

opusdei.org

# Celibacy

What is celibacy? How did it arise in the Church? Who lives apostolic celibacy in Opus Dei and why? An article from the "Diccionario de San Josemaría," which is currently being translated into English.

09/14/2020

The word “celibacy” describes the condition of the celibate person – someone who is not married. This is a negative definition that can be applied to very different situations.

Celibacy is the condition, first, of those who are not yet married but intend to marry and therefore actively try to meet people of the opposite sex. Second, it is also the condition of those who once thought of getting married, but due to circumstances (such as an absorbing dedication to their work, the need to care for family members, etc.), remain unmarried. Finally, celibacy is the condition of those who for some particularly reason (ordinarily related to religious beliefs) consciously and voluntarily take on a commitment to remain unmarried. This is the celibacy we will consider here. Founded on passages of the New Testament, it has been lived since the beginning Christianity.

Saint Josemaría preaches and writes as a pastor about the vocation to celibacy *for the kingdom of heaven* (the expression used by the Gospel): rather than offering a theory of

celibacy, he lives it and teaches how to live it. He also speaks as a founder and therefore, although many of his teachings can be applied more broadly, addresses himself particularly to the faithful of Opus Dei, ordinary Christians who live and strive for holiness in the middle of the world.

## **1. A brief historical overview of celibacy**

There are two key New Testament texts that discuss and recommend celibacy. The first is in Saint Matthew's Gospel, when Christ praises those who decide not to marry *propter Regnum coelorum*, "for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven" (*Mt 19:12*). The second is from the First Letter to the Corinthians, where Saint Paul speaks about celibacy and marriage as divine gifts or vocations and points

to the special value of the former (*1 Cor 7:3-7, 25-35*).

From apostolic times, some Christians, both men and women, accepted the New Testament invitation and took on a commitment to celibacy. The men were usually called *ascetics* and the women *virgins*. The latter, who were more numerous, often ratified their commitment with a consecration; this practice was common enough that it even gave rise to a liturgical rite. Some women, however, took on a commitment to celibacy without changing their canonical or ecclesial status; they remained laywomen and were neither religious nor consecrated according to any official rite of the Church.

With the spread of monasticism at the beginning of the fourth century, ascetics and virgins (both consecrated and non-consecrated)

were integrated into the various monastic communities. Both the reality and the idea of a commitment to celibacy by ordinary Christians continuing to live in the middle of the world disappeared for all practical purposes.

In the early 20th century, a greater interest arose in the Church regarding the lives of the first Christians, many of whom lived celibacy without abandoning their lay vocation in the middle of the world. This is the celibacy lived by some members of Opus Dei, and which Saint Josemaría spoke about in his preaching.

## **2. Celibacy, love and mission**

Christ's words "for the kingdom of heaven," which are often used to define Christian celibacy, evoke the rich meaning of the expression "kingdom of heaven" in Sacred Scripture. First, they point to God's

lordship over the universe as its Creator; second, to the powerful, loving and saving action by which God chose Israel and guided it throughout history with the promise of the coming Messiah; and third, to Christ himself, who consummates the plan of salvation in his Death and Resurrection. The kingdom becomes present in Christ and extends through Him to all humanity and to the whole of creation, which will be renewed at the end of time.

Since the commitment of celibacy is a response to the divine call, it must be God who grants it as a gift. Hence we need to consider it in light of the action of grace, as a participation in Christ's love and mission.

Saint Josemaría always insisted on God's love for us, shown in Christ, to which we are called to respond. "To know that you love me so much, my God, and yet... I haven't lost my

mind!” (*The Way*, 425); “Jesus, may I be last in everything... and first in Love” (*The Way*, 430); “What is the secret of perseverance? Love. Fall in love, and you will not leave him” (*The Way*, 999).

The passages cited — to which many others could be added — refer to all Christians, whatever their state or condition, including those who are called to celibacy. Those who follow this vocational path are not people who “do not understand or value love; on the contrary, their lives can only be explained in terms of this divine Love (I like to write it with a capital letter) which is the very essence of every Christian vocation” (*Conversations*, 92). Those God calls to celibacy are people who know how to love, and therefore, with the help of divine grace, they can follow the path on which love for God fills every corner of their heart and personality.

