

Assistant Numeraries: A Home Reaching Out to the World

Assistant numeraries: a specific calling to care for and strengthen family ties in Opus Dei

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Jesus had just spoken of seeds, birds, thorns and fertile soil. He was illustrating the dispositions of those who listen to him, so different from one another. One or the other, as

time goes by, will prove to be more or less fruitful: "What has fallen on good soil are those who hear the word with a good and generous heart, who keep it and bear fruit" (Lk 8:15). The Lord probably still has this image in mind when, a little later, someone interrupts him: "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside and want to see you" (Lk 8:20). The Master then replies, to everyone's surprise: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Lk 8:20). This is one of the moments in the Gospel in which Jesus speaks of a new form of relationship, stronger than the one that visibly united him to his mother: the bond of the supernatural family, which arises from listening to and accepting the word of God.

In the image of a God who is communion

The Church is, in the words of the Catechism, "the true family of Jesus"[1]. Pope Francis reaffirms this: "Jesus has formed a new family, which is no longer based on natural bonds"[2]. Faith has a fruitfulness so strong that it generates new, real unions. And in Opus Dei, which is a small part of the Church, the same thing happens: those who have experienced what St. Josemaría says as "breadth of God's love"[3] become part of the small family that is the Work. A family that breathes in the intimacy of a God who is neither solitude nor isolation, but communion between persons, between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; a family called to remain united, both by the love of God's heart that vivifies it and by the divine mission to which each of its members has been called: to transmit, each one in his or her daily circumstances, that God loves us as sons and daughters.

During the early years of the Work, St. Josemaría was not clear about how this essential feature of the spirit of Opus Dei, its family character, should materialize. After a short time, however, he realized that his mother and sister were in fact generating the climate he was looking for in the centers of the Work. After prayerful consideration, he decided to ask them for this irreplaceable help. Blessed Álvaro del Portillo explained, years later, how those two women "transmitted the warmth that had characterized the domestic life of the Escrivá family to the supernatural family that the Founder had formed. We were learning to recognize it in the good taste of so many small details, in the delicate mutual dealings, in the care for the material things of the house, which implied - most importantly - a constant concern for others and a spirit of service, made up of vigilance and self-denial; we

had contemplated it in the person of Father and we saw it confirmed in Grandmother and Aunt Carmen" [4].

On many occasions, we have seen the vital need for the family upon seeing children growing up sustained by the affection of their parents, or meeting elderly people who know they are accompanied by the caresses or words of their grandchildren! Life is not the same without this family support, no matter how successful we may be. A person who knows he or she is loved is capable of overcoming or coping with joy with any difficulty. The need to feel loved, to belong to a home, is universal: it is part of our deepest identity. The care and gratuitousness that this requires "can never be lacking, no matter how far humanity progresses"[5].

When we say that the people of Opus Dei form a family, it is not just a simple family environment, which is

possible in so many other places. This family environment has to be a palpable reality with supernatural roots and with daily, material, affective and loving fruits. Each and every one of us must cultivate and strengthen these bonds, because it depends on all of us that we not only breathe a family environment, but that we are truly family.

However, the founder of Opus Dei clearly saw the need for people who, with the wisdom to combine the material and the intangible, would take care of these ties in a particular way. To ensure this mission, including even the smallest material details, corresponds in a special way to the assistant numeraries. It is a specific call, which arose among the first women of Opus Dei, to be those hands that unite the most divine and the most human, imitators of other hands: those of the Mother of Jesus,

who always combined both realities to discern and fulfill the will of God.

Gratuitous love that affirms the other person

Perhaps the most outwardly visible part of an assistant numerary's mission is to organize and plan the care of the centers, so that everyone knows and feels responsible for their house. As in any family, the tasks are distributed with flexibility, according to the possibilities of each one. It could be said that the assistant numeraries hold the home in their hands and then give it to others [6]. In some cases, this family dimension can be felt through concrete actions such as preparing food, cleaning or decorating, but this reality leads us to another reality that transcends the material: their main mission, which is to affirm each person in her identity and apostolic mission.

It is not only a question of carrying out a series of material tasks, which we can and should all do together," writes the Prelate of Opus Dei, "but of planning, organizing and coordinating them in such a way that the result is precisely that home where everyone feels at home, welcomed, affirmed, cared for and, at the same time, responsible for". [7]

For this reason, St. Josemaría considered this mission an "apostolate of apostolates," the "backbone" that allows Opus Dei to move in the world with a family spirit, or the "canvas" on which all the other members of the Work weave their friendships.

In her daily life, an assistant numerary tries to make tangible, in a certain way, the words we pray at the Angelus: "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (Jn 1:14). In her daily life, she seeks a strong union with the Eucharist in order to bring

God back into the world and place him before the eyes of others: every gesture, every word, every thought and every action is intended to communicate that God is present in the most mundane events of daily life.

As a reflection of Mary's infinite fruitfulness, God has given to Opus Dei the gift of celibacy, the secret root of authentic paternity and maternity, [8] to which is added, in the case of the assistant numeraries, a specific manifestation: *"By your work you care for and serve life in the Work, making the singular person the focus and priority of your work"*[9]. From this arises - and this is the deepest part of her mission - a gratuitous love, expressed in all the dimensions of being; a love endowed with *"the refreshing spontaneity of what is alive, of one who seeks unprecedented occasions to show that she believes and loves"*[10]; a love that brings

each one out of anonymity, renewing her vigor, giving her new strength, for it reminds her that she is loved simply because she exists, and not for what she has or for what she does.

