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Sowing Love, Reaping a Culture of Gift: A Legacy of St. Josemaría

During the BeDoCare conferences held in Kenya this October, Fr. Javier del Castillo, Vicar General of Opus Dei, gave a talk in which he invited participants to reflect on the “culture of gift,” rooted in people’s daily “yes,” their generosity, and their spirit of service, across three key areas: family, professional work, and care and social charity.

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1. Introduction: Strathmore

In 1957, Msgr. Gastone Perrelli, Apostolic Delegate for Eastern and Western Africa, asked St. Josemaría, the founder of Opus Dei, to promote

a university with a Catholic spirit in Kenya. At that time, Kenya was on the road to independence, achieved in December 1963. Two members of Opus Dei arrived in Nairobi in 1958, and in 1961 Strathmore College began.

Strathmore was the first interracial school in East Africa, founded on the explicit condition of being "interracial and open to non-Catholics and non-Christians."[1] In 1962, the women of Opus Dei, under the same conditions, founded Kianda College.[2] The same criterion guided the beginnings of Opus Dei in Nigeria and other parts of the African continent.[3] St. Josemaría proclaimed many times: "There is only one race, the race of the children of God."[4]

This was an extraordinary institutional achievement, a true sign of fraternity ahead of its time. But the heart of today's reflection lies

here: for institutions to flourish and endure through history, they require more than noble ideals and solid structures. They need the daily “yes” of the people within them — their generosity, commitment, and spirit of service — to bring them to life.With this living response, even the greatest institutions not only endure, but become sources of renewal and fruitfulness for generations.

This is the creative tension that runs through history: structures are necessary, yet a culture of gift is equally vital. Strathmore and Kianda are not simply monuments to a past vision; they are ongoing invitations. Every generation of teachers, students, and staff is called to choose anew — to make openness, freedom, and fraternity a lived reality rather than mere words on the mission tab of a website. This is precisely why BeDoCare begins with the word ‘BE’: only by becoming, by shaping who

we are interiorly, can our ‘doing’ and our ‘caring’ bear the depth and consistency needed to sustain a true culture of gift.

2. Sowing love: “Put love where there is no love and you will reap love”

Sowing is one of Scripture’s most striking images of hope. A seed is small, fragile, and easily overlooked, yet once it enters the earth it carries hidden power. Jesus tells us: “A sower went out to sow his seed” (Lk 8:5). And the sower scatters not sparingly but abundantly, almost recklessly, trustingGod for the harvest.

Love works in the same way: given freely, beyond calculation, it bears fruit because God makes it grow.

St. Josemaría saw in the sower’s gesture the magnanimity of God

Himself, and also the way Opus Dei should spread — broadcasting the seed of holiness generously, in all circumstances, abundantly, without distinction, without self-interest. Its message is the universal call to holiness:

"He calls each and every one to holiness, he asks each and every one to love him: young and old, single and married, healthy and sick, learned and unlearned, no matter whereTheir work, or where they are."[5]

To sow is to share the love we have received. Each heart won for Christ becomes a new sower. And each small gift — an act of patience, a word of encouragement, a hidden sacrifice — extends the chain.

St. John Paul II reminded us: "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, [...] if love is not revealed to

him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it."[6]

Sowing love is therefore the beginning of a new culture. But it must be done in God's style — open-handed, trusting, generous.

St. John of the Cross captured this when he wrote: "Put love where there is no love, and you will reap love."[7]

This occurs when we give freely to others and we thereby create the conditions for a response that is equally free, for a gift ceases to be a gift when it carries an expectation of return. What arises in this dynamic is a spiral of gift-giving that is also life-giving, a process whose effects defy quantification. A notable example occurred in the United States in 2011, when an altruistic kidney donor, acting without

personal gain, initiated a national chain of transplants. His decision set off a sequence of exchanges that saved dozens of lives, demonstrating the incalculable ripple effect of authentic generosity.[8]

3. BeDoCare: “It is good that you exist […]. It is necessary that you exist”

Our deepest identity is that of children of God, the source of our meaning. From this flows our desire to treat one another as true brothers and sisters of the same Father, sharing the same dignity. And the concrete way to live this identity is through the gift of oneself: by loving and caring for one another. As the Prelate of Opus Dei stated at the first BeDoCare Conference, “We are jointly responsible for taking care of the world, establishing relationships founded on charity, justice, and respect, especially overcoming the

disease of indifference."[9] Indeed we are co-responsible for one another's flourishing.

