

# Apostles Who Give Life

The vocation to Opus Dei as a numerary: enlarging the heart to transmit God's life to the members of the Work and to those who share a stretch of the journey towards heaven with them.

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John was just a teenager when he traveled through the towns of Galilee and Judea at Jesus's side. During those long walks, his position in the group mattered little: sometimes he

led the way with youthful enthusiasm, while at other times he succumbed to the weariness typical of his age and lagged behind. But John was always attentive to the Master, carefully observing his gestures and listening to his words. Where Jesus and the other eleven were, there was John's home.

Years later, with the apostles spread to the ends of the known world, John's heart remained united to Jesus and, through Him, to his former travel companions. His heart had even expanded, and it now included Jews and Gentiles, the poor and the rich, servants and masters. Conscious that he was privileged to have lived with Jesus, he began to write: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life [...] we proclaim also to you, so that you may*

*have fellowship with us* (1 Jn 1:3). John had matured; now he felt like a father, calling those he wrote to “children,” and even “my little children” (1 Jn 2:1, 18). His heart had grown to the point of feeling like a *father* in the family of Jesus' disciples.

## **Strength that supports the family**

The saints have sought to make God's nearness tangible in every moment of history. They have turned their surroundings into places to encounter Christ and their relationships into spaces to live with Him as in a home. Over time, they have made Jesus's words come true on earth: *In my Father's house there are many rooms* (Jn 14:2). Those who have embraced the call to holiness can repeat what St. John experienced: *We know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in*

*God, and God abides in him (1 Jn 4:16).*

When St. Josemaría understood the vocation to transmit a message of holiness in the middle of ordinary life, he also saw that this mission would be carried out from within the world, through ordinary work and *from within a family*. He explained it succinctly in the early years of Opus Dei: "Opus Dei in its entirety is a home,"<sup>[1]</sup> and he understood that, for him, this mission meant bringing God's closeness to people through his life "as father and mother."<sup>[2]</sup> He trusted, furthermore, that some people, also by divine invitation, would want to care for this home. And so he posed a question that was at the same time a petition to God: "My God! How can we advance your Work quickly if you do not send us many good vocations?"<sup>[3]</sup>

This group of people for whom St. Josemaría prayed would be called to become the initial nucleus from which this home would grow. They would be a portion of a family united by their consciousness of being sons and daughters, and in them, others could get to know the spirit of the Work. Meditating on the early Christian community, the founder wrote, “Notice how the Gospels show us the people around our Lord divided, as it were, into ever-larger concentric circles. First, we see the huge crowds of people; then, closer to Jesus, the large group of disciples, *turba discipulorum eius* (*Lk 6:17*); and closer still, right next to him, the small group of the Twelve.”<sup>[4]</sup> After describing the “concentric circles” around Jesus, St. Josemaria returned to the present: in a similar way, he explained, “in order to extend the fine fabric [...] of our apostolic work, which ought to reach all souls without discrimination — because

we are interested in all souls — the Cooperators, who do not strictly belong to the Work and do not have a divine vocation, are helped and supported by the Supernumeraries; and them, by the Associates and the Numeraries."<sup>[5]</sup>

All faithful of the Work seek to radiate the Gospel wherever they are, through their lives, work, and friendship. They are all called to be fully dedicated to holiness, because that is the source of true happiness. At the same time, it is the numeraries, with their special dedication to caring for certain essential tasks (such as making of the centers homes, giving Christian formation, or organizing the apostolate), who form that small nucleus called to be “the foundation, the strength, that sustains our entire family.”<sup>[6]</sup>

## **Passing the torch on, from the early years**

In the early years of Opus Dei, St. Josemaría met many young people, both students and professionals.

Before the new horizon of holiness in the middle of the world, they embraced the gift of celibacy: they understood that God was inviting them to unite their hearts, including in this specific way, to the heart of Christ. The first numeraries carried out their apostolate in their professional work and, at the same time, as an inseparable aspect of their mission, they felt called to care for that characteristic of the Work as a family bound by supernatural ties. They knew that they were not only sons and daughters, but also called to continue the Father's project, to care for the Work with a fatherhood and motherhood that, spiritually speaking, could be fully expressed.

