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MONTEFALCO SCHOOL FOR WOMEN: AN OPUS DEI INSTITUTION IN MEXICO

This article examines the education of women within the Opus Dei by focusing on the educational model used within the Montefalco¹ School for Women. As part of the Opus Dei's work, the school obeys and is fully integrated with the organization's guiding ideology referred to as the "Work of God" or just "the Work."² This study is based on my previous work³ on the Opus Dei's clergy as well as on fieldwork and archival work. I also used interviews with women who were associated with the different charismatic (divine) categories of this religious group as well as the ample literature published by the Opus Dei. I begin with some of the historical context for this organization in Mexico.

Obeying the orders of founding priest, Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás, the first group of Spanish women associated with Opus Dei arrived in Mexico in March 1950. They were expressly charged with the care and management of all the housing used by the organization's members⁴. Opus Dei had been in Mexico since 1948, doing proselytizing work on behalf of the organization. This group of women was called the Opus Dei's feminine section, and was made up of three young women who were under the orders of Guadalupe Ortiz de Landáuri.

From the time it was created, "the Work" has been characterized by its support of theological directives coming from the Vatican⁵ that promote masculine and feminine identities based on gender difference and principles

of complementarity of men and women.⁶ These identities were developed within the core of the institution — the founding priest occupied a hegemonic space as the institution's patriarch, a role now exercised by the clergy. It is men, as priests and members, who occupy positions of power and control. Women occupy secondary places and their function is to reproduce the institution's ideology and gender roles within education. Women are in charge of administrative and housekeeping duties for the institution's houses, visitors' accommodations, schools, retirement centres and so on.

Opus Dei is a conservative organization that promotes an ideology of social conformity that is justified as the way in which spiritual peace can be achieved by its followers.⁷ It reaffirms social differences by demanding an uncritical adherence to productive and reproductive functions of men and women that do not change their position in society. To achieve harmony and avoid conflict, difference in terms of gender, social class and ethnicity is handled by separating men from women, the rich from the poor, and whites from indigenous persons. These daily practices show how the ideology of "the Work" is based on a hierarchical social order that is authoritarian, sexist, classist and racist.

The Opus Dei in Mexico, given its religious position and conservative ideology, identifies with the upper echelons of the country's ecclesiastical hierarchy and politically aligns itself with right wing governments. In the recent past however, it has managed to maintain good relations with PRI⁸ governments. It rejects the theology of liberation,⁹ claiming that it is discriminatory, while maintaining a preference for upper class catholic members¹⁰.

When we take a closer look at the educational practices of "the Work of God" by focusing on the Montefalco School for Women, we can appreciate the way in which gender intersects with other social categories like class and ethnicity.¹¹ The way in which this intersectionality manifests itself within the practices of the school can be seen in the particular roles that women are assigned depending on their social class, their status within "the Work," and their ethnicity.

Upper class women maintain the social order through their philanthropic role formalized via a women's board called, "Asociación Cultural Universal, A.C." (Universal Cultural Association) where "numery" and "supernumerary"¹² members are in charge of fundraising for the school as well as manage and plan activities related to it. These women are conservative and subservient to the Church hierarchy, to "the Work," to the men in the prelature and to the men in their lives. They obediently carry out their assigned social and religious tasks, teaching to other women through example the organization's educational model based on differentiation.

Supernumerary women have deeply held beliefs about their roles as mother-wives¹³ and reproduce this ideology in their work with poor women who are offered jobs outside the household in order to help sustain the family. Work alternatives offered to poor women fall within traditional notions of women's work and are placed within familiar parameters of domesticity.

It is believed that the problem poorer women face is that they do not have access to a good male provider at home and are therefore forced to seek training so they'll be able to find work outside the home. Privileged upper class women are then able to fulfill the philanthropic demands of the ideal bourgeois woman by helping train poorer women for work outside the home.

The schools that I am looking at in this paper are located outside the beautiful grounds of the ex-hacienda of Montefalco, located in the eastern region of the state of Morelos. This educational complex has three schools for women: a secondary level televised school; a technological high school level certificate program; and a training school for domestic work. Differences in terms of ethnicity are clearly seen in terms of who gets trained for what in the Montefalco schools. For example, indigenous women are trained for domestic work while the mestiza daughters of local businessmen, teachers and public servants are given skills for future administrative, bureaucratic or business jobs. White women are expected to be in charge of philanthropic work.

