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Isabel Sánchez and Opus Dei: “Deepening in the charism, rectifying, and dreaming of sowing good”

The path to the Centenary has sparked a process of reflection, seen in the recently concluded Regional Assemblies held around the world. In this conversation with Isabel Sánchez, secretary of the Central Advisory, she shares some of the key topics discussed.

13/02/2025

As we mark another anniversary of 14 February, between the conclusion of the Regional Assemblies and the upcoming General Congress, we speak with Isabel Sánchez, secretary of the Central Advisory, the body that assists the Prelate in his work.

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Which major challenges in today's world affect Opus Dei's growth and development?

I think it is fair and deeply human to look at the world — our world — especially in this jubilee year, from a perspective of hope. The value placed on individual and social freedom, increasing access to education for large sectors of the population, human and social progress, and the globalisation of communication are actually facilitating the spread of the Christian message and getting to meet Jesus. Many people have a longing for God within them; the number of Christians is increasing in large parts of Africa, Latin America, and Asia; we are witnessing a wave of conversions among intellectuals in the United States; adult baptisms are on the rise in old Europe; and many people, by different paths, are learning to find God in their daily lives. Wherever the Church grows, Opus Dei is growing as well.

But there are also shadows that darken this picture. In the secularised West, the loss of a sense of transcendence makes it difficult to understand ways of life that place God at the centre. Our hedonistic and individualistic culture struggles to reconcile concepts like love and effort, freedom and responsibility, spontaneity and good habits, bonds and security.

I think the challenges we face can be summarised in three words: commitment, communication, and trust.

Commitment, that marvellous capacity of human freedom to weave love through promises, has become an almost unutterable word in every aspect of life. We seem to find greater freedom in the ease of breaking ties than in the patient effort of building them.

At the same time, the information overload, the unscrupulous spread of fake news, and the superficial way in which we accept misinformation without verifying or cross-checking sources create an atmosphere of confusion. This does not clarify our thinking but instead leads to increasing polarisation.

And trust, because authority is often perceived as a thirst for power, placed under suspicion, and consequently, met with distrust.

On the path to the Centenary, and reflecting on the experience of the Regional Assemblies, would you say that Opus Dei has begun a process of discernment between what is essential and what is secondary?

The Regional Assemblies were a path envisaged by Saint Josemaría from the very beginnings of Opus Dei. The founder always maintained an

attitude of openness and consultation with those who were joining the Work, but these Assemblies were first held in a structured and formal way in 1943. Since then, they have been regularly organised in the countries in which the institution is present.

In this sense, the Regional Assemblies held in 2024, which looked ahead to the upcoming General Congress and the Centenary of the Work, have not started a new process, but rather continued an ongoing conversation. Decade after decade, always in the light of the charism received from God as a gift for the Church, formulas, approaches to formation, and evangelisation practices have been reviewed, strengthened, reinvented, and, in many cases, discontinued as they became obsolete or inadequate due to social and cultural transformations.

What stands out about these most recent Regional Assemblies, compared to previous ones, is the high level of participation, made possible by technology, and a format designed to foster dialogue. This included listening to people who are not members of Opus Dei and a general enthusiasm for identifying new areas and initiatives to respond to the needs of today's world.

It was also a source of joy to hold these Assemblies within the broader journey of synodality in the Church. The Secretariat of the Synod encouraged us to experience the Prelature's Regional Assemblies as a special moment of listening. This process ran parallel to the participation of many Opus Dei members in their respective dioceses, actively engaging in the activities proposed as part of the Synod.

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As we mark another anniversary of the beginning of Opus Dei's work with women, and in this context of preparation for the Centenary, we want to ask you about some more complex issues for which the Work has faced criticism.

Is there any acknowledgment of failures in discernment processes?

For centuries, the Church (and within it, Opus Dei) has followed Jesus' words: "Come, follow me." Every proclamation of the Gospel, every attempt to present and propose a path of Christian life, has no other purpose than to share the possibility of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, who is the one who lovingly invites and who gives the strength to respond to his call.

