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Path to the Centenary (1): Vocation, mission, and charism

During this time of preparation for the centenary, which we have begun with regional assemblies, the Prelate invites us to reflect on Opus Dei's identity, history, and mission. The purpose of this series is to delve deeper into the charism by focusing on one of its essential aspects: the sanctification of work. This first article explores the specific role of the Work within the Church and develops the concepts of

vocation and mission in the context of ordinary life.

10/01/2024

I. Vocation, mission, and charism

In the beginning was the Word. Everything was made in the Word and through the Word. God *calls* all things into being.

The life of God is a life of interpersonal relationships. The divine processions (generation and spiration) aim toward personal existence: the Son is begotten by the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. When God creates, He follows this same logic: He *desires personal beings before Him*, modeled on the Son and created out of love. God calls the entire universe into existence

because He wants personal beings to partake in his life, free beings capable of knowing and loving Him.

In a sense, the whole world is the outcome of a vocation. Each of us has been personally called into existence, with our own particular face, voice, and eyes. Each of us stands as our own “I” before the divine “You.” That is why God created the world—because He thought of each one of us.

Vocation: from fear to joy

The word “vocation” is warm and fatherly, not distant but familiar. It is a word for everyone, a word that reveals, calls, and invites. In fact, the entire history of salvation can be seen as a continuous history of vocations; unceasing calls from God to men and women across different times and places, to rulers and ordinary people, to entire cities, to nations and their descendants.

Saint Josemaría's preaching brings us closer to this idea of vocation, revealing its greatness and universality. Before the Second Vatican Council, when vocation was perhaps understood more narrowly, the founder of Opus Dei brought it into the conversation. In doing so, he was recovering the teachings of many saints, speaking clearly about vocation as something for all human beings.

At first, finding the word "vocation" in *The Way* or in Saint Josemaría's homilies might have caused some surprise, perhaps even mixed with fear. But soon after, it led to joy. Vocation, as he explained it, referred to ordinary life: to study, work, friendship, family, cultural pursuits, and all professions. Understood this way, vocation illuminated the importance of what might otherwise seem insignificant. Thanks to this message, the word "vocation"

became for many a familiar, accessible term, full of paternal care.

“Our calling discloses to us the meaning of our existence. It means being convinced, through faith, of the reason for our life on earth. Our life, the present, past and future, acquires a new dimension, a depth we did not perceive before. All happenings and events now fall within their true perspective: we understand where God is leading us, and we feel ourselves borne along by this task entrusted to us” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 45).

No one is excluded

Many people who heard Saint Josemaría’s preaching were surprised by his insistence that people do not always need to change their position in life, their work, or their family circumstances to respond to God’s call. This call often comes right where we are, in the

ordinary contexts of daily life. It may even come, unexpectedly, while we are at work.

The way Saint Josemaría spoke about vocation was rooted in a profound biblical framework, specifying the concrete, particular value of a general theological concept: God calls every human being to know and love Him. We are all called to a vocation of identification with his Son and participation in his very Spirit. We exist for that reason, and all are included, without exception: the healthy and the sick, the rich and the poor, workers and intellectuals, those gifted with many talents or just a few for certain activities.

The vocation to know and love our Creator, to resemble his Son who became man — because we were created *in Christ* — has a name: the vocation to holiness, to participation in divine life. God is the only Holy

One. Every human being receives this call, whether they already belong to the people of God, the Church, or do not yet know the Church. All of us are made to be part of it. God calls everyone, without excluding anyone, to participate in his life. Christ Jesus shed his blood, died on the cross, and rose again so that our divine filiation, darkened and almost lost due to sin, could be restored and regained in Him.

When God calls, it is always with a mission in mind. He calls to entrust us with a task. We see this clearly illustrated throughout the history of salvation. God directs his word to each human being: “Go, do this; act according to what I will show you; leave this land; speak in my name; go to the place I will show you...” It is as if He were saying: “I created you for this!” In a sense, all these specific missions are manifestations of the original mission that the Creator

entrusted to humanity in Genesis: *The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Gen 2:15).*

The universal call to holiness comes with an equally universal mission: to be conformed to the image of the Son, to love with both fraternal and filial love, and to reject sin. Being conformed to the Son means participating in his mission, which is to reorder a world disordered by the sins of men and to bring it back to the Father in the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, this mission involves a story. While the vocation calls for an immediate, specific response, the fulfillment of a mission unfolds in history, as we grow into what we are called to be and help transform the world into what God intends.