The buildings of the colonial hacienda itself have been renovated for use by rich visitors who pay for this privilege. This helps the schools raise funds that are then used to partially subsidize secondary and bachelor level students who come from lower middle-class homes. Those students who come from Montefalco's bordering towns are able to benefit from lower tuition fees. Students in the domestic service school, who come from very humble backgrounds, the poor surrounding neighbourhoods and towns, reside in the school. Their training is paid via the practicums that are part of their training in domestic work as well as through other types of funding, such as donations. Students who participate in this program see their participation in it as a means to improve their socio-economic situation. For the poorer students, the possibility of permanently leaving their towns or neighbourhoods, if they are accepted as auxiliary numeraries for example, becomes a strong incentive to put up with the heavy study and workloads they have in the domestic service training school.¹⁴

The Montefalco School for Women as an educational, residential and confessional complex, is the result of a long process of more than 50 years in the making — as the founding priest of Opus Dei, Josemaria Escriva, said of the school's initial promoter, Pedro Casciaro, "...only a man with crazy ideas like Don Pedro Casciaro could have accepted a world in ruins, a hacienda in a tropical land, surrounded by wild vegetation, with no roofs and trees growing inside the houses and with surrounding lands filled with iguanas, scorpions and snakes."¹⁵ Within the walls, the inhabitants and the educational community of Montefalco we find the contradictions that sum up the efforts of an institution that tries to manage harmony on its own terms within a context of difference that is the reality of the women that are part of this world.

The Montefalco school reproduces an Opus Dei educational model based on the idea that parents have a "natural" right to choose the school where they are to send their children. It means that parents have the natural right to choose a religious educational and training model that is socially conservative. By sending their daughters to the secondary televised and technological

schools, Montefalco's lower middle class families commit themselves to support for Opus Dei religious, educational and social values within their homes. The school for domestic service training on the other hand, does not require parental consent, and dedicates itself mainly to the training of young women destined for domestic work in others' houses.

The two main questions that are addressed in this paper are: how does a catholic-oriented education influence the formation of feminine identities? and, how do these Opus Dei schools promote traditional gender, class and ethnic roles in Mexico?

Montefalco and Opus Dei's Educational Model

The history of Montefalco

The ex-hacienda of Montefalco is located in the municipality of Jonacatepec in the state of Morelos, Mexico. Surrounded by the beautiful mountains of Montefalco and Jantetelco in the Valley of Amilpas close to the Cuautla-Puebla highway, this place is said to be a place of, "...chores, happiness and shortages but above all of hope."¹⁶

The ex-hacienda is named after Santa Clara de Montefalco, the saint that is said to have worked with St. Francis of Assisi in Montefalconi.¹⁷ The Opus Dei Prelature carefully renovated the place to its former majesty, keeping in mind its origins in the 17th century, when "Don Pedro de Aragón bought from Don Pedro Cortés, the marquis of the Valle de Oaxaca, the land close to Jonatepec and Chacaltzingo and named these lands Santa Clara de Montefalco." The main use of these lands at the time was for the cultivation of sugar cane.¹⁸

For many years Santa Clara de Montefalco was in the hands of Spaniards living in Mexico. Towards the end of the 19th century, it was the property of the Mexican family García Pimentel, whose heirs left it all to the Opus Dei:

In 1951, Don Pedro Casciaro, a supernumerary of the Opus Dei in Mexico, requested from the family that what remained of the Hacienda de Santa Clara of Montefalco be donated to the Opus Dei in order to build a retreat and several schools for the peasantry that lived in the area. My mother, who owned the largest piece of the property, after requesting her children's consent, acceded to the request from Casciaro along with her daughters-in-law, Doña Rafaela García Pimentel de Bernal, Doña Dolores García-Pimentel de Riba and Doña Guadalupe García-Pimentel de Corcuera. From that time onwards, the Opus Dei has been very successful in doing the kind of work that Father Casciaro had envisioned. (García-Pimentel, 1993, p. 52)

When Casciaro made this request for the hacienda to the García-Pimentel family, he fully trusted that the catholic tradition of the family would make them honour his request.¹⁹

Don Pedro, as a priest and a Spaniard, was not legally entitled to receive the donation so a way to circumvent this restriction had to be found, and a

board of trustees called “Campo y Deporte” was created. Through this legal trick the constitutional prohibition against having these lands as clerical property was avoided.

In general, Opus Dei never appears directly as the owners of any real estate properties;²⁰ it is always boards or associations who play this role. In this manner, Opus Dei is able to avoid legal sanctions as well as the judgments or critiques of the institution. In fact, the civilian boards and associations cannot actually hide their links with the Opus Dei, as for example in the case of Montefalco, as it is clear that those who run these places as corporatist works, as they call them, are part of the Opus Dei.

The donation of the hacienda of Montefalco to Opus Dei created a pattern that enabled the appropriation of more real estate for “the Work of God” in Mexico. First, a request for the donation of land or other property is made to a rich family. Then ownership of the donated land or property is transferred to a board of lay persons of Mexican nationality. The board or association become the legal owners of the property whose mandate becomes one of promoting a variety of social activities within the rural populations that live around or close to these properties (Casciaro, 1992, p. 233).

The Centro Agropecuario Experimental “El Peñon” (Experimental Farming Centre “El Peñon”) was the first educational project at Montefalco. It was a learning centre for men only and its aim²¹ was to find ways to diversify the economic activity of the region. This initiative was not successful, in part because many of the region’s men did not feel motivated to participate in a program that focused on studying for a technological bachelor in farming.²² The failure of “El Peñon” points to the unfeasibility of a project that does not understand the infrastructure needs of the region: It was unable to offer the kind of training needed to achieve its goals.