This deep understanding of the relationship between love and celibacy reflects his own experience. Saint Josemaría began considering the priesthood when, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, he “began to sense Love, to realize that [his] heart was asking [him] for something great and that it was love” (Meditation, March 19, 1975: Andrés Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, I, p. 97).

In his response to the interviewer in *Conversations*, quoted briefly above, Saint Josemaría adds a second reason for celibacy which clarifies its importance in the life of the Church. “Those who are celibate are *de facto* freer of ties of affection and have greater freedom of movement to dedicate themselves permanently to conducting and supporting apostolic undertakings. This is also true in the lay apostolate” (*Conversations*, 92). This reason may seem to be less

important or even just pragmatic; but it reminds us that the call to celibacy is simultaneously a call to participate in the Church's mission.

Christian celibacy is chosen and lived out of love. But love for whom? For God and for our brothers and sisters, who we are called to serve. “Love for God and apostolate, as reasons for celibacy, are not only inseparable; they are intrinsic to one another. The reason for celibacy is love for Christ; and this love necessarily entails sharing in his mission” (Burkhart-Lopez, I, 2010, p. 166).

The inseparability of the two reasons for Christian celibacy highlights its great value in the Church. Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium give frequent testimony to its importance, from writings on virginity and celibacy in the Patristic period to the Council of Trent (cf. Council of Trent, Session XXIV, Canon 10: DZ, 1810)

and the Second Vatican Council (cf. LG, 41; PO, 16, etc.), not to mention the many references in documents, addresses, etc., of recent pontiffs.

The inseparability of these two reasons is echoed in the whole life of the celibate person. Those who open themselves to God's gift of celibacy receive the grace "to give body and soul to the Lord, to offer Him an undivided heart, without the mediation of earthly love" (*Conversations*, 122). "How is that heart of yours getting along? Don't worry: the saints — who were perfectly ordinary, normal beings like you and me — also felt those 'natural' inclinations. And if they had not felt them, their 'supernatural' reaction of keeping their heart — soul and body — for God, instead of giving it to creatures, would have had little merit. That's why, once the way is seen, I think that the heart's weaknesses need be no obstacle for a

determined soul, for a soul in love”(*The Way*, 164). Celibacy opens a person’s heart fully and tenderly to God, while also infusing a more sincere and authentic love for all men and women.

This is why Saint Josemaría liked to add the adjective “apostolic” to the noun “celibacy,” emphasizing the unity between the two reasons for Christian celibacy.

Purity of heart and of the affections is an indispensable condition for living chastity and growing in love for God and in service to one’s brothers and sisters. “Purity enhances and strengthens character” (*The Way*, 144); “it acts in the Christian’s life as the salt that preserves from corruption, and constitutes the touchstone for the apostolic soul” (*Friends of God*, 175). Purity leads to openness to the gift of life, including spiritual life. Those

who are faithful to the commitment to celibacy receive from God a fruitfulness by which they share in God's fatherhood. God "returns a hundredfold; and he does so even in children. Many give them up for the sake of his glory, and they have thousands of children of their spirit. Children, as we are children of our Father who is in heaven" (*The Way*, 779).

Hence Saint Josemaría always opposed any attempt to present a commitment to celibacy as the consequence of a lack of strength or as an emotional handicap. "We Christians are in love with Love. Our Lord does not want us to be dry and rigid, like inert matter. He wants us to be saturated with his love! People who, for the sake of God, say No to a human love are not bachelors or spinsters, like those sad, unhappy, crestfallen men and women who have despised the chance of a pure

and generous love” (*Friends of God*, 183).

This reality applies to all Christian celibacy. First, to the celibacy proper to the consecrated life, for which Saint Josemaría always expressed great appreciation, even though it was a very different path from the one to which God had called him. Second, to priestly celibacy, which he himself lived and of which he always stressed the spiritual and human richness. “People who say that we priests are lonely are either lying or have got it all wrong. We are far less lonely than anyone else, for we can count on the constant company of our Lord, with whom we should be conversing without interruption” (*The Forge*, 38). And finally, to the celibacy of those men and women who, responding to a divine call, decide to remain celibate in the middle of the world in order to sanctify the world from within. This

last is “apostolic celibacy,” an expression he often used to refer to celibacy lived in the middle of the world.