A specific mission in the Church

When God created the world, He opened history to the possibility of

receiving missions. The Word is sent into the world by the Father to assume human nature, with the mission of completing creation, redeeming humanity from sin, and restoring our full dignity as children of God. The Holy Spirit is sent into the world and history by the Father and the Son, with the mission of conforming believers to the Son and gathering them into the Body of Christ. The Church is born from these two missions and is, in a way, their continuation in history (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 2-4). The entire Church is *called* and *sent*: called by the preaching of the Kingdom of God by Jesus, and after the resurrection, sent to all nations to teach the Gospel to all people and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Church exists and lives for this mission, and this task is the goal of the various missions that the Holy

Spirit inspires throughout history. As diverse and beautiful as the flowers of the earth are, so too are the missions that God has entrusted to many saints, countless Christian communities, laypeople and priests, religious men and women: missions that have contributed and continue to contribute to the one *missio Ecclesiae*.

“The garden of the Lord, brethren, includes – yes, it truly includes – includes not only the roses of martyrs but also the lilies of virgins, and the ivy of married people, and the violets of widows. There is absolutely no kind of human beings, my dearly beloved, who need to despair of their vocation; Christ suffered for all. It was very truly written about him: *who wishes all men to be saved, and to come to the acknowledgement of the truth* (1 Tim 2:4)” (St. Augustine, Discourse 304: Sermon on St. Lawrence the Martyr).

When we get to know Saint Josemaría's life and listen to his preaching, we understand that he too received a specific mission from God — always in the Church and with the Church. By declaring his holiness and setting it as an example for the faithful, the Magisterium has recognized the mission received by Saint Josemaría as part of the very mission of the Church.

Shortly after beginning his priestly work, Saint Josemaría sought to give a name to the mission he had received from God, so that his spiritual sons and daughters could continue it in history: Opus Dei, the Work of God, *operatio Dei*.

Emphasizing God's initiative, he began speaking of it as a new foundation, identifying 2 October 1928, as "the day when the Lord founded his Work" (Personal Notes, no. 306, 2-X-1931).

However broad and general a mission inspired by the Holy Spirit in human history may be — and the mission of Opus Dei certainly is that, to the point that Saint Josemaría described it as a “sea without shores” — each new foundation will always have a distinctive feature that justifies its *purpose*.

Seeking that distinctive feature, the specificity of a mission or a new foundation, does not mean separating it from other initiatives inspired by the Holy Spirit, but rather understanding it better. Therefore, the specificity of Opus Dei cannot be defined by contrasting it with what others do or do not do, by highlighting differences or dividing fields of action. The uniqueness of those working in the vineyard of the Lord must be highlighted without ever losing sight of the Church’s single mission, in a spirit of unity that seeks communion.

In every new foundation, there is a delicate balance between specificity and tradition, between what is (or seems) new and what in the Christian message must necessarily remain the same. There are tasks that the Church recognizes in its life and tradition as essential to the mission it has received from Christ. For example: exhorting the people of God to holiness and conformity with Jesus Christ, teaching everyone to have a personal and filial relationship with God, placing the Eucharist at the center of the lives of the faithful, fostering priests' availability for the sacrament of reconciliation, administering the sacraments so they are received fruitfully, reminding all the baptized that they are apostles in a world that must be re-evangelized, spreading the teachings of pastors, councils, and especially the Roman Pontiff...

How can we understand the *faith* that Saint Josemaría experienced a century ago in founding Opus Dei, and how did he grasp the *novelty* that Opus Dei implied?

To this end, in the years leading up to the centenary of the foundation of Opus Dei (1928–2028), we want to revisit and deepen our understanding of the specific elements that characterize its mission, and once again examine the charisms that God has granted and continues to grant to its members so that this mission may be fulfilled.

“Ordering the world to God through work”

Many of St. Josemaría’s writings focus on the objectives of the new foundation. These goals, though seemingly general, contribute to the overall good of the Church, the sanctification of souls, and the Christian transformation of the

world. However, these goals also point to a specific, unique mission that illuminates the entire existence of those who receive this divine calling. If we were to express it in a single phrase, that mission could be described as “ordering the world to God through work,” or, with slightly more detail, “transforming earthly realities by placing Jesus’ cross at their summit so that, purified from sin, all human activities may be sanctified from within and take on the *form* of Christ.” St. Josemaría explained that the members of the Work “will sanctify themselves, sanctify others, and sanctify the world itself” in that mission. Priests and lay people both contribute to this mission, but with a precise structure: the former are called to serve the latter, as this mission directly and immediately pertains to the lay faithful (cf. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, nos. 31, 36).

