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The Prelate on the 50th Anniversary of IESE: Sanctifying work, transforming the world, and the Christian meaning of leadership

As part of the 50th anniversary celebrations marking the start of IESE's activities in Madrid, Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Grand Chancellor of the University of Navarre and Prelate of Opus Dei, visited the campus and gave this lecture to

an audience of more than 600 employees and alumni.

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This is the full text of the Prelate's remarks.

It is a pleasure and an honor for me to be with you on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of IESE's activities in Madrid, a cause for deep joy as we witness the development of an educational initiative that has helped many people grow in professionalism and discover the profound (social, Christian) meaning of work — a topic very dear to Saint Josemaría. In these remarks, I will draw from some of his writings.

You have built one of the most prestigious business schools in the world. I want to encourage you to aim not only for external successes — confirmed by business school rankings — but also, with even greater determination, for those internal successes that hold even more value from a Christian perspective. These internal successes, which are compatible with both success and failure from a business standpoint, are the fruit of work done well, out of love.

To reach those inner successes, what matters is not only what we do or what results we achieve, but also how we work and why. Through those internal triumphs, the impact of this school will reach even further.

The reality and human value of work

As Saint Josemaría said: “Work, all work, bears witness to the dignity of

man, to his dominion over creation. It is an opportunity to develop one's personality. It is a bond of union with others, the way to support one's family, a means of aiding in the improvement of the society in which we live and in the progress of all humanity.”^[1] —

Saint Josemaría is speaking here of the “why” of work in general. For you, the “why” of your work is reflected in IESE’s mission: “You train leaders who aspire to have a deep, positive, and lasting impact on people, companies, and society through professional excellence, integrity, and a spirit of service.”

If you fulfill this inspiring purpose well, you will reach the very heart of society. You will improve the world from within. And this noble mission can be lived out in all your activities, not just those of highest strategic value taken up by IESE’s top

management. Every kind of work can hold great interior value.

Even at the natural level, “the dignity of work depends not so much on what is done, but on who does it, and in the case of man, he is a spiritual, intelligent, and free being.”^[2] —

In other words, the natural dignity of work lies in the spiritual dignity of the human person, and it is greater or lesser depending on the quality or goodness of the work as a spiritual action. And this quality essentially depends on freedom; on love — not as passion or feeling, but as *dilectio*, the elective love of an end, as an act proper to freedom.^[3] —

As your own Juan Antonio Pérez López taught, it’s a matter of fostering transcendent motives in ourselves and in those we lead: the desire to serve clients well, human connection with others, commitment to the company’s purpose. These

things motivate us to serve more and serve better — and they can be achieved while also producing the strategic results companies need and developing the required skills in the right people.

In this context, these words of Saint Josemaría are both inspiring and demanding: “It is well to remember that the dignity of work is based on Love. Man's great privilege is to be able to love and to transcend what is fleeting and ephemeral. He can love other creatures, pronounce an ‘I’ and a ‘you’ which are full of meaning. And he can love God, who opens heaven’s gates to us, makes us members of his family and allows us also to talk to him in friendship, face to face.”

In other words, we are made for Love, and work is one of the platforms where Love can grow within us and in society. This is a

central part of the Christian vocation in the world and in society. “This is why man ought not to limit himself to material production. Work is born of love; it is a manifestation of love and is directed toward love.”^[4] —

I recently came across an inspiring story published years ago in Forbes magazine, which illustrates this human connection; this love manifested through work. It was written by an emergency room nurse in an American hospital who witnessed an astonishing act of leadership: “It was about 10:30 p.m. The room was a mess. I was finishing up some work on the chart before going home. The doctor with whom I loved working was debriefing a new doctor, who had done a very respectable, competent job, telling him what he'd done well and what he could have done differently. Then he put his hand on the young doctor's shoulder and said, ‘When

you finished, did you notice the young man from housekeeping who came in to clean the room?' There was a completely blank look on the young doctor's face.

"The older doctor said, 'His name is Carlos. He's been here for three years. He does a fabulous job. When he comes in he gets the room turned around so fast that you and I can get our next patients in quickly. His wife's name is Maria. They have four children.' Then he named each of the four children and gave each child's age.