The Educational Model

Opus Dei’s educational model is based on a practice that locates education as the main concern and interest of first parents and then teachers. It therefore displaces the student as the main subject of an autonomous education. Fathers as the heads of family and mothers responsible for the management of the household as well as the education of children are expected to fulfill a number of obligations. They are expected to be on top of what their children do at school as well as how they fare there in order to make sure that the education that is being received falls within the expectations and demands of the Opus Dei. That is, it is assumed that parents will be the gatekeepers of an Opus Dei-centred education based on faith and catholic values. The formal education of children becomes the duty of parents who are viewed as being helped by the tutors, teachers, priests and Opus Dei authorities.

The belief that rules and values learned at home and at school should be in harmony makes the goal of education one of channeling family life and values. The goal of education is to be a means through which family life and values are promoted since the belief is that rules and values learned both at home and at school should be the same. For parents, the support they can

expect from the school takes the shape of a kind of ideological training where ways of living in harmony with catholic faith are transmitted through “family orientation courses.” Parents, both fathers and mothers, are trained and are expected to impose this training in catholic values on their children. With parental consent, support and surveillance, the education of girls and young women is made the responsibility of numeraries.

The educational model, based on the organization’s own structural²³ and institutional practices, keeps men and women separated. Based on Catholic church precepts, this traditional approach regards women as different from, yet complementary to, men and expects women to be obedient to men. Their role as catholic women is to obey their husbands’ orders and to manage their households and care for their children’s education. To fulfill these roles well, girls and young women need to be educated by taking courses that teach them the appropriate roles and abilities needed in order to fulfill their gender roles.

The school also says that its objective is to support women in rural areas by allowing them the possibility of giving themselves fully to service for others. It is worth noting however, that Opus Dei has managed only in the most superficial of ways to meet the economic requirements of the region focusing on labour options for women that privilege ‘service for others’ or, in other words, to work as database entry clerks, as secretaries and as school teachers.

The Montefalco school understands that its location within a capitalist labour market makes it necessary for it to provide training for paid work among poor women. The training, however, follows catholic church ideology that understands women’s central roles as those of mothers and wives. Therefore, it becomes very important to give all women who attend the school, regardless of their social background, a sound in education in Opus Dei faith. The vocational training received by these women is seen as a means of providing them with the necessary elements for success that will in turn ensure that they carry out the roles as holy women that guarantees them a place in heaven. The push towards holiness is not based on an idea of materially and socially improving the conditions of either the women themselves or their communities but rather on the spiritual improvement of women. This translates, practically speaking, into a passive acceptance of “their fate.” In other words, in Montefalco women’s traditional and family roles are promoted via the spiritual counsel of Opus Dei numeraries and priests as well as through the resources provided by upper class women supporters.

For the fathers of the girls and young women who attend the school there is little expectation that they will be involved in their children’s education. Following traditional conceptions of gender roles, men are primarily expected to fulfill the role of being good providers for their families; it is understood therefore that their time is to be dedicated to work outside the home. Mothers are expected to dedicate themselves weekly to the task of caring for their children’s education, whereas fathers are required to occasionally go to a meeting or class. This is the case even when the ideal of the perfect family does not correspond to the common reality of women-headed households. For students to be accepted at the Montefalco school, their parents must live

together under the norms of an acceptable catholic family, and have enough resources to pay for the subsidized cost of this private education.

Montefalco School for Women's Ways of Making Differentiated Feminine Worlds

The women's school is one of Opus Dei's most well known corporatist works. It is also very well advertised for purposes of fundraising.²⁴ It is under the direction of the women's board "Asociación Cultural Universal" A.C. (Universal Cultural Association, C.A.) made up of Opus Dei numerary and supernumerary members.

The women's school is a modern building located inside the grounds of the ex-hacienda of Montefalco. It has a history of at least 3 relevant educational stages that relate to the history of women in Mexico: (a) in 1958, the Mexican numerary Margarita Mendoza founded and became the director of the first women's school, the "Granja Escuela" (The Farm School) where a literacy campaign for rural women was organized; (b) in the 1970s to the mid-1980s vocational programs were set up to train women as secretaries and as teachers in the Normal School for Teachers; and (c) from the end of the 1980s onwards, training in the use of computers and in English language skills were added.

In 1968 training through the secondary level televised school was started — here, prerecorded television programs would deliver high school level education to students. This educational method required few resources — all that is needed is a few classrooms where the video plays while a teacher plays the role of classroom monitor and facilitator of video activities. This kind of video high school tied in nicely with plans from the Ministry of Public Education. Apparently, the success of this kind of educational method got an award from the Ministry of Education for "the efficiency with which the school used this kind of educational method which made it the recipient of an award in 1968 from the Ministry of Public Education who even proposed it, in a televised program, as a viable educational model."²⁵ It's important to mention that the secondary school has an enrollment of 200 students.

