

Local Lives, Universal Faith: You Can Only Give What You Have

We begin our new local series featuring personal testimonies of people in the region on how the faith and the Work has impacted their lives. Eugene is a supernumerary from Singapore who came into contact with Opus Dei while studying in Australia. This is his story, which all began with a simple invitation.

11/30/2022

I come from a Catholic family in Singapore, and was baptised early on as an infant. Growing up, the faith was very much around me. I was an altar server and attended close to ten years of catechism classes before receiving the sacrament of confirmation at sixteen.

Nevertheless, after enlisting for military service, my faith life stagnated, and it was quite a feat just getting to Mass every weekend.

There were many occasions where I could not get to church due to training requirements. I learnt many things from the army, but that period certainly did nothing much from a spiritual point of view.

I subsequently chose to pursue my tertiary education in Canberra, Australia. One summer afternoon, I

was approached by a fellow student after weekday Mass, and was invited to attend an evening of recollection. That was my first encounter with Opus Dei. It took me a while to fully comprehend the charism of the Work, and I am thankful for the persistence of those who were patient with me. On hindsight, their sense of sincerity and doggedness meant only two possibilities: either they were brainwashed, or genuinely inspired to spread the message that everyone is called to holiness. It was certainly the latter, with seeds being planted with much care. In all honesty, what are the chances of coming across St. Josemaria's teachings in a city with no centres of Opus Dei? Divine Providence was quietly at work.

I vividly recall attending a monthly recollection at St. Thomas More parish on a cold winter night in Canberra. The key idea which

developed from the talk was that as Christians, you can only give what you have. For some reason, this point continued to gnaw at my conscience many months after. Little by little, it dawned on me that if I desired to make Christ known to others, I had to take the faith more seriously by deepening my doctrinal knowledge and prayer life. That ascetical struggle had to be there. Otherwise, I would have nothing concrete to offer. Nonetheless, I knew I had a long way to go, and needed help in this regard.

One of the most useful means of formation provided by Opus Dei is spiritual direction. I view it as personal encouragement, and it has allowed me to look at things and issues from a whole new horizon. I learnt that I could be a good Christian by doing the little things well, the importance of developing human virtues, and how doctrine

and piety are two essential sides of the same coin for a mature faith life. No one can claim they are the finished product, but the sound advice offered by the directors gives one the confidence to keep trying again in the face of setbacks, which I am very grateful for.

On 2nd October 1928, St. Josemaria ‘saw’ Opus Dei, as how God wanted it. As the Work matured, what inspired me most was his notion of education, and a vision for universities to be imbued with Christian values. According to him, varsity years were best spent acquiring a sound social conscience, as well as developing personal freedom and responsibility. In this connection, he understood an urgent need to do apostolate with young people, and to college students in particular. Without this vision, I would never have met the Work at university and receive the formation

which it provided. I gradually discovered my vocation, and joined Opus Dei soon after completing my studies.

Mt. Tepeyac Residences, 2022 (Baguio, Philippines)

I am currently married with two adorable kids, and a supportive wife who also has a vocation to the Work. However, living in a city-state like Singapore brings about its own unique challenges in raising a family, such as materialism and the high cost of living just to name a few. Herein lies the beauty of Opus Dei's message, that each of us are called to holiness regardless of the circumstance and place we find ourselves in. Over the last couple of years, I was able to attend annual courses for supernumeraries at Saxum in the Holy Land and the Philippines. Cultural differences aside, it was clear that the vocation

to Opus Dei was one and the same. It was edifying to see how everyone could easily relate to the successes and challenges faced by each other. As St. Josemaria aptly puts it, that there is only ‘one cooking pot’ for all, and nothing else.

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours” (St. Teresa of Avila). There are many out there yearning for formation and guidance, although they may not yet know it. As such, we need to reach out with the same zeal as did those early Christians in the first centuries. Our Lord does not demand great things, only that we try our best given our personal circumstance. Presently, I conduct circles for a group of cooperator friends and university students, give catechism classes and provide marriage preparation talks for couples. It is important to realise that God is ultimately in charge, and will

bestow bountiful graces to those who are genuinely looking for Him. For those who are reading on, I sincerely seek your prayers as well for the apostolate of the Work as a whole.

Looking back, a chance colloquy after mass was the seed of my vocation in Opus Dei, the beginning of a wonderful journey. Our Lord is a generous giver who knows us best, and He uses others along the way as instruments to draw us closer to Him. All we need is to correspond with a heart ready to love.

Eugene Cheah (Singapore)

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