



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

[Home](#) - [News](#) - Shining new light on Opus Dei's mission

Shining new light on Opus Dei's mission

Erica Noonan, The Boston Globe

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Opus Dei means “work of God” in Latin. At the Montrose School in Medfield, it means educating girls to be leaders with “faith, character, and vision,” said the independent Catholic institution’s head, Karen E. Bohlin.

For Mary Brennan, a Franklin mother of six, it is a search for divinity in everyday life as she cares for her children and works part time. “It’s faith in practice,” said Brennan, who prays several times a day, using a rosary, Latin readings, and the New Testament. “As Catholics, it’s making a connection between work and faith.”

Eighty years after being founded in Spain by St. Josemaria Escriva, Opus Dei remains an under-the-radar extension of Catholicism that is often misunderstood, adherents say. Yet it maintains a thriving presence in Greater Boston, with about 300 members, centers in Chestnut Hill, Boston’s Back Bay, Cambridge, and Pembroke, and the affiliated school in Medfield for girls in grades 6 through 12.

It took an image crisis - spurred by a 2003 novel by Dan Brown, “The Da Vinci Code,” featuring a monk-assassin with ties to Opus Dei - to put the prelature front and center in popular culture, and not in a positive light.

Finding many misrepresentations in Brown’s book, particularly about how Opus Dei treats women, who make up more than half of its membership, Boston College graduate Marie Oates started work on her own book, a pioneering collection of essays by two dozen women proclaiming the group’s egalitarian nature.

“We realized we had to tell the world about ourselves,” said Oates, who co-edited “Women of Opus Dei” with Dr. Jenny Driver, a physician at Brigham & Women’s Hospital. “Saint Josemaria loved women, and had great respect for them and everything they do in the world.”

About 20 percent of the organization's 87,000 members worldwide are "numeraries," who live celibate lives, primarily work in service to the church, and live in Opus Dei residences.

Roughly 2 percent of its members are priests, according to Opus Dei, and the remainder are regular churchgoers with secular jobs and families, like Brennan, who attends Mass daily when possible. But her deepest relationship with God, Brennan says, is outside the sanctuary while doing her everyday work "with great love" - raising children, doing freelance design at night, and in her part-time job in the cafe at Dean College in Franklin.

Opus Dei's mission was also the inspiration behind the three-decade-old Montrose School, though today 25 percent of the girls and faculty are not practicing Catholics; several are Muslim, Greek Orthodox, or unaffiliated. The school is financially independent from Opus Dei and the Archdiocese of Boston, though it maintains a warm institutional relationship with both.

"I guess you could say our secret weapon is prayer," said Bohlin, a scholar at Boston University's Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character and an Opus Dei member. "We don't have a corner on that market, but we do integrate it into all we do. And because we respect every person as a child of God, it's easier to appreciate people, gain perspective under pressure, and laugh at ourselves."

The "Work," as members call their faith, has historically been outside the direct purview of the Vatican, contributing to longstanding internal Church tensions between strict followers of papal hierarchy and Opus Dei, which some critics have called "a church within a church."

National Public Radio's Vatican correspondent, John L. Allen Jr., described Opus Dei as an especially intense form of Catholicism, calling it "the Guinness Extra Stout of the Catholic Church."

"A strong brew, definitely an acquired taste, and clearly not for everyone," Allen wrote in his 2005 book on the group, which he billed as "the most controversial force in the Catholic Church."

Opus Dei might have remained out of the limelight indefinitely if not for Brown's novel, which in 2006 was made into a hit movie starring Tom Hanks. Suddenly tourists were appearing on the doorsteps of Opus Dei residences around the world, asking questions about medieval torture chambers and ancient corporal mortification practices like self-flagellation, as performed by a character in the

novel.

“We didn’t think anyone could really think what was in the book could be true,” said Oates, a Duxbury native who lives in New York. “But so many people did.”

The most devout men and women in Opus Dei do wear a cilice, a small metal chain, around their upper thigh under their clothing for a few hours per day, as a reminder of the pain endured by Jesus Christ during his crucifixion. Slightly uncomfortable, it does not draw blood or torture the wearer, Oates said.

Her book, put out this summer by Crossroad Publishing Co., features narratives of conversion and faith in practice from a variety of women - stay-at-home mothers, academics, business leaders - from around the country.

Both Oates and Driver said they were sure as young women that they wished to forgo traditional marriage and children and commit themselves to the church and Opus Dei. There are no regrets, they said.

“You feel loved. This is a family,” said Driver, who lives at Bayridge, the prelate’s Back Bay facility.

Being a numerary is not the same as being a nun, and they do not wear special garments or accept orders from the Archdiocese, they said.

“I guess you could say my heart dedicated itself to Jesus. He is my significant other,” said Oates, a public relations consultant who serves on Boston College’s Council for Women.

Because Opus Dei is a personal calling, without typical Vatican top-down hierarchy, its members have autonomy to teach, speak, lead small groups of discussion, and travel the world assisting the sick and needy as they see necessary, Oates and Driver said.

Free of traditional church structure, aside from the traditional morning Mass celebrated by a male priest, the umbrella of intellectual and spiritual opportunities offered by Opus Dei is especially empowering for women who may feel constrained by the church’s male-dominated bureaucracy, the co-editors said.

Their book has drawn praise from progressive religion writers and scholars, including Phyllis Tickle, author of “The Divine Hours” and “The Words of Jesus.”

Tickle said longstanding suspicion toward Opus Dei's emphasis on a personal relationship with God, especially within the Catholic Church in Europe, has hurt the group. "They have a bad rap not just among non-Catholics, but even among Catholics," she said.

"There are many people out there asking how do you rein it in?" Tickle said in a telephone interview from her Tennessee home.

Yet Opus Dei has much to offer contemporary religious debate, said Tickle. Many faiths acknowledge the mundane and ordinary parts of life, but seeking the divinity within them, as experienced by women, is the "great strength" of Opus Dei, she said. "It takes life where it is, so that it may be lauded."

In Greater Boston, nearly 100 young women, mostly college students, live at Bayridge, a historic Commonwealth Avenue mansion designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany. Opus Dei also runs the Chestnut Hill Center on Hammond Street in Newton, and the Elmbrook Student Center in Cambridge, offering educational programming for young men in high school and college, as well as the Arnold Hall Conference Center in Pembroke, offering job training and retreats for adults.

The Montrose School was established 30 years ago in Brookline by Catholic parents and educators who were also Opus Dei members. This year it made Boston magazine's list of the area's best private schools, outranking Belmont Hill School, Concord Academy, the Rivers School, and Milton Academy.

Attendance at Montrose has been growing steadily, and three years ago the school moved from a rented building in Natick to the 14-acre campus, with an athletic field, in Medfield.

Religious education remains part of the school's core curriculum. Students can choose between attending daily morning Mass or spending 45 minutes in quiet reading sessions, with a long list of approved books that include Plato, Jane Austen, and even Malcolm Gladwell's "Blink."

Montrose students travel to Rome to study Dante's "Inferno," are the only high-schoolers invited to present their writing and research on ethics and philosophy at a Notre Dame college competition, and are regularly accepted to Ivy League colleges.

"The most consistent feedback I get from visitors, community members, and parents is, 'This is a happy place. Your students are genuinely happy,' " said

Bohlin. "That's refreshing."

By Erica Noonan, The Boston Globe Newspaper