Jesus' tone is clear (it is a loving invitation), but we can make mistakes when we echo it — and we have. Out of enthusiasm to share what one considers a great good, there may have been times when things were rushed, or when there was a failure to foster attentive and respectful listening. From the testimony of some individuals, we know that, unfortunately, this has happened in certain cases. Beyond acknowledging this and personally asking for their forgiveness, these experiences have helped us to be more mindful of how we act and to exercise greater care.

In a recent interview, Lidia Vía, who oversees activities for youth in Spain, provided a detailed explanation of the improvements that have been made in this area over many years, and how those close to Opus Dei's apostolic activities have been involved in this process.

The preparation for the Centenary, which we have sought to approach with gratitude for the gift received, recognition of painful experiences, and aspirations for the future, has given us the opportunity to rectify as we go, where changes were already possible. The testimonies of people who have suffered within the Work have also led us to acknowledge failures and to seek forgiveness. Those of us in positions of responsibility have often done this personally within private or family settings, while the Prelate has done so publicly in various interviews. Additionally, at an institutional level, almost every statement issued by Opus Dei's communications offices to clarify certain matters has also recognised — sorrowfully — where there have been shortcomings: failures in discernment, emotional support, and in some cases, negligence.

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Some accusations concern excessive regulation of life in the centres, based on criteria found in internal documents accessible only to those in governance roles. What would you say about this? What lessons have been learned or changes made?

Opus Dei centres are meant to be spaces of formation and charity; homes where members of the Work can gather to support each other, share evangelization projects, receive spiritual accompaniment, and continually renew their Christian formation.

The centre belongs to everyone and exists for everyone, but celibate members of the Work (about 12% of the total) reside there with the mission of making it a true Christian family environment. The common project is demanding because it seeks

arduous, hard-won goods: the holiness of each person and a continuous sowing of goodness.

As in any other human living space, some basic rules of coexistence are necessary so that those sharing a home do not live as strangers, to ensure time and conditions for prayer, rest, and renewal. These are family norms (a simple shared schedule, agreements for the use of common areas, etc.) and family traditions that help one feel part of something with deep roots and history. Due to this familial nature, they must be lived with flexibility and spontaneity. When they are not lived thus, for whatever reason, the result can be stress or suffocation.

In this area, the lessons learned are similar to those of many families and other institutions: moving toward more horizontal organizational and leadership styles, involving

everyone, addressing intergenerational challenges with care and generosity, avoiding haste to better support others, and creatively resolving the tensions many people worldwide experience in balancing professional and family life.

When Saint Josemaría began teaching the path of Opus Dei to those who followed him, he realized it was a journey of trial and error, of successes and failures. It is beautiful that he wanted to involve those early members of Opus Dei and asked them to document their experiences to share what they learned. As Opus Dei grew and thousands of people joined, these became small protocols of best (and worst) practices. These experiences, which were meant to be dynamic and adaptable like life itself, at some point in the 1970s and 1980s, solidified into criteria with more authority than they originally had.

Perhaps the necessary feedback was not diligently gathered to assess whether what was once beneficial remained so. This is understandable, as the desire was to stay as close as possible to the founder, and it was thought that maintaining all those small details was the best way to do so.

This phenomenon is common in many charismatic institutions. As time passes, Opus Dei encounters new contexts, is enriched by younger generations, and learns from their experiences. The Work has welcomed people from increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds and trajectories, and the revision of best practices aimed at ensuring that individuals live their path to God with freedom and joy was slow. However, this revision has been ongoing for years.

These formative documents have always been available to the Holy See. Within Opus Dei, they were shared with those responsible for formation. Given today's demand for transparency and horizontality within Opus Dei, as in families, they have been progressively introduced. Now, there are few normative documents, such as the Statutes, which are currently under review. There is a book defining the spirit and customs of Opus Dei, available to members, and there is a set of experiences for formation at the local level.

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How does Opus Dei listen to its members, including those with a more critical gaze, who question certain issues?

