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In DYA: Jesus' "New Commandment"

On August 23, 1932, Saint Josemaria wrote down in his 'Intimate Notes' that all the centers of Opus Dei should have a plaque with the words of Jesus' "new commandment": "that you love one another as I have loved you." The first place this was done was the DYA Residence in Madrid.

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Begun in 1931, the Second Spanish Republic offered some positive

elements for the country's development, especially regarding a greater openness to democracy. But it also brought with it grave social and political problems right from the start. The republican Constitution, a socialist manifesto, was approved without consensus. Among other measures, the Church was made subordinate to the State and education by religious orders was prohibited.

In the summer of the following year, an event took place that traumatized Spanish society. On August 10, a group of military and political forces, most of them seeking a return to an authoritarian monarchy, mobilized for a coup d'état. The uprising did not succeed because, besides poor organization, the government arrested the leaders within a few hours and restored public order.

At that time Josemaría Escrivá had been spreading the spirit of Opus Dei in Madrid for four years. He was meeting with several groups of people to speak about striving for sanctity in the middle of the world: university students, men from various professions and manual trades, some young professional women, as well as other women who were chronically ill, and diocesan priests.

In that summer of 1932, two events disrupted the founder's apostolic efforts. First, a diocesan priest who assisted him in the Work – José María Samoano – died on July 16 after three days of severe pain and vomiting. Death threats received in the previous months, and the virulence of his illness, pointed to poisoning out of hatred for the faith. In addition, a significant number of the university students in contact with him took part in the attempted coup

on August 10. The majority went to prison or into exile. So Father Josemaría, who had not been involved in these political activities, saw the group of students in contact with him become widely scattered.

Perhaps he had these events in mind when, two weeks later, on August 23, he wrote in his *Intimate Notes*: “In all our centers, in a very visible spot, the 12th verse of chapter 15 of Saint John will be placed: *Hoc est praeceptum meum ut diligatis invicem, sicut dilexi vos* [This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you].”[1]

During the following months, the founder of Opus Dei began the activities of the work of Saint Raphael, both with classes of Christian formation for students as well as catechism classes for children. In December 1933, the increasing number of young people

in touch with him enabled him to open the DYA Academy at 33 Luchana Street in Madrid.

While they were preparing the house for activities, the founder asked his spiritual sons to copy down a phrase from the Gospel of Saint John, when Jesus at the Last Supper said to his Apostles: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (*Jn* 13:34-35). The Latin version, drawn on paper in imitation of parchment, was placed with a simple frame on the wall of the library used as a classroom for the DYA Academy. Decades later, Escrivá said “I suffered because of the lack of love, the tremendous lack of charity among Christians. So, in the first house, with some of my mother’s furniture and other items that a

friendly family had given us, we were able to furnish and put the apartment in order; but the first thing I put up was the *Mandatum novum*, which I asked one of those first fellows to draw for us.”[2]

Nine months later, in September 1934, the DYA Academy moved to Ferraz Street, no. 50. When setting up the Residence, on the wall in what they called the “room of the piano” or “of the afternoon snack,” they put up the plaque with the words of the “new commandment.” Anyone entering that living room, where the founder regularly met with his spiritual sons and the other residents, saw right away those words from Saint John's Gospel.

Those verses summed up one of the three pillars on which the DYA Residence was grounded. Besides a personal relationship with God and study seen as professional work,

friendship and openness to others defined DYA. Escrivá insisted that Christians cannot limit their contacts to those closest to them, nor form closed groups or “cliques.”

He presented charity as “an essential and indispensable element of Christian life.”[3] Specifically, he pointed to the close union between the “new commandment” and Saint Paul’s exhortation: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (*Gal* 6:2).[4] He even considered having this verse from Saint Paul placed in the oratories of the centers of the Work, as a reminder.[5]

As the months went by, the political situation in Spain became increasingly tense, with physical violence flaring up at times. Father Josemaria established as a criterion for the DYA Residence that no political commentaries were to be

made in the collective activities and meetings. In February 1934 he wrote down: “For the work of Saint Raphael: the young men should not be permitted to argue about political matters in our house. Help them see that God is the same as always, that his arm has not been shortened. Tell them that the apostolate done with them is of a supernatural character: remind them often of the presence of God, in personal conversations, in talks, and always. Make them ‘catholic’ in heart and mind.”[6]