"The older doctor went on to say, 'He lives in a rented house about three blocks from here, in Santa Ana. They've been up from Mexico for about five years. His name is Carlos,' he repeated. Then he said, 'Next week I would like you to tell me something about Carlos that I don't already know. Okay? Now, let's go

check on the rest of the patients.”
The nurse who narrated this story commented later: “I remember standing there writing my nursing notes — stunned — and thinking, I have just witnessed breathtaking leadership.”

Sometimes, the human dimension can be lost when we think of work only in terms of competing with other companies to generate more profit, instead of thinking about serving people with care and love.

Of course, companies cannot forget about strategy and profitability, which are signs of quality service delivered responsibly and efficiently. But just as important — if not more — is serving with love for the work and love for the people.

Supernatural value: the sanctification of work

“For a Christian these horizons extend and grow wider. For work is a participation in the creative work of God. When he created man and blessed him, he said: ‘Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth’ (Gen 1:28). And, moreover, since Christ took it into his hands, work has become for us a redeemed and redemptive reality. Not only is it the background of man's life, it is a means and path of holiness. It is something to be sanctified and something which sanctifies.”^[5]
—

What does it mean to sanctify work? We will consider two fundamental, interconnected aspects, which the founder of Opus Dei spoke about frequently.

First, the supernatural dimension of work is not something added on top

of its natural human dimension. The order of Redemption does not add something alien to the reality of work as established in Creation: it is the very same human reality of work that is elevated to the order of grace. Sanctifying work does not mean “doing something holy” while working, but actually making the work itself holy.

The second aspect, which is inseparable and, in some way, a consequence of the first, is that sanctified work is sanctifying: we not only can and should sanctify ourselves and cooperate in the sanctification of others *while* we work, but *through* our work, doing it well on a human level, serving others for the love of God.

This is the Christian path: contributing through work to world peace, social justice, sustainability, and preparing the world to receive

God. Pope Leo XIV reminds us:

“Every effort should be made to overcome the global inequalities – between opulence and destitution – that are carving deep divides between continents, countries and even within individual societies.”

As Saint Josemaría explained, there is a necessary connection between the sanctification of professional work and the reconciliation of the world with God: “Uniting professional work with ascetical struggle and contemplation (it might seem impossible, but it is necessary if we are to help reconcile the world with God) and converting this ordinary work into a means of personal sanctification and apostolate: is this not a great, noble ideal, worth giving one’s life for?”^[6] —

We can live this great, noble ideal out in our work, whatever it may be, keeping this perspective of service to

society — “A world to change,” as your motto says — in mind. I like to see that your mission speaks of leadership that is good for people, for companies, and also for society.

Great good can be done for society from within businesses, although not everything society needs can be achieved through business, since companies are limited by their specific missions and the need to generate profit (which is part of their purpose).

States, communities, and families are also needed, each bearing their own responsibilities. In your training, therefore, strive to reach the person in their entirety, including their spiritual dimension, so that well-formed individuals may contribute to serving society in all its dimensions. This is the fruit of the sanctification of your work, done well and for love.

If we want to transform the world, we must begin by transforming ourselves and making room for God in our lives, particularly at work. Some well-known words from the founder of Opus Dei offer a simple yet essential definition of the sanctification of work, in the form of practical advice: “Add a supernatural motive to your ordinary work and you will have sanctified it.”^[7] — This does not mean doing something different, but doing the same things in a different way, with a supernatural motive that moves us to put in more effort and more love.

In other words, work becomes holy when done for a supernatural motive. But this must not be understood as a kind of “morality of intentions” alone. In classical terms, we should not give primacy to the *finis operantis* (the worker’s intention) as something independent of the *finis operis* (the purpose of the

work), as if the latter had no real importance.

The *finis operantis* is the motivation of the person working, which may be driven by different kinds of intentions. The *finis operis* is what they seek to achieve through the activity: serving a client, completing a report, achieving a goal. To truly serve through our work, good intentions are not enough: we need concrete actions. “To be useful, serve,” as Saint Josemaría put it.

