

In The Name of The Father, and in Honour of Friendship

Chidera reflects on the profound impact of Opus Dei's teachings on friendship, which transformed her understanding from mere companionship to a deeper, Christian act of accompaniment. Despite some negative experiences with Opus Dei members, the narrator remains grateful for the meaningful friendships inspired by St. Josemaría's teachings, celebrated during a Mass of Thanksgiving.

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It frequently happens in a city such as Lagos that nothing is ever straightforward enough. So even when you have prepared beyond reasonable doubt to make it to Lagoon School by 11 am for the Solemn Mass of St. Josemaría, you will find yourself at Whitesands instead, more than an hour later, because what is a Saturday morning without every Tomi, Dalu and Hakunde stuck in Epe traffic with you?

A stickler for plans like myself is inevitably visited by sulky thoughts of all the hugs I would miss, the familiar smiles I wouldn't get to exchange, and the friends I was hoping to see after so long; after all, what is a Mass of Thanksgiving

without your own little village to celebrate with?

“In the name of the Father...” said a priest I had never seen before

I was seated beside one of my best friend’s parents, and like the unnecessarily emotional person I can be, I felt my heart swell and my eyes grow misty. I would not have been in this exact position if I hadn’t once been seated in a cosy library listening to another priest of Opus Dei several years ago, listening to a definition of friendship that shifted me.

“A friend is not just someone who is there for you, but someone you are there for.”

Simple enough if your natural disposition is to give rather than take; mind-blowing anyway else. Until then, I had never thought about friendship beyond company, which

was lovely and convenient, to stomach the annoyances of life with.

That there could be something rather extraordinary and Christian about friendship only started sinking in gradually as I got to know some members of Opus Dei, faster when I read books by or around St. Josemaría, and fastest when life seemed to put a thumb to my brain, press down, and crush me from the inside out.

In those moments when I experienced loneliness that weighed like the profound loss of something I wasn't certain I ever had or could have, the flashes of light that delivered semblances of sanity to me came from friends—many of them, numeraries of Opus Dei.

If I took my art classes seriously, I could paint you a picture of a scene that never leaves me. I'm sitting on a bench in Afara Leadership Centre,

my heart black with pain, and this friend nestles beside me, takes my right hand in hers and presses it without saying a single thing, as though she knew I could not bear words. She lives in Enugu now and spends most of her time convincing children that *“this injection is not painful.”*

As this pain ebbed through the years, a deep understanding of what friendship means blossomed in me and has never left. More than company, it is to accompany. Like Jesus with those disciples on the road to Emmaus, which is why what the priest is saying now makes sense:

“In a similar way, Opus Dei organises activities that accompany ordinary people in the middle of the world”.

Activities that accompany ordinary people “in the middle of the world”—as they never get tired of saying. But how do you get to know or encounter

those activities in the first place?
Mostly through friends.

Naturally, not every ‘friendship’ experience is as uplifting as I’ve described, not even for me. Opus Dei’s message might be perfect, but its members are not. Sometimes, I have been entrusted with stories of pain from friends who have felt reduced to a number (the statistics of souls in attendance for so-and-so activity) under the pretence of friendship. A friendship that was neither truly about giving nor receiving but being prodded to ‘do’. Or stories of grief and repulsion from a rigidity that masquerades itself as free and personalities that mechanically regurgitate things once written down as soulless as AI.

Thankfully, some of these stories left my care and were poured into a recent research study conducted towards the Centenary of Opus Dei.

So, both developments are working towards the same goal: ensuring members of Opus Dei stick to St. Josemaría's teachings and nothing less.

In 2028, Opus Dei will be 100-wild!

I have known it for a tenth of that time and have the lore to match. If not for a centre of Opus Dei called Imoran, I would never have met my best friend, Uloma. And if it wasn't for Pan-Atlantic University, which is inspired by the Spirit of Opus Dei, I wouldn't have gotten to know Jessica, whose parents I'm now standing beside receiving the final blessing.

So, what is a Mass of Thanksgiving without your own little village to celebrate with? I wouldn't know since I couldn't help carrying them all in my heart. True, I didn't get to give the hugs I wanted—hugs that say everything without words—but at this Mass, I came to thank God for St.

Josemaría and the friendships his words have inspired in my life; for teaching me what it means to truly accompany out of Love even though “*I still dey learn work*”. And that is what I did.

Anyone who knows me knows my friends are my joy. I am too loud not to share how much I love them all.

“*The Mass is ended, go in peace...*”

“And in honour of friendship.” I whisper to myself.

Chidera

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