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# **In Conversation with Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz: “With Christ, unity is born from within”**

On the anniversary of the Prelate's election, here is the text of a gathering with students in which he reflected on unity as a divine gift and an essential dimension of Christian life, as well as how it is practised and safeguarded in the Church and in Opus Dei.

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"A united Church, a sign of unity and communion, which becomes a leaven for a reconciled world." With these words in the Mass at the beginning of his Petrine ministry, Pope Leo XIV expressed a desire that, in many ways, is shaping the horizon of his pontificate.

Eight months later, we have seen him close the Holy Door and bring the Jubilee of Hope to a conclusion. During this period, unity has been revealing itself for what it truly is: not an abstract concept, but a constitutive dimension of the Church, of society, and of the human person himself — and therefore that which keeps the door of hope open.

This article summarizes a class given by Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Prelate of

Opus Dei, in dialogue with theology and philosophy students from various countries who live in Rome. Drawing on their questions, rooted in their real-life experience, it offers a concrete reflection on unity as a gift received, a shared task, and, to use an expression from Saint Josemaría, a dominant passion.

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***The following is the introduction to the class, followed by an exchange of questions and answers.***

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## Introduction by the Prelate, Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz

The unity of the Work is, fundamentally, a participation in the unity of the Church. Saint Josemaría frequently recalled that the Work is a small part (a *partecica*, a "little piece") of the Church. From this it follows that the elements which constitute the unity of the Work are, in essence, the same as those which sustain ecclesial unity.

Unity is one of the fundamental marks of the Church, together with catholicity, holiness and apostolicity. It is, moreover, one of the marks most explicitly expressed in the Gospel, when Christ Himself, speaking of his disciples, prays *that all may be one as you, Father, are in me and I in you*.<sup>[1]</sup> This prayer offers us a very profound key for understanding Christian unity.

Indeed, the ultimate substance of the unity of the Church — and, therefore, of the unity of the disciples of Jesus Christ — is participation in the same unity of God, which, insofar as we can limitedly know the mystery of the Trinity, we see particularly in the Holy Spirit, because what unites is love, and the Holy Spirit is love.

Therefore, even the more human elements of the unity of the Church, and of the Work, attain their true value when they are informed by charity. It is not a matter of seeing them only as organisational elements, although they are that too, but of recognising that their deeper value lies in being an expression of the love that unites.

From this perspective, the unity of the Work, as part of the Church, can be considered under three dimensions, following a distinction used on occasion by the then-

professor Joseph Ratzinger when speaking of the Church: what the Church is visibly, what it is constitutively and what it is operatively.

First, the Church is visible. What does this mean? That it is a people, a group of human persons, with a singular characteristic: it is a people formed by many peoples. The first Letter of Saint Peter expresses this with a very significant formula when speaking of the Church as *populus acquisitionis*,<sup>[2]</sup> a people that God has acquired for Himself.

Since Pentecost, the universal Church is a whole: it is the visible reality of a visible people, which is small in its beginnings, but called from the start to universality. And what gives visible unity to this people, humanly formed by such diverse peoples, are mainly three elements: the common profession of faith, sacramental life

and the existence of a common head, the Roman Pontiff. One faith professed externally, one sacramental life (with its different rites and liturgies) and one principle of universal government, are the visible elements that make the unity of such different peoples and cultures possible.

The other aspect Ratzinger comments on is what the Church is constitutively. Here we enter the heart of the mystery. The Church is the Body of Christ. Saint Josemaría recalled this forcefully when saying that the Church is "Christ present among us."<sup>[3]</sup> —

This is the deepest reality of the Church, the one that gives meaning and efficacy to everything visible. It is not just that Christ is present giving strength from within, but that the Church, as a whole, is truly a Body. The Mystical Body is not a

metaphor: it is a spiritual reality, a true union of all members with Jesus Christ. This is what the Church is constitutively.

In this context, Joseph Ratzinger offered a very well-known and very concise definition: the Church is the people that lives from the Body of Christ (he refers to the Eucharist); it lives from the Body of Christ and becomes the same Body of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist. It lives from the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, and becomes the Body of Christ in the Eucharist.

