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“Opus Dei is what happens in the lives of its members”

Interview with Fernanda Zaidan Lopes, a chemistry graduate (Brazil, 1986) and chair of the Preparatory Committee for the centenary Opus Dei (2028-2030) for the past four years. In a conversation with “Mundo Cristiano” in Rome, she explains the nature of her work and the main challenges of this international project.

10/29/2025

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Towards the Centenary

You are part of the preparatory committee for the centenary of Opus Dei in Rome. Who is on the committee? What were the criteria for their selection?

The central preparatory committee for the centenary of Opus Dei was formed in December 2020 in order to get the ball rolling and initiate reflection on the celebration. Our starting point was this question: how can we better serve each person, the Church, and the world from the charism of Opus Dei?

The team, made up of four women and three men residing in Rome – to make it easier to work together – from different culture, generations, and professional background, was meant to kickstart our thinking about the principles that will inspire the celebration, lines of action, possible projects, and timelines. The variety of perspectives involved enriched it from the beginning.

Initially, the committee was composed of Juan Manuel Mora (the coordinator), Isabel Troconis, Santiago Pérez de Camino, Jaime

Cárdenas, Marta Isabel González, and Mónica Herrero. Later, Linda Corbi and Gema Bellido joined, replacing Marta and Mónica, who had left Rome. I serve as the President of the committee.

What is your work now, three years before the date of the centenary? Are you planning specific events, or is it more about outlining the underlying principles?

So far, with the guidance of the Central Advisory and the General Council, the governing bodies that advise the Prelate, we have identified three priority areas: broad reflection, listening to everyone, and contributing to the professionalization of social impact initiatives inspired by the message of Opus Dei, with an emphasis on formation in topics related to

citizenship and the social doctrine of the Church.

From the start, we envisioned the centenary as both festive and fruitful, a celebration and a call to action, so that each of us can come out of this process personally transformed and that transformation can be seen in the institution as a whole. One concrete example is what we just experienced with the regional assemblies, which were been a space for global reflection on how we can better serve the Church and society, with over 50 thousand people participating directly. The conclusions reached were drawn from the personal proposals we received and will help inspire the evangelizing action of the members and the formative projects of Opus Dei for the coming years.

After the initial listening stage, we are entering a closer preparation

phase, in which local centenary committees are being formed in different countries to work on proposals adapted to the circumstances and idiosyncrasies of each place.

Much of the work we will do from Rome now will be supporting and accompanying the local teams, so that each person can live centenary from where they are, in their own context. We hope this journey will ignite a light in everyone's hearts, so we all feel and actually *are* part of the centenary.

GIVING THANKS, ASKING FOR FORGIVENESS

Among the possible focuses for your work (taking stock, giving

**thanks, asking for forgiveness),
what is the most important?**

Our principal focus is the desire to give thanks to God for the gift of the 100 years since He inspired a new charism for his Church. This is compatible with recognizing and correcting errors, learning more, and embarking on the adventure of the future.

Personally, I am thrilled – and I see the same excitement in the people around me – to discover and rediscover how the divine message that once inspired me and filled my life with meaning can continue illuminating many other people's stories and bear fruit in a loving response through work, family, leisure, and all the areas in which our lives unfold.

I think a phrase from John Paul II in the letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* summarizes all of this: “remember

the past with gratitude, live the present with enthusiasm, and look forward to the future with confidence.” These words have guided us from the beginning.

Is there anything that needs to be improved or that could be highlighted, from an outward-facing perspective?

Certainly, there is room for improvement. Our approach is for everyone, without distinguishing between external and internal. Today’s world, with the polarization all around us and the existential peripheries in which so many people have been abandoned, calls all of us to renew our faith, allowing God to reach out to us in the most everyday situations; to develop a greater capacity for dialogue, overcoming individualism and distraction; to sincerely seek to collaborate with others, drawing near to our

neighbors in need; to have the humility to recognize our own limits without exaggerating others'; and to be ready to build bridges at every moment.

Thinking about what to highlight, I would say that this celebration is an opportunity to unleash the full potential of the message of sanctifying work and daily life, which St. Josemaría received and began to share almost a hundred years ago.

Will we see new proposals for projects with other institutions or people in the Church?

A moment ago, I mentioned that our world needs people willing to build bridges and cooperate with others, avoiding polarization and individualism. We want to bring that attitude of openness and collaboration to the preparation and celebration of the centenary.

Ever since St. Josemaría received the divine mission to found Opus Dei, he had help and relationships with other Church institutions: the Bishop of Madrid, of course, as well as his spiritual director, who was a Jesuit priest, the nuns of the Monastery of San Isabel, and the religious who participated in the academic formation of the first priests. At the same time, he was very clear that the Work was in the world to “serve the Church as the Church wishes to be served” at every moment in history.

As Opus Dei is its people, in this sense what is *new* lies in the charism embodied in the lives of many men and women of each generation. That is why St. Josemaría called the pastoral phenomenon of Opus Dei a *disorganized organization* in which the priority is each individual’s personal initiative. The majority of members participate in life in their parishes and (from their place of

work) in various sectors of society, contributing to or leading activities with other Catholics, Christians, and people of goodwill who may not share the faith but do share our concerns and desire to make the world a better place.

What role do the founder's writings place in this rediscovery of the spirit? Are they being utilized enough?

Looking toward the centenary, the Prelate wants more unpublished texts by St. Josemaría to be available to everyone, and little by little, letters and other writings have been published on escriva.org.

Undoubtedly, they are a living and valuable reference for the faithful of Opus Dei and many other people.

It has happened to me, and I have often heard the same thing from others, that when I come across these texts, I feel like they were written

today. I like to think that because these words are imbued with the Gospel, with the same Christian message, they are like a seed that still has its power and strength. It is up to us to fertilize and cultivate the ground so that the seed may grow, and the preparation for the centenary can be an opportunity to let ourselves be personally challenged by St. Josemaría.

One example is a new book entitled *Camino enamorado*, with a selection of 99 points from *The Way*, St. Josemaría's most well-known book, annotated for a contemporary audience. Another representative case was the Catholic prayer app Hallow's 2025 Lent challenge, which used the same book by the founder of Opus Dei, with comments and guided reflections by recognized figures worldwide.

CHANGES OVER TIME

In the document “Path Toward the Centenary” (January 2024), members of the Work were invited to contribute their suggestions and share their experiences. What kind of suggestions have been coming in?

We have received a flood of thousands of extremely varied suggestions, some very specific, others broader, with more global or local applications. This great participation has made me realize that the Work truly belongs to everyone.

The Prelate, Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, often reminds us that in reality, Opus Dei is not about buildings or institutional initiatives, but what happens in the lives and families of each of its members.

The suggestions we have received show where the dreams of so many people in Opus Dei and their friends lie: in better embodying some aspect of that message to contribute to a better world, especially by supporting families and young people.

Thanks be to God, many of these proposals show the desire to recognize and contribute to addressing the social needs of each place. In all of them, there is a desire to serve, empathy with people's suffering, and a commitment to help heal or prevent it whatever possible.

People who were part of the Work in the past, at some point in their lives, contributed very especially to this process. Their voices have helped us understand the past more completely and to mature processes of improvement in order to help each person better.

Could the centenary contribute to a better understanding of the laity's role in the Church?

I believe that if each person, due to their condition as a Christian, as a baptized person, takes their commitment to holiness and evangelization seriously, the laity's role will shine on its own. It would be marvellous for the centenary to contribute to that.

Committed Christians, citizens practicing solidarity, good family members, good professionals... They are building the Church. Through the formation and accompaniment the Work offers, in each person's encounter with God in their daily life, we want to help them become sowers of peace and joy in all environments, bringing the charity of Christ to all human realities.

What do you recommend members of Opus Dei do to prepare for the centenary?

I would summarize it like this: “Be ready to listen and willing to respond.” The Gospel, the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, the teachings of the Church, the message of St. Josemaría, and the people and circumstances around us all speak to us, challenge us, and call for a response. A response from someone who loves this world and therefore seeks to understand the dynamics that bring it to life, to be there at the “very origin of change,” with a hopeful mindset, without fear of being contaminated, without nostalgia for times past.

Looking ahead to the next hundred years of Opus Dei, given that the majority of the members of the Work are married, perhaps work on initiatives related to the family

and on education in affectivity will be a priority. Indeed, this is already happening in several countries. Do you think that matters related to the family and marriage will take on more and more weight in the Work's formation and proposals?

I am delighted to think that, on the occasion of the centenary of the Work, we can deepen our understanding of marriage as a divine vocation, as the founder of Opus Dei saw it. I am also excited about the fact that it will be the Work's supernumerary members and cooperators who, with the testimony of their own lives, will be able to respond to the needs of families and marriages.

One of the priorities that most of the regional assemblies in countries where the Work is present had to do with support for marriages and

families, and the social contribution they represent. One specific contribution that we are still being asked for is accompaniment open to everyone, with formation tailored to the circumstances and context in which they live, highlighting topics like conjugal love, communication within the couple, building a shared family project, marital unity, complementarity in diversity, support in cases of separation, involuntary singleness, challenges that might arise in the process of raising children, caring for dependent elderly relatives, etc.

What expectations does the new Pope Leon XIV raise for you? Do you expect something specific from him?

It was very moving to experience a change in the papacy during the Jubilee of Hope and on the path to the centenary of the Work. Part of

the St. Josemaría's legacy refers to love for the Pope and the Church, and when you experience that affection, you realize that it does not belong to you alone; it is an inheritance, a family tradition.

Living in Rome, I've had the opportunity to be very close to Pope Francis and to his trips, speeches, and calls to the entire people of God. I can say that he "spoke" to me in a particular way as a Latin American, although Rome helps you to have a universal heart. I am always moved when I think of the last times I was able to be close to him, when I went to Gemelli hospital to pray with the faithful gathered there, and his final appearances in St. Peter's Square during Holy Week.

In the early days of Pope Leon XIV's pontificate, it is impressive to see the unity and harmony – never uniformity – in the Church;

continuity amid the variety of expressions and characters. I can tell you that, although I don't know him well, I already love him and seek to support him in his mission through my own work, as I also tried to do during Pope Francis' pontificate.

At the inauguration Mass of his pontificate, thanks to a few fortunate coincidences, I had the opportunity to read the prayer of the faithful in Portuguese. It was very brief, but it allowed me to witness the Pope's emotion in that moment, to feel seen by him, to see the square from his perspective, as well as the cameras were broadcasting the celebration to the whole world. It is truly a treasure to have the Pope, who unites us all and connects us with the heart of Jesus.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN ONE HUNDRED YEARS LATER

Specifically, how is the role of women being addressed in the centenary?

The world has changed a lot in these hundred years, and some of those changes have to do with the presence of women in spaces where they were not before. This poses new opportunities and challenges, for which there is no single answer.

I am glad to see that the founder of Opus Dei was a pioneer in this regard; he was able to recognize very specific characteristics of female leadership. And so St. Josemaría affirmed that women are called to bring to families, civil society, the business world, universities, public life, and the Church something unique to them, that only they can give: *their gentle warmth and untiring*

generosity, their love for detail, their quick-wittedness and intuition...

Personally, I dream of advancement for women that does not involve disdain for men or confrontation between the two. We will only build something lasting and relevant if we know how to respect and promote the dignity of all individuals and collaboration between them.

How is the Work experiencing the process of updating the statutes, which was requested by Pope Francis and coincides with this path towards the centenary?

We have lived this process in the Work very united to the Prelate and, all together with him, very united to the Pope. It has been a three-year journey, during which Msgr. Ocáriz kept us informed of each step of the work, which helped us to accompany him with prayer, as he asked us to. I could see firsthand the Prelate's trust

in God and promptness in responding to what the Holy See was asking for at each moment.

The proposal for adaptation allowed us to gather suggestions from all members who wanted to participate, and once again see how the charism and the juridical dimension go hand in hand. That intention remained constant throughout the life of the founder of the Work and, in a way, God has wanted to bring it back to the fore on the path towards the centenary.

We do not know how the statutes will turn out, especially because while we were in the review process, there were significant changes in the Code of Canon Law regarding personal prelatures, which are now equated with a clerical association. The spirit of the Work is eminently lay, although priests also play a fundamental role. The important

thing is that we can live our spirit, which has enormous potential for the present world, to the full.

Reflecting on how the charism is expressed in juridical terms has also helped us to recognize aspects that are particularly meaningful today; areas in which we are called to make a concrete contribution to the Church and to society, such as seeing work as a means of encountering Christ and serving others, and as an expression of the secular character of our charism. In a changing world, connection to the origin is important, because it is the basis for creative fidelity in our personal response.

This interview was published in the print version of *Mundo Cristiano* in August 2025.

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(03/11/2026)