anyone in Opus Dei would do so.

More generally, **we completely refute the premise that membership of Opus Dei constitutes psychological abuse**, as has been unfairly alleged. This is to wholly misconstrue the true nature of the organisation and the freedom of choice to belong to it, and which all individuals have affirmed and reaffirmed up to seven times during the initial years of choosing their vocation. People ask to join Opus Dei of their own free will, and the minimum age for making a formal commitment is 18, after at least one and a half years of preparation and discernment. In Raquel's case, she was 19 years old. As for the reference to the so-called "unwritten practice" of admitting people from the age of 14 and a half, please see the explanation about junior candidates, who are not and cannot be members of Opus Dei.

There are many, many people who will attest to the truly positive and beneficial impact membership has had on their lives and who remain grateful for their experiences, whether they have chosen to continue within the institution or to leave.

Of course, we are truly saddened to hear of some individuals' negative experiences and invite anyone with concerns about past alleged misconduct to contact the safeguarding office in their country. Allegations are always taken seriously and followed up worldwide to ensure that personal conduct aligns with the culture and standards expected of Opus Dei, both now and in the future. We are open to listening to anything that can help us learn to better fulfill our mission in the Church and to resolve conflict where it exists.

With respect to the civil cases mentioned, we have confidence in the Irish and UK legal systems and welcome the opportunity to address the issues fully and transparently.

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