Towards a Globalized World

Because of globalization at the end of the 20th century, changes were put in place to address the new context. The Normal School, created in 1978, was replaced by a high school level, technical training certificate in business administration. This shift reflected the perceived need for the training of women in the areas of hospitality and tourism in general. In 1996, the focus of the certificate was changed again to focus more on business administration with courses in accounting and English so that graduates of the program²⁶ would meet the labour needs of the local business community as well as be able to keep up with technological advances.

The certificate is made up of 3 modules or units that focus on scientific, legal and practical skills. The scientific module provides training in math, geography, history and Spanish language skills. The legal module focuses

on classes in accounting, business administration, civic studies and law. And, the practical skills module teaches typewriting, the use of office equipment and offers a technology workshop. In addition, the certificate also has 3 focus areas — the spiritual education area, the extracurricular activities area, and the academic tutoring area. Among these 3 areas, it is the one with the focus on spiritual education that is given priority because it is seen as an important means of proselytizing and advocating for new membership to “the Work.” An Opus Dei priest is in charge of the students’ spiritual education, making sure the students comply with the rituals of attending mass, saying the rosary and practising confession.

A workshop on social communication is at the core of the extracurricular activities. The workshop encourages gatherings, field excursions and cultural visits that are meant to promote the development of religious identities that will show allegiance or vocation to Opus Dei. Academic tutoring refers to the preceptorship that each student receives — each student is assigned a preceptor that in essence ensures that the student, her family and even her social life is under the institution’s control. The numerary preceptor and the priest are responsible for ensuring the total supervision of students, particularly in terms of the spiritual development of girls and young women. The numerary preceptor also keeps an eye on the academic performance of the students assigned to her to make sure that they stay on course. This level of control of students is exercised both in the school and at home.

Winning Hearts and Minds

Teachers at the school for women are all numerary women although it is possible at times to hire teachers who are not Opus Dei members. Besides fulfilling their roles as teachers, during afternoon hours numeraries carry out evangelizing duties especially focusing on the women in the students’ families.

Part of my research involved doing interviews with teachers at the school – Gema Santamaría, the principal of the school and María Eugenia Arias, the person in charge of social communication at the school were two of the numerary teachers I interviewed. Gema provided me with the information I requested about details on the functioning of the school. She became involved with Opus Dei as a very young woman and when she decided to become a numerary member her family proved fully supportive of her decision. She is convinced that the ministry work that she is able to do as part of this charitable religious community is beneficial both to herself and to other women for whom she is able to show and model the road to sanctity or holiness.

María Eugenia Arias or Maru, like Gema, seems to be happy and sure of her decision to cultivate a spiritual life that ensures her a place in heaven. She does not question her full time involvement in Opus Dei since she was a 17 year old high school student. Maru comes from a large family whose parents were not completely supportive of her joining the Opus Dei at such a young age. But Maru does not regret having renounced her own life in the world in

order to dedicate herself fully to the education of women to fit well within the ideology of the school. She says she made the right decision despite the many years that she has not been able to see her family.²⁷

Through Maru's experience we get a clear example of how the Opus Dei is able to carry out the recruitment of new members – it was Maru's friend who took her to meet father Casciaro, an Opus Dei priest. The opportunity to take part in the gatherings organized by the women's school made such a positive impression that she applied for admission to the school soon after. For years she's been living in Montefalco where her skills and friendly nature have made her the ideal public relations person for the school, making connections with local newspapers and radios that she can use as a platform to disseminate the institution's ideas as well as those of the students in the high school level televised school program and those in the technological certificate program.²⁸

Maru explains that one of the objectives of Opus Dei is to increase its presence in the nearby regions to Montefalco, in the eastern region of the State of Morelos. To this end, they have experts go into these regions and facilitate courses for teachers²⁹ and parents that provide a forum for the discussion of family life and its problems. The diploma programs offered to parents are not free of charge, and Maru says that the work of proselytizing in the region has not been easy as there are still feelings of distrust towards the institution to overcome. She also mentions that although teachers were at first reluctant to participate in the courses, she sees gains being made in that respect. For the Opus Dei, having teachers involved in their programs is seen as a positive, for teachers have access to students and can become good vehicles for the reproduction of Opus Dei thought and influence within the communities. Incidentally, these efforts to gain a foothold with the families and teachers of the region was a project that was supported by the Kellogg Foundation.

The work of women in Montefalco is of great importance for Opus Dei because they are the teachers, preceptors and evangelists doing their work with families to reproduce the Catholic Church's and Opus Dei's interests in the region. Extracurricular activities are also very important because they are a means through which numeraries can carry out their ministry work with the women in the community to ensure their allegiance to the catholic faith as well as the fulfillment of their role as responsible mothers in charge of their daughters' education and as tolerant and obedient wives.

A Bigger World Through Service: the School for Domestic Workers and Auxiliary Numeraries

The centre for the training of auxiliary numeraries is a boarding school for very poor young women who typically pay their tuition by exchanging domestic work for training, board and keep.

