

Supernumeraries: In the Bloodstream of Society

Supernumeraries: the men and women who are the most frequently seen face of Opus Dei.

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The year is 61 A.D. Barely three decades have gone by since Jesus ascended to heaven, after having entrusted his disciples with the dizzying mission of bringing the joy

of the Gospel to the furthest corner of the earth. After many adventures, Paul has finally arrived in Rome, where he is welcomed by the early Christian community. *And he lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered* (Acts 28:30-31). These are the final words in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. We would like Saint Luke to have continued his story, narrating the adventures of those first years of the young Church's expansion. But we realize that the evangelist had already accomplished two great deeds: seeking and organizing the available material about the life of Jesus, including his childhood; and doing the same with the achievements of some of the first apostles. Besides, even if Saint Luke wanted to continue the story, how

could he narrate the history of the Church from that moment on?

Like the first Christians

It is feasible to investigate and recount the lives of a few people. But the spread of the Christian faith in the following decades to the point of filling all “the cities, islands, towns, villages, the army, the palace, the senate, the forum...”^[1] – who could tell such a story? In the middle of the second century, Justin could write that “there is no race of men, whether they be called barbarians or Greeks, or by any other name, among whom prayers and thanksgiving to the Father are not offered through the name of Jesus crucified.”^[2] How could one ever recount this process? One would have to narrate the life of each of that vast multitude of ordinary people who incarnated in their own lives faith in Christ and spread it to those around them, one

by one, passing the faith on to the next generation, forming a long chain that reaches us today.

Nevertheless, we can form some idea of that quiet revolution thanks to the letters gathered in the New Testament, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, the acts of the martyrs and the news given by non-Christian authors of that era. All this material allows us to glimpse the daily adventure of those first communities, so similar to ours. In them, faith, hope and charity are mixed with cowardice, betrayal and discouragement; heroism with pettiness, holiness with sin. God uses the threads of these personal stories to weave the life of the Church. “He takes our triumphs and our failures and weaves beautiful tapestries.”^[3]

Only God can tell this story because “he himself knew what was in man” (*Jn 2:25*). We can address the

psalmist's words to Him: *For thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb ... when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth. Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance; in thy book were written, every one of them* (Ps 139:13-16). When we enter into his presence and are finally able read the great book of history that God is writing, we will marvel at the lives of so many holy people who have allowed the Holy Spirit to work in them. Speaking about the need to bring the joy of the Gospel to everyone, Saint Josemaría said on one occasion: “I have no other recipe to be effective than the one the first Christians had ... In the spiritual life we have the same means. There is no possibility of advancing. The same recipe: personal holiness!”^[4]

The “true history” of the Work

By God's will, Opus Dei – a “small portion of the Church”^[5] – is part of this story of striving to be faithful to God in the midst of personal failings. Therefore those who try to recount the history of the Work encounter the same difficulty. “Opus Dei in some ways is similar to an iceberg. Often what is seen is the tip, that is, the institutional, corporate dimension or the action of an individual with a public role. But the base isn't seen: the vast majority of persons who lead an ordinary life. Ordinary men and women who, for the most part, are not and never will be in the news: family members, colleagues at work and neighbors who lead an ordinary life and carry out the evangelizing action of the Church in a capillary and unnoticed way. The apostolic activity of these people goes beyond simply a list of initiatives and is impossible to measure; it is a true 'sea without

shores' that resembles the spread of the faith among the first Christians.

“It revolves around friendship, daily encounters with others, face to face conversations between two friends who appreciate each other and share hopes, dreams and sorrows in the office, when relaxing after a hard day of work, at the end of a paddle tennis match, while waiting with other fathers and mothers to pick up their children at school, at the taxi rank, in the nurses' lounge at the hospital during a few minutes of rest... Amid the wide panorama of daily human encounters, a friend opens the eyes of a friend to the greatness and joy of realizing we are a child of God and a brother or sister of our fellow men and women.”^[6] It is in these encounters of friendship, one by one, in unexpected places and moments, that the true history of the Work is written. The struggle for holiness in the most varied

circumstances needs to mark the life of anyone called to Opus Dei, regardless of how one's vocation is specified, but perhaps in a particular way this is true of supernumeraries. They are “the majority of the faithful in Opus Dei,”^[7] and hence they are its most frequently seen face. They make present a great “mobilization of holiness”^[8] in the world, supported and strengthened by the other faithful in this family.

During the first years, the majority were numeraries, among other reasons due to Saint Josemaría's need to rely on people who had the specific mission of helping him to enkindle and keep alive the flame of the Work through tasks of formation and government. Thus Opus Dei was able to take its first steps in the world, opening a path willed by God for a multitude of people from all walks of life. At the same time, Saint Josemaría recognized from the

beginning the call to marriage in many people who drew close to him, and he had the same message of holiness for them. Therefore what great joy he experienced when he was able to open the door of the Work to the first supernumeraries! They were there since its foundation, but the juridical path did not yet exist to receive them in an institution of the Church, where they had the same importance as the other members.

