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“I’d Rather Have the Kids!”

Agustín Cornejo is the manager of the agricultural school, Las Garzas, in Chile, and a Supernumerary of Opus Dei. The youngest of eleven siblings, orphaned when he was six, he talks about his life and work.

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The youngest of eleven siblings, orphaned when he was six years old, Agustín Cornejo entered the Las Garzas Agricultural School (Chile)

thanks to the generosity of his oldest sister's husband.

He arrived at Las Garzas "thinking it was just about working on a farm." But soon he realized that he had to study. "You just had to hack it!" he says with his vigorous rustic dialect. He confesses that "there were many things that captivated me at the school: the teachers, the priests, the friendly football matches; we worked, we ate and we studied together. It was a family to me."

"But when I finished, I left to start working. But soon I decided to return because though I was working hard, I missed the family warmth. I spoke with the director and, as I was free for a few days, he invited me to do a retreat. I had gone to a wedding celebration that lasted till dawn the day before, so I had not slept at all. But I told myself: I'll go just the same! At the party, somebody had asked if

anyone could accompany his sister who had to travel to San Fernando. I offered to do it because from there I could just slip off quietly to the retreat and nobody could tell me not to go. So, I went and there they offered me this job. It was the year 1988."

Were you already married?

"No, I hadn't thought about it then. When I met Mrs. Elvira" —that's how he calls his wife— "I asked her to marry me on the second day. She said I was crazy so I replied: if we aren't getting married, then I'm out of here. Because it was clear that this young girl was someone you shouldn't hurt. She accepted, but she asked me to wait for a while."

When did you ask to join Opus Dei?

"I had been working for 3 years in Las Garzas and all the time I kept wondering when they were going to

ask me," he recalls with a mischievous grin. "I didn't understand much, but I liked the security of being with God, of working with Him—always with the intention of working better. It doesn't matter if I make a mistake, if sometimes I fall or go backwards. Someone will help me to get back on the right path. That's how I want to live."

And what about your wife?

"She complained that I left her alone, that I was spending all my time praying, that I was busy with my own things. But she kept packing my job bag each day. Until one day she told me: I'm in the Work. It's about time!, I told her. I've been praying for you for six years."

Agustin and Elvira have six children "for now." Two of them study in Las Garzas, in the 3rd and 4th year of secondary school, respectively.

"Seeing the table with the six young tykes makes me feel proud," he says. "I thank God for them. The youngest of my daughters already knows how to read and the other day she recited the capitals of the world to me. Of course, I pray a ton for them and my wife does too. To work so hard and just have one child, it's not worth it! Between having six kids in the house and a good car in the driveway, I'd rather have the kids and my 1977 pick-up! There's nothing to lose! One of my daughters asked me: How long are we going to be poor? All our lives, I told her, unless you work hard, you do quite well, and you want to be generous with your parents. I think it's good for them not to be rolling in money. They all help each other a lot, and they lend their things to one another."

Would you like any of your children to go to the university?

"If one of them goes, all should have a chance to go... and there's no money for that. That's why I'm praying and working hard. But they have to be the ones who want it, and not because Dad says so. Let's see how their grades are, how they do in the exams, and afterwards how it can be managed. God can write with the leg of a table. If people would have told me when I was a child that I was going to study in Las Garzas and that I was going to work here for twenty years, I would have thought they were crazy. But God gives us things little by little, treating us like small children, who begin by taking milk, then baby food and after that, soft beans. But I tell them that if they want to study, they have to have two things clear in their heads. First, they should be responsible for their studies without expecting Mom or Dad to be coaching them. And second, that they should go to the university to learn, to serve, to help

others. If they are going there to just make money, it's a waste of time."

What is your greatest motivation in your work?

"Las Garzas is my whole life!" he declares passionately. "I feel in synch with the kids here. I'm just a street-kid myself; I like trading wise-cracks with them. Besides, I remember how confused you can get when you're young and there is no one to tell you things clearly: to work well, to follow a time-table, to take care of the house, to be careful with parties, with alcohol, with girls. Generally, young kids only open up with their friends and their friends don't invite them to challenging things. When you show a young kid some trust, he starts changing and begins talking about himself, what he's done, and ends up being grateful for having been led by a firmer hand. Parents

are now very soft with the children: too much freedom, too much money."

"It's great to see that the students start changing and when they finish school, they call us up to tell us that they are working, that they got married, that they are with their wife, with their children. You see real achievements. And achievements also on the farm, among the workers, with the agents, in the production. It would be a contradiction to teach and not to produce good grapes on the farm."

And in your work, how do you find God?

"Sometimes, I lose my peace. I have to be watchful, because at times the devil stirs me up with his little tail and I get angry or don't act in the way a son of God should. I have to be like Him, to disappear so that God can be seen in me. The students need to see someone who treats them with

affection, with love, who is truly concerned about them, who corrects them in a friendly way. Sometimes, I have to be a bit tough with them. Then I first talk it over with God, and ask Him for advice. I pray for the fellow and then do what has to be done, but with a peaceful heart because I've already talked about it with the Big Boss."

"In Las Garzas, I'm like a mouse in the cheese because I can pray all day. The poor guy who works in an office looking at papers all day has to stop what he's doing to pray. But as I move around the school, going from one place to another, I can pray. If I see a friend, I pray for him. And I leave the difficult things to God, because all our efforts amount to almost nothing. I don't have great things to offer Him, but I can offer Him the patience I try to have with a student, pruning a grapevine well,

trying to treat my wife and children better."

Saint Josemaria is a good friend?

"Of course! He knows me and helps me find God more easily. He is a good intercessor, because without God's grace, everything we do is just a bag of beans. I know that so many people pray and have prayed for me. They don't go around bragging about it, but I know they are praying for me; they have offered their Mass or the Rosary. That's why I've never felt alone."

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