

Numerary and Associate Priests: Making Others "Shine"

Priests incardinated in the Prelature of Opus Dei: a mission of service dedicated to fostering the holiness and apostolate of the other members of the Work and of those who participate in the activities of Opus Dei.

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The adventure of the twelve apostles began when they saw Jesus turn

water into wine at a wedding. Later, they witnessed Him forgiving sinners and laying hands on the sick. They actively helped feed the multitude and listened to the discourse on the bread of life. For the group that Jesus chose from among his followers – men and women who followed Him enthusiastically – mercy was a daily lesson.

After three years, the apostles arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover. They brought with them the precious experience of that time of close companionship with the Lord, but their faith was still immature: they had not yet learned the lesson of the Cross or contemplated the Risen One. Jesus would institute the Eucharist before their very eyes while they celebrated the Passover there in the Upper Room. And in the same room, He would consecrate them as priests to

perpetuate his sacrifice of love through the centuries.

“Do this in memory of me” (*Lk 22:19*): these words were etched into their hearts and have been passed down to us with all their original force. From that moment on, obeying Jesus’ mandate, priests have repeated them with admiration and gratitude in the Eucharistic celebration. Jesus entrusts what is most sacred — his body and blood — to the hands of ordinary men and sends them to bind and loose on earth, exercising their priestly function for the benefit of humanity (cf. *Mt 16:19*). By Christ’s will, the ministerial priesthood is an essential reality: without it, there would be no Church.

Priests with the charism from October 2^[1]

Let us now leap from first-century Jerusalem to twentieth-century

Madrid: Opus Dei was in its early stages, and St. Josemaría began to share the nascent charism with some diocesan priest friends, asking them to collaborate in the undertaking he was beginning to set up. Most of those good priests, however, did not come to embrace the light that God had entrusted to St. Josemaría, and over time, they disengaged from his activities.^[2] The founder started to realize that the fully dedicated priests this family needed would have to come from among the laity joining and living a vocation to the Work. Very shortly after, he asked some of them if they were freely willing to consider God's call to the priesthood, serving the new family of the Work in another way. Years later, in 1943, St. Josemaría received an inspiration resolving the question of how to incardinate them in the Work; and from 1944 on, groups of numeraries were ordained priests. A few decades later, after St.

Josemaría's death and during Blessed Álvaro's tenure as head of Opus Dei, for the first time, some associates were ordained.

St. Josemaría wrote three letters to his priest sons, detailing the specific traits of the priesthood of these numeraries and associates in the Work.^[3] When he began writing the third of these letters in 1956, thirteen years had passed since the ordination of the first three, Álvaro del Portillo, José Luis Múzquiz, and José María Hernández Garnica, and over 150 numeraries had already been ordained. In these documents, we find answers to crucial questions about their specific identity, pastoral mission, and lifestyle, within their vocation in Opus Dei.

Everything changes and nothing changes

Even before discerning their possible call to the priesthood, numeraries

and associates embrace the gift of celibacy by accepting their vocation. Before their ordination, the divine call leads them to imitate Christ's hidden life with years of intense work and evangelization. They are ordinary Christians, like everyone else in the Work, striving to live with a true priestly soul; offering their entire existence to God as a living, holy, and pleasing sacrifice (cf. *Rm 12:1*), sharing Christ's life with many friends and acquaintances. What, then, does the priesthood mean for these celibate men who have been trying to live as apostles in their workplaces for years?

On one hand, everything changes because the transformation effected by the sacrament is radical. Priestly ordination gives a new meaning to their lives, making them ministers of the mysteries of God (cf. *1 Cor 4:1*); it endows them with a new way of being and of positioning themselves

in the world, embodying the one priesthood of Jesus Christ (cf. *Heb 5:1*). They are ordained, in St. Josemaría’s words, “to become nothing other than priest-priests, priests through and through.”^[4] However, at the same time that everything changes, nothing changes in the essence of their vocation to the Work. Their dedication to Christ and their commitment to the Church are reaffirmed. Therefore, numeraries and associates called to the priesthood in the Work do not experience “an identity crisis, because their vocation to Opus Dei remains unchanged.”^[5]