We should also stress here that the centrality of love in the celibate person never leads Saint Josemaría to forget that love is essential for all vocations in the Church.

In his works, we find frequent passages in which he lists different states or conditions (celibate, married, widowed, priests, men, women, young, old, etc.) precisely to emphasize that all are equally called to holiness and to love for God, “which is the very essence of every Christian vocation” (*Conversations*, 92): “Each person, in his own place, according to the vocation which God has inspired in his soul (be he single, married, widowed or priest) must strive to live chastity with great refinement, because it is a virtue for

everyone. It calls on everyone to struggle, to be delicate, sensitive and strong. It calls for a degree of refinement which can only be fully appreciated when we come close to the loving Heart of Christ on the Cross” (*Friends of God*, 184; cf. *Christ is Passing By*, 25).

This is why Saint Josemaría reiterates and makes his own the constant Church teaching on “the excellence and value of celibacy” (*Conversations*, 45, 92 and 122; *Friends of God*, 184). At the same time he proclaims that marriage is not just a mere social institution, nor the path for Christians who do not receive the call to celibacy, but a true Christian vocation in the full sense of the expression: “I have spent almost forty years preaching the vocational meaning of marriage. More than once I have had occasion to see faces light up as men and women, who had thought that in their lives a

dedication to God was incompatible with a noble and pure human love, heard me say that marriage is a divine path on earth!” (*Conversations*, 91).

### **3. Apostolic celibacy in Opus Dei**

Right from the beginning, since October 2, 1928, the message of Opus Dei has been addressed to people in any profession or trade, single or married.

Saint Josemaría saw that in Opus Dei there needed to be persons who, in order to assure the continuity of the apostolic tasks, “commit themselves to live in celibacy, and to whom certain functions of formation are reserved because of their greater availability, c” (*The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, p. 38). He also understood that he would have to begin by incorporating those who committed themselves to celibacy in Opus Dei, in order to strengthen and lay the

foundations of the Work so that, when the time came, the doors could be opened to married people. “Thus he orientated his initial work towards those people whom he perceived as having the vocation to ‘apostolic celibacy,’ as he liked to call it; at the same time, he vigorously and in clear terms preached the Christian value of marriage. Opus Dei developed as a result of that apostolic work, and it was stated from the very beginning that married people as well as celibates could form part of it, although the manner of belonging to Opus Dei of the former would have a juridical form different from that of the latter, in line with what canon law then allowed, until eventually full recognition came of the fact that both married and celibate persons could be members of Opus Dei with full rights” (Ocáriz, “Vocation to Opus Dei as a Vocation in the Church” in *Opus Dei in the Church*, p. 111).

Likewise he stressed, right from the start, that this commitment to celibacy “has nothing whatsoever to do with attitudes of consecration or giving up secular activities. On the contrary, it is set firmly in a context of full, radical affirmation of things secular; in fact it is a call to testify to the value of things secular in and through temporal tasks and occupations” (Illanes, “The Church in the World: The Secularity of the Members of Opus Dei” in *Opus Dei in the Church*, p. 185).

In order to explain the reality of the spirit and life of Opus Dei, Saint Josemaría often turned to the example of the early Christians. “The easiest way to understand Opus Dei,” he said in an interview, “is to consider the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by their Baptism. Externally

they did nothing to distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens. The members of Opus Dei are ordinary people. They work like everyone else and live in the midst of the world just as they did before they joined. They live like any other Christian citizen who wants to respond fully to the demands of his faith, because that is what they are” (*Conversations*, 24). He often reiterated this comparison, speaking more specifically about the celibacy of “those ascetics and virgins who personally dedicated their lives to the service of the Church. They did not shut themselves up in a convent: they stayed in the middle of the street, among their peers” (*Instruction*, December 8, 1941, no. 1. 81).

