

Wanting To Be Children, Finding the Warmth of a Home: Filiation and Paternity in Opus Dei

On the anniversary of the Prelate of Opus Dei's election, we reflect on fatherhood and filiation in this family.

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Each time a new successor to St Josemaria is elected and

subsequently appointed by the Pope, that person passes from being a son to being a Father of this supernatural family. The Holy Spirit carries out a transformation in his heart. It happened in 1975, the year in which the founder passed away, likewise in 1994, in 2017, and will continue happening as the Work continues on its path. When this succession takes place, each faithful of the Work also learns to be a child in a new way. In reality, it is an opportunity that presents itself to us every day, all our lives.

Though one may be a child by natural generation or by spiritual ties, that relationship can remain simply as a "fact", as something that is there, perhaps forgotten, and it is not chosen *in the present* moment by exerting any effort. Because, besides that "fact", we can also choose to "live as children", in the same way that a father of a family goes beyond

merely "knowing himself a father" to effectively choose to "live as a father", to assume the beauty of that relationship. That choice means not being satisfied with "being children", which is already a lot, but also "wanting to be children", opening ourselves to the warmth of a home.

The Holy Spirit: school to become children and a Father

St. Josemaría had to learn to be a father. "Until 1933, I was embarrassed at the thought of referring to myself as 'Father' of all these associates of mine," he said, referring to the first years following the founding of Opus Dei. "For this reason I almost always called them brothers, instead of sons."^[1] He nevertheless listened to the Holy Spirit, and soon he perceived in his expressions that feeling of a healthy pride in his followers: "I cannot help raising my soul in thanksgiving to

God, from whom proceeds all fatherhood in heaven and on earth, for having given me this spiritual fatherhood which, with his grace, I have taken on in full consciousness of being on earth for this purpose alone. And so I love you with the heart of a father and a mother."^[2]

Many times, the founder of Opus Dei confessed that, inexplicably, he felt his heart widen more and more every time more people approached the warmth of this family. At the same time, he was aware that, personally, he was not indispensable. He knew that we would be well cared for when he was no longer physically on earth to exercise his fatherhood: "My children, I love you more than your parents do. I don't mind saying so because I'm not exaggerating. And I am certain that in the heart of those who succeed me, you will find the same affection. I was about to say more, even though

it seems impossible, because they will have this family spirit which fills the whole Work, very deeply engraved on their souls."^[3] —

The family is bigger than the part

The decision to assume paternity or assume filiation – to truly want to live as parents or as children – means overcoming the logic of isolation and entering into the logic of a family. Saint John Paul II said that "God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude, but a family, since he has in himself fatherhood, sonship and the essence of the family, which is love."^[4] For this reason, his word always germinates in the fertile ground of these human bonds: a family, a group, a people... until we reach the universal community that is the Church. From God the Father, St Paul points out, "from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph. 3:15).

An African proverb goes: "If you want to go fast, go alone: if you want to go far, go together." Family gives us a broader vision; we are enriched by others' sensitivities and perspectives. In the case of the Work, we are enriched by the faithful who come from many different places, guided by the Father. Pope Francis has spoken many times about the beautiful task of combining our holy zeal to improve what we have at hand and belonging to a family that extends beyond what we can reach: "The whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts. There is no need, then, to be overly obsessed with limited and particular questions. We constantly have to broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all. But this has to be done without evasion or uprooting. We need to sink our roots deeper into the fertile soil and history of our native place."^[5]

As the children get older, their father confides important things to them, and they enthusiastically accept their increased responsibilities. Feeling valued is part of the process that makes them grow into adults. And these acts of trust tend to grow over time. The request does not always need to be expressed. When the son has learned to anticipate the needs of his family, a hint is enough. He tries to understand his father's will; he wants to assume it as his own, and he offers to carry it out. In the family of the Work, these indications from the Father can be received through the messages and letters we regularly receive; having one's attention alert to detect his concerns when participating in meetings or interviews; trying to recognize his guidance in the orientations and suggestions that he sends us for the whole Work that, in some way, take priority over local matters. Children seek to surprise the father by

showing him that they not only understand his words but try to go farther and carry them out: they remember them at every moment, they are driven by them and make them fruitful.

Difficulties in moving to the divine rhythm

Looking at the life of Christ, we understand well that sonship and the cross are not incompatible. On the contrary, both are marked with the promise of the resurrection. All natural and spiritual sonship contains this double dimension in some way. Its foundation is love, so there can also be pain, which, far from ruining things, shows how firm, safe, and resilient the relationship is, no matter what tremors it has to suffer. Being a child means being lovingly united to the father's will. It comes as no surprise that, at times, this requires suffering.

This attitude does not discard the difficulties that we may encounter, nor does it even assure us that the best solution will always be chosen from a human point of view, because we can all make mistakes. What we do know is that the Holy Spirit is the one who guides us, and that for him no obstacle is insurmountable and no detour is a dead end. This dynamism is part of knowing that we are living within a supernatural logic. God's logic has many more dimensions than just the *length and breadth* that we see. So many saints have moved in this way, following the melody the Holy Spirit inspires even when they did not fully understand it or lacked human approval. "To be a good dancer, with you as elsewhere," said a twentieth-century writer, speaking about docility to that divine music, "we must not know where it leads. We must follow, be cheerful, be lightweight (...). Do not want to move

at all costs: accept to turn, to move sideways. We must learn to stop and slide instead of walking."^[6]

That cross that can come with sonship is ordinarily great or burdensome. We do not expect to carry all the weight, only that which a child can carry. It is our greatest desire to contribute, with our *savings*, a grain of sand to the *family business*.

A veiled message

Daily prayer and mortification for the Prelate are among the customs that St. Josemaría, inspired by God, wanted the people of Opus Dei to live. To human eyes, it may seem little, but when they are united to and enlivened by the love of God that prompts them, they become a powerful channel for grace.

Understandably, St. Josemaría's successors felt the weight of that

blessed burden that God placed on their shoulders. At the same time, it is the Holy Spirit who truly carries out the supernatural mission entrusted to them as shepherds. At the end of his letter of February 14, 2017, a few days after being appointed Prelate of Opus Dei by the Pope, the Father confessed: "My daughters and sons, if in this world, so beautiful and yet so tormented, anyone at any time feels alone, let them know that the Father is praying for them and is truly accompanying them in the Communion of Saints, and that he carries them in his heart. Here I like to recall how the liturgy sings of the Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple (...) It seemed, the liturgy says, that Simeon was carrying Jesus in his arms; in reality, it was the other way around. (...) it was the Child who sustained the old man and guided him. That is how God supports us, even though at

times we can only perceive the weight of souls."^[7]

Behind these words, we may be able to intuit a veiled and discreet message for each of us. It is as if the Father were telling us that we support him. He feels the weight of being the Father, of having become the guide and shepherd of this flock, but he is relieved to discover that we back him up with our prayer, sacrifice, and eager assumption of the adventure he proposes to us. God uses us to support him.

^[1] St. Josemaría, *Intimate Notes*, 28 October 1935. Quoted in A. Vázquez de Prada, *El Fundador del Opus Dei*, Volume I, Rialp, Madrid 1997, p. 555.

^[2] St. Josemaría, *Letters* 11, no. 23.

^[3] St. Josemaría, Communication read by Don Alvaro del Portillo at the beginning of the Elective Congress of the first successor of Opus Dei, September 15, 1975.

^[4] St. John Paul II, Homily, January 28, 1979.

^[5] Francisco, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 235.

^[6] Servant of God Madeleine Delbrêl, "The Dance of Obedience."

^[7] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter 14-II-2017, no. 33.

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