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Path to the Centenary (2): The Mission of Opus Dei in the Mind and Preaching of Saint Josemaría

This second article in the series preparing for the centenary tries to deepen our understanding of the purpose and mission of Opus Dei, based on the personal reflections and teachings of its founder.

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Pdf: *Path to the Centenary (2): The Mission of Opus Dei in the Mind and Preaching