Students live in Opus Dei buildings with strict regulations for when they can go out or when they can have family visitors. Women numeraries are charged with their care, regarding students as "little sisters" whose infantile

souls require constant vigilance. Young women students from humble backgrounds with jobs as domestic workers are perceived as being less capable both in their intellectual abilities and in their personal agency. The intergenerational relationships established between school numeraries and students are therefore extremely unbalanced as the young women are infantilized, treated as being perennially underage minors. It is also possible that the imbalance in the relationship between teachers and students is also marked by the racial prejudices towards indigenous populations many of these students come from.

It is in the rural communities and in poor city neighbourhoods where candidates for the auxiliary numerary program are recruited. Oftentimes, the impetus for these young women to enter the program differs from the spiritual calling offered by the Opus Dei. Some of the young women I interviewed told me that entering the program meant getting access to travel and to a better life. Many arrive at the school without having told their parents of the type of institution in which they will be living and studying. To avoid legal troubles, the school for women asks that the students have completed their secondary school and that they are 18 years old. The consent of parents, however, is not required as a condition for their acceptance into the program.

This type of school was born in the early 1950s out of an initiative started informally by the Spanish numerary Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri³⁰ in Mexico city. The goal was to find women who could replace those numeraries who until then had been responsible for doing necessary domestic work. In the 1970s, domestic education was formalized through the creation of technical schools that have proven successful for Opus Dei. According to high numeraries Hortensia Chávez and Alfonsina Ramírez, Mexico is where poor women are trained to fulfill international needs for domestic workers in centres and houses that belong to the Opus Dei worldwide.

These young women are trained as good domestic workers to uphold the image of the bourgeois families who expect loyal servants (Suárez, 1996, p. 297). Some of the women refuse to work exclusively within the Opus Dei and are then placed in the households of rich supernumerary families. These women are also indoctrinated in Opus Dei ideology which demands of them unconditional loyalty towards their employers. Indoctrination via education helps to consolidate the social positions of everyone involved.

Some of the bad reputation of the Opus Dei in the region is related to the violent methods through which it is said numeraries recruit young women. For many years, parents in the region did not trust the school as the word had spread around that “they would abduct young women.”

Restrictions to student rights are justified in terms of the needs of the program, which requires that those students in the technical program live at the school. Therefore, family visits are only allowed once a month and only a few days during end of term holidays. Those parents who support their daughters attending the school are asked for a minimum payment to cover tuition. For the rest, Opus Dei covers all costs for training, board and keep of women students.

From the time they first join Montefalco, the young women are expected to work in all types of domestic activities related to the maintenance of houses owned by numerary men, numerary women, the schools, and the buildings dedicated for the use of wealthy visitors as retreat houses. The young women wash and iron clothing, work in the kitchen and as wait staff for resident numeraries or visitors to the retreat houses.

Numeraries that manage the school as well as senior auxiliary numeraries who already perform these duties are the teachers at the school. The students are always under the supervision of numeraries. Auxiliary numeraries are responsible for the students' spiritual education as well as making sure that students fulfill all the obligations specified in their individualized life plan at Montefalco. The spiritual formation of students falls within an established class hierarchy exemplified by the relationship established between auxiliary numeraries and students. It is telling that spiritual training is carried out by auxiliary numeraries who are considered to be closer to the class background of the students. Numeraries from upper class backgrounds are expected to intervene in the spiritual education of the students only when problems such as disobedience or non-compliance with rules and rituals occurs.

Spiritual training or education that teaches Opus Dei values is under the ultimate control of an Opus Dei priest who is the spiritual director of all the women, be they students, numeraries or auxiliary numeraries. Students are closely guarded by the school's director, other students and by the teachers that are auxiliary numeraries. A framework of external and self-control is put in place, from the priest's and director's control over students' spiritual education to the expected conversations with women of their same class to the life plan following Opus Dei values that occupy the students throughout the day. It is obligatory for students to go to mass, to continually pray the rosary and supplications, to go to confession and take communion at least once a week. In this manner time that can be dedicated to personal endeavours is reduced to the time allotted for sleeping.

Mondays at Montefalco: A Coming Together of Diverse Women.

A bus full of women – mothers, grandmothers and children – from the surrounding towns arrives on Mondays at Montefalco. All are received in the “El Rodil” courtyards, an area reserved for spiritual retreats located in the hacienda, a place surrounded by beautiful gardens and a swimming pool. This house is used to host upper class visitors who are invited or are members themselves. It is also used for numeraries and auxiliary numeraries who go on their own retreats or are taking summer courses. The house is well decorated and architecturally it remains true to Mexican 19th century colonial architecture.

Women from the town of Montefalco who go for spiritual education on Mondays do not have access to this house — they are only allowed to use the courtyard, the garden close to the administration building, the bookshop and the chapel.

Some of the women most interested in receiving training also come on Tuesdays to participate in study circles in order to strengthen their faith through guided readings selected by and under the guidance of numeraries. To attract more women workshops in a variety of areas are run but the main focus remains centred around the provision of a Christian education to the women who come.