From his time in the seminary, St. Josemaría understood the priest’s identity as a service. “All we want is to serve”^[6]: this was his own life’s experience. In 1930, a few years after being ordained a priest, someone asked him for details about his future priestly career. St. Josemaría wrote

this note for himself: “‘The priesthood,’ I told him, ‘is not a career—it’s an apostolate!’ That’s the way I feel about it. And I wanted to write it in these notes, so that, with the help of the Lord, I’ll never forget the difference.”^[7] In the aforementioned letter, dated 1956, St. Josemaría highlighted this longing from the first line: “My priest sons, you have been ordained to serve. Let me begin by reminding you that your priestly ministry is a mission of service. Since I know you well, I am aware that this word ‘service’ expresses all that you wish and all that you are. This good and sincere desire of yours to be forever occupied in doing good to others, just like your brothers and sisters, is for me a source of great pride and consolation.”^[8] The priest’s life goal is, in short, to repeat what Jesus did at the Last Supper: to kneel at the feet of his friends.

Kneeling in order to help the laity in their vocation

Pedro Casciaro recalls how one day St. Josemaría invited him to take some time to discern the call to the priesthood. When he decided that, indeed, it could be his path, he recounts how the founder of Opus Dei, kneeling beside him in the oratory of the house they were in, pointed to the red carpet at the foot of the altar and said: “A priest has to be like that carpet. Over it the body of our Lord is consecrated. It’s at the altar; it’s true, but it is there to be of use. Furthermore, it is there so that everyone else can have something soft to tread on and you see how it does not complain, it does not protest... Do you understand what the service of a priest is? You will see that later on, in your life you will reflect on these things.”^[9]

In the case of numerary or associate priests, the fundamental content of this service consists in making themselves available to their sisters and brothers — kneeling! — to help them carry out their mission. The new place the priest occupies in the Work crystallizes as a service to the holiness and apostolate of others and, therefore, also as a custodian of the unity that makes these things possible. Who notices a carpet? Who can fail to use it, when its very reason for being is to make others feel comfortable and insulated from the cold floor? Like a good carpet that rests discreetly, the priest of the Work remains comfortably in the background, knowing that by letting his lay brothers and sisters shine, he is more effective: that is how he fulfills his mission. For this reason, the prelate of Opus Dei advised his priest sons: “make a special effort (...) to ensure that the lead role and the brightness in your life are those of

Christ, and that in any case it is your sisters and brothers who shine.”^[10]

This desire to serve is expressed in many details. It is common practice in the Work for priests to be one more among their lay brothers; they are not served just because they are priests.^[11] Moreover, the priests feel that they have “a greater obligation than the others do”^[12] to serve with joy, and this attitude avoids any possible trace of clericalism in the lifestyle of the people of Opus Dei.

Four tasks of a mission

Let us return to the scene in the Upper Room to consider Jesus’ behavior, contemplating how He exercises the one priesthood of which all other priests partake. The Master kneels and takes a basin to wash his friends’ feet after their travels. He wets them with water, scrubs to remove the dust, and dries them with the towel tied around his

waist. He does all this calmly, as if He had nothing more important to do at that moment – or, perhaps, *because* He has nothing more important to do. Similarly, the priest kneels because he wants to help his brothers and sisters become holy. But how does he concretely care for them? What priestly tasks must he perform? What is his specific mission?

“Together with the tasks belonging to their priestly ministry in the Church, which is centered on the Eucharist, the priests of the Prelature dedicate themselves chiefly to their ministerial service to the other faithful [of the Work] and to the priestly care of their apostolic activities.”^[13] This is the mission they have received from the Church: to vivify, with their priesthood, this small family within the people of God. This means, on the one hand, that their configuration with Christ-

as-priest happens through their faithful identification with and transmission of the charism: the priest who serves best is the one who embodies the spirit of Opus Dei best. Additionally, their priesthood is primarily at the service of the holiness of the members of the Work and their apostolate, and therefore, at the service of all the specific apostolic initiatives that the Work launches.

As is logical, their usual dedication to these tasks does not limit the exercise of their priesthood, although it undoubtedly guides it, because it is the reason for their ministry. Any other priestly work, no matter how important it may seem, is secondary, because it is subordinate to the mission for which they have been ordained. “Specifically,” adds the Father, further clarifying this task, “in accord with the particular pastoral mission of the Prelature,

they are concerned above all with celebrating the sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance; preaching the Word of God; spiritual direction; and an extensive task of doctrinal formation.”^[14] Let us examine these four tasks of their mission a bit more closely.