The doors of DYA were open to whoever wished to attend, with the only requirement being that they respect the Christian principles defended there. Jose Luis Muzquiz recalled that, on one occasion, out of curiosity he asked Father Josemaria about “an important person in the world of politics. I think it was Gil-Robles, for whom I felt a certain sympathy at the time. The Father

quickly replied: ‘Look, here you will never be asked about politics. People here come from all parties: Carlists, Popular Action, monarchists from the Spanish Renewal, etc. And yesterday,’ he added, ‘the president and secretary of the Association of Basque nationalist students were here.’”[7] Then the founder with a smile spoke to him about the formation offered in DYA: “Instead they will ask you other ‘annoying’ questions. They will ask you if you pray, if you make good use of time, if your parents are happy with you, if you study – since for a student study is a grave obligation.”[8]

In January 1935 Fr. Josemaria preached the monthly spiritual day of recollection for a group of traditionalist friends of a young man he had known for several years, Adolfo Gomez Ruíz. The diary of the house records one of the objections the founder raised before consenting

to give the day of recollection: “The Father said that he would be delighted but he put some conditions. One was that they would not come as traditionalists, but as young Catholics, since he did not want even the slightest political tone to be present.”[9] Escrivá preached the recollection to six young men, making reference only to the spiritual topics he ordinarily spoke about.

At the end of 1933, amid an atmosphere of heightened tensions after the unsuccessful coup attempt and the subsequent government repression, he insisted in the *Instruction on the Work of Saint Raphael*: “Don’t talk about politics, in the ordinary sense of the word, and avoid in our houses talk of parties and banners. Make them see that in the Work there is room for all opinions that respect the rights of the Holy Church.”[10]

The deliberate absence of a political stance by the directors of the DYA Residence contrasted sharply with the social situation. Within the house, the attempt was made to create an atmosphere of serenity when commenting on current events and during times of study. Outside, on the streets, in the university classrooms and the student associations, the social atmosphere was very agitated, and even led to assassination attempts among right-wing and left-wing extremists. The inscription with the *Mandatum novum* placed in the piano room was a permanent reminder of what their attitude ought to be, especially when confronting those who loathed or even hated the Catholic faith. On April 6, 1936, Juan Jimenez Vargas contrasted the atmosphere in the Residence with that found outside on the street: "Between the strikes at the Special Schools and the news from those who have witnessed the

exchange of gunfire this afternoon, which produced quite a few victims, no one can be unaware of the agitated environment around us. Nevertheless, it is impossible to find a place where one can work more peacefully than in this house.”[11]

However the absence of political quarrels at DYA didn't prevent “tensions reflecting the social-political situation from arising,”[12] which were resolved by the director, Ricardo Fernandez Vallespin, or by Father Josemaria himself. Juan Jimenez Vargas found that the atmosphere at the Residence helped “cool down” his own hot-blooded temperament: “I prefer to stay here because I have a mad longing to go out and get involved in all the commotion and gunfire.”[13] Another young student Angel Galindez, who was 18, put the social agitation in perspective: “These things affected us a lot but not in a

vital way. The need to study for the university admission exam, plus the match of Spain against Austria, occupied the universe of our concerns.”[14]

On the other hand, a few were actively involved in politics or stopped coming to the Residence in order to employ all their energies in political activity. The traditionalists especially found it hard to grasp the message of the Work, as Jimenez Vargas recounts: “they saw no solution other than a political one, and therefore they were fully immersed in an activism aimed at a violent solution for everything.”[15]

This was the case of the Carlist Vicente Hernando Bocos, who listened gladly to the Christian message of Father Josemaria, but found it hard to accept the markedly spiritual nature of his words: “He discouraged us students from becoming polarized around politics,

since it hurt him to see such good young people dedicating ourselves principally to politics, which ‘left one dried up.’ He told me, as personal advice, that I should study a lot, in order to become someone who could serve others, and insisted that I reflect on the parable of the talents. I used to tell him that I didn’t think I had buried my talent, but he insisted that I meditate on the parable.”[16] Hernando Bocos’s idea of social action was radically different from that presented by the priest, who “used to tell us: ‘you need to have strong and consistent sentiments, but without seeking to hurt anyone.’ I told him: ‘I’m not convinced by what you say, because what I want is to strike hard and fast.’”[17]