Opus Dei³¹ members are expected to be permanently engaged in pastoral activities including both the School for Women and those from the Retreat Centre Management house. In addition, student candidates and those who have been accepted in the auxiliary numerary program are recruited to help out as catechists with the children of women who receive spiritual counselling from auxiliary numeraries.

Opus Dei is particularly careful with the way in which its activities are run. This extracurricular and pastoral activity is carried out in a clean, orderly space, in an efficient and dynamic manner. Mothers are put into small groups where a review of the religious activities assigned to them is done. Their children in the meantime receive classes in religious doctrine. Children are organized into similar age groups where young certificate program students serve as their catechists.

Mothers and grandmothers also take part in confession where they await their turn patiently to enter the confessional booth. The priests and spiritual director for the women belong to the Santa Cruz Holy Order, an exclusive Opus Dei prelatore. During my field trip I saw that the priests were for the most part young and not from Mexico.

Women are also given the opportunity to purchase scapularies and Christian education books edited by the Opus Dei in the bookshop. The bookshop has a number of religious and ideological books on themes related to the prelatore – for example, there are biographies on the founders of the faith, books that exalt the role of mothers and the importance of families, and books that present arguments against abortion as well as for liberation theology.

Groups of women in pairs, made up of an auxiliary numerary and a local woman, meet in “El Rodil” for a ritual called the brotherly talk by preceptors and apostolates where local women are expected to share their problems with auxiliary numeraries. The latter are expected to give good counsel to the women on matters related to the family, to the woman’s role as mother and wife and to her role as a good person. This kind of intervention into the private lives of women visitors is given by women who themselves have no direct experience of the matters on which they are often asked to give counsel as all numeraries, including auxiliary numeraries practise celibacy.

During my research, I spoke with Arcadia “Caya” Tadeo – an almost 60-year-old member from a humble background who nevertheless was accepted as a supernumerary most likely due to her exceptional qualities as leader. Arcadia told me with ease and laughter how, “the upsets that like in all marriages I have with my husband I offer to God, and I tell my husband, if it wasn’t for my visits to Montefalco I would have left you long ago.” Every

eight days, on Mondays, Arcadia goes to “El Rodil,” something she has been doing since she was a child. She comes all the way from Chacaltzingo in the municipality of Jaltepec and when she is not able to make it every week, due to family problems, she attends every two weeks. On Tuesdays she also comes to the doctrine study circles taught by the “misses”³² and she is only sorry that she is not able to attend these circles more regularly. Arcadia believes that Opus Dei has been a beneficial influence in her personal and family life and passively accepts the life of restrictions that she has endured. Arcadia even appears in one of the Opus Dei’s promotional videos in Mexico where through her testimony there is an attempt to create the impression that Opus Dei treats all social classes equally and that its aims are to positively influence the life of the inhabitants of the region. In truth, Arcadia remains more the exception than the rule.

The Funding of Montefalco

Montefalco has a number of buildings that include classrooms, areas for the spiritual education of mothers, a training centre for the education of auxiliary numeraries and two retreat centres, one for adults and the other for youth. All of its buildings are kept in optimal conditions, are beautiful and require costly maintenance. Costs are covered through the payments made by visitors to the retreat centres — i.e., supernumeraries, friends and supporters of Opus Dei and their children — from upper class backgrounds who pay fees in accordance with the level of service they expect to receive: somewhat austere though beautifully decorated individual rooms for adult guests; quality food that is well prepared and elegantly served; and, all the resources needed for the exercise of meditation and reflection as covered in the Christian education classes provided. It is rather like staying at a luxury hotel with all the expected amenities — ample rooms, beautiful gardens and other impeccably kept facilities so that visitors can rest their bodies and feed their souls with the satisfaction of knowing that, for a few days, they will be spiritually taken care of by a priest from the Santa Cruz Holy Order and by the women of Opus Dei.

The secondary level and technological schools get their income from school fees as well as other sources of revenue in order to cover the costs associated with the objectives of being self-managed and self-sufficient. According to the numeraries in charge, the income generated is not adequate enough to cover all costs so it is necessary to conduct fundraising campaigns³³ almost permanently. The schools have also resorted to other sorts of revenue generation such as the sale of scapulars, books, rosaries and at times even food.

Sources of funding are therefore mixed, being made up of school fees, sales of a variety of goods, subsidies and the donations from husbands, family members and friends of the supernumerary ladies who come to Montefalco. These ladies come to Montefalco to purify their souls and do charity work which, in their view, enables them to comply with the demand for detaching oneself from worldly goods espoused by Opus Dei.

Concluding Thoughts

The Montefalco School for Women is located in a beautiful place in Mexico, a place where the colonial past and the country's present come together. Montefalco encapsulates the vision of Opus Dei's founder Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás to Christianize women's and men's lives and in so doing make their lives holy.

Beneath this catholic vision lies the idealized notion of the possibility of collaboration among different social and economic classes. The idea of collaboration is used to keep intact class divisions, ethnic differences and a sexist understanding of gender roles in the family and society at large. The phrase "Find God in work and in everyday life" encapsulates this kind of religious vision.

