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Rest for God's Children: Annual Formational Workshops

A reflection on the rest, study, and fraternity that characterize the workshops organized for people of the Work during their vacations.

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Saint Josemaría taught his children to seek God in everything; we find Him in work, family, relationships, hobbies, and the joys and sorrows of

daily life. Christian life is a continuous and progressive discovery of God, leading us to identify ourselves more and more with Jesus Christ.

We strive, therefore, to be “another Christ”^[1] and, like Him, to bring the world to God the Father wherever we are. If we understand that our whole lives can be holy, we will recognize the foolishness of taking a “vacation” from the pursuit of holiness. We would never put our families or friendships on hold during vacation, either, and leisure is not merely a tool to be able to work more or better after the break, or an unfortunately necessary consequence of human weakness. On the contrary, it is a time to seek and find God, to grow in self-knowledge, to enjoy spending time with others, and to be refreshed in body and soul. Like all other parts of our lives, it is a stage on our journey to Heaven.

A 20th-century philosopher explained that “genuine philosophical reflection” considers the “tangible, visible world [...]. But this world of things in their interrelationships has to be questioned in a specific manner: things are questioned regarding their ultimate nature and their universal essence.”^[2] His words can be applied to “contemplative souls in the middle of the world.”^[3] Periods of leisure and rest help us recover that specific vision because they remind us of the ultimate purpose of our existence: to live life fully, with God. On vacation, in a particular way, we confront the temptation of busyness and fix our gaze on what is most important: who God is, who I am in front of Him, and how our relationship transforms every other relationship and aspect of my life.

Seeking the Master

The disciples learned how to pray and work from their Master. Prayer and work occupied most of any pious Israelite's day. However, the Gospels show us Jesus teaching his apostles lessons that seem curiously unpragmatic: He invites them to marvel at nature (*Look at the birds of the air (...). Consider how the lilies of the field grow (Mt 6:26-28)*), makes them see that they need to recover strength after returning from their first apostolic mission (*Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest (Mk 6:31)*), and exhorts them to do all they can to care for the people around them, like Him (*This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you (Jn 15:12)*).

“Our Lord sent out his disciples to preach, and when they came back he gathered them together and invited them to go with him to a desert place where they could rest... What

marvellous things Jesus would ask them and tell them! Well, the Gospel is always relevant to the present day.”^[4] From the very beginning of Opus Dei, St. Josemaría’s fatherly concern moved him to ensure that his children, who struggled to sow the seeds of the Gospel with all their hearts, lives, and souls, could rest, gain perspective, recover strength in body and soul, and go forth once more, rekindled and ready for their apostolic mission. It was not easy to find the time, place, and financial means to achieve this, but St. Josemaría was convinced that it was necessary. He managed to organize the first study week at La Granja de San Ildefonso (Segovia, Spain); the workshop lasted a few days and consisted of time to pray peacefully, to be formed, and to enjoy family life, all in an environment suited to his children’s youth. Over the years, annual workshops and courses of varying duration and content came

together, adapted to the circumstances of the attendees.

The purpose of formation is identification with Christ, and thus the primary goal of these workshops is a personal encounter with the Lord. This encounter unfolds in three ways: first, through *rest*, which gives us space from our usual daily tasks and an opportunity to spend more exclusive and relaxed time God; second, through *study and deep, meaningful formation*, which enkindles and readies us for the mission of sanctifying the world within our particular circumstances and bringing others to God; and finally, *family life* or fraternity, which means being together in service and mutual care, sharing interests and concerns.

A starting point for rest: my identity

Since rest is not a suspension of life, it only makes sense for it to align with each person's identity and mission; to be true relaxation in body and soul, with and for God, and with and for others. The workshop is also a unique opportunity for deep, calm formation, in accordance with St. Josemaría's explanation of rest: "To rest is not to do nothing: it is to relax in activities which demand less effort."^[5] —

What is essential is to rest with our Lord. In this means of formation, we can go to Jesus in prayer in a way that might be more challenging in other circumstances: calmly, without haste, with a clearer mind and heart... In this sense, we can also "fine-tune" little expressions of faith and care in our relationship with God, such as accompanying Him in the Tabernacle, physically or with our imagination, reviewing points of struggle from the year, calmly

rereading texts that inspire us or pondering ideas we want to understand better, etc.

In this way, the workshop will not be an escape from reality or a painkiller that allows us to temporarily forget our daily occupations. The time we spend resting “is a time for contemplation, a time for praise, not evasion. It is a time to look at reality and say: how beautiful life is!”^[6] The serenity of the workshop helps us look back and be thankful for our recent experiences, even when they are difficult to accept or understand. “It is necessary to reconcile with our own history, with the facts that we have not yet accepted, with the difficult parts of our own existence... True peace is not about changing our history but welcoming it and valuing it, just as it has unfolded.”^[7]

