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“We encourage young people to discover and choose their own path”

Lidia Via has been working in the Regional Advisory of Opus Dei in Spain since 2019, overseeing activities with young people. In this interview, she talks about the formational activities carried out by the Prelature with young people and the support offered in the process of discerning any vocation to celibacy.

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Note: the video above is currently available only in Spanish, with English subtitles coming soon.

The recent Regional Assemblies of Opus Dei, themed “Going More Deeply into Our Charism and Renewing Our Desire to Serve God, the Church, and Society,” have once again highlighted the pivotal role of young people in the present and future of the Work. Alongside the whole Church, Opus Dei has embarked on a journey of reflection on vocational pastoral care and support during discernment processes for vocations to celibacy.

The Youth platform – a space for young people on the Opus Dei website and social media – was launched one year ago. To mark its anniversary, we spoke with Lidia Via, who oversees the Work's activities with young people from the Regional Advisory of Opus Dei in Spain. She discussed the formational activities Opus Dei currently organises for young people in Spain, lessons learned and improvements made over the nearly one hundred years of its history, and future hopes and challenges.

Lidia Via holds a degree in Journalism from the Complutense University of Madrid and a Master's in Corporate Reputation from the University of Navarra. A Madrid native with Catalan parents, she has led youth associations promoted by Opus Dei in Madrid, Zaragoza, and Tenerife, as well as a student residence in Madrid.

She has launched creative communication entrepreneurship initiatives and advises various projects and organisations in the field of strategic communication. For the past five years, she has been part of the leadership team for women in Opus Dei in Spain, where she is responsible for youth initiatives.

We are going to talk about young people in Opus Dei throughout the conversation, so let's start at the beginning: what is Opus Dei, in your own words?

Opus Dei is the people who belong to Opus Dei, each one of them. They are Catholics who, with God's help, seek to contribute to the Church's evangelising mission by living in coherence with Christ's message in their daily lives — particularly in

their work — and striving to cooperate with God's grace so that many people can come to know and encounter Christ personally.

At its inception, Opus Dei did not have formational activities for minors. What led to the start of these activities?

It was a natural evolution for an ecclesial reality that grew alongside the first members who formed it. When Saint Josemaría began Opus Dei at the age of 26, he started by gathering his friends, who were university students and young professionals. Consequently, the first formational initiatives were student residences. This was the start of what is called the Saint Raphael work in Opus Dei: formational activities with young people.

Over time, those young people formed families of their own and wanted their children to receive the

same formation and accompaniment that had helped them draw closer to God. This is how the first activities for adolescents and youth associations began in the 1950s. Similarly, in the 1960s, some parents started schools where they wanted Opus Dei's guidance in providing Christian orientation for the education of their children and their families.

What does Opus Dei offer young people?

Opus Dei offers young people formational activities, both spiritual and human, to inspire them to become well-rounded men and women who live out the Christian message in their daily lives, thereby contributing to the betterment of their social and professional surroundings.

These activities are diverse, depending on each individual's needs

and aspirations. There is a tailored formational programme for those young men and women who ask Opus Dei for guidance in living their Christian vocation in the world. This includes weekly classes on spiritual life and Catholic teachings, spiritual guidance, moments of prayer, and opportunities to give of themselves through catechesis and assisting those in need.

This formation aims to encourage young people to grow in their personal relationship with Jesus Christ, deepen their knowledge of the faith, serve others, be loyal friends, and prepare themselves to become good professionals and responsible citizens while cherishing their families.

The mission of Opus Dei in the Saint Raphael work is to accompany young people so they can become, as Saint Josemaría said, “Christians full of

optimism and vigour, capable of living their divine adventure in the world.” In this way, they can do good and improve the society around them.

Young people today seem to be distancing themselves from the Church’s messages and the Christian way of life. What do you consider to be the main challenges in forming today’s youth?

The first thing I’d like to say is that sometimes I hear young people described in a way that, in my opinion, is a bit inaccurate. People claim that they are tired, fragile people, incapable of committing themselves to great ideals. My experience has been quite different.

