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Associates: Deep Roots and High Branches

The vocation to Opus Dei as an associate: an unlimited field of possibilities.

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In the year 587 BC, Jeremiah found himself in Jerusalem, receiving a curious oracle in which the Lord asked him to buy a field. The prophet, somewhat perplexed, especially given the historical context in which he received the instruction,

responded: *Behold, the siege mounds have come up to the city to take it, and because of sword and famine and pestilence the city is given into the hands of the Chaldeans who are fighting against it. [...] Yet thou, O Lord God, hast said to me, 'Buy the field' (Jer 32:2-25). Nonetheless, the Lord insists. He wants to offer a sign for his people, including us, through the prophet's actions: Behold, I will gather them from all the countries [...]; I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety. [...] I will give them one heart and one way, [...] I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul (Jer 32:37-41). God Himself will reforest the field with those trees that are his children; He will personally plant each seed and make it sprout, grow, and take root.*

A vocation with deep roots

It is common to use the image of fire to speak about evangelization, as a message that spreads quickly, igniting everything in its path (cf. *Lk* 12:49). However, fire often does not last for long and leaves nothing but ashes behind. Thus, alongside the image of spreading fire, we can also turn to the image of a forest being planted and growing (cf. *Mt* 13:31). The process of rooting the initial seeds may be slow, but once the trees have started to grow and a forest has formed, life bursts forth in an uncontrollable multitude of forms, sounds, and colors. An immense variety of plants, animals, and other forms of life thrive in the shade of those trees. What was once barren land becomes a pleasant, cool, and habitable place. The trees anchor the soil, channel the breeze, attract rain, retain moisture, purify the air, and provide food and shelter for all kinds of creatures. There, no force can stop the vigor of life.

The task of evangelization that the associates of Opus Dei carry out in the middle of the world can be compared to that forest. The Prelate of Opus Dei, in explaining the gift of the vocation to the Work as an associate, has spoken of its ability to *implant* apostolic roots, *cultivate* a wide range of relationships, and reach far and *deep*.^[1] We could summarize these qualities by saying that the associate vocation is a vocation of deep-rootedness, which speaks of particularly firm and deep roots that remain strong amid the turmoil of our world. Many times, these roots are established in a specific place; at other times or seasons, due to work, study, family, or other reasons, a person may move from one place to another, and this transplantation is an occasion for putting down new roots. But beyond physical roots, there are roots in the form of friendships tied to the land, which give life. Behind this capacity

for deep-rootedness — sometimes in physical places and always in the hearts of people — there is a special grace, a particular divine desire: *I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul (Jer 32:41).*

"Let us reflect on the importance of preserving the roots," Pope Francis invites us, "because only by going deep will the branches grow upwards and bear fruit. Each of us can ask ourselves, even as a people, each of us: what are the most important roots in my life? Where am I rooted? Do I remember them, do I care for them?"^[2]

Rooted in God: the gift of celibacy

Where am I rooted? Roots speak to us of the land, that land which had fundamental value for the Chosen People because it was a gift from God, and each Israelite had the responsibility to enjoy it, preserve it,

make it fruitful, and pass it on to the next generation. It is surprising, therefore, that when the promised land was distributed among the various tribes, one of them received nothing. It was the tribe of Levi, destined for the worship of the Lord. Far from complaining, the Levites prayed: *The Lord is my chosen portion; [...] I have a godly heritage* (Ps 16:5-6). They understood that the portion of land allotted to them was none other than God Himself. God wanted to be “the ground of [their] existence” and “the foundation of [their] life.”^[3]

In this divine choice, we can find “the true foundation of celibacy,”^[4] to which the associates and numeraries are also called. God is the land in which the celibate heart takes root. Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz captures this deep vision of celibacy in his letter on the vocation to Opus Dei, going beyond partial or reductive

interpretations. Indeed, he points out that "we should not think of celibacy only or mainly as a functional choice: that is, as something that enables us to dedicate ourselves more to the tasks of the Work or go from one place to another. It is true that celibacy makes this possible, or easier, but its fundamental motive is that it is a special gift that identifies us with Christ's life."^[5] Celibacy is a special identification with this aspect of Jesus's heart: He is the image everyone who receives this gift looks to. Therefore, celibacy is the opposite of individualism: it enables a special openness to God — like the tribe of Levi — and a special openness to others — like Christ Himself.