First of all, numerary or associate priests enliven the Work through the celebration of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and Penance, the everyday sacraments that accompany the daily life of any Christian. The daily celebration of the Holy Mass constitutes the priest’s most fundamental task; it is the source from which all the strength of God flows. As Saint John Paul II wrote, “The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church.”^[15] And when a priest truly

lives from the Eucharist, it is evident in his life and surroundings, in fruits of holiness and apostolic zeal.

The priests of the Work also dedicate many hours to the sacrament of Penance. Saint Josemaría desired wanted hearing confessions “a dominant passion and a pleasant practice”^[16] for his sons. Through the pious practice of confession, we learn “to be more sorry, and hence to love more too.”^[17] The priest has countless opportunities to be the good Samaritan for his brothers and for those who approach his ministry: to cleanse their wounds, to soothe them with words soaked in hope, and to cover the costs of their recovery. The frequent reception of the sacraments is the main strength of those who want to bring holiness to all corners of the world and to every aspect of life. When the priest centers his life on facilitating access to the sacraments, he becomes increasingly

aware of the primacy of grace; the action of Jesus Himself in his work. Saint Josemaría summarized his priestly mission in these words: “Mine is to hide and disappear, so that only Jesus may shine forth.”^[18]

Secondly, the priest is a minister of the Word and has “the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ to all.”^[19] In *Opus Dei*, the priest also enlivens and inspires his brothers through preaching, which is meant to facilitate, in various ways, each person’s personal encounter with Jesus.^[20] Saint Paul expressed this very clearly: “We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor 4:5). If it is to move people’s hearts, preaching must be full of life, to make them think, touch their hearts, and give them hope. In particular, praying *aloud* is a peculiarity of the priestly ministry in

Opus Dei — though undoubtedly not exclusive to it — and is aimed at fostering each person's relationship with God. In order to pray and to help others pray, to show the bridges between faith and life, to reach the needs and circumstances of others with the gift of tongues, the priest needs to dedicate time to study, so that he can improve both the style and substance of his words. Since the mission of preaching is always exclusively supernatural, the priest needs an ongoing relationship with the Holy Spirit, who intimately accompanies the hearts of men and places in their hands the fruit of this ministry of the Word.

In the third place, priests accompany souls. As St. Josemaria assured us, “the Work began and was built” with spiritual direction or accompaniment, “and that it is how it will continue.”^[21] This task is therefore essential for its

development. It is part of the core of the charism, and it corresponds to lay people and priests alike. The priest accompanies many people, all kinds of individuals, without excluding anyone, but he cares for his brothers and sisters in Opus Dei in particular. It is “a most beautiful, sacrificial, unglamorous task, and yet very fruitful and pleasing to God,”^[22] because it also has a great multiplier effect. Always safeguarding each person's freedom, his role “is to open horizons, help form judgment, point out obstacles, indicate appropriate means to overcome them, correct distortions or deviations in the path, and always encourage: never losing sight of the supernatural perspective, which is an optimistic affirmation, because every Christian can say that he can do all things with divine help (cf. *Phil 4:13*).”^[23] Through his role as a spiritual advisor, the priest ensures that all individuals can find in him the closeness, compassion, and

tenderness of Jesus himself, whom he represents.^[24]

Finally, the fourth task through which priests contribute life to the Work is their enthusiastic dedication to doctrinal formation and the transmission of the faith. In our cultural context, it is essential to commit significant energies to this aspect of the priestly task.

Increasingly, this involves a first proclamation that often requires personal reconsideration of many issues. “Doctrine is always the same, but the paths by which people assimilate and come to love it are varied.”^[25] Therefore, this mission is carried out through whatever means are best suited to the needs of each moment: meditations, classes, conferences, seminars, publications, engagement in the media or social networks, etc. The priest requires a profound intellectual formation that enriches his spiritual life and enables

him to share a deep understanding of the faith with his brothers and sisters. This formation aims not only to impart knowledge but also to provide each person with the tools to develop a personal synthesis of their faith and thus be capable of enlightening others and learning from them as well.