Like all of us, today’s youth are children of their time. History shapes each generation in specific ways. For instance, hundreds of Spanish youth, both Catholic and non-Catholic, came

to Valencia from cities across the country in order to help when there was heavy flooding recently.

We want the formation they receive to help them make a positive impact on society. Through their studies and professional work, their way of building relationships, and their approach to life's challenges, they can do so much good and improve the world they live in. To this end, it's vital to help them develop a constructive critical sense, enabling them to see beyond trends and situations and recognise that life is more nuanced than social media, where you're limited to simply liking or disliking something.

Life — and people — are rich, and our complexity and variety helps all of us grow. Our challenge is to form young men and women who have grown up in a context of polarisation and confrontation, offering them

welcoming, open spaces where they can confidently be themselves, side-by-side with other styles, perspectives, and ideas.

During the Assemblies held in Spain, we received suggestions from members of Opus Dei and those close to it about the need for greater openness in Opus Dei centres; to organise more activities for those distant from the faith and to welcome more diverse people. We want to work in this direction because it makes us better and, above all, brings us closer to Christ.

At the same time, what is most beautiful about the Church and Opus Dei — the “real” aspect, so to speak — is not so much what happens at a corporate level (in university residences, youth associations, etc.), but the contributions made by each person of Opus Dei in their own contexts. As Saint Josemaría used to

say, the environments of Opus Dei should never be “a kind of defensive fortress but, on the contrary, a clear and tangible example of an open spirit and understanding.”

And all this formation you provide for young people—is it aimed at leading them to join Opus Dei?

No. The aim of our work with young people is to remind them that everyone is called to holiness, and therefore, each person has a vocation (a calling, a mission) wherever they are. That is Opus Dei’s message. We want to contribute to the Church’s mission of evangelisation, an invitation Christ extends to each of us personally.

For this reason, we encourage young people to discover and choose their own path. As Pope Francis says in his Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*, addressed to young people, it is important to ask, “What does it mean

to live the years of our youth in the transforming light of the Gospel?”

Opus Dei is simply one path within the Church, and it's normal that most of the young people who take part in Opus Dei's formational activities never join the Work. Of course, among those who participate, some may discern that their vocation is within Opus Dei, whether in apostolic celibacy or within marriage.

At what age can someone become a member of Opus Dei?

Only from the age of majority. No one under eighteen can join. However, a vocation is a personal experience born from one's relationship with God, and this sense of calling may begin to take shape earlier.

In this regard, when a young person expresses a desire to join the Work

and live celibacy, Opus Dei envisions a process of vocational discernment with various steps.

When can someone request admission to Opus Dei?

From the age of sixteen and a half, a person can request admission to Opus Dei by writing a letter to the Prelate, thereby starting the discernment process (this does not constitute legal incorporation). At eighteen, if the individual confirms their desire to proceed, they may incorporate into the Work.

Is this incorporation definitive? How do you ensure that people are free?

From the first incorporation, there is a period of at least five years, during which the person reaffirms their desire to be a member of Opus Dei at various stages, ensuring the individual's freedom throughout the

process. In fact, between the request for admission and definitive incorporation, the person explicitly expresses the desire to belong to the Work at least eight times.

These milestones in the vocational process allow for ongoing discernment of the person's freedom and suitability, while also enabling the individual to confirm — or reconsider — whether this is their path in the Church.

What is the discernment process to become part of Opus Dei?

Discernment is fundamentally an experiential process. I find inspiration in Pope Francis' catechesis on discernment, where he describes it as a beautiful yet "exhausting" journey. It involves engaging your mind, will, and heart — your entire being — while realizing, as the Pope says, that "God is a Father and does not abandon us."

These processes blend simplicity and complexity in equal measure.

Simplicity, because a person gradually sees and senses that God is calling them to a particular way of living, checking whether they feel comfortable and joyful in that mission, while knowing that every path is an adventure. Complexity, because nothing external can guarantee that this is their vocation; it is part of the interplay of light and shadow in faith.

