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Spanish Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, the newly elected head of Opus Dei, answers questions during a media opportunity at the University of the Holy Cross in Rome Jan. 24, 2017. His appointment was approved the previous day by Pope Francis. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Buenos Aires — October 1, 2024

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Argentine prosecutors have concluded that there are grounds for launching a criminal investigation into the highest authorities of Opus Dei in South America between 1983 and 2015 for the crimes of human trafficking and [labor exploitation](#) against at least 44 women recruited by the religious order to perform domestic tasks in their homes.

According to a document seen by The Associated Press, prosecutors sought a federal judge to summon those who served during that period as vicar or regional councilor of Opus Dei Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Bolivia to testify: Carlos Nannei (1991-1997), Patricio Olmos (1998-2014) and Víctor Urtizarrazu (2014-2022). They also seek to interrogate the regional secretary in charge of the order's female section, Gabriel Dondo, who held the position until 2015.

[Opus Dei](#) — Work of God in Latin — was founded by the Spanish priest Josemaría Escrivá in 1928, and has 90,000 members in 70 countries. The lay group, which was greatly favored by St. John Paul II, who canonized Escrivá in 2002, has a unique status in the church and reports directly to the pope. Most members are laymen and women with secular jobs and families who strive to “sanctify ordinary life.” Other members are priests or celibate lay people.

Following a complaint filed in 2022, the team of prosecutors launched an investigation that concluded that from the early 1970s until 2015, “people holding different positions within Opus Dei established a structure dedicated to recruiting at least 44 women, most of them girls and adolescents, to be subjected to living conditions comparable to servitude.”

The Opus Dei in Argentina has denied the accusations.

“We categorically deny the accusations of human trafficking and labor exploitation,” said the office of the Prelature of Opus Dei in Argentina in a statement, adding that in order to build this accusation, “the formation received by some of the women in the group and the vocation freely chosen by the numerary assistants of Opus Dei are completely taken out of context. This is a totally false accusation.”

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Prosecutors argue that Opus Dei selected girls and adolescents from low-income families, usually from rural areas far from the organization's activity centers, and that they were recruited "under the promise of receiving training and improving their job prospects."

"Once admitted, they were subjected to a regime of 'spiritual, professional and work training,' and if they showed a vocation to be numerary assistants, they were assigned for life to perform domestic tasks in Opus Dei centers, both in the country and abroad," they said.

The investigation centers on four cases that fit the crime of human trafficking under current Argentinian legislation.

Some of the complainants gave their testimony to AP in a story published in November 2021 in which they reported working under "manifestly illegal conditions" that included working without pay for 12 hours-plus without breaks except for food or prayer, no registration in the Social Security system and other violations of basic rights.

Their identities have been preserved in the prosecutors' resolution.

Most of the women requested dispensation saying that the physical and psychological demands they were subjected to during their years of service became intolerable. They maintain that they were left to their own devices, without money, and many needed psychological treatment after leaving Opus Dei.

A federal judge must now decide whether to grant the prosecutors' request to summon the former vicars to testify.

Opus Dei Argentina reaffirmed its commitment to fully cooperate with the justice "to clarify the facts and resolve the situation in a fair and transparent manner."