Let us now look at the third dimension from which we can consider the of Church's unity. If the first referred to the fact that the Church is, visibly, a people formed by persons; and the second to the fact that, in its deepest reality, it is the Body of Christ; the third expresses that the Church, in its action in the



world, is the universal sacrament of salvation.<sup>[4]</sup> The sanctifying power of the Church unfolds in the preaching of the Gospel and in the sacraments, especially in bringing people to confession and the Eucharist and, consequently, in awakening in them apostolic zeal.

The unity of the Church — and, within it, the unity of the Work — is, ultimately, a gift from God. It is profoundly supernatural, although it also has human and organisational expressions. And it is a gift that is given to all of us; for this very reason, it is also everyone's responsibility to care for it.

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# Questions

- Unity as part of the charism of Opus Dei
  - Unity as a personal gift
  - Being instruments of unity in a culturally diverse world
  - Healing wounds and rebuilding trust
  - Living interior unity in contexts without solid reference points
  - Collegiality as richness
  - Freedom of expression and care for unity
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**If unity is a gift that belongs to the whole Church, what is there in the spirit of Opus Dei that makes us practise and care for it as one of our dominant passions?**

The unity lived in the Work is, essentially, the same unity of the Church, as is the case in any other ecclesial reality. But, logically, in the Work there are aspects proper to the spirit that configure its way of being.

The fundamental point is unity of spirit. The Work has a particular spirituality and, insofar as we all participate in that spirit, it gives us a profound unity. This is not uniformity, but a common way of thinking and living according to that spirit, with great freedom in all matters of opinion. Saint Josemaría spoke of a small common denominator — the spirit of Opus Dei

— with a varied numerator. Unity is given by that common denominator.

That spirit is "as old as the Gospel and, like the Gospel, new."<sup>[5]</sup>—

Therefore, we cannot think that there is in the Work something completely different from what is common to the Church. It is, rather, a matter of a particular way of living realities that belong to the very essence of Christianity.

Which realities? If we want to consider some central points of the spirit of the Work, we can start with the centre and root of spiritual life: the Eucharist. It is the centre of the whole Church, but in the Work it is lived with a very clear awareness of its importance and with a vital demand for daily fidelity: participating in Holy Mass, being souls of the Eucharist, even seeking, as Saint Josemaría says, to centre our thoughts on the Eucharist.<sup>[6]</sup>—

If the Eucharist is the centre and root, the foundation of the spirit of Opus Dei is the sense of divine filiation. It is something common to all Christians, undoubtedly, but in the Work it occupies a particularly central place as the foundation of spiritual life: we live our practices of piety, work and daily life from that awareness of being children of God.

Alongside this is the hinge of the spirit of Opus Dei: the sanctification of work. We are all called to sanctify ourselves, and to share the possibility of sanctifying their work with many others. But in the Work this aspect goes right to the heart: it is the point around which our effort of sanctification and apostolate revolves.

Thus, with all the common elements of the unity of the Church, in the Work these characteristics make us *one* insofar as we live the same spirit:

the Eucharist as the centre and root,  
divine filiation as the foundation,  
and the sanctification of work as the  
hinge.

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**Father, if unity is a gift from  
God that we ask for the whole  
Church and for the Work, can  
we also ask for it as a  
personal gift, for each  
individual?**

Yes, of course. Unity is a gift from  
God for each person, by increasing  
the desire for unity within us and  
then, with his grace, receiving the  
strength to be elements of unity  
through charity and affection.

Unity is thus a condition of efficacy  
at all levels. Saint Josemaría  
expressed this with special clarity in

one of his letters from 1931: "God counts on our weaknesses, on our weakness and on the weakness of others. But he also counts on all our strength, if charity unites us."<sup>[7]</sup> Unity gives strength, *if charity unites us*. And what truly unites us is affection.

Here it is worth distinguishing affection from pure sentiment. True affection, true love, is manifested above all in works: in self-giving, dedication, and interest in others. Often this love is accompanied by the feeling of affection; other times it is not. But when there is true love, there is unity.

Fundamentally, the personal level has much to do with unity. It is also a source of apostolic zeal, because it leads us to feel other people's apostolic missions as our own. This encourages and motivates us, even when our own activity is more limited or has less scope for action.

What others do is also "ours," and this awareness generates strength and fruitfulness.

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**The Work is approaching its first centenary and its message has reached people of different generations, cultures and places in the world. How can we be instruments of unity today, assuming that responsibility amidst the cultural changes and circumstances of our time?**

On one hand, we can meditate frequently on unity and truly ask the Lord for it, so that He may give us concrete lights to know how to put it into practise it wherever we may be.



