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March 24 - In Dan Brown's best-selling thriller, "The Da Vinci Code," Opus Dei is depicted as a dark and mysterious cult within the Roman Catholic Church, a secretive society of men and women who have sought political power to further the interests of a wealthy elite. Yet the true nature of Opus Dei, Latin for the "Work of God," is more prosaic, say those who have studied the organization.

Founded in 1928 by Spaniard Josemaria Escrivá, who was made a saint by Pope John Paul II in 2002, the 85,000-member organization has a simple aim: to provide a structure for lay Catholics so they can better live their journey of faith while fully immersed in the world. For a few celibate members, that road includes self-mortification, wearing a strap with spikes on it. But it is not, they say, of the exaggerated and bloody sort depicted in Brown's book.

John Allen, the Vatican correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter, is the author of a new book on the mysterious organization due to be published by Random House later this year. Allen—who says he is not a member of Opus Dei—spoke with NEWSWEEK's Edward Pentin in Rome.