The supernatural order assumes and elevates this human reality, so that work is holy if it is “born of love, manifests love, and is ordered to love,” and if this love is “the charity of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.”^[8] When we live the unity of life that Saint Josemaría so often spoke about, God’s charity permeates everything we do at work, from reports to calls to small details

completed with care. The *finis operantis* penetrates and transforms the *finis operis* of our entire way of acting from within.

Work is holy, sanctified, when it is inspired and infused by love for God and for others, for God's sake. This is the heart of the "supernatural motive" that, added to our work, is enough to sanctify it. And it is clear that this "intention" naturally leads to human excellence in the work itself: "It is no good offering to God something that is less perfect than our poor human limitations permit. The work that we offer must be without blemish and it must be done as carefully as possible, even in its smallest details, for God will not accept shoddy workmanship. 'Thou shalt not offer anything that is faulty,' Holy Scripture warns us, 'because it would not be worthy of him.'" That's why each person's work, the task that occupies our days and energy, "must

be an offering worthy of our Creator. It must be *operatio Dei*, a work of God that is done for God: in short, a task that is complete and faultless.”^[9] —

But we must not confuse working with excellence with the *perfectionism* that stems from pride or lack of order. We should work well within reason, knowing we have many responsibilities that also deserve our attention and where we must bring the love of God.

Sanctified work is not only work *for* God and *in* God, but also necessarily work *of* God, because it is God who sanctifies. He loves us first and He makes our love possible through the Holy Spirit, whose charity we participate in.

For God to work in us and through our work (so that our work becomes a work of God) we need to make room for Him in our daily lives: spaces for prayer and listening — in

our homes, offices, streets, churches — to have this unity with God that allows Him to enter into all our actions.

Sanctifying work in the objective, external, structural sense (for example, finance or accounting) is inseparable from sanctifying through work (in the daily effort to meet goals and serve people), and also from sanctifying oneself in work (growing in love). Indeed, it is the immediate and necessary result of sanctifying work in its subjective dimension (as a personal act).

Undoubtedly, subjectively unsanctified work can still contribute to the sanctification of the world, insofar as it helps establish social, economic, and other such structures that are naturally effective and just — an essential aspect of ordering these structures according to God's will. Think, for instance, of

the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

However, only work that is subjectively sanctified, and therefore sanctifying for the one doing it, necessarily contributes not only to a just world, but also to infusing that world with Christ's charity, sanctifying it. Naturally, this sanctification of the world from within requires not just one but many people sanctifying their work and being sanctified through their work, in all kinds of professions.

As Saint Josemaría said, “the divine paths of the earth have been opened up,”^[10] and we need many men and women willing to walk them to uplift the world from within, not through ideological or polarizing campaigns, but through each person's inner growth, openness to others, and receptivity to God's grace, which

wants to pour out faith, hope, and love around us.

The particular importance of managerial work

You have a great mission ahead of you: to educate business leaders who will create the environments in which many others will work and develop, on a personal level, through their work. It is a great responsibility to prepare people who will carry such weight.

Many times, they will not have ready-made solutions for how to interpret a problem or resolve a situation. In general, management involves a series of activities like forecasting, organizing, coordinating, and overseeing the development and results of an organization's activities.

Given the complexity and variability of reality, it's understandable that different interpretations arise when

theorizing about the nature or analyzing the practice of managerial work.^[11] That's why a manager's education does not consist only in memorizing principles or collecting tools in marketing, finance, strategy, or accounting, but in achieving a prudential understanding, which is usually acquired only through long, well-processed experience.

A manager's responsibility demands the practice of prudence, the virtue most proper to governance. A well-known quote from Saint Thomas Aquinas comes to mind: "May the wise teach us, the saints pray for us, and the prudent govern us."

Through your classes and the case-study method, your students learn to exercise prudence by asking the right questions, digging deeply into arguments, understanding others' viewpoints without prejudice, and changing their own opinions.

In its broadest form, prudent action requires sufficient knowledge of the past, attention to present circumstances, and foresight regarding the future consequences of potential decisions.