I believe that the work we have been doing in recent years, in line with what is happening in society and

families, is aimed at improving the responses we give, at how we integrate that listening and those voices into our decision-making. More emphasis is also being placed on the design of participatory processes, envisioned by Saint Josemaría and adapted to the present moment. As I mentioned, the celebration of the regional assemblies has been a powerful declaration of the desire to listen to and integrate everyone's voices. Additionally, we wanted the feedback I referred to earlier to be a priority throughout this process, and so we have made sure this work is happening in each country.

Those with governance responsibilities in the Work have the doors open to anyone, and we dedicate a lot of time to listening. Personally, I find it very helpful to converse with people who ask me difficult questions.

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How are issues studied in the government of the Work? How are changes communicated and managed? Are there auditing tools to ensure that these changes are applied across all regions?

In a sense, I believe that many of the misunderstandings or mistakes that the Work is accused of stem from weak internal communication and insufficient channels. In today's world, with the immediacy of communication, the demand for transparency and accountability, sharing information about changes and their reasons is necessary and desired. I can confirm that we have made progress in many areas, though perhaps not always at the pace we would like, nor in every part of the world, nor in all cases.

The Prelate demonstrates, with deeds and actions, this desire to reach every

single person in Opus Dei directly. He wanted all the information about recent canonical changes in Opus Dei to reach everyone equally through the website, with him acting as the spokesperson. In fact, many people have asked the governing bodies in their countries about it, expecting those individuals to have more information, and they have been surprised. As in any organisation, some information is shared as needed because of the nature of the work being carried out, but a great deal is a right for everyone. We are working on that process.

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What is the plan of life as proposed by Saint Josemaría? What is its purpose?

The most exciting thing about the Christian faith is that it reveals to us a God with a human face, a name. Our God is incarnate and close to us,

but He is God: He cannot be seen or heard; He is beyond the reach of our senses. If we want to know Him and have a relationship with Him, we need to set up appointments — flexible but frequent ones — that help us look at Him with the eyes of faith, listen to his word as found in the Scriptures, learn to know and adore Him in the Eucharist, and find Him within ourselves. These scattered appointments throughout the day form a plan, a plan for Christian life. But this plan of life is not an end in itself; its true purpose is that, at each turn of the day, we may experience the joy of a new encounter with Jesus Christ, who passes by and helps us, encourages us, lifts us, comforts us, and teaches us. With this divine strength, we can face life with great serenity, joy, and freedom, striving for all our activities and relationships to be shaped by love.

In Opus Dei, there is a plan of life that is common to everyone, and which must be adapted to each person's circumstances and duties, according to their professional situation, stage of life, or various obligations. It is proposed as a way to live in the knowledge that we are children of God at all times.

From the very beginning, Saint Josemaría warned about misguided perspectives that could make this plan feel burdensome: treating it as an end in itself and settling for merely “getting it done;” giving disproportionate weight to our inevitable failures in following it; failing to live it creatively and falling into routine; understanding those moments in an “inward-facing” way that distances us from the needs of others. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that we seek to live it in order to unite ourselves with

Christ and bring his love to the world.

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In your life, you have particularly focused on the formation of women who held leadership positions. What aspects do you emphasise the most? What “vices” do you fear the most, and why? What do you consider the most valuable learning experiences?

Leading a Christian organisation can only be about serving. I admire the dedication and worth of all these women (a very small number of the total) who, in every country where Opus Dei is present, strive professionally to enhance the religious formation of the people who approach the apostolates of the Work, channeling their desire to spread the Gospel, and providing the means (resources, activities, spiritual care, etc.) to keep the calling they

have received from God alive and vibrant. I learn a great deal from them.

When it comes to guiding them through their responsibilities, the main ideas come from Saint Josemaría's experience: ensuring that they express their opinion honestly in any matter studied; that they are open to the ideas and opinions of the rest of the team; that we never lose sight of the attention to the individual person, even in the simplest or most material study; that in any decision affecting people, their freedom is listened to and respected with great care.

Additionally, they should use their time in that leadership position to grow in knowledge and skills that will ease their professional transition to another field once their term is completed.