The educational goals of Opus Dei are to provide pastoral education, to promote the Christian faith, to engage in philanthropic works, to recruit members, and to engage in the kind of social activism that promotes conformity among the lower classes and urges them to accept their lot in life and patiently await for their reward in heaven. The institution also promises that holiness is achievable through hard work during their time on this earth which, again, will be well rewarded in heaven.

Through this kind of social welfare, a practice favoured by Catholics, Opus Dei seeks to create for itself a prominent social position. From an authoritative position with a Christian perspective, it seeks to influence social policy as well as politicians and businessmen who are attracted to charity works like Montefalco. During the past decades, philanthropy has proven an efficient resource in the hands of conservative sectors in society, helping them build compliance among the more vulnerable groups in society.

The five decades that Opus Dei has been in Montefalco have not really had an important educational impact in the region. It has, however, managed to create a strong reputation in the region by providing a social space where people of different social classes and for a variety of reasons can come together. These spaces are of course arranged so that they carefully maintain the desired distance between the different social classes, genders and ethnicities who are not encouraged nor expected to mingle socially. Some women come to receive training that according to Opus Dei befits their social class, while other women work as teachers and apostolates or attempt to comply with their philanthropic duty by helping with the education of those less fortunate.

Local women go to reaffirm their roles as subservient women both to their homes and their husbands and to continue educating their children in conservative catholic practice that Opus Dei encourages in part to prevent the advances of women's liberation movements in the region. Women, in their roles as wives and mothers, are encouraged to identify themselves with the Virgin Mary to renew and reaffirm social conservative values. Women supernumerary members associated with the organization are also subjected to similar expectations of subservience to men who, while fulfilling their

roles as providers, are expected to exercise power over women in no less of an arbitrary and powerful manner.

Montefalco is a place that believes in God, in Opus Dei's founder, in male power and the subjugation of women. In order to achieve the holiness or state of sanctity promised by the institution, women give up their freedom and even their bodies to motherhood and celibacy.

Women in Opus Dei are trained in the ideal feminine role of being responsible for the reproduction and transmission of the prelature's values. In addition to their administrative roles, women numeraries at Montefalco are expected to dedicate themselves to the education and training in Christian values of the supernumeraries, the students, the mothers and grandmothers from the community in order to fulfill the expected role of being the servants of others.

The expected role for all women, admitting some differences among them of course, is to militantly ensure that women's inequality remains unchanged. So while women come from different social classes, what unites them is the uncritical acceptance of their oppression as women. Their social prejudices have not enabled them to overcome hierarchical structures that divide society in terms of skin colour, social standing and money.

At each religious speech during mass, during confession and in the spiritual teachings for the community, the gendered division of labour is reiterated – i.e., men are the providers who work outside the home and women support their men by being in charge of all household duties as well as the good education of their children.³⁴ Women who are poor and who may not count on the support of a male provider are expected to reconcile their situation with assigned gender roles so they send their daughters to receive gender appropriate training like domestic service. They therefore actively participate in fulfilling the role expected of them by Opus Dei. Believing that they are offering their daughters opportunities for a better life, they accept the training provided in a school that offers an orderly and religious education even though this training is ideologically based on the subjugation of women.

Since 1958 the school has provided technical training for poor women as domestic workers. Thousands of women have been trained at the school as efficient workers and as faithful auxiliary numeraries. The Catholic-based education of women at the school contributes to a gender-biased model of education even though it becomes apparent to women involved in the programs that it is a difficult task to reconcile their lives to the demands of emulating the ideal represented by the Virgin Mary.

Notes

1. See <http://www.opusdei.org.mx> and <http://www.escuelafemeninademontefalco.edu.mx>
2. Opus Dei was founded as a Christian charismatic organization by Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer on October 2, 1928. In 1941 it was recognized under canonical law as a pious union and as a secular institute in 1950. As of 1982 it has the status of personal prelature.