Like any vocation in the Catholic Church, the discernment and admission process in Opus Dei is long to ensure that only those who freely desire to join may do so. First, one must express the desire to be part of Opus Dei. For a period of at least six months, they receive formation and personal accompaniment to deeply understand the commitment they are preparing for.

This is followed by at least another year of formation and discernment, after which a person can take the first step of incorporation, which is temporary. For a minimum of five years, they must reaffirm their desire to move forward every year. While this may seem lengthy, having to reaffirm one's desire at least six times over several years helps to understand one's calling and ensures that the Work can accompany individuals in a way that respects their freedom, initiative, and suitability.

What leads a young person with a vocation to celibacy to choose between being a numerary or an associate?

Vocation is a mystery. In Opus Dei, while we all have the same vocation, there are different ways of belonging to the Work. When someone recognizes their call to apostolic

celibacy, they also discern how they want to live out their vocation and commitment to God in practical terms.

Depending on their personality, life circumstances, character, and aspirations, they may see themselves as a numerary (dedicated to forming other members of the Work, usually living in a centre, open to the possibility of moving to other countries, or serving in the governance of the Work) or as an associate (carrying out extensive apostolic activity within their family and professional environment while contributing to the formation provided to those who come into contact with the Work).

In my experience accompanying vocational discernment, the key question to ask someone is, “What do you see in yourself?” and encourage them to dialogue with God about it.

For this reason, we are trying to ensure that all centres of the Work include numeraries, associates, assistant numeraries, and supernumeraries. This allows young people to see living examples of the vocation expressed in different ways. It's not uncommon for someone to begin their path in one way and continue it in another based on their initial discernment.

How has Opus Dei improved its processes of vocational discernment?

In Opus Dei, as in other institutions in the Church, we have learned valuable lessons from both positive and negative experiences regarding vocational processes. As mentioned earlier, we have deepened our understanding of vocational discernment by emphasizing the protagonism of the person responding to God's call.

Institutionally, this is matched by a patient approach, reinforcing the maturity required and fostering greater confidence in making deeply considered and conscious decisions.

For example, we have adjusted the timelines for incorporation, understanding better the need for personal and ecclesial discernment timeframes. A couple of years ago, after consulting the councils of men and women who assist him in governing Opus Dei, the Prelate introduced greater flexibility in these timelines. This allows for a more personalized approach, helping individuals and the institution discern the best timing and each person's readiness for incorporation.

We've also developed greater sensitivity toward those who leave the Work during this process, striving for a deeper understanding

of the possible reasons behind their decisions.

Additionally, we are more intentional and clear in the formation provided to those of us in Opus Dei who accompany young people in their vocational discernment. We engage in continuous formation by working with papal and recent Church documents on discernment to ensure young people feel — and *are* — truly free and joyful in their vocational journey.

Lastly, we've enriched our understanding of the unity between each person and their family. This commitment begins at the initial stages of formation, where Opus Dei supports and aids parents in their mission to educate their children, and extends throughout life. For instance, as a numerary living in a centre, it fills me with joy that families can know the people I live

with and share in my life, just as I share in theirs.

How are families informed about their children's vocation?

Nowadays, it is necessary for all individuals to begin this journey with their parents' awareness. We ensure that this happens, not only with minors but also with young adults, who are often still dependent on their parents. Families are informed that their sons or daughters are in the midst of a vocational process, and they accompany them throughout it.

Moreover, those providing guidance or formation within associations and centres are encouraged to form strong relationships with the families, not only in cases where their sons or daughters express a desire to join the Work or begin the process, but also as part of walking

alongside the family in each person's formational journey.

What is a junior candidate?

Junior candidates are boys and girls aged fourteen-and-a-half and older who sense a call from God to belong to Opus Dei as celibate members (numeraries or associates) but are not yet able to do so, because they are minors and below the age required to request admission. In these cases, the Work acknowledges their desire and accompanies them in this process according to their stage of life.

During this period, they are not members of the Prelature and do not take on any obligations or responsibilities. What they receive is spiritual guidance and formation aimed at better self-awareness, deepening their knowledge of Church doctrine and the sacraments, and becoming better sons and

daughters, friends, students, and so on.