In such a role, the most dangerous vice is a lack of faith: not relying on God's action or being unable to transmit supernatural hope. On another level, we are putting measures in place to avoid authoritarian styles, rigidity, or lack of creativity. We also ensure periodic and effective renewal to prevent people from staying in their positions for too long.

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There is a growing recognition of mental health as a global challenge affecting people in various sectors of society. How has attention and accompaniment in this area evolved within the Work over the decades? How has the institution adapted to new sensitivities and approaches regarding psychological wellbeing?

People who come to Opus Dei are simple, ordinary people; the people

you'd find walking down the street. And the streets are full of people with problems, including mental health issues. Like families and other human organisations, we have had to learn — and we continue to learn — how to identify these issues, not to stigmatise them, to care for vulnerabilities, and to encourage seeking specialised attention when needed.

The fields of psychiatry and psychology have evolved significantly in recent decades. After a time deeply influenced by psychoanalysis, and later by the development of medications, there is now a much greater presence of psychotherapeutic approaches through non-pharmacological therapies. Some past experiences may have stemmed from this context. We have learned to avoid mixing spiritual care with therapeutic treatment.

I can confidently say that we are more sensitive to prevention: recommending self-care, facilitating rest, and avoiding work overload or excessive tasks. We also rely much more on the help of families, especially when it comes to young people.

It's not an easy issue for anyone, and we still have much to learn.

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How do members of Opus Dei, particularly celibate members, balance their relationships with their families and the institution?

A crucial characteristic of Opus Dei is its very clear familial aspect. Any person who asks for admission and begins to live the charism of Opus Dei finds that it is a family, while, at the same time, they came from a family and still have that family. And we have not managed to integrate

these two families in the best way. There has been tension in some cases, and we have learned from it. Some people have even left the Work because of wounds or tensions in this area, because they did not feel accompanied through this integration. At the same time, we realise that it is important to care for the ways in which family life is lived within the Work. It's true that the call to Opus Dei is a call to give oneself to others in a task of evangelisation, in a task of formation, which sometimes will ask for exclusive dedication at a certain moment. What we have learned is that the decision about where each person needs to be at any given moment should be made primarily by the individual, with God.

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Do you think the lifestyle of Opus Dei is demanding?

The ideal of any Christian is to live loving God and doing good to others. If this were only a goal, it would be an exhausting impossibility. But this ideal is something we receive as a gift: to love God and, *with* Him, to love others. This dynamic is a source of joy, peace, faith, and hope. It balances life because it leads to building it on solid pillars, with a unity of purpose that makes it very coherent.

But to maintain the primacy of these evangelical values in practice, we need help from Heaven and daily effort.

In Opus Dei, occasions are provided to receive grace, while also urging members not to shy away from God's bold calls. It is a demanding path because it aims for a hard-won good. It is a loving path because what is sought is love, which is very

compatible with one's own fragility and mistakes.

Thousands of people around the world have found happiness on this path. The secret lies in living it with maximum freedom and renewed love for Jesus Christ, who called us, and for others.

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What role does corporal mortification, such as the cilice or disciplines, have in the life of a person called to live in the world? Are these practices obligatory? What is their benefit?

The Catholic Church is a people that has followed Jesus of Nazareth for twenty-one centuries, seeking union with Him. There is no Jesus without the Cross, and no one can be a Christian without sharing the Cross with Him. For a Christian, the way to be in the world is to love the Cross.

In addition to the sufferings and sorrow that life brings, Christians' generosity and love throughout the ages has found ways to participate in our Lord's salvific suffering, in big things and small: fasting, deprivation, voluntary discomfort... All of this has contributed to practices of mortification that in some way revives, in the body – symbolically – the passion of Jesus: the use of cilices and disciplines, for example. Saint Thomas More, father of a family and Chancellor of England, practised them; the shepherd children of Fatima sought them.

Opus Dei takes its proposals for Christian life from this secular tradition. Celibate members are recommended a minimum of bodily mortification as a means of intimacy with the Lord, with these parameters: moderation, common

sense, and always seeking advice in spiritual direction.

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What space is there for personal freedom in what seems to be a very regulated lifestyle (rules, schedules, external demands...)?

