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“We respect their voices and we're listening. That's our number one priority right now”

Since 2017, Kathryn Plazek (Pittsburgh, 1988) has been one of eight women on the Central Advisory, the consultative body that works with the Prelate, Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, in the governance of Opus Dei. We spoke to her about some of the allegations made in the media by three women who had been part of the prelature.

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Kathryn's work focuses on the formation and promotion of activities for young people. She specialises in issues such as vocational discernment, child protection and the creation of a safe and trustworthy environment. We spoke to her about some of the allegations made in the media by three women who had been part of the prelature, about the protocol for dealing with institutional allegations, about the administration of Opus Dei, and about the vocation of assistant numerary.

From your position on the Central Advisory of Opus Dei, what is your view of the stories shared by some women in the Financial Times?

First of all, with regards to the women who, for a longer or a shorter period of their life, formed part of Opus Dei and have felt the need to express their negative experiences or their grievances in the article: we want them to know that we respect them, we respect their voices and we're listening. That's our number one priority right now.

That's why in the places where there have been former members who have come forward with their negative experiences with grievances, the prelature has launched special forums to be able to listen, to promote healing and to promote resolution.

Being open to listening, and not just being open, wanting to listen, doesn't mean, on the other hand, that we accept all of the accusations that have been made by the Financial Times article. Some of them are very

grave, very serious, and we deny them because they have absolutely no foundation in reality.

On the other hand, apart from the grave accusations that we deny, we acknowledge that these women have suffered negative experiences, such as lack of sufficient emotional support, lack of opportunities for professional development, failures in the discernment process, lack of clear barriers or clear distinctions between work and other aspects of life, and lack of accompaniment and support when they cease to be members of Opus Dei.

Many of these situations respond to circumstances or contexts from many years ago that, thankfully, have since then been corrected. But that doesn't take away from the fact that there has been suffering. And we apologise for that. We want to apologise face to face. We have

apologised publicly and we will continue to do so as often as necessary. Because Opus Dei is an organisation that seeks to do good.

What is the protocol for the handling of institutional claims that the Prelature has made available?

Opus Dei has set up specific pathways for conflict resolution and healing in places where there are people who need to express their complaints. This system has been in place for a year in some countries, and is now applied everywhere.

Through it, we want to learn about any negative experiences people may have had, apologise and ask them for forgiveness, and put right any harm that may have been caused.

Whoever is interested can find the contact information for their country on the Opus Dei website.

Throughout the article, some women who were part of Opus Dei claim to have been pressured into having a vocation. What is your view on this?

A vocation is a call from God. So no one can induce you to have a vocation. You either have it because God calls you or you don't have it. You can't pressure anyone into having a vocation.

As far as vocational discernment in Opus Dei goes, the process is actually designed so that only people who really feel that they're being called to this way of life, who only know what they're committing to, can be accepted as members. It's a process that takes place over the course of many years. From six and a half up to about eight or nine years, depending on each person's rhythm.

There are different steps: you receive classes and conversations about

what this commitment entails, about the spirit, about the spirituality. You begin living it out in your own life. And there are many different points where you have to first ask for admission and then reaffirm. Reaffirm your desire to be part of Opus Dei. You actually do this not just once, not just twice, not even three times, but eight times.

So you have to affirm eight times that you want to be a member of Opus Dei and that you know what this entails. And you do this before two witnesses, who are responsible for making sure that you do realise what you're committing yourself to.

What is the vocation of assistant numerary mentioned by most of the women in the article?

To be an assistant numerary is to live out a vocation within the Catholic Church. Like all members of Opus Dei, they strive to find God in their

ordinary lives and make him present, especially through their professional work.

In the case of assistant numeraries, that professional work consists of taking care of the people and the centres of Opus Dei, attending to people in their most basic needs and creating a home that fosters the flourishing and formation of each person, whether they are a member of Opus Dei or one of the many people who come to the centres to participate in the activities.

There are about 4000 women who currently live out this vocational path with a lot of love, creativity, and commitment.

Does the vocation consist of a series of household chores? Is this description accurate?