Less than two years after the Work began, Isidoro Zorzano wrote to the founder, "Every day, it seems more beautiful to me; it is my only aspiration to cooperate in that ideal."<sup>[7]</sup> Similarly, during the Civil War, Álvaro del Portillo had an intense desire to cross the frontlines "not for patriotic reasons — although he did not lack patriotism — but to 'personally collaborate in the matters that the Father would like to entrust to us,'"<sup>[8]</sup> while St. Josemaría was almost alone on the other side of the country. A few years later, in Valencia in October 1937, Francisco Botella and Juan Jiménez Vargas "saw the need to finish their studies quickly to be more available, considering the future expansion of Opus Dei."<sup>[9]</sup> Later, from Mexico, Bl. Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri wrote to St. Josemaría, "I want so much to serve him [God]! – materially, by working as much as my body is capable of [...]; and spiritually, by

giving myself totally and helping my sisters and all the people I do apostolate with.”<sup>[10]</sup> All of these excerpts show, beyond the desire to bring the Work to different places, the personal conviction that each writer was living for God and for this family.

When the founder of Opus Dei began to rely on this group of sons and daughters, he understood that the Work would continue to be what God had asked of him, because it would always be a family. That is why, some time later, he could write: “I don't feel alone when you keep watch with me — *cor meum vigilat* (*Heb 5:8*) — when I see your concern for forming others who will continue the work.”<sup>[11]</sup> Since the first years of the Work, the numeraries have passed the torch to continue creating this home for apostles, caring for the heart of the family, where the others can ignite their desire for holiness

and the Christian transformation of the world.

## **Giving Christ's life abundantly**

The Prelate of Opus Dei summarized the numeraries' mission by saying that the particular service they render is to "give life" to their brothers and sisters.<sup>[12]</sup> The gift of apostolic celibacy leads them to live very close to Christ's heart, like St. John did. In this immediate way, they collaborate with the Lord to transmit divine life to all the other faithful of the Work and to the people around them. Only this way, by the will of God, can "the spirit [remain] active and awake in everyone."<sup>[13]</sup> Thus the associates, supernumeraries, and cooperators can count on the encouragement and support of a friend and brother to bring divine life to their own environments.

Numeraries ignite this familial warmth in various ways, always in

an atmosphere of fraternal welcome and sincere friendship, striving to transmit a way of life that illuminates the intelligence and strengthens the heart to maintain a vibrant apostolic spirit. In this endeavor, they may sometimes assist others by promoting activities or institutions with other members of the Work, or by working in the Administration of a center; at other times, it may involve extending the Work to a nearby city or another country, or visiting those who are homebound due to illness or immobility. The key is not the specific activity they carry out, but the magnanimity with which they cultivate divine life in their hearts and offer it to those around them with “paternal and maternal affection.”<sup>[14]</sup>

Receiving and giving abundantly, magnanimously, are attitudes befitting those who work alongside

Christ. *I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10)*, Jesus says in the Gospel of John. The Lord gave Himself entirely in Bethlehem and on Golgotha; He generously turned water into wine and multiplied loaves and fish; his miraculous catches of fish were also abundant... In his role as Teacher, Jesus abundantly gave while teaching and preaching to the crowds; furthermore, He formed those closest to Him with special predilection: "Jesus lavishes love upon the apostles: He shapes their minds, strengthens their wills, corrects their faults, and straightens their intentions until, with the sending of the Holy Spirit, they become the pillars on which the Church is built."<sup>[15]</sup> And in this self-giving, which results in joy, the apostles imitated and continue to imitate the Master.

St. Josemaría desired that all the faithful of the Work be closely united to the Cross, especially the numeraries, because of their particular mission to serve. He used a compelling image to express the way they would spend their lives, with joyful sacrifice, to make this great mission possible in the world: “Our Lord [...] wants there to be in the Work a group nailed to the Cross. The Holy Cross will make us enduring, always with the spirit of the Gospel itself, producing the apostolate of action as the sweet-tasting fruit of prayer and sacrifice.”<sup>[16]</sup> Where Jesus, his Mother, the holy women, and young John were, we find the source of divine life, which overflows in the sacraments and Christian charity.