They are helped to reflect on their apostolic mission in the world and are also introduced to the spirit of Opus Dei in a way that provides appropriate and sufficient information in light of their vocational interest. In any case, at least in Spain, this figure is not as common as in the past, perhaps due to the slower pace of newer generations.

Furthermore, the concept of the junior candidate has evolved over time, both in its understanding and in its practical application. Drawing from the experience gained by Opus Dei in vocational processes, adjustments have been made to the formation and guidance provided during this period. These changes aim to solidify the aspirants' human and spiritual maturity while

ensuring their parents' active involvement.

For instance, junior candidates were once encouraged to live as similarly as possible to members of Opus Dei. However, in recent years, formation has shifted towards helping them grow personally as Christians in the world while addressing their desire to dedicate themselves to God.

I believe these changes, many of which were implemented around the year 2000, reflect the lessons learned by the Work and a deeper understanding of today's youth and families.

Do vocations to celibacy generally come from Opus Dei families?

The reality of vocations within Opus Dei has evolved significantly. In Spain, for example, it was initially common for sons and daughters to be the ones who introduced Opus Dei

to their parents. Over time, these young people established their own families, raising their children with a focus on a personal relationship with God, strong family bonds, a desire to serve others, the value of well-done work, and friendship... In short, passing the elements that had shaped their own Christian lives on to their children.

Naturally, to desire something, one must first know about it, so it makes sense that many vocations to Opus Dei in Spain come from Christian families that also pass on the Christian spirit of Opus Dei. That said, each family is unique. In my own family, for instance, my parents are members of the Work, but each of my siblings has charted a completely different path in life.

Additionally, in other countries, the situation often differs greatly. In some places, vocations frequently

arise among adult converts, for instance, because Catholic families are rare.

Some people believe that, over the years, Opus Dei has been too insistent about asking teenagers whether they have a vocation and encouraging them to take the step. What would you say in response?

As I mentioned earlier, we share the Church's mission of evangelisation. The way this mission has been carried out has evolved over time and may have been perceived differently depending on each individual's experience.

Throughout the Church, as in broader society, there has been a profound shift in how we accompany young people. This has influenced how vocational ministry is approached, particularly in discernment with adolescents, where maturity, prudence, and respect are

emphasised for appropriate guidance.

We're aware that some people who have had experiences with Opus Dei have shared that they felt pressure in this regard, and I am deeply sorry that this ever happened. I wish it hadn't; that no one had gone through that.

I think that during the early decades of expansion, enthusiasm for spreading the message of Opus Dei, which is closely tied to action, may, in some cases, have resulted in an approach that, while well-intentioned, was perhaps overly insistent. However, Opus Dei has always upheld the belief that vocation is a personal and free call, and it has sought to encourage each individual to reflect deeply, before God, with freedom and without pressure, about their spiritual path.

There seems to be a crisis of vocations in the Church and Opus Dei, or many people who begin the path later leave. What would you say about this?

It is true that the number of vocations has declined compared to the 1990s and the early 2000s. Vocations are ultimately a gift from God; as the Prelate recently mentioned in an interview, we collaborate with God's grace to help many people encounter Jesus Christ.

At the same time, vocations are not the only measure of fruitfulness. While the numbers are lower than at other times, we thank God for those who continue to give their lives to Him in Opus Dei, whether through celibacy, as supernumeraries, or in other paths within the Church. Additionally, many families, young people, and adults draw closer to the

Work and express gratitude for the formation they receive.

It is also true that many people have been part of the Work and later chosen not to continue. We are sorry that some have bad memories when they look back on their time in Opus Dei, or that have felt alone at the time of their departure. In this regard, perhaps we lacked closeness and commitment to these individuals and were too focused on ensuring their departure did not negatively impact others within Opus Dei. I believe this has not been the case for many years, and, in any case, we want to keep working to ensure it never is.

I also know that many people consider their years in Opus Dei to have been happy ones, seeing them as a God-given aid to help them grow solid Christian roots. Many of these individuals remain close, and some

have even sought readmission into
Opus Dei.

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