You can't reduce this profession to just a series of menial tasks. We

could think of another profession that's also oriented very directly to the service of the person, like, for example, a teacher.

What does a teacher do? A teacher gives homework, corrects exams, and talks in front of a classroom. Does the vocation of education, of teaching, of helping people to discover their talents and put them at the service of the world, can it be reduced to just those three activities of giving homework, grading papers, and talking in front of a class? No, it's much broader and richer than that, and the same goes for the vocation of an assistant numerary.

Do assistant numeraries receive a salary for their work?

In addition to the vocational aspect, which embraces your whole life, assistant numeraries are professionals. And as such, they are paid, have contracts, receive their

salaries by bank transfer, and have complete autonomy over their financial affairs. They pay for their personal expenses and contribute to the expenses of the house where they live.

On the other hand, it's true that there haven't always been good clear boundaries set between work and the other aspects of one's life because, as mentioned before, it is a vocation that embraces your entire life. But we've seen that it's important to have those clear boundaries between your working hours and times when you're not working, when you're enriching yourself in other aspects of life. So that's a learning process, and now we're a lot better about defining those boundaries.

Why do some members of Opus Dei travel or live abroad?

Opus Dei is an international organization. It's present in over 60 countries. Some members change from one country to another to support specific apostolic needs, or projects, or the work of the Prelature. But these movements are free, they're voluntary.

Nobody can be moved from one country to another unless they want to do so. A lot of people actually volunteer. They say: "I'm available", or "I have this work opportunity", or "this studying opportunity. I could go and support Opus Dei in this other country for a period of time." Longer, shorter. Sometimes people are asked to go, and sometimes people say: "no, I don't see myself there". "I can't learn another language" or for any number of reasons. So whenever somebody in Opus Dei does move from one country to another, he or she does it freely.

In general, it's an opportunity that's enriching culturally, professionally, apostolically, spiritually, personally. And if it doesn't work out, you can go back to your country, there's no problem. So you can only move freely. And of course, only if you have all of the necessary documentation that's required by law.

What is the age limit for membership of Opus Dei? Why do some women claim to have been members as minors?

Currently, you have to be at least 18 years old to join Opus Dei. This is in the statutes that date from 1982, which is to say, 40 years ago. There it clearly stipulates that in order to join Opus Dei you need to be of age, at least 18 years old.

What these women may be referring to is the figure of a candidate, which is a figure described in the statutes.

And that's a young person who hasn't turned 18 yet, who thinks that they have a vocation. They feel called by God to follow this vocational path, but they're not old enough to join Opus Dei. The figure of candidate allows you to begin a path of formation and discernment, so that you join Opus Dei when you turn 18, if you see that this is your vocation.

Candidates are not members of Opus Dei. They have none of the rights, obligations, and duties that members have. And even to become a candidate, you need your parents' explicit permission.

What are hospitality schools? Have any students lived there?

Hospitality schools were educational initiatives aimed at giving girls a chance in life. The mission of many of them was to serve girls who were coming from disadvantaged backgrounds or vulnerable sectors of

society, so that they could continue their education and learn a trade, thus enabling them to secure employment and improve their situations upon graduation.

Hospitality studies, depending on the country, can be considered as continuing education or vocational training. Sometimes it's a way of obtaining professional qualification in countries where the hospitality industry or hotel sector is important, providing access to employment opportunities. Alternatively, it can simply be a means of equipping women with the tools, skills, and training they need to improve their situation in life.

Maintaining relationships with their families was always a priority for these schools. This was crucial because many of these girls lived far away from their families, and communication was not as easy

before Internet and cell phones. However, the schools facilitated communication with parents, who would visit the school, observe their daughters' activities and learning, and receive newsletters prepared by the students detailing their studies and activities. Incorporating families into the educational journey of the girls was integral to the mission of these hospitality schools.

What message would you give to the women who have expressed pain?

Opus Dei's message to the women who have made these claims and have come forward with their complaints is that we respect you, we are listening, and we are committed to making sure that this doesn't continue to happen in the future. So we want to apologise when we have done wrong and make amends and take measures to ensure that these

situations do not continue to happen in the future.

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