True transformative power of society

In a world that often focuses on notoriety and noise, the work of an assistant numerary may seem discreet and silent, but it is endowed with a real power to transform society. There are no devices for measuring the energy released by the willingness to constantly direct attention to people, always placing them at the center, seeking to enrich all aspects of their lives: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, etc. This genuine interest in each and every person is permeating society, beginning with the faithful of the Work, who in turn bring this

humanizing attitude to their own professional environment. The mission of uniting the divine and the human, so characteristic of Opus Dei, extends, as in concentric circles, to all those who approach this family, until it reaches the whole of society. With God's grace, if you wish," said Msgr. Javier Echeverría told the assistant numeraries, "you can be like a spiritual, apostolic atomic power station, capable of extending its effects to the whole world." [11]

Each assistant numerary enriches, with her own personality, the life and work in each center of the Work. She also strives to provide herself with the necessary preparation and competence to carry it out. This professionalism can also include the areas of economic and business management, resource optimization, team leadership, nutritional knowledge, the ability to adapt to the people of each place, sustainability,

etc. All of this involves continuous learning, keeping pace with the advances of society and the different professional sectors, but without losing sight of the fact that the essential thing is to keep alive the sensitivity towards family care. A person called to live this vocation *"places professional competence directly at the service of people, showing in a practical way how the same spirit can materialize in different historical circumstances; it becomes a factor of humanization of culture, of being a vanguard, and therefore of inspiration for the professional work of all"*[12].

The care of persons and of the home is a privileged sphere of dialogue with the contemporary world. *"You have an exciting mission,"* writes the Prelate of Opus Dei: *"To transform this world, today so full of individualism and indifference, into an authentic home. Your task, carried out*

with love, can reach every environment. You are building a world that is more human and more divine, because you dignify it with your work converted into prayer, with your affection and with the professionalism that you put into caring for people in their integrity".

Choice, commitment, happiness

Discernment in discovering one's vocation as an assistant numerary is not based primarily on an inclination for a specific type of task, such as those more directly related to care. Any study or professional profile can contribute to this desire to affirm the whole person. God gives this mission to whomever he wills: all that is needed is the desire to look to Christ and, through Christ, to the other members of her family and her environment.

Generally speaking, there is nothing to prevent assistant numeraries from

continuing their formation or personal development in any field: this is a richness that brings value to themselves, their relationships and their work. The important thing is to integrate this professional and personal development into their deepest identity, which is rooted in a firm and mature decision of fidelity to God's call. On the other hand, it can also happen that the dedication of an assistant numerary means giving up a previous profession. This is something that happens to so many people, especially those who decide to devote more time to taking direct care of a home. But it is not simply a blind sacrifice, but a mature decision, based on the joy of one who embraces something she loves, on the joy of one who chooses to give life. The Pope discovers this reality in the figure of St. Joseph: *"Joseph's happiness is not in the logic of self-sacrifice, but in the gift of himself. Frustration is never perceived in this*

man, but only trust (...) Every true vocation is born of the gift of self, which is the maturation of simple sacrifice (...). When a vocation, whether in married, celibate or virginal life, does not reach the maturity of self-giving by stopping only at the logic of sacrifice, then instead of becoming a sign of the beauty and joy of love it runs the risk of expressing unhappiness, sadness and frustration"[14].

The vocation of an assistant numerary is, like every vocation in Opus Dei, "all-encompassing", that is, it embraces all aspects and moments of life[15]. It is not a professional call that is put into action only during the workday. This same mission of making God's love palpable animates moments of formation, of rest, of family life, of friendship, or in any type of activity. God wants there to be people in Opus Dei who, in love with him, transmit by their presence

the same affection of God, the same care for his Son incarnate and present in the Eucharist, and for men and women, children of God.

The evening is falling. The people stand listening to every word of the Master. Jesus sympathizes with their weariness. He knows that most of them are far from home, and he asks his closest disciples to arrange the groups on the grass. Jesus works the miracle of feeding them with only five loaves of bread and two fish, and they all regain their strength to continue their journey with him: men, women and children (cf. Jn 6:1-15).

Later, Jesus will again send the disciples to prepare a meal. In the Upper Room, with the same gesture of blessing and looking up to heaven, Jesus gives himself in bread and wine before his Passion (cf. Mt

26:17-27). The Lord materializes his immense love in two modest foods, and thus assures his presence on earth until the end of time, as a foretaste of the banquet in heaven. From this love hidden in the bread and wine, present in the tabernacle of the centers of the Work, the assistant numeraries protect the family spirit, highlight the unique value of each person and teach the world to build relationships of affection, service and support.

[1] Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 764.

[2] Francis, Angelus, June 10, 2018.

[3] St. Josemaría, Homily, October 2, 1968.

[4] Blessed Álvaro del Portillo, Interview on the Founder, Rialp, chapter 6: "Family and Militia".

[5] Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, Pastoral Letter, January 24, 1990, no. 44.

[6] Cf. St. Josemaría, Letters 36, no. 33.

[7] Monsignor F. Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, October 28, 1920, no. 14. The emphasis is also in the original.

[8] Cf. Monsignor F. Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, October 28, 2020, no. 13 and no. 22.

[9] Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 15.

[10] St. Josemaría, Letters 36, no. 62.

[11] Bishop Echevarría, Pastoral Letter, October 23, 2005, p. 6.

[12] "Reflections on Administration in Opus Dei: Riches and Prospects," in *Romana*, no. 72, 2021.

[13] Monsignor F. Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, October 28, 2020, no. 17.

[14] Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter Patris corde, no. 7.

[15] Cf. Bishop F. Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, October 28, 2020, no. 8.

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