As Cardinal Ratzinger explains: "Man is that strange creature that needs not only physical birth but also appreciation if he is to subsist. This is the root of what we call hospitality or care [...] For an individual to accept himself, someone must say to him: 'It is good that you exist.' It must be said, not with words, but with that act of the whole being which we call love. For the form of love is to want the existence of the other and, at the same time, to make it flourish anew. The key to the *I* lies in the you; the path to the *you* passes through the *I*."[10]

Viktor Frankl, the Viennese psychiatrist imprisoned in Auschwitz, experienced this love that gave him life when one day a foreman secretly gave him a piece of

bread. He states: “It was far more than the small piece of bread which moved me to tears at that time. It was the human ‘something’ which this man also gave to me — the word and look which accompanied the gift.”[11]

If this can occur at the human level, with the advent of Christianity, as Joseph Ratzinger adds, we not only say to the other, “it is good that you exist,” but “it is necessary that you exist.”[12]

This is the very root of care. It is not pity, nor condescension, but the recognition of the other’s dignity rooted in the image of God within them.

St. Josemaría’s legacy is not primarily theoretical but existential. He began in the Church a path of sanctification in ordinary life. To discover God in daily work and encounters transforms how we see others:

everyone deserves love and justice; everyone is worthy of our self-giving.

That is what you are doing in BeDoCare: reminding each person that their existence is not only good but necessary, and that in their fragility they summon forth the best of our humanity.

As St. Josemaría so often repeated: "You, by your very condition as a Christian, cannot live with your back turned to any concern, to any need of your fellow men."[13]

4. Challenges of individualism and consumerism

But this vision grows in contested soil. Individualism urges us to cling, hoard, and measure every relationship by profit; consumerism feeds endless dissatisfaction, making people and societies restless and closed in on themselves. Together

they erode personal and community bonds, leaving the weakest — the sick, the poor, the unborn, the elderly, migrants — most vulnerable. The result is fragmentation and even aggressiveness, as we end up defending “what is ours” at any cost.

This combination produces what Pope Francis has called a “throwaway culture”: “There are those who presume to be able to establish, on the basis of utilitarian and functional criteria, when a life has value and is worth being lived. Such a mentality can lead to grave violations of the rights of the most vulnerable, to serious injustices and situations of inequality, resulting for the most part from the mindset of profit, efficiency and success.”[14]

The temptation is to keep these challenges in the abstract. But they are not abstract — they invade the most intimate spaces of life. They

fracture the family, reduce work to transaction, and erode care for one another.

That is why St. Josemaría's legacy speaks with such urgency. And that is why the logic of gift must be re-planted precisely where individualism and consumerism wound us most deeply.

5. The Legacy of St. Josemaría in family, work, and care of others

a. Gift in the family

The family is the first school of gift. Here, hidden acts of service — washing dishes, bandaging a wound, ironing clothes for a special family event — become a daily apprenticeship in love.

This conviction led St. Josemaría to affirm that marriage is a Christian

vocation, a call from God:[15] "Christian spouses must be conscious that they are called to sanctify themselves by sanctifying others, that they are called to be apostles, and that their first apostolate is in the home. They must understand the supernatural work implied in founding a family, educating children, and radiating Christianity in society."[16]

For many, "family" naturally includes the extended network of cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. A child does not grow up alone; he or she is carried by a whole community. Grandparents pass on wisdom, older siblings take responsibility for the younger, and relatives step in when parents struggle. The burdens and the joys of one household are shared by all. This lived solidarity springs from belonging to one another and recognizing that we are all children of God.

But consumerism undermines this. By making us forget about God, it detaches sexuality from gift, in essence, reducing it to commodity. Children become either “rights” or unwanted “products.” Family life itself is reshaped by domination and self-interest.

The antidote is to rediscover complementarity as self-gift. As John Paul II taught: “The human person […] must never be treated by another as the means to an end; the person is a good toward which the only proper and adequate attitude is love.”[17]

Children, too, are a gift — not property. Indeed, they are often called “the wealth of the family,”i n some societies though not in economic terms. They are the true wealth because they embody hope and continuity. In the family, they “breathe in” love through parents, siblings, and relatives. There they

learn to share and to dialogue, to see themselves as children and siblings, to grasp justice, and to practice both giving and receiving forgiveness. In this way they discover their own vulnerability and that of others. The family thus becomes the school where attitudes are formed that later shape wider social life.