## **Some ways to "give life"**

All aspects of a numerary's life can contribute to strengthening and

inspiring their mission. The effort to sanctify themselves in their work, the professionalism with which they engage in giving Christian formation to others, friendships with relatives and colleagues, their own personality, tastes, hobbies, and interests: all these dimensions can not only harmonize with their personal vocation but also enrich and enhance it. Moreover, it is on this path that these aspects of their lives find their greatest meaning.

Beginning with each person's unique personality, there are various ways to care for the Work as a supernatural family. Firstly, a numerary gives life in abundance when he or she personally lives an existence guided by divine grace. The lives of St. John and the siblings at Bethany illustrate how to unite the human and the divine. What they shared was the fact that their hearts were close to the Master's, as ours

can be: "If the centre around which your thoughts and hopes turn is the Tabernacle, then, my child, how abundant the fruits of your sanctity and apostolate will be!"<sup>[17]</sup> Truly, everything hinges on the living contact with the Source of life, from which all happiness and fruitfulness come. In other words, when one's own way of life is imbued with a supernatural sense, it becomes easier to inspire others to live that way in ordinary circumstances. Therefore, cultivating one's interior life and humanity is essential for carrying out the mission of giving life to one's brothers and sisters in the Work. The Church, and within it Opus Dei, grows through attraction.

A second way of giving life is by cultivating a passion for people; the desire to bring Christ to others and accompany them on their journey with sincere friendship, "face to face, heart to heart."<sup>[18]</sup> This entails

genuine interest in each person, closeness and openness toward everyone, getting involved in their lives and trying to understand their reality. Opus Dei is not a set of organized activities; rather, it is each person who is part of this home, each person who finds a bit of Jesus's warmth in it. In this sense, friendships are the best school of formation, where the capacity for listening, empathy, dialogue, and genuine concern for others naturally develops. A heart that lovingly welcomes the gift of celibacy continually seeks to expand the circle of friendships because it desires to kindle others with the love within.

Another way to give life is by bringing the spirit of the Work to one's professional work. Through their personal experience in this field, numeraries can significantly enrich the formation of the faithful of Work who they accompany. If they

work well, in a Christian way, out of love of God, while caring for others and for the common home, understanding the social and cultural dynamics of the time, and not measuring personal self-realization by their progress toward goals that put the person in second place, they will have placed healthy professional ambitions at the service of their own vocation. They will have learned firsthand what they can later transmit to their brothers and sisters. In this regard, the perception that colleagues of Luis Gordon (one of the first numeraries) had of him speaks volumes. They thought of him as a "father of the workers in his factory, who deeply mourned him upon his death."<sup>[19]</sup> They also noted that "it is difficult to find a soul as great as his among people in the hustle and bustle of the world and business [...]. He devoted his life entirely, sanctifying his work and being an affectionate father to the poor and an

exemplary model for the workers in his factory, leaving behind a void that will be hard to fill."<sup>[20]</sup>

Finally, another way to give life to others arises from cultivating an interest and taste for reflection, always in order to serve others. Those who seek to help others become salt and light in society through friendship and Christian formation need a certain capacity for reflection, study, and understanding of the contemporary world. In St. Josemaría's words, "In order for all my sons and daughters to be able to provide sound doctrine to millions of souls, like capillaries, you have an obligation to stay informed about matters, even temporal ones, that in any way affect the Church, the Pope, and souls."<sup>[21]</sup> Philosophical, theological, and cultural formation is a priority for anyone who wants to be an apostle in the world and who has a particular responsibility to

form others, who, in their turn, are also apostles.

## Availability of heart

All these ways of *giving life* form a habitual disposition to orient one's existence toward others, offering them the most valuable things: time, affection, acquired knowledge, prayer, etc. This is the disposition that the Father calls "*availability of heart*: the *effective* freedom to live only for God and, through him, for others, coupled with a willingness to take on the tasks required in the Work."<sup>[22]</sup> The dimension of care and service prevents personal resources from being like coins that are hidden and bear no fruit (cf. *Mt 25:25*) or from becoming a refuge for oneself alone.

The way of following Christ and living the virtues is adapted to the particular vocation to which each has been called. With a full

awareness of their secular nature, numeraries live the virtues according to their specific calling to leave everything to follow Christ as the foundation of a family. *“All things are lawful,”* St. Paul writes, *but not all things are helpful.* *“All things are lawful,”* *but not all things build up* (1 Cor 10:23-24). At the same time, this availability of the heart is also manifested in the openness, and even the desire, to adapt, to the extent possible, one's place of residence and work to the needs of others. This ensures that everyone can easily find the support and companionship they seek in Opus Dei.