In April 1936, the founder asked them to produce another “new commandment” plaque, similar to the one hanging in the piano room. He probably wanted this copy for the

new site for the DYA Residence that he was looking for in Madrid at the time. Three month later, in July, DYA moved to a new building located on the same street, this time at number 16 Ferraz. There they brought the copy of the *Mandatum novum*. The original drawing – which had been in both 33 Luchana and 50 Ferraz – was preserved in a trunk kept by the founder's family.[18]

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936 led to a strong repression in Madrid, which took the lives of thousands of Catholics, both priests and laity. The founder and members of the Work had to go into hiding, and the new DYA site was left to its own devices. For four months it was the headquarters of an anarcho-syndicalist committee, where torture and death sentences were carried out.

On March 28, 1939, the day on which Madrid surrendered, Josemaria Escriva returned to the Spanish capital in an army truck that belonged to a supply column. When passing by Ferraz Street, he asked the driver to stop for a moment and saw that the house had been badly damaged by artillery fire. The next day he returned with several members of the Work and they collected a few objects scattered on the floor.[19]

A few weeks later, on April 21, he once again went to the residence, accompanied by his brother Santiago, Juan Jimenez Vargas, and Miguel Fisac. They had little hope of salvaging much more, but suddenly they were surprised to see “on the floor, covered by rubble, the plaque with the *Mandatum novum* quite well preserved.”[20] Jimenez Vargas continues: “probably, since they didn’t understand the words, they

saw no religious significance in it, and they left it hanging on the wall, as if it were a useless picture. And there it stayed until the wall collapsed from the bombardment.”[21]

Escriva always saw this discovery as providential, since it pointed to “what is permanent when everything else collapses: the commandment of Love.”[22] Christ’s words had a deep theological meaning that referred not only to those who thought differently from them, but to the very essence of charity, to the Holy Spirit, who makes it possible for every child of God to give themselves completely to others. Francisco Ponz, who joined Opus Dei just after the Civil War, recalled: “He referred frequently to Christian fraternity. He spoke to us with a lot of love about the *Mandatum novum*, about how he wanted it to be present in our hearts, and how we should live it with

everyone, and of course with the fellows we dealt with in our centers. He viewed having found this Gospel text among the ruins of Ferraz as a special providence of God.”[23]

A few years later, during the 1941-1942 academic year, something took place in Madrid that remained engraved on the heart of another young person in Opus Dei, Amadeo de Fuenmayor. One day several young people spoke jokingly about someone who had served Mass badly, and everyone in the house joined in the joke. Aware that the director had been the first to laugh, that afternoon the founder preached a meditation for everyone about fraternal charity, in light of Jesus' *Mandatum novum*: “From the start the tone with which the Father spoke impressed us deeply. He addressed us with great strength, with extraordinary force, as if wanting to engrave his words with fire on our souls. He repeated to us

what the Apostle Saint John in his old age liked to repeat to the first Christians: *Filioli mei, non diligamus verbo, neque lingua, sed opera et veritate*. He spoke to us for half an hour, in an impressive way, about the demands of fraternal charity. Then, almost at the end, he pleaded with us that, with the passing of the years, we would tell our younger brothers that one day the Father called us to Diego de Leon so that, with him, we would ask our Lord that in the Work we will always live fraternal charity with the greatest care, as it has been lived right from the start. I remember that I cried, or rather that we cried during the meditation.”[24]

The founder asked that the *Mandatum novum*, written in Latin, be hung in the study rooms of the centers of Opus Dei where activities related to the work of Saint Raphael are carried out. Nowadays, a

translation into the language of the corresponding country is usually added, so that all the young people can understand the words of fraternal charity that Jesus gave to his Church.

José Luis González Gullón

[1] *Intimate Notes*, no. 815 (23 August 1932). Jesus stresses the importance of his “new commandment” by repeating it several times in his discourse at the Last Supper.