“Prudence, besides being the perfective habit of this kind of activity (*praxis*), is the only intellectual virtue whose object is moral; it serves as a sort of ‘bridge’ between both dimensions, reconciling thought and action. As a moral habit, it intrinsically perfects the agent—in other words, it shapes the kind of person one becomes through leadership.”^[12] —

By exercising prudence in leadership, your participants will grow both morally and intellectually, and they will be able to create environments where others also grow, contributing to a better society.

Other key characteristics of good managerial work include openness and flexibility: openness of mind, in order to learn from experience and study; openness in order to understand the changes required by new times; openness in order to welcome and value suggestions or explanations from others (without haste or prejudice); the ability to listen.

Openness also means not shutting down initiatives arbitrarily, but encouraging and guiding them. It includes openness to change, and in particular, mental openness to change our minds whenever necessary. As Saint Josemaría said, “We are not rivers that cannot flow backward.”

Above all, it means openness of heart, to understand and love others. That openness leads us to accept others as they are, without judgment.

It also means being a bridge for people who think differently. We can work very well with people of other faiths or no faith, and who have lifestyles we may not share, yet who usually a lot of good within them. Friendship and a shared project within the company can be built on that good foundation.

As for flexibility, it clearly stands in contrast to rigidity, but not to strength. It is the ability to accept and decide upon necessary or appropriate exceptions. In this context, I think it is also worth highlighting the importance of fostering the interior freedom of collaborators at all professional levels, by explaining the reasons behind decisions or directives.

The goal is for them to want to do their work well in order to serve better. Along the same lines, good leadership avoids excessive control

and overly detailed instructions. Micromanagement, as a leadership style, creates puppets, not mature people with sound judgment.

I would also like to mention the value of knowing how to delegate, taking people's individual circumstances and the environment into account. I am reminded of what Saint Josemaría wrote in a broader context: "You cannot use the same means with everyone. Mothers are, once again, the best example: their justice lies in treating each child differently."^[13]

Some, particularly the younger ones, need follow-up and feedback to gain the experience they need as quickly as possible in order to do their work well. Others, who are more mature, need coaching that helps them learn to make their own decisions. And eventually, they reach a point where they can work independently,

because the leader can delegate to them with complete confidence and without concern. But all of them need the trust, closeness, and friendship of their managers.

Management typically involves channeling diverse elements and actions toward a common goal. This demands a certain capacity for synthesis, which, while remaining attentive to the distinct aspects of each issue, is able to unite them under a shared final objective. This is where what many refer to as the “purpose” of the company comes in, which includes paying attention to its many stakeholders, so that leadership can bring everyone’s efforts together in a unified way.

The unique importance of managerial work lies, obviously, in the fact that much of the effectiveness of others’ work, their personal growth through work, and

the culture and tone of the company depend on it. Thus a particular weight of responsibility falls on managers.

A leadership role is not a privilege, but a service and a responsibility, which consists in creating an effective context for other people's work. Managers, therefore, need to cultivate the interior disposition that leads to a firm commitment to their own duties.

You form such leaders here not only through classes and teamwork, but also by creating a culture of work well done. This can be seen in many small, practical ways (well-kept gardens, clean whiteboards, carefully prepared classes with clear and compelling conclusions), as well as in a spirit of joy, human warmth, and care for individuals.

Ultimately, this atmosphere of friendship, in which everyone

realizes they truly matter and are genuinely loved, explains the openness and joy that can be felt in your school and in gatherings of alumni.

Thank you very much.

[1] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 47.

[2] Saint John Paul II, Address, 3 July 1986, no. 3.

[3] See C. Fabro, *Riflessioni sulla libertà*, Maggioli, Rimini 1983, pg. 43–51; 57–85.

[4] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 48.

[5] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 47.

[6] Instruction, 19 March 1934, no. 33.

[7] *The Way*, no. 359.

[8] Rom 5:5.

[9] *Friends of God*, no. 55.

[10] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 21.

[11] See, for example, G. Scalzo and S. García Álvarez, “El Management como práctica: una aproximación a la naturaleza del trabajo directivo,” in *Empresa y humanismo*, XXI [2018], pg. 95–118.

[12] G. Scalzo & S. García Álvarez, pg. 112.

[13] Letter, 29-IX-1957, no. 25.

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