As mentioned above, from 1928 onwards Saint Josemaría saw that the spirit of Opus Dei was meant for people in all walks of life. Hence the

decision to begin his apostolate by stressing incorporation into the Work with a commitment to celibacy was made to prepare for the time when married people could join Opus Dei. That time came in 1948 and 1949, shortly after Opus Dei had received its first pontifical approval on February 24, 1947. Two documents from the Holy See, and the subsequent definitive approval, granted on June 16, 1950, made it possible.

In 1967 the founder said: “Who are the men and women who have accompanied this poor sinner, following Christ? A small percentage of priests, who have previously exercised a secular profession or trade. A large number of secular priests from many dioceses throughout the world, who thus strengthen their obedience to their respective bishops, increase their love for their diocesan work, and

make it more effective. They stand with their arms open in the form of a Cross so that all souls may always find shelter in their hearts, and like me they live in the hustle and bustle of the workaday world which they love. And finally a great multitude made up of men and women of different nations, and tongues, and races, who earn their living with their professional work. The majority of them are married, many are single. They share with their fellow citizens the important task of making temporal society more human and more just. They work, let me repeat, with personal responsibility, shoulder to shoulder with their fellow men and experiencing with them successes and failures in the noble struggle of daily endeavour, as they strive to fulfil their duties and to exercise their social and civic rights” (*Conversations*, 119).

According to the 2018 Pontifical Yearbook, about 92,900 persons now form part of the Prelature, of whom 2,095 are priests. The large majority of the lay faithful are married.

In Opus Dei the two situations of celibacy and marriage are complementary. Both contribute to highlighting and carrying out the mission proper to the Prelature, spreading awareness of the possibility of sanctifying all earthly realities, each in the situation where God has called them.

And all this bearing in mind what Saint Josemaría so often stressed: the unity of the vocation. In Opus Dei there are no categories or grades of members, because all the faithful in Opus Dei, whatever their position in society, share in the same spiritual reality (the call to sanctify one's one state or condition in the world) and all have the full responsibility to

contribute to the Prelature's mission. "In the Work," Saint Josemaría said, "there are no degrees or categories of membership. The vocation to Opus Dei is one and the same. It is a call to commit oneself personally, freely and responsibly to try to carry out God's will, amid the multitude of personal situations of each member in the world, to which the same specific vocation is adapted" (*Conversations*, 62).

In other words, the great variety of faithful who form part of Opus Dei, which is "a reflection of what is to be found in the People of God as a whole, implies different modes of being a member of Opus Dei; but these modes are not degrees of a greater or lesser belonging to Opus Dei, nor do they denote different vocations" (Ocáriz, "Vocation to Opus Dei as a Vocation in the Church" in *Opus Dei in the Church*, p. 108). Thus it would be as wrong to consider the

married faithful as partial members and the celibate people as full members. All the men and women in Opus Dei, celibate and married, are equally members and all are fully secular.

Saint Josemaría “always thought and spoke in terms of what is usually called today an ‘ecclesiology of communion.’ Thus he always spoke of a multiplicity of situations, roles and involvements, each endowed with intrinsic dignity, which, on account of their very diversity, complement one another, all contributing to the perfection, and apostolic effectiveness, of the whole” (Illanes, “The Church in the World: The Secularity of the Members of Opus Dei” in *Opus Dei in the Church*, p. 185). Hence “the universal call to holiness and apostolate, with all that it implies (recognizing in and from all human situations an openness to one and

the same fullness of Christian life) is reflected in the very structure of Opus Dei, thereby enabling the Prelature to be effective in its mission of proclaiming and spreading that call from within the great variety of earthly realities” (*Ibid.*).

*Laurent Touze*

## Bibliography

Ernst Burkhardt - Javier López, *Ordinary Life and Holiness in the Teaching of St. Josemaría*, I, Scepter, 2107.

José Luis Illanes, “The Church in the World: the Secularity of Members of Opus Dei” in *Opus Dei in the Church*, Scepter, pp. 121-190.

Fernando Ocariz, “Vocation to Opus Dei as a Vocation in the Church” in *Opus Dei in the Church*, pp. 77-120.

.....

pdf | document generated  
automatically from [https://opusdei.org/  
en-ie/article/apostolic-celibacy-catholic-  
church/](https://opusdei.org/en-ie/article/apostolic-celibacy-catholic-church/) (03/21/2026)