This calling, which numeraries also receive, may shine particularly clearly in the associates because it is not linked to complete availability for tasks of formation or government, or to being able to move

from one place to another. The associates, as the Father writes, “show in [their] own lives what it means to give [oneself] to God in the middle of the world, with an undivided heart. [...] By your lives you show the completely free nature of the apostolic activity of every baptized person, carrying it out with all the energy of a celibate heart.”^[6] —

This is how an associate explained her vocation to her brothers shortly after discovering it: “I have given my life to God in Opus Dei. I will remain in my home and my work, as always. But my heart belongs entirely to God. I want to serve Him in the middle of the street.”^[7] — In our times, accepting a call to celibacy “in the middle of the street” may seem somewhat naive or absurd, almost like buying land in Judea during the Babylonian siege. We should not lose sight of the fact that the call to celibacy is a gift from God that has the power to transform

the environment in which it plants the seed. Moreover, the world is thirsty for this gift, even though it often does not recognize it. Benedict XVI said that our world “needs a witness to God that lies in the decision to welcome God as a land where one finds one's own existence. For this reason, celibacy is so important today, in our contemporary world.”^[8] —

St. Josemaría, referring specifically to his daughters and sons who are associates, explained that "all of us in the Work have the special and sufficient grace of God to live our dedication to God in the world with delicacy. Our cell is the street, and we are contemplatives on the streets: it is enough to fulfill, with delicacy, the Norms, which are concrete and broad and adapt like a glove to the hand in any environment."^[9] — Each norm of the plan of life is an encounter to which the Lord invites

us so we can put deep roots down in Him. From there, deeply rooted in a life of intimacy with Christ, the seed of the vocation deposited in the heart of each associate grows *like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit (Jer 17:8).*

Rooted in society and in people

All kinds of terrain are suitable for the seed of the vocation of an associate of Opus Dei to take root. This has been the case since the first, very diverse, vocations arrived, and we can still see it today. "You find yourselves in quite varied circumstances and you move in all kinds of professional environments," the Father tells the associates. "Your life is open to an unlimited field of possibilities in which to embody and

spread the spirit of Opus Dei.”^[10] ___ In this highly varied field of work and human relationships, the associates “express what Opus Dei is in a particularly clear way, through the sanctification of your ordinary life, your professional work and your family life, without changing your place.”^[11] ___ The witness the associates give through their lives shows that “the mission of Opus Dei is very simple. Everyone must seek God in their state and profession. I, as a practitioner; you, painting scenery; the doctor as a doctor; and the lawyer and the office worker and the farmer, each in their own sphere. It is about becoming holy through the normal occupations of each day, through ordinary work.”^[12] ___

St. Josemaría was enthused about the great work of evangelization that his associate daughters and sons would carry out “in all the immense panorama of work.”^[13] ___ The diary

from one of the first associates' workshops recounts a visit from Encarnación Ortega, who was then living in Rome and collaborating with the founder of Opus Dei.

"Surrounded by all of us, eager to hear everything, Encarnita began to talk and talk... Two hours went by, and she would never have finished, nor would we have tired of listening to all this, the *stuff* that will lead us straight to God."^[14] Encarnita conveyed the Father's hopes for their vocation because they could "go to the very depths of society."^[15] "I am envious of you," St. Josemaria told his associate daughters and sons: "Your dedication to God is total and complete just like mine, but you can reach further."^[16]

This capacity to *go to the depths* and *reach far* has to do with the associates' ability to put down roots, to establish many deep relationships, giving depth to the Church's

apostolate, especially in their professional environment, where they are witnesses of Christ:

"Because you stay longer in each place, you make it much easier to implant the apostolates in the area; your way of life allows you to cultivate a great multiplicity of relationships, and to do so in a very stable way: in your family and your profession, in your neighbourhood, in the town, city or country where you live. 'You reach further,' as St Josemaría said, not only in terms of the breadth of your apostolate, but also in its depth."^[17] —

All of this is possible because in the Work, "the main apostolate is always that of friendship. This is what our Father taught us: 'It can truly be said, my dearest children, that the greatest fruit of Opus Dei's work is what its members obtain personally by their apostolate of example and loyal friendship with their colleagues at

work: in a university or factory, in the office, in the mines or in the fields.”^[18] “You, the associates,” the Father wrote, “carry out Opus Dei mainly through a deep personal apostolate in your own professional and family environment.”^[19]

The gift of celibacy gives this apostolate particular strength. It is a special intimacy with Jesus Christ that expands into rich friendships, because celibacy, as Pope Francis says, “is a gift that, to be lived as a means of sanctification, calls for healthy relationships, relationships of true esteem and true goodness that are deeply rooted in Christ.”^[20]

The friendship of a celibate person, imitating Jesus Christ, makes the love of God present wherever they are. It is a merciful and accessible love that grows for the people close to them. The friendship that, by the grace of God, associates are called to offer is a love that endures over time, a love

that can be counted on without fear, similar to that of a father or mother who is always there. This love is first and foremost displayed within the family; that nucleus made up of parents, siblings, cousins, and other relatives is usually the first environment in which God invites us to be salt and light (cf. *Mt* 5:13-14). This space gradually expands to include all the people who pass through our lives, to whom sincere friendship offers a solid and rich ground where their own seed can germinate and thrive, growing healthy and robust.

The friendships of the associates often represent a relationship of genuine spiritual mother- or fatherhood, which means — as Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz explained to an associate who asked him about it — "genuine concern for others' good. What mothers do is give life. So how do we give life through apostolic

celibacy? With dedication, concern for others, prayer, spirit of service, seeking to make life pleasant... All of that is genuine motherhood. This, together with sharing, in one way or another, according to the circumstances, love for Jesus Christ, who is true life [...]. That is the greatest motherhood: to share Jesus Christ."^[21] —

Roots nurtured by a home

It has been said that the gift of celibacy, in those who receive it, increases their capacity to love others and to open up in friendship to many people. Those who embrace the celibacy of Christ are never solitary individuals; but, as if that were not enough, those with a vocation as associates also establish roots in a family, in a home, which is Opus Dei. The associates "will never lack the warmth of family," St. Josemaría wrote, "because the Work

always lavishes affection and understanding on each of her children. The whole of Opus Dei is a home: one single home with one single cooking pot."^[22] —

Like all the faithful of the Work, the associates experience their belonging to this family primarily through a filial love for St. Josemaría and his successors, to whom God has given the gift of being fathers in Opus Dei.

^[23] — It is moving to see how this spirit of filiation took root in the early associates, who, without knowing the Founder except by reputation, felt God moving their souls to filial piety. This was the case, for example, with Concepción Álvarez, who, even before personally meeting St. Josemaría, was *infected* by the sense of filiation she saw in the other members of the Work, and she wrote to one of them: "I imagine an immense family united with that affection for the Father, who cares

for everyone [...]. I am immersing myself in it too, and I think of the Father often, and what I offer for him, I fulfill it first of all, with all my strength."^[24] ___

The miracle of paternity in the Work continues in the successors of St. Josemaría. Therefore, each associate can feel that the words with which the Prelate of Opus Dei concluded his first extensive letter are directed towards them: "My daughters and sons, if in this world, so beautiful and yet so tormented, anyone at any time feels alone, let them know that the Father is praying for them and is truly accompanying them in the Communion of Saints, and that he carries them in his heart"^[25] ___ and in his daily Mass.^[26] ___

A happy consequence of wanting to be sons and daughters is that it makes us brothers and sisters. The filiation of the associates necessarily

overflows in fraternity, which drives them to know others and their families well, to love and care for them, and to allow themselves to be loved and cared for by them.^[27] The love of Christ that they receive through others, especially those who share the same path, sustains and propels them towards the future in that same adventure; in the case of the associates, also "by working with the numeraries in caring for the other faithful of the Work."^[28] The fraternity among associates, numeraries, and supernumeraries is a source of joy, hope, and consolation in this effort to bring the Gospel to all people.^[29] With that closeness of prayer and concrete gestures, face-to-face whenever possible, we will live "the marvel of the Communion of Saints. With the certitude of faith, we know that we are even closer to one another than when we are physically nearby."^[30]

"The Work. What is the Work now?" Saint Josemaría asked, dreaming from a tiny room in the Legation of Honduras during the Spanish Civil War. "Hardly anything is visible; it's truly the mustard seed. A few men, without prestige, without financial means or experience, almost all of them just setting out in life. But we know that, in the supernatural field of the Church, from this mustard seed there will rise a bush destined to cover the entire world, in which many birds of the air will seek shelter."^[31] Several decades have passed since that meditation, and Saint Josemaría saw part of that dream come true while he was still on this earth. The founder of Opus Dei also dreamed that, in the future, the number of associates would be twice that of the numeraries.^[32] As we approach the centenary of Opus Dei, we can ask the Lord to multiply

the vocations of associates, like forests and *valleys that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the Lord has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters* (Num 24:6), to make this work of spreading the Gospel in the Church, *God's field* (1 Cor 3:9), more solid and deep-rooted.

[1] Cf. Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 18.

[2] Pope Francis, Audience, 3-V-2023.

[3] Pope Benedict XVI, Address, 22-XII-2006.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 22.

[6] Ibid, no. 18.

[7] Lázaro Linares, *Antes, más y mejor: un relato de mi vida en el Opus Dei*, Rialp, Madrid 2001, pg. 37 (our translation).

[8] Pope Benedict XVI, Address, 22-XII-2006.

[9] St. Josemaría, *Letter 27*, no. 11.

[10] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 18.

[11] *Ibid*, no. 19.

[12] Quoted in Lázaro Linares, *Antes, más y mejor*, qt., pg. 29.

[13] St Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 114.

[14] Diary of la Estila, 10-VIII-1953. Quoted in “Las agregadas del Opus Dei, preparación y comprensión de la misión. España 1950-1955”, *Studia et Documenta* 15 (2021), pg. 143-178; pg. 169.

[15] Ibid.

[16] St. Josemaría, *Get together*, 15-IX-1962; quoted in Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 18.

[17] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 18.

[18] St. Josemaría, *Letter 6*, no. 55; Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 1-XI-2019, no. 20.

[19] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 18.

[20] Pope Francis, Address, 17-II-2022.

[21] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, *Get together in Poznan*, 23-VI-2022.

[22] St. Josemaría, *Letter 27*, no. 11; cf. Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 16-II-2023, no. 13.

[23] Cf. St. Josemaría, Letter 6-V-1945, no. 23; Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter 14-II-2017, no. 2.

[24] Letter of Concepción Álvarez a María Ampuero, 30-VI-1952. Quoted in “Las agregadas del Opus Dei, preparación y comprensión de la misión. España 1950-1955”, qt., pg. 168.

[25] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 14-II-2017, no. 33.

[26] Cf. Idem., Pastoral letter, 16-II-2023, no. 12; Letter 12-VII-2019; cf. *Lev* 28:29-30.

[27] Cfr. Idem, Pastoral letter, 16-II-2023, no. 6.

[28] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 18.

[29] Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 17.

[30] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Letter 12-VII-2019.

^[31] St. Josemaría, Meditation, 25-07-1937, en *Growing on the Inside*, pg. 217.

^[32] Cf. Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 18.

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