“This is the secret of the holiness which I have now been preaching for so many years. God has called on all of us to imitate him. He has called you and me so that, living as we do in the midst of the world — and continuing to be ordinary everyday people! — we may put Christ at the top of all honest human activities. Now you will understand even better that if anyone among you didn't love work, his own particular job; if he didn't feel sincerely committed to some noble occupation in this world so as to sanctify it, or if he were to lack a professional vocation, then that person would never be able to understand the supernatural substance of what this priest is saying to you, for the very good reason that he would be lacking an indispensable condition for doing so: that of being a worker” (*Friends of God*, no. 58).

The invocation that the *Preces* (or “Prayers”) of Opus Dei reserve for the intercessory prayer *Ad sanctum Josephmariam, conditorem nostrum*, condensing the essence of his message into a few lines, gives central importance to the sanctification of work, specifying its apostolic and missionary dimension: *Intercede pro filiis tuis, ut fideles spirítui Operis Dei, laborem sanctificemus et animas Christo lucrifacere quaeramus.*

All other aspects of the Christian perspective that St. Josemaría saw illuminated in the new foundation seem to revolve around the axis of work in Christ: the possibility of finding God and seeking holiness in ordinary life; the universal call to holiness; the imitation of the hidden life of Jesus and the Holy Family of Nazareth; a special devotion to St. Joseph, craftsman and worker, to the point that members of the Work

renew their dedication to Opus Dei on his feast day; divine filiation as participation in the mission of the Son to reconcile all things to the Father through the Spirit; the apostolate of friendship and confidence that the members of this institution are called to exercise with colleagues and in their social relationships; the enduring nature of Opus Dei, as long as there are people working on earth... All these aspects are reflections of a foundational light whose focal point is a new understanding of the divine dimension of human work.

Is the specificity of this mission, as outlined above, the charism of Opus Dei? What is the relationship between vocation, mission, and charism? In Sacred Scripture and the history of the Church, the term “charism” has a broad meaning. However, it primarily refers to a “gift granted by God for a mission.” In this

sense, the dynamism of vocation-mission precedes the notion of charism. The Word of God calls to entrust *a mission*; then, God grants the necessary charisms and gifts to fulfill it. Sometimes, in common language, we use the word “charism” to also refer to the gratuity of a mission or a particular spirituality, to indicate that it is a gift of the Spirit, a divine initiative: it is God who inspires, calls, grants grace, assists, guides, and lovingly seeks the response of the human person.

“When God Our Lord plans any work for the benefit of men, He first thinks of the people He will use as instruments... and He communicates the appropriate graces to them. This supernatural conviction of the divinity of the endeavor will eventually give us such enthusiasm and intense love for the Work that you will feel supremely happy to sacrifice yourselves to see it come to

fruition” (*Instruction*, 19-III-1934, nos. 48-49).

God grants grace and the charisms of the Spirit to men to fulfill the mission to which we are all called: holiness and identification with Christ. God grants those who He calls to a particular mission or pastoral purpose in the Church all the appropriate gifts and charisms needed to carry it out. If we want to recognize the specific charism of any new foundation, including Opus Dei, we need to reflect on its mission, as its founder described it.

We must not forget, moreover, that the *mission of Opus Dei* precedes the *institution*. In principle, this mission is compatible with different canonical institutional forms, present or future, as long as they allow the implementation of what God asked of its founder: seeking holiness and the fullness of divine filiation in the

midst of the world through the exercise of ordinary work, ordering all human activities to God, and transforming them to give them the *forma Christi*.

Finally, understanding and delving into the mission of Opus Dei is a task that is, in a way, inexhaustible, because it is an authentically theological fact with God as its author. It is a mission open to history and animated by the creative Holy Spirit, and therefore capable of informing different eras and situations: it is a charism that will be embodied by many people in diverse circumstances throughout history. The pneumatological dimension of a mission means that the way of being and living of those who embody it can be defined more as a spirit than as a letter. This is why Opus Dei has a spirit, the *spirit of the Work*.

Exploring the meaning of this mission and this spirit, as St. Josemaría saw it in his personal meditation and transmitted it in his preaching, will be the subject of the next article.

This series is coordinated by Prof. Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti together with some professors of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (Rome).

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(03/03/2026)