Among these, forgiveness and reconciliation stand out as essential in a world marked by wounds we inflict on one another. Disputes within families are often resolved through the mediation of elders, teaching that peace is more valuable than pride. This is where reconciliation begins: in the home, in the village, around the family hearth. And it does not remain there. The lessons learned in these small reconciliations ripple outward into society. When families learn to forgive, communities become capable of peace. When forgiveness

fails at home, its absence is felt far beyond, feeding cycles of hostility and division — even as we see today in wars and conflicts that scar entire nations. Thus, forgiveness learned at home becomes increasingly vital for our world. Forgiveness is, in fact, the most gratuitous act of all, returning good for evil. As Pope Leo XIV affirms: "True forgiveness does not await repentance, but offers itself first, as a free gift, even before it is accepted."[18]

Thus the family is not just a private unit — it is the seedbed of a culture of gift for society where every member is necessary and no one should be isolated from others: it is here, in these networks of kinship and care, that life itself is freely given, and therefore grows in meaning only when it is handed on as freely as it was received. As Jesus teaches: 'Freely you have received; freely give' (Mt 10:8); or as the

Swahili proverb says, *'Mti haukui bila mizizi'* — a tree does not grow without roots — reminding us that the gift of life is sustained and passed on within the family and community.

b. Gift in professional work

Work is another privileged field for self-gift. Yet individualism and consumerism distort its meaning from opposite sides. Individualism reduces work to the pursuit of personal gain or treats it as a burden to avoid, cutting it off from solidarity. Consumerism, on the other hand, drives us into workaholism — endless production for endless consumption — while measuring its worth only in material returns. Both leave the person empty, because they obscure work's deeper meaning. Far from being mere survival or achievement, work finds its truth in service and collaboration in the common good.

To live this, St. Josemaría teaches us, we must first work well — diligently, responsibly, and competently — without letting work become an idol that devours family and interior life. But working well, and justly while essential, is not enough.If reduced to contractual compliance alone, work risks being hollowed out, leaving no space for the human and spiritual meaning it is meant to bear.

Here Benedict XVI offers a key insight in *Caritas in Veritate*: "While in the past it was possible to argue that justice had to come first and gratuitousness could follow afterwards, as a complement, today it is clear that without gratuitousness, there can be no justice in the first place."[19] What work needs, therefore, is the logic of gift, and not just for it to have the added transcendent dimension of charity, but as Benedict XVI implies,

it needs it if it is to remain just and not drift into injustice.

In St. Josemaría's terms, work is the place where the Christian acts as "leaven in the dough," transforming oneself, one's colleagues, and even the task itself into a sacrifice pleasing to God. And in doing so, it also keeps it from corruption.

This insight finds a natural echo in Africa, where the cultural ethos is captured vividly in the word *Harambee* — "let us pull together." *Harambee* is not merely a slogan; it is a way of life in which communities unite their strength to accomplish what no individual could achieve alone: whether it is in building a school, supporting a family in crisis, or ensuring that a wedding or funeral is celebrated with dignity. Each person contributes according to their means, and together the whole community rises.

Applied to professional life, this principle illuminates the sanctification of work as service and solidarity, as for instance: a doctor who spends extra time with a patient who cannot pay; a teacher who mentors struggling students after class; or an entrepreneur who prioritizes fair wages and family-friendly policies.

All these embody the spirit of Harambee and are seeds of a culture of gift. Thus work becomes more than a transaction: it becomes a vocation. It ceases to be an idol or an escape and instead becomes participation in God's creative and redemptive love for everyone, not just ourselves. As the family is the school of gift, so too the workplace becomes a second school where daily work, united in service, teaches us to "pull together" and to build up society on the firm foundation of self-giving.

c. Gift in care and social charity

Finally, care and social charity. St. Josemaría, in the early days of Opus Dei, sought strength among Madrid's poorest.

"I went to seek strength [...] in the poorest neighborhoods of Madrid. Hours and hours, back and forth, every day, on foot from one part to another, among the [...] poor who owned absolutely nothing; among children with runny noses and coughing spells — all [sickly], but still God's children, still souls that were pleasing to him. [...] And so I went in search of the means to do the Work of God in all these places. The sick constituted the human strength of the Work."[20]

This intuition — that caring for the weakest strengthens the giver — remains prophetic.

Individualism and consumerism hide fragility by idolizing independence. Yet it is precisely in vulnerability that we discover our common humanity Illness, poverty, and old age are not threats to dignity but moments when dignity shines most clearly. Care, therefore, is crucial as it is the human and humanizing response to fragility, but it must be given freely and personally.

In fact, care is more than a task; it is a way of relating that acknowledges our shared condition. By recognizing our own vulnerability and that of others, we rediscover human interdependence. This has concrete consequences: the development of palliative care, assistance to families with dependents, the rise of care-oriented professions and the promotion of their dignity, and a growing appreciation for the spiritual, psychological, and emotional dimensions of life are just

some examples that have arisen from people with a mission to care, and in and through their personal witness have inspired and strengthened many of these social charity professions.