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St. John witnessed the way Jesus's home, initiated in Galilee and Judea, expanded even beyond familiar regions. The world began to be that home. It had all started where John

was when, at the foot of the Cross, Jesus told him, “*Behold, your mother!*” *And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home* (Jn 19:27). Which of us would not go to that home to fill ourselves with love for God, together with our Lady? They shared confidences, prayed together, remembered past adventures, and dreamed about the future. With Mary’s guidance, they would have left that home renewed, with a desire to spread that love in “concentric circles,” until it reached the entire world.

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<sup>[1]</sup> *Letter 27, no. 11.*

<sup>[2]</sup> Words of St. Josemaría recorded in S. Bernal, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría Escrivá, entrevista de Salvador Bernal a Mons. Javier Echevarría*, chapter 4.

<sup>[3]</sup> L. Martínez Ferrer, "Vicente Rodríguez Casado: niñez, juventud y primeros años en el Opus Dei (1918-1940)," *Studia et Documenta*, vol. 10, 2016, pg. 216.

<sup>[4]</sup> *Letter* 27, no. 6.

<sup>[5]</sup> *Ibid*, no. 7. The statement that the cooperators do not have a vocation means, in this context, that they do not have a vocation to the Work. As St. Josemaría always preached, they have the divine vocation to holiness that all people have. Note also that the terms "Oblates" has been changed to "Associates" in the quote, for ease of reading: this is the term that St. Josemaría used to refer to this modality of the vocation to the Work at the end of his life.

<sup>[6]</sup> *Ibid*, no. 5.

<sup>[7]</sup> I. Zorzano, Letter from Málaga, 5 September 1930, quoted in J. M. Pero-

Sanz, *Isidoro Zorzano*, chapter 9, paragraph 1.

<sup>[8]</sup> L. Martínez Ferrer, *Vicente Rodríguez Casado: niñez, juventud y primeros años en el Opus Dei (1918-1940)*, *Studia et Documenta*, vol. 10, 2016, pg. 235. The quote within is from Álvaro del Portillo, *De Madrid a Burgos*, pg. 2 (3), AGP, APD, D-19114.

<sup>[9]</sup> C. Áñchel, *Francisco Botella Raduán: los años junto a san Josemaría*, *Studia et Documenta*, vol. 10, 2016, pg. 174.

<sup>[10]</sup> Letter to St. Josemaría from México D.F., 29 June 1950, published in *Letters to a Saint*, online edition from the Opus Dei Information Office, 2018.

<sup>[11]</sup> Letter 27, no. 60.

<sup>[12]</sup> Cf. Pastoral letter, 20-X-2020, no. 10.

<sup>[13]</sup> *Letter* 27, no. 76.

<sup>[14]</sup> *Ibid*, no. 23.

<sup>[15]</sup> *Ibid*, no. 9.

<sup>[16]</sup> *Instrucción sobre el espíritu sobrenatural de la Obra*, no. 28.

Commenting on these words, Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz wrote: "Our Father [St. Josemaria] does not indicate who make up this group nailed to the Cross. But Don Alvaro, in his note commenting on this paragraph, points out that the different ways of living one's vocation in the Work are already announced or alluded to here. From the context we can think that, in this case, it refers above all to the numeraries" (Pastoral letter, 20-X-2020).

<sup>[17]</sup> *The Forge*, no. 835.

<sup>[18]</sup> *Furrow*, no. 191.

<sup>[19]</sup> P. P. Ortúñez Goicolea, "Luis Gordon Picardo. Un empresario en los primeros años del Opus Dei (1898-1932)," *Studia et Documenta*, vol. 3, 2019, pg. 132.

<sup>[20]</sup> *Perlas Divinas*, publication of the Hermanas Oblatas del Santísimo Redentor, año IV, 45, pg. 348; published in *Studia et Documenta*, vol. 3, 2009, pg. 133, nt. 56.

<sup>[21]</sup> *Instrucción sobre la obra de San Miguel*, no. 32.

<sup>[22]</sup> Cf. Pastoral letter, 20-X-2020, no. 11.

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