On the other hand, “to relax in activities which demand less effort” does not mean squeezing time to get to everything. Curiously, St. Thomas teaches that laziness and restlessness have the same root: both take away our peace, keep us from living in the present moment, and prevent us from joyfully fulfilling the commandment to sanctify the holidays. We are capable of mimicking the frenetic pace of a normal day even during a period of rest, moving from the rush of work to the rush of vacation. Perhaps we think that the more intense experiences we accumulate, the better our rest will be. Of course, our annual workshops give us a chance to try new things (visiting unknown places, playing different sports, trying exotic foods...), but they are also a time to learn to enjoy small, ordinary things: opening up and getting to know the others, valuing and being grateful for what we have,

allowing ourselves to be surprised, contributing to family life by sharing our talents and interests, dedicating time to reading and reflection, etc. Developing our capacity to find joy in simple things will make it easier to find the *small opportunities for rest* present in our day when we go back to the hustle and bustle of daily life. And this rest, offered drop by drop, is more effective than a sudden downpour amid many days of drought.

Investing in what matters

Vacations are also a valuable time to invest in tools that help us live better and enable us to creatively and enthusiastically carry out our mission, in accordance with the needs of today's world, and faithful to the Gospel, the Church's teachings, and the spirit of Opus Dei. Most of us probably have the opportunity for more intense training at our

workplace or in professional associations (courses, seminars, etc.). Throughout our lives, Opus Dei also provides us with specific moments for personal (and collective) growth in different aspects of our lives and mission. It is not always easy to find time for them, due to tiredness, other interests, or the pressure to address more “urgent” issues, but they have a great impact. Just as reading a good book, whether fiction or nonfiction, has little immediate effect beyond the pleasure it gives us but nonetheless provides insight into human nature and helps us understand ourselves and help others in the future, so our annual workshops bring the mission God has given us to life, both in the medium- and long-term.

If we want to take this formation in, we need to dedicate time, with

initiative and personal responsibility, to reading, reflection, dialogue, and study. Our goal is not to cover many topics, but to go deeply into what we cover. It can be helpful to ask for guidance in spiritual direction before the workshop, and to sketch a plan for considering the topics on our mind and heart. Once there, the fact that we speak with a different person than usual during the workshop can open new horizons and help fully consider the things we discover.

In a culture that sometimes glamorizes activism, seeing everything in terms of efficiency and results, the activities typical of an annual workshop might be seen as useless or like a waste of time: going for a walk, studying philosophy or theology, reading a good novel or a comic, reviewing documents from the Magisterium, listening to music without doing anything else at the same time, spending a morning

listening to someone recount an event from their life or something they have learned, conversing with someone who has a very different background... Setting aside the dubiousness of claiming that these activities won't enhance our productivity or lead to any "*wow*" moments, what really matters is that they help shine a light on the most important things of our lives, which are strengthening our relationships with God and with others.

Real festivities

As children of God, we are never alone. We always know we are watched over and accompanied by a Father who loves and cares for us. Additionally, each member of Opus Dei is part of a supernatural family; we know that we are supported by others and that we are responsible for helping them and being there for our family. We do this first the

communion of saints, in prayer and
and through our struggle for
holiness, and also through our effort
to work well and to accompany those
closest to us.

Leisure time is also an opportunity to
care for those around us. Rest is not a
competition against others (my plan
or yours, my time *or* others') but part
of what it means to share our lives:
we can open up to others with an
attitude of service and true
friendship. "The inner structure of
real festivity has been stated in the
clearest and tersest possible fashion
by Chrysostom: '*Ubi caritas gaudet,
ibi est festivitas,*' 'Where love
rejoices, there is festivity.'"^[8]

There are many occasions to
celebrate in ordinary life, and those
occasions are obvious in times of
rest, reminding us how lucky we are
to be surrounded by a family. Our
encounter with God and others fills

our hearts, and we can go back to it when the pressures of life intensify and we find it more difficult to put people first in spite of the demands of our work or long to-do lists.

All my time is free

We may have fond memories of family vacations from our childhood, going to a cottage, camping, or visiting grandparents; getting a change of scene and reconnecting with cousins or another group of friends. If we ever made a special trip to another city or country, we probably still have pictures and stories of our adventures.

We might see the same people year after year in our annual workshop, and then it is an opportunity to catch up, exchange impressions and experiences, and enjoy being together again. At other times, we

might have the chance to travel abroad or discover another part of our own country, experience another culture, and connect with people living the same vocation in another context. Thus, little by little, we accumulate enriching memories.

St. John Paul II was once asked about his free time, and he told the questioner simply, “All my time is free.” In *Opus Dei*, with the freedom that characterizes God’s children, each of us takes the lead in our own story, learning to harmonize activity and rest, seeking out and deepening in our formation, and strengthening our bonds with the others.

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^[1] Christ is Passing By, no. 183.

^[2] Josef Pieper. *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2009, pg. 109.

^[3] St. Josemaria, *Collected Letters*, volume 2, Letter no. 6, no. 15a.

^[4] *Furrow*, no. 470.

^[5] *The Way*, no. 357.

^[6] Pope Francis, Audience, 5-IX-2018.

^[7] *Ibid.*

^[8] Josef Pieper, *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*, St. Augustine's Press, South Bend, 1999, no. 23.

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