[2] Memory of Cipriano Rodríguez Santa María, Manizales, August 1975, in AGP, series A.5, 344-1-1. The representation of the “new commandment” in various ways is traditional in the Church. The founder knew in Madrid the crucifix of Merciful Love that the sculptor Lorenzo Coullaut Valera finished in

June 1931 at the suggestion of Mother Esperanza, founder of the Congregation of the Slaves of Merciful Love. At the foot of this image, the Gospel is open at the page with the *Mandatum novum*. Cf. José María Zavala, *Madre Esperanza. Los milagros desconocidos del alma gemela de Padre Pío*, Freshbook, Rivas-Vaciamadrid, 2016.

[3] Juan Ignacio Ruiz Aldaz, “Caridad,” in José Luis Illanes (coord.), *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Monte Carmelo - Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer Historical Institute, Burgos 2013, p. 196.

[4] These two Scripture texts are cited together in point 385 in *The Way*, with the comment: “I have nothing to add.” Cf. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *The Way. Critical-Historical edition*. Scepter 2009. The *Mandatum novum* is also

cited in points 454 and 889 of *The Forge*.

[5] Cf. *Intimate Notes*, no. 937 (19 February 1933). He stressed these two Scripture teachings throughout his whole life. For example, the commandment of love “obliges us to love all souls, to understand others’ circumstances, to forgive, if something someone has done to us needs to be forgiven. Our charity must be such that it covers all the deficiencies of human frailty, *veritatem facientes in caritate*, treating those who err with love, but not allowing compromises in matters of faith” (Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *Cartas*, vol. I, Rialp, Madrid 2020, p. 273). And in *Friends of God* (no. 44) he writes: “I feel I must remind people constantly about these words of Our Lord. St Paul adds, ‘bear one another’s burdens; then you will be fulfilling the law of Christ.’ Think of the amount of time

you have wasted, perhaps with the false excuse that you could easily afford it, and yet you have so many brothers, your friends about you, who are overworked! Help them unobtrusively, kindly, with a smile on your lips, in such a way that it will be practically impossible for them to notice what you are doing for them. Thus they will not even be able to express their gratitude, because the discreet refinement of your charity will have made your help pass undetected.”

[6] *Intimate notes*, no. 1160 (16 March 1934).

[7] Memory of José Luis Múzquiz de Miguel, Derio (Vizcaya), 29 August 1975, in AGP, series A.5, 231-1-1.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Diario de Ferraz*, 27 January 1935, p. 124, in AGP, series A.2, 7-2-1.

[10] *Instruction on the Work of Saint Raphael*, 9 January 1935, p. 12, in AGP series A.3, 89-3-1.

[11] *Diario de Ferraz*, 16 April 1936, pp. 162-163, in AGP, series A.2, 7-2-3.

[12] Memory of Miguel Español (undated), in AGP, series A.5, 1429-1-27.

[13] *Diario de Ferraz*, 17 April 1936, pp. 164-165, in AGP, series A.5, 1429-1-27.

[14] Memory of Ángel Galíndez (undated), in AGP, series A.5, 329-1-1.

[15] Memory of Juan Jiménez Vargas, Pamplona, 26 June 1976, in AGP, series A.5, 221-1-2.

[16] Testimony of Vicente Hernando Bocos, Palencia, 3 September 1975, in AGP, series A.5, 219-2-4.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Cf. *Crónica* 1978, p. 149 (AGP, Library, P.01). This “new commandment” is now kept in the Colegio Mayor Montalbán (Madrid).

[19] Cf. *Diario de Madrid*, 28 and 29 March 1939, in AGP, series A.2, 11-1-1.

[20] Memory of Juan Jiménez Vargas, Pamplona, 26 June 1976, in AGP, series A.5, 221-1-2. This “new commandment” is kept in the Commission of Opus Dei in Italy (Milan).

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] Cf. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *The Way. Critical-Historical edition*, commentary on point 385, note 58.

[23] Memory of Francisco Ponz Piedrafita, Pamplona, 26 September 1975, in AGP, series A.5, 238-3-5. Ponz mentions other words of the founder

that refer to the *Mandatum novum*:
“Love for souls – he once said – leads
us to love all mankind, to
understand, excuse, forgive
everyone. You must have a love that
covers all the deficiencies of human
wretchedness.”

[24] Memory of Amadeo de
Fuenmayor Champín, Pamplona, 4
September 1975, in AGP, series A.5,
212-1-6.

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