In the meantime, Saint Josemaría continued transmitting the message of Opus Dei to people who were not called to celibacy. Finally, during a trip to Milan in January 1948, he found the solution. On returning to Rome he wrote enthusiastically: “There will be great and beautiful surprises. How good our Lord is! ... He is opening an immense apostolic horizon for the Work ... How broad and deep is the channel that is

opening!”^[9] Thus the desire that our Lord made known to him on October 2, 1928 became a reality: that many people, from all walks of life, also those who follow or wish to follow a married path, may welcome God’s invitation to seek sanctity in the middle of the world and fill it with his light, by embodying the spirit of Opus Dei.

Opus Dei is each person in Opus Dei

“Among the supernumeraries,” Saint Josemaría wrote, a few years after receiving the first three, “there is the whole range of social conditions, professions and trades. All the circumstances and situations of life are sanctified by these children of mine, men and women, who within their state and situation in the world dedicate themselves to seeking Christian perfection with a fullness of vocation.”^[10] Fullness of vocation:

the founder was very clear on this point right from the beginning. Every supernumerary is called to make every moment of his or her life – family, work, rest, social life – the *work of God*. They are called to contemplate God in everything and to respond with daring to his call, “more madly in love with him than Mary Magdalen, than Teresa and little Therese ... more than Augustine and Dominic and Francis, more than Ignatius and Xavier.”^[11] The holiness to which the faithful of the Work, both celibate and married, are called is the same as that of those great saints; all are invited to embody the totality of the vocation to Opus Dei, not just a part of it. Hence each supernumerary man and woman can make those words of Blessed Guadalupe their own: “The Work is myself and it could not be otherwise. What joy it gives me to always feel this so clearly, right from the first day and each day more!”^[12]

This joyful reality sheds light both on the adventure and the responsibility of supernumeraries. Just as the worker in Jesus' parable received the goods from his master so that he could negotiate with them (cf. *Mt* 25:14), those who receive this calling have in their hands a gift from God for the world. They are not collaborators in a task that others do. “This should excite and encourage us to give our all and to embrace the unique plan that God has willed for each of us from eternity.”^[13] The Prelate of Opus Dei, in his letter on the vocation to the Work, points out that the calling of the supernumeraries “cannot be limited to living some practices of piety, attending some means of formation and participating in some apostolic activity. Rather, it encompasses your whole life, because everything in your life can be an encounter with God and a form of apostolate. To do Opus Dei is to do it in our own lives

and, through the communion of saints, to cooperate in carrying it out throughout the world. Or, as our founder reminded us in a graphic phrase, to do Opus Dei *by each one being Opus Dei.*"^[14] —

This can be seen, for example, in the life of Aurora Nieto, the first woman who joined the Work as a supernumerary. She was "a young widow with three small children, who lived in Salamanca. She had a degree in education and was holding down several jobs to support her family. She had a silent desire to do apostolate with young people, with university students in the middle of the world. She was afraid that her family and financial obligations would make this impossible, but [Saint Josemaría] assured her that there was a place for her in Opus Dei."^[15] — Aurora, in a conversation with a numerary friend of hers, spoke about her meeting with the

founder: “He told me how, from home and without neglecting my children, I could be admitted and join the Work. It seems unbelievable to me and although the idea of being far from you and the houses [the centers] makes me a bit sad and even a bit afraid of not adapting myself well to the specific spirit that the Father wants, I trust that he knows what he’s doing and hasn’t seen any problem with it.”^[16]

Saint Josemaría saw no problem with it because the spirit of Opus Dei is precisely to vivify the world, *outside the centers*, to serve the Church in the streets, in each one’s home, in social gatherings, at work... “Once again I insist that the vocation to Opus Dei is a contemplative vocation, of souls who are in the middle of the street out of love for Christ, making the street their cell, but in a continuous dialogue with God.”^[17] From those first moments of her vocation,

Aurora understood that “Opus Dei depended on her in Salamanca.”^[18]

The family and social structures

Saint Josemaría was very excited about the first workshop for supernumeraries, and he followed it closely. He took part in it personally and devoted a lot of time to preaching and spoke with each of the participants, who say those days were engraved in fire on their hearts. He spoke to them frequently about the spirit of Opus Dei, making it clear that our Lord was calling each one of them to embody it with the same fullness with which its founder did. One of those taking part, Angel Santos, recalled that the message was “to sanctify the world from within with the means of our interior life and the fulfillment of our ordinary duties as Christians; to be contemplatives, with naturalness, in the midst of our daily occupations; to

carry out an apostolate of confidence, to turn our houses into bright and cheerful homes. And doing everything with a strictly personal responsibility (without seeing ourselves as representatives, and without clerical tendencies), which is a sign of a mature laity.”^[19]