Christian faith is always a framework of freedom, because it places us before God as children, not as slaves. His calls always have an invitational tone and He asks for free, responsible responses.

Opus Dei is made of a group of free adults who have chosen a Christian way of life. They know what they are committing to and live it freely. This choice of life leads them to love their world passionately, to be immersed in society, face its challenges alongside their peers, give their friendship and affection generously,

etc. They are sowers of peace and joy, walking hand in hand with others.

From the moment they realize that God is calling them to this path, they receive explanations about how to specifically live certain Christian virtues, the spiritual plan of life that is proposed, the means of ongoing formation they will need for their mission of evangelization, etc. This makes sense: Opus Dei is a path in the Church, a broad path, but one with a clear outline. Those who discover the call to live this vocation in their hearts naturally want to live it in the best way possible. Therefore, the formational encounters mentioned earlier are a necessary requirement before their formal entry into the Work: no one is admitted who does not know what they are committing to or who does not freely choose it.

In addition to this theoretical knowledge, the years prior to definitive commitment ensure that these proposals come to life, which always involves struggles and failures, because we are human. All of this is part of the vocational discernment process, both for the Work and for the individual involved. In this respect, Opus Dei is no different from other institutions in the Church.

We humans are imperfect: we are free, but we must learn to live and feel that freedom. From the organisational standpoint, the fundamental lessons learned consist of constantly fostering and promoting freedom, which is the main engine in a life of self-giving: a freedom shaped by the love received from God. In this task, we need to eliminate rigid or authoritarian styles of formation, while also detecting voluntaristic or

perfectionist behaviours, which lead to stress and sadness.

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How have you learned to accompany people who leave the Work, or to help those who need to accompany such processes?

To me, the people who have left the Work are not a group; rather, they are faces in my prayers, real people with whom I shared dreams and projects, who at some point in their journey, for reasons that are unique to each one of them, left. In many cases, it was part of the normal discernment process, and after some years, some of them have requested admission again. In other cases, the reasons were different, and those people have maintained a respectful closeness with the Work.

What hurts me most are the painful departures of those who left feeling

hurt or angry. I'm thinking of a few cases close to me, and I deeply regret not having known how to reach them in time, to accompany them better, or to maintain the friendship despite our differences.

I'm sorry that these things have happened. We have been learning to better accompany these departures and to make sure no one is left alone.

In any case, I have repeatedly seen how God has used these *winding* paths to bring great good to the individual people, both those who left and those who remained, and to Opus Dei.

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Where did the offices of healing and resolution come from? Are they proving effective?

We want people who leave Opus Dei to be accompanied by those closest to

them at that moment, understanding and caring for them within their concrete circumstances. In recent years, we have made a special effort; many people have received this accompaniment and help when they left the Work, or some time later, when they came back in contact.

We are also aware that this hasn't always been the case. Because of that, as the first and most basic measure, starting in March 2024, the Prelate wanted to ensure that there was a protocol of care in all countries. In some places, this protocol has developed into the establishment of offices of healing and resolution. This ensures that people with whom relationships have been lost, or who prefer that route, have somewhere to turn. I would like them to have been unnecessary, because we knew how to accompany those leaving Opus Dei, whatever their reasons.

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If you had to choose one area in which you believe the institution still has much to learn, what would it be?

When we reach the centenary of the Work, marking a century of a journey traveled by tens of thousands of individual people, I would like people to say of us what the first Christians' contemporaries said of them: "See how they love one another!" See how they care for each other, how passionately they love the world, and how they contribute to making it better.

To get there, we need to continue growing in our knowledge of how to form people more deeply in and from personal freedom, ensuring that each person knows themselves, feels known and loved, is encouraged to develop their talents, and puts

them at the service of the common good.

There are many open fields: evangelical authenticity, incarnate spirituality, freedom, openness, openness and dynamic outward movement, social sensitivity, and collaboration with those who don't share our beliefs. These are proposals from the regional assemblies to help us move forward. And this should not be done only by the institution as such, but by each individual, because, in the end, Opus Dei is made up of the people who form it.

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