Then, there are many elements that help, but one very important one is understanding that the unity of the Work is the unity of a family. One cannot speak of or understand the unity of the Work without thinking of the unity of the family. It is something very particular and very essential to its spirit.

This unity always manifests itself as a direct union with our holy founder. Saint Josemaría continues to be *our Father* from heaven, through his writings, with his spirit, with what he has left us as an inheritance, and with what we know of his life. Part of our personal responsibility in caring for unity also consists in helping, wherever we are, to keep the figure of our Father alive: turning to his intercession in different needs, keeping his memory present, and trying to act according to his mind. This is what Pope Saint Paul VI told Blessed Álvaro del Portillo: "When

you have to do something, think of how the founder would do it." Don Álvaro was very grateful for this advice, it brought him great joy, because he had acted this way from the very beginning. Union with Saint Josemaría is a very important part of the unity of the Work.

Alongside all this, there is also filiation to the Father, whoever he may be at each moment; a filiation that gives real unity to the whole Work, to both sections, always based on what is most fundamental, which is unity of spirit.

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**Father, sometimes misunderstandings or wounds from the past can become obstacles to living unity. How can we rebuild trust when there has been pain or resentment?**

In these cases, the first thing is to help people think about the Lord's attitude: God loves each person infinitely, much more than we can love. Returning to this profound truth changes our way of positioning ourselves before others and helps us, especially when there are remnants of resentment or a reason for displeasure, from the past or present, to remember that God loves the other person infinitely.

Saint Paul expresses this forcefully in the Letter to the Ephesians, in a text we know well: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to

walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."<sup>[8]</sup> He expressed something very specific here: unity in the "bond of peace."

Transmitting peace. Saint Josemaría frequently encouraged us to be sowers of peace and joy. From a very young age, in his intimate notes, he wrote with amazement: "I believe the Lord has placed another characteristic in my soul: peace, having peace and transmitting peace."

What peace is this? It is Jesus Christ Himself. *Ipse est pax nostra*, "He is our peace."<sup>[9]</sup> Therefore, all the work of caring for unity is, necessarily, a work of union with Jesus Christ. As Saint Paul says: "In the bond of

peace, being one body and one Spirit..."<sup>[10]</sup> It is the Holy Spirit who united, with the gift of charity. Faith unites, certainly, but more fundamentally, what unites us is love, and the Holy Spirit is the infinite love of God.

**We live in a culture of disunity and individualism in society, politics, institutions, and even families. How can we live unity in an authentic way; a unity that is not merely external but springs from within each person, when there are so few example around us?**

Saint Josemaría spoke of being instruments of unity: people who create, defend, and care for unity. To live this, the principal reference point is always Jesus Christ.

In what sense can the passion, desire, or tendency to care for unity be dominant in our lives? It is dominant when it comes to permeate our thoughts and feelings and therefore spontaneously moves the way we live. It is then that others' concerns become ours as well: their interior life, work, health, illness... Always in the appropriate way in each case. We want to pray for them, and we have an interest in making their path easier. We rejoice in their successes. Everything that "belongs" to others is ours. That is unity.

Unity also leads us to suffer with those who suffer, and it manifests itself in a very concrete way in our attitude towards others' defects or limitations.

Moreover, when the desire for unity is dominant in us, there naturally arises a special attention to promoting what unites and to

avoiding — even rejecting, as the case may be — whatever might become, however slightly, a principle of disunity.

**Father, sometimes working and making decisions together can seem slower than doing things on our own. In the Work, collegiality is a habitual way of working. How can we understand and live it as a richness and not as an obstacle?**

Within the organisation of the Work, collegiality is a very important aspect of unity: it must be lived at all levels, both in government and in apostolic endeavours. It is a great measure of prudence, because it prevents anyone from ruling alone without taking others' opinions into account. Saint Josemaría — with God's light —

established this way of acting from the beginning and wanted it thus throughout the Work.

He recalled this very forcefully on one occasion in one of his letters. "I have repeated to you — this is a text you already know — on countless occasions, and I shall repeat it much more throughout my life, that in the Work I demand collegial government at all levels, so that we do not fall into tyranny."<sup>[11]</sup> —

We risk falling into unilateral working styles simply due to haste: thinking that something is urgent and that there is no need to wait for others and take their opinion into account. Saint Josemaría used to say that "urgent things can wait, and very urgent things *must* wait." Not to waste time, but to study them as planned. This way of proceeding is a guarantee of effectiveness and serenity.