The supernumeraries should exemplify in a special way the mission of being salt and leaven that dissolves in the world so that, being the same thing as the dough, without being different from it in any way, they give flavor and consistency to it. Saint Josemaría saw Opus Dei as an “intravenous injection in the bloodstream of society.”^[20] Thus, being the very blood of the world, their mission is to imbue social structures with the spirit of the Gospel, making this world a better place, each one from their own small or important position. Since work is the activity to which a

supernumerary man or woman dedicates a good portion of their time, it is only natural that their desires will focus on drawing all the good possible from that profession, filling it with the newness of Christ, finding God in that service done with as much care as possible. Therefore they will often be at the forefront of their professional field, pointing to the future, urged forward by the creativity of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, for supernumeraries who have received the call to marriage, their family, with or without children, will be the heart that pumps new blood, the first field where their eagerness to be saints is made a reality. “The vocation as a supernumerary in the Work develops in the first place in the family sphere.” the Prelate of Opus Dei stressed. “This is the heritage you leave to society.”^[21] Among the many paths that we take

in life,” Saint John Paul II said, “the family is the first and most important one.”^[22] Much of society’s future is forged in the formation received during those years of family life, both in being educated in the faith, and in developing the virtues needed to be a person who contributes to the good of all men and women. The family is the source where future changes germinate in all fields: in the workplace, in co-responsibility within the home, in care for the weakest, in education, etc. Thus, although discreet, the family has deep repercussions in society as a whole. “The family is the place of encounter, of sharing, of going forth from ourselves in order to welcome others and stand beside them. The family is *the first place where we learn to love.*”^[23]

“Moreover, you are called upon to influence other families positively,” Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz

continued, speaking about the vocation of supernumeraries. “In particular, by helping them to make their family life more Christian and by preparing the youth for marriage, so that many young people will be enthused and be able to form other Christian homes, from which the many vocations to apostolic celibacy that God desires will also arise. Even if you are single or widowed – or, of course, couples without children – you can see in the family your first apostolate, because you will always have, in one way or another, a family environment to nourish.”^[24] —

The supernumerary vocation is a sign of the maturity of the laity, whose hour has sounded in the Church with particular strength in the last century. When Saint Josemaría and Blessed Alvaro arrived in Rome to seek a juridical

channel for the Work, they were told they were arriving a century too soon, particularly when they spoke about the vocation of supernumeraries. Much progress has been made since then in understanding the vocation of the laity, but embodying this wonderful reality remains a challenge, an exciting mission.

The vocation to Opus Dei is a great grace from God to contribute to this mission in the Church, as witnessed by the life of so many supernumerary faithful of the Work, both men and women. For some of them the process of recognizing the sanctity of their life is now underway. For the vast majority, most likely this will never take place. But not a single gesture of their daily fidelity to God's love escapes our Heavenly Father's gaze. These are deeds of love that no written or digital page will record. But they are

recorded in the only book that counts, the one God is writing and from which nothing can be erased. And those who witness these deeds will thank God every day, as we do, “for the faithfulness of so many women and men who have preceded us on the path and who have left us a precious testimony.”^[25]

^[1] Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 37.

^[2] Saint Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 117.

^[3] Francis, *Christus vivit*, no. 198.

^[4] Saint Josemaría, Notes taken from his oral preaching, 29 February 1964.

^[5] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 14 February 2017, no. 31.

^[6] José Luis González Gullón – John F. Coverdale, *Historia del Opus Dei*, Madrid, Rialp 2021, pp. 594-595.

^[7] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 28 October 2020, no. 23.

^[8] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 962.

^[9] Saint Josemaría, *Letters* 18 January 1948, 29 January 1948 and 4 February 1948. Cited in Luis Cano, “Los primeros supernumerarios del Opus Dei,” *Studia et Documenta*, vol. 12, 2018, pp. 256-257.

^[10] Saint Josemaría, *Letters* 29, no. 10.

^[11] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 402.

^[12] Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri, Letter 28 May 1959, in *Letters to a Saint*, 2018, p. 112.

^[13] Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 13.

^[14] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 28 October 2020, no. 25.

^[15] Inmaculada Alva - Mercedes Montero, *El hecho inesperado*, Rialp, Madrid 2021, pp. 194-195.

^[16] Ibid., p. 195.

^[17] Saint Josemaría, Homily, 26 October 1960.

^[18] Inmaculada Alva – Mercedes Montero, *El hecho inesperado*, p. 195.

^[19] Luis Cano, “Los primeros supernumerarios del Opus Dei,” p. 274.

^[20] Saint Josemaría, *Instruction on the Supernatural Spirit of the Work*, no. 42.

^[21] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 28 October 2020, no. 24.

^[22] Saint John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 2 February 1994.

^[23] Francis, Homily, 25 June 2022.

[24] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 28 October 2020, no. 24.

[25] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 19 March 2022, no. 5.

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