3. I'm referring to my doctoral thesis, *Bellas y santas, el toque de distinción de las mujeres del Opus Dei. Procesos de construcción de la identidad de las numerarias en México*, México, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2006; and, my Master's thesis in History, *Ser santos en medio del mundo. Una aproximación a la Obra de Dios en México*, México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1999.
4. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *Camino*, 12 ed. México: Editora de Revistas, 1985; *Surco*, 2a ed. México: Editora de Revistas, 1987.
5. See *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Papal Encyclical, Rome, August 15, 1988.
6. This is based on Catholic belief that refers to biblical readings that, in turn, coincide with arguments found within 19th century Mexican positivism. According to these, there is an accepted difference between men and women where women are seen as just being, whereas men are seen as doers (See Verena Radkau, "Hacia la construcción de lo 'eterno femenino'. El discurso científico del Porfiriato al servicio de una sociedad disciplinarian". In *Papeles de la Casa Chata*, vol. 6, no.8, México, 1991; Marcela Suárez Escobar, "La familia burguesa y la mujer Mexicana en los inicios del siglo XX." In Campuzano, Luisa (coordinator), *Mujeres latinoamericanas del siglo XX. Historia y cultura, tomo II*, México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Casa de las Américas, 1998.
7. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *Forja*, México: Editora de Revistas, 1987, pp. 215-220.
8. This group from Spain has been discreet in its relations with political power but it has been tolerated and, oftentimes, supported by PRI governments since its arrival in México in 1950.
9. The followers of Sergio Méndez Arceo, sympathizer of the "option for the poor" and bishop of Cuernavaca's diocese where Montefalco is located. The bishop and his followers had serious conflicts with members of Opus Dei due to the very different interpretations of the gospel they espouse.
10. The Legionaries of Christ are a religious Congregation of priests of pontifical rite, founded in 1941 in Mexico. They are a powerful organization that along with Opus Dei tends to favour elite membership which they share between them (See Elio Masferrer et al., *El círculo del poder y la espiral del silencio. La historia oculta del padre Marcial Maciel y los Legionarios de Cristo*, México: Grijalbo, 2004).
11. Gender is understood as a socially constructed category that helps explain relationships among people whose bodies are sexualized and who have a variety of cultural practices and where masculine power and feminine subalternity are in constant conflict. Gender is a polysemic terms and as such is used in a dynamic, non-static manner where time and space play an important role.
12. Numeraries are regular members, and women supernumeraries are associate members, of the Opus Dei. The latter are married women who dedicate their time to their families as well as to philanthropic activities. In general they belong to the upper classes.
13. Marcela Lagarde, *Los cautiverios de las mujeres: madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas*, México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), 1993.
14. Auxiliary numeraries is a category exclusively assigned to women who are in charge of domestic work in Opus Dei centres.
15. Author's interview with numerary Hortensia Chávez on March 9, 1996 in Mexico City.

16. *Montefalco es una esperanza*, mecanoescrito. s/í, p. 1.
17. According to Consuelo Montelongo, numerary and director of the Opus Dei office of information, Women's Section, April 1996.
18. Joaquín García-Pimentel y Brannif, *Notas para la genealogía García-Pimentel*. México, edición del autor, 1993, p. 40. The grandiose construction of the temple to Santa Clara shows the landowners' great veneration of her. This is also seen in the choice of name for the area as well as in the feast in honour of this patron saint held every year on August 18. The feast, celebrated uninterrupted to this day, represents another way of manifesting local religious fervor.
19. Cited interview with Hortensia Chávez. Donations of hacienda lands and buildings to catholic church religious orders is a common practice among the upper classes, as with the García Pimentel family.
20. In Opus Dei's 1993 application to the Secretaría de Gobernación requesting its registration as a religious organization, it denied owning any property.
21. The other aim was to consolidate its presence in a region of the country known for its support of theology of liberation.
22. Compare this with the situation in the school for women where its secondary level certificate program has been restructured in order to adapt to new labour and educational needs.
23. Opus Dei divides itself into masculine and feminine sections. The first directs everything and the latter is principally responsible for the general maintenance of buildings. Even though women have made some labour gains their work remains centred around reproductive, not creative, activities.
24. During his 1970 visit to Mexico, Escrivá de Balaguer offered to do some fund-raising on behalf of Montefalco to help it attain its educational goals.
25. *Escuela Fememina de Montefalco: mecanoescrito*. México, Asociación Cultural Internacional, A.C., n.p..
26. Numeraries at Montefalco were interviewed and provided this information about the school. Among the numeraries interviewed are Gema Santamaría, Maru Arias, Alfonsina Ramírez, Hortensia Chávez and Consuelo Montelongo.
27. According to Opus Dei, giving one's life over to God for religious women entails giving up the traditional roles of mother and wife. Even those who present themselves as lay persons, like those in this prelature, practise celibacy. These women are to dedicate themselves to their new family in the school and to the practice of serving others by teaching students and by serving a hypothetical divine husband that materializes himself in the figure of Escrivá de Balaguer and all the other numeraries who run the administration of all the organization's houses.
28. Since 1994, students have been writing articles that are published in the newspaper, *Diario de Cuautla* in the permanently assigned column, *Viva la Familia!*
29. These certificate program courses are organized by Montefalco and are funded by the Kellogg foundation. They are delivered in the city of Cuautla by the civil association "Encuentros con la comunidad/Encounters with the community." The duration of the courses is 140 hours targeted to public school kindergarten, primary and secondary school teachers.
30. Mercedes Eguíbar, Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri. *Trabajo, amistad y buen humor*, Madrid, Palabra, 2001.

31. Escrivá de Balaguer, *Camino*, pp. 960-982.
32. The “misses” are numeraries who teach classes in spiritual instruction.
33. Brochure from ACIAC, *Escuela Femenina de Montefalco*, n.p.
34. See Ava Baron et al., “Symposium on Eileen Boris: Home to work.” In *Labor History*, vol. 39, no. 4 (1998), Farnham, U.K.

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