Deciding alone can even generate anxiety, especially when matters are complex. By contrast, counting on input from other people helps us to see better. This is also true when someone has more experience or knows more about a particular topic. Experience shows that a person who knows less can provide a light, a solution or a nuance that the other person had missed.

Therefore, although collegiality requires more time, it is worthwhile. It is a price worth paying, because what is achieved is very valuable. It is not only a system for doing things, but above all a spirit; the conviction that we all need the insights of others. And this must be lived at all levels.

**I sometimes worry that we don't have the confidence to say what we really think, for fear of generating disagreement or divisions. How can we find the balance between the freedom to express our own opinion and caring for unity, knowing that we will not always agree on everything?**

Valuing diversity is a necessary aspect of our dominant passion for unity. This may seem contradictory, but it is not. Unity does not consist in everyone thinking alike, but in loving others as they are and finding points of union there. So being understanding toward others is part of the idea we've already discussed, that everything that concerns the others is also "ours." And this helps us avoid a critical spirit.

If we want to live this way, the first thing we need to do is make it a conscious intention, understanding that part of unity is accepting others' opinions. This includes not being afraid to say what we think. Always with prudence, of course; it is not a question of saying just anything, at any time, and in any way. But in appropriate spaces — in a meeting or conversation, for instance — it is good to express our own opinion, even when we think it will be the minority view. We are not trying to impose our ideas on others, but simply to say what we think in conscience. Far from breaking our unity, this build bridges towards it.

I remember that years ago, when I was appointed consultor in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, I visited the philosopher Cornelio Fabro — I saw him quite frequently — who had also been a consultor for many years. He said to

me emphatically: "I'll only give you one piece of advice from my experience: in meetings, always say what you think, even if you see that everyone else thinks the opposite. Always do that." Well, I'll leave you with the same advice.

Furthermore, in a very direct and visible way, caring for unity means caring for Christian fraternity. This involves a constant effort to unite, avoiding the formation of groups within the Work, treating everyone equally, and fostering sincere interest in the others' lives. Saint Josemaría was deeply enthusiastic about this attitude in people who bring others together.

We should not be surprised by the diversity of characters and interests, nor by the difficulties of human connection that arise from such differences of character. In one of his letters, Saint Josemaría said: "You

must also constantly practise a fraternity that rises above all natural sympathy or antipathy, loving one another as true brothers, with the treatment and understanding proper to those who form a well-united family."<sup>[12]</sup> These words are both beautiful and demanding, and it is in our hands to practise and transmit them.

I would like to recall, in closing, a text that we know well, but which always gives much food for meditation. It is from a letter of Saint Josemaría, written in 1957: "In the Tabernacle of the oratory of the General Council I have had these words placed: *Consummati in unum*. All of us with Jesus Christ are one. May we, placed in the forge of God, always preserve this marvellous unity of mind, of will, of heart. And may our Mother, through whom all graces come to men, splendid and

fruitful channel, give us, with unity, clarity, charity and strength."

This is not merely a pious ending to a speech. It is a pious conclusion, yes, but profoundly logical. It leads us naturally to pray for unity. In fact, we pray for it every day. And it is fitting to do so with a grateful and optimistic soul, because we pray for something that already exists: we pray that it may be maintained, that we may know how to care for it, and we give thanks to God for the unity of the Work, which is a very great gift.

Perhaps we are so accustomed to unity that we run the risk of not appreciating it sufficiently. That is why it is good to ask for the grace to value it more, be more grateful for it, and care for it better: not as an abstract idea, but in real gestures, decisions and attitudes, where unity becomes a true passion.

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[1] Jn 17:21.

[2] 1 Pet 2:9.

[3] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 131.

[4] On this triple dimension of the Church, cf. *Lumen Gentium*.

[5] Saint Josemaría, *Letters (II)*, Letter 6, no. 31.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, nos. 268 and 835; *Christ is Passing By*, on the Eucharist.

[7] Saint Josemaría, *Letters (I)*, Letter 2, no. 56.

[8] Eph 4:1-4.

[9] Eph 2:14.

[10] Eph 4:3-4.

<sup>[11]</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Letter 24-XII-1951*, no. 5.

<sup>[12]</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Letters (I)*, letter no. 2.

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