When a culture of care and therefore of gift exists, we overcome individualistic perspectives. As Mamen Guitart, a professional dedicated to care, explains: “Only people know how to care, and we all learn to care when we are cared for. It comes naturally to give what you have received, and it is logical that such attention not be limited to the private sphere of a home or an institution. The culture of care spreads like a cascade, and that is why it ends up impacting the whole society. A better society should aim to educate people capable of caring. That would amount to an atomic bomb against individualism. The culture of care is so elementary, so

important, and so humanizing that it should form part of the strategic lines of any society that aspires to true progress."[21]

This, in fact, ought to be the distinctive mission of all the initiatives represented here. Your projects will certainly solve concrete problems, but if accompanied by persons who discover and are inspired to give of themselves freely to others, they will also shine as a light for society. The State, businesses, families, and communities will look to you — to your priorities, your culture, your attention to each person, and the principles that guide you. It will be a particular light that you will bear, one capable of illuminating all of society with a vision of care rooted in human dignity.

6. Conclusion: the attitude of listening and the culture of gift

After all that has been said about the culture of gift, about care, about work, about institutions — what is the decisive first step? The answer, though simple in appearance, is profound: we must begin by listening.

Listening is not merely a technique to be employed; it is an internal disposition of the soul whereby we freely open our minds and hearts to one another. It is the primordial gesture of care, the foundation of authentic dialogue, and the condition for genuine fraternity. In every act of listening there are two persons: one who entrusts, one who receives. To listen is to recognize the other not as object but as subject; to regard the other with love; to attend with both

the senses and the heart, allowing their reality to shape our response.

Without listening, the act of giving becomes distorted. It degenerates into paternalism, when we impose our own solutions; into dependency, when assistance erodes another's freedom; or into projection, when what we give reflects our own desires rather than the true needs of the other. In each case, the gift humiliates instead of elevating. Benedict XVI expressed this with precision: "If my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift."[22] Listening is the safeguard of this personal presence.

Here, then, lies our responsibility. Institutions, however noble, may preserve values, embody ideals, and provide opportunities, yet they run

the risk of becoming cold structures unless they are animated by persons who discover and embody the logic of self-giving. And this possibility exists when men and women, in their ordinary work and daily relationships, begin by embracing listening as a way of life and a guiding principle. Only then will institutions have the real possibility of transcending their functional roles: schools will be more than classrooms, hospitals more than wards, businesses more than enterprises: they will be able to become places where humanity is renewed, where fraternity flourishes, and where the love of God becomes tangible.

This is the enduring legacy of St. Josemaría: not only to promote institutions, but to inspire persons — one by one — who, by listening and giving of themselves, sow love wherever they are — until society

itself is renewed and transformed into a true culture of gift.

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[1] Cf. Vázquez de Prada, A., *El fundador del Opus Dei, Los caminos divinos de la tierra*, vol. III, Rialp 2003, pg. 380-383 (Private translation unless otherwise stated.).

[2] Ibid. pg. 383.

[3] Ibid. pg. 384.

[4] St. Josemaría Escriva, *Furrow*, no. 303.

[5] St. Josemaría Escriva, *Friends of God*, no. 294.

[6] St. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 4-III-1979, no. 10.

[7] St. John of the Cross, *Cartas*, in *Obras completas*, ed. Lucinio Ruano

(Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2001), Carta 26, pg. 1041.

[8] Sack, Kevin. “60 Lives, 30 Kidneys, All Linked.” *The New York Times*, 18-II-2012.

[9] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, “Enlarging the Heart,” Rome, 29-IX-2022.

[10] Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*. Translated by Mary Frances McCarthy, Ignatius Press, 1987, pg. 79–80.

[11] Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Translated by Ilse Lasch, Beacon Press, 2006, pg. 75.

[12] Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*. Translated by Mary Frances McCarthy, Ignatius Press, 1987, pg. 81.

[13] St. Josemaría Escriva, *The Forge*, no. 453.

[14] Pope Francis, *Address to the Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences*, "Disability and the Human Condition — Changing the Social Determinants of Disabilities and Building a New Culture of Inclusion." Clementine Hall, 11-IV-2024.

[15] St. Josemaría Escriva, "Marriage: a christian vocation," in *Christ is Passing By*.

[16] St. Josemaría Escriva, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 24.

[17] St. John Paul II, General Audience, 16-I-1980.

[18] Pope Leo XIV, General Audience, 20-VIII-2025.

[19] Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2-VI-2009, no. 38.

[20] Berglar, P., *Opus Dei: Life and Work of Its Founder Josemaría Escrivá*. Scepter, 1993.

[21] Cf. Mamen Guitart: “La hospitalidad salvará al mundo” - Aceprensa.

[22] Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 25-XII-2005, no. 34.

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