Naturally, not all priests will be experts in each of these tasks, nor will they be equally attracted to all of them with the same intensity. In each place, prudence is exercised to find tasks that best suit each individual, taking into account the needs of the Work as well. It is clear that there are many other good things to do, but these four tasks, distributed according to each person's personal characteristics, constitute the core of their ministry: through them, the numerary or associate priest becomes holy and sanctifies his brothers. This is their specific way of

washing the feet of *their own*, like our Lord. “We must be like the canvas which forms the backing of a tapestry and remains unseen,” said Saint Josemaría, “so that the others may shine with the gold and fine silk embroidery of their virtues, knowing how to put ourselves in a corner, so that your brothers or sisters may shine with their sanctified professional work in their place in society and in the world.”^[26] All this demands from the priest a strong awareness of his mission and an intimate union with Christ, especially when other tasks may seem more urgent, effective, or attractive. Committing oneself to this task entails renewed fidelity in the light of 2 October, including, as another facet of that same fidelity, adaptation to the spiritual and cultural needs of the moment.

A unique style characterized by secularity, unity, and freedom

Priestly identity and mission are embodied in each individual's life with their own tones and manners, giving rise to a specific pastoral approach. Undoubtedly, "the fact that the priests of the Prelature live the spirit of the Work, just like everyone else, implies a certain priestly style,"^[27] a style with characteristics that we can discover in Saint Josemaría's priesthood, unpacking everything that is perennial and universal in his priestly example. While there is only one priest, Jesus Christ, and all the Church's priests throughout history participate in his one priesthood, it is also true that there are different priestly *styles* within the Church, according to the vocation and peculiar mission of each. When defining the style of a priest of Opus Dei, we can return again to the image of the carpet. There are many types of carpets, and choosing one can be a complicated task due to the enormous diversity of

fabrics and various materials they are made of, shapes, sizes, etc. What kind of carpet is a numerary or associate priest?

In this case, the style is defined by several factors: their family life, in which they actively participate; their dedication to their brothers, sisters, and apostolic tasks within Opus Dei; the specific spirituality that permeates their relationship with God and others; and other aspects of their mission that give a distinctive mark to their priesthood. This distinctive mark should not be understood as a mold or a principle of uniformity, because each priest retains his own character and personality. Rather, it is a style that naturally arises from the charism that becomes life and, precisely for that reason, serves that charism with simplicity.

However, perhaps the foremost characteristic of this unique style is the secular nature that priests have lived before their ordination and do not lose because of their priesthood. This secular orientation entails a way of thinking and understanding reality, which Saint Josemaría referred to as a “lay mentality.” It is a fundamental aspect of the priestly ministry of numerary and associate priests, among other reasons, because the apostolic activities to which they are called to serve are secular: led by laypeople and meant for them. The numerary or associate priest serves those who lead these tasks; they support them without seeking to occupy a governance role that is not characteristic of this lay mentality. Precisely because of their love for the priesthood and this distinctive secular outlook, Saint Josemaría advised priests never to “get involved in temporal affairs. It is the laypeople, each according to their

conscience, who take care of earthly matters.”^[28] In this way, priests can better prevent the risk of clericalism and promote the personal freedom of the laity.

The distinctive style of the numerary or associate priest is also strongly characterized by the mission to be an instrument of unity in the place where they live, especially in Opus Dei centers and in certain instances of its governance. A priest’s heart learns from Jesus to serve all people willingly, ensuring that they approach the Lord without becoming attached to the one who is merely an instrument. They vigilantly “put all their strength into preventing the formation of cliques or little groups”^[29] around them. Priests do not engage in personalized work; they are aware that they are carrying out the work of Christ in the world through Opus Dei. Souls are

entrusted to them, but they are not theirs: they belong to God.

At the same time, since their hearts are large, molded after Christ's, Saint Josemaría wrote that his sons who are priests "cannot be content with fulfilling the apostolic tasks entrusted to him. [They] must take initiative."^[30] This is even more applicable in places with few Christians or where Opus Dei activities require less time-consuming dedication. "It is not our way to sit with our arms crossed, waiting for souls to come,"^[31] because it was not Jesus' way: in the Gospel, we see how the Lord goes out in search of souls. He does not wait for them to come to Him; He goes to where the people are, in the town squares, by the lakeside, in the Temple...

When they "use their initiative to build up an abundant priestly

work,”^[32] numerary and associate priests naturally consider that their primary concern is tied to fostering the interior life and apostolate of all members of Opus Dei. To achieve the latter, in addition to always being at the service of the Prelature of Opus Dei and obeying the prelate and his vicars like any priest to his ordinary, they rely on the directors’ support and advice with regard to these activities. Furthermore, “as far as possible, they also cooperate in the activities of the diocese where they live.”^[33] This is only natural, because the priest of Opus Dei sees himself as secular, just like his diocesan brothers, both in mindset and in formation. For this reason, he will form bonds of friendship with other priests and collaborate with them, whenever his own duties allow, offering to hear confessions or assist in various activities carried out in parishes. A priest in the place he is called to be has great apostolic

potential, and he is not afraid to take on new apostolic challenges, complicating his life out of love for God.

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“Many great things depend on priests: we have God, we bring God, we give God.”^[34] This is the giant mission that Jesus entrusted to the first priests of his Church that night in the Cenacle. Before doing so, however, He wanted to engrave in their hearts the one attitude that makes priestly service possible: to stoop down, to kneel, like the least of all, to wash the feet of others. This is the first school for living a holy priesthood, called to invigorate the Church through the charism that God wants for Opus Dei. No priest is alone in this mission, because Mary, “mother of priests,”^[35] listens to them when they seek her, in need of her help.

^[1] This article will explore the vocation of numeraries and associates who are ordained priests. This description does not apply to other priests who also have “the charism from October 2” and, nevertheless, are incardinated in a particular church and always remain at its service.

^[2] Cfr. J. L. González – J. Aurell, “Josemaría Escrivá en los años treinta: los sacerdotes amigos,” *Studia et Documenta*, vol. 3, 2009, pg. 41-106.

^[3] These are letters 10, 25, and 26, dated 2-II-1945, 28-III-1955, and 8-VIII-1956 respectively, and sent in 1966, 1964 and 1966, in the same order.

^[4] St. Josemaría, “A Priest Forever,” in *In Love with the Church*, no. 35.

^[5] P. Berglar, *Opus Dei. Life and Work of its Founder Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Scepter, Princeton, 1994, p. 172.

^[6] St. Josemaría, *Letter 10*, no. 17.

^[7] St. Josemaría, *Intimate Notes*, no. 127. Cfr. A. Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, Scepter, Princeton, 2001, p. 84.

^[8] St. Josemaría, *Letter 26*, no. 1. A few years later, the Second Vatican Council would underline this understanding of the priesthood: “Priests by sacred ordination and mission which they receive from the bishops are promoted to the service of Christ the Teacher, Priest and King. They share in his ministry” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 1).

^[9] P. Casciaro, *Dream and Your Dreams Will Fall Short*, Scepter, London, 1997, p. 93.

^[10] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 21.

^[11] Cfr. F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 21.

^[12] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 26, no. 7.

^[13] F. Ocáriz, Carta pastoral, 28-X-2020, n. 20. Cfr. Código de Derecho Canónico, c. 295 *in fine*.

^[14] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 20.

^[15] St. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 1.

^[16] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 26, no. 30.

^[17] St. Josemaría, *Alone with God*, no. 259.

^[18] St. Josemaría, Letter 28-I-1975, quoted in E. Burkhart, J. López, *Ordinary Life and Holiness in the Teachings of St. Josemaría*, vol. 2, Scepter, New York, 2020, pg. 341.

^[19] Cfr. Vatican Council II,
Presbyterorum Ordinis, no. 4.

^[20] Preaching can take different forms: doctrine classes, sermons, homilies, meditations, etc. These are different genres, with different purposes and different approaches and methods. On the other hand, lay people also comment on the Word of God in the life of Opus Dei, but in situations in which priestly ministry is not required, such as in the brief circle, the commentary on the Gospel, formation talks, etc.

^[21] St. Josemaria, *Letter* 26, no. 35.

^[22] *Ibid.*, no. 35.

^[23] *Ibid.*, no. 37.

^[24] Cfr. Pope Francis, Address in a symposium on the priesthood, 17-II-2022.

^[25] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 26, no. 38.

[26] *Ibid.*, no. 8.

[27] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 20.

[28] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 26, no. 51.

[29] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 10, no. 32.

[30] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 26, no. 35.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, n. 20.

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] St. Josemaría, *letter* 26, no. 17.

[35] Pope Francis, Homily, 29-III-2018.

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