

## **“I’d rather have the kids!”**

Agustín Cornejo is a Supernumerary of Opus Dei. He is presently the Director of the agricultural school, Las Garzas, of which he is an ex-alumnus. He talks about his work and his life.

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The youngest of eleven siblings, orphaned when he was just six years old, Agustín Cornejo entered the Las Garzas Agricultural School (Chile) thanks to the generosity of his oldest

sister's husband, who had taken charge of his six young brothers-in-law.

He arrived at Las Garzas "thinking that it was just about working on a farm". But afterwards he realized that he had to study. "You just had to hack it!" he says with his quaint rustic expression. He confesses that "there were many things that captivated me at school: the teachers, the priests. We had friendly matches, we worked, we ate and we studied. It was obvious that it was a family."

"But when I finished, I left to work. While working, I decided to return because though I was working hard, the money was scarce and I missed the family warmth. I spoke with the director, and as I was free for a few days, they invited me to do a retreat. I had gone to a wedding celebration that lasted till dawn the day before, so I had not slept at all. But I told

myself: I will go just the same! At the party, somebody had asked if anyone could accompany his sister who had to travel to San Fernando. I offered myself because from there I could just slip off quietly to the retreat and nobody could tell me not to go. So, I went and there they offered me this job. It was the year 1988.”

Were you already married?

“No, I had not thought of it then. When I met Mrs. Elvira” –that’s how he calls his wife– “I asked her to marry me on the second day. She asked if I were crazy and I replied: if we are not getting married, then I am not needed here; because it was clear that one should not hurt this young girl. She accepted, but she asked me to wait for a while.”

When did you ask to be a member of Opus Dei?

“I had been working for 3 years in Las Garzas and all the time I kept wondering when they were going to ask me,” he recalls with a mischievous grin. “I did not understand much, but I liked the security of being with God, of working with Him; always with the intention of working better. It does not matter if I made a mistake, if sometimes I fall or go backwards. There will always be someone who will tell me how to rectify. That is how I want to live.”

And what about your wife?

“No, she complained that I left her alone, that I was spending all my time just praying, that I was busy just with my own things. But, all the same, she would prepare my work bag. Until one day, she told me: I am in the Work. It’s about time! –I told her–, I have been praying for you for six years.”

Agustín and Elvira have six children “for now”. Two of them study in Las Garzas, in the 3rd and 4th year of secondary, respectively.

“To see the table with a brood of six makes me feel proud,” he comments. “I thank God for having them. The youngest of my daughters already knows how to read and the other day she recited the capitals of the world to me. Of course, I pray a ton for them and my wife does too. To work so hard and have just one child, it’s not worth it! Between having six kids in the house and a good car in the driveway, I’d rather have the kids and my pick-up from the year ‘77! There is nothing to lose! One of my daughters asked me: Until when are we going to be poor? All our lives, I told her, unless you work, things go well with you and you want to be generous with your parents. I think it is good for them not to be rolling in money: they all help each other a lot;

they lend their things to one another.”

Would you like any of your children to go to university?

“If one goes, all should have to be able to go... and there is no money for that. That is why, I am praying and at the same time working hard. But as long as they want to, and not because Dad says so. Let’s see how their grades are, how they do in the exams and afterwards, how it can be done. God can write with the leg of a table. If people would have told me when I was a child that I was going to study in Las Garzas and that I was going to work here for twenty years, I would have thought they were crazy. But God gives us things little by little, like to little children, who begin by taking milk, then baby food and after that, soft beans. But I tell them that if they want to study, they have to have two things clear in their

heads: first, they should be responsible for their studies without expecting Mom or Dad to be coaching them, and second, that they should go to the university to learn, to serve, to help others. If they are going to do it just for making money, they are mistaken.”

What is your greatest motivation in your work?

“Las Garzas is my whole life!” he declares passionately. “I live for the kids. I am very fond of them: I like to set the standard. Besides, I remember how flustered one can get when one is young and there is no one to tell him things clearly: work well, follow your time-table, take care of the house, careful with the parties, where they take you, with the alcohol, with the girls. Generally speaking, the young ones only open up with their friends and their friends don’t invite them to good

things. When one shows a young kid some trust, he starts changing and begins to tell where he has been, what he has done and ends up being grateful for having been led by a firmer hand. Parents are now very soft with the children: too much freedom, too much money.”

“It is great to see that the students start changing and when they finish school, they call us up to tell us that they are working, that they got married, that they are with their wife, with their children. You see that there are achievements. And, there are achievements also on the farm, among the workers, with the agents, in the production. It would be a contradiction to teach and not to produce good grapes on the farm.”

And in your work, how do you find God?

“Sometimes, I lose it. I have to be attentive, because since we are not

little angels, the devil stirs me up with his little tail and I get too upset or do not act in a way that is proper of a son of God. I have to be like Him, to disappear so that God will appear within me. In this way, the student can see someone who treats him with affection, with love, that one has concern for him, who corrects him in a nice way. Sometimes, one has to be a bit tougher with them. Then one has to talk it over with God, ask Him a little for advice, pray for that kid and the moment will come to act, but with a lighter heart because one has already talked about it with the Super Boss.”

“In Las Garzas, I find myself like a mouse in the cheese because I can pray. A guy who is working in an office looking at his papers has to stop what he is doing in order to pray. However, I go around the school, from one place to another and in the meantime, I pray. If I see

some friend, I pray for him. And I leave the most difficult things to God, because we can do just next to nothing. I do not have great things to offer to Him either, but I can offer Him the patience I try to have with a student, to prune a grapevine well, to treat my wife and my children better.”

Saint Josemaria is a good friend?

“Of course! He knows me and helps me to find God more easily. He is a good intercessor, because without the grace of God, there is very little we can do. If I look behind the curtain (of the stage) I can see how many people pray and have prayed for me. They don’t go about announcing it, but I know that they are praying for me; they have offered a Mass or the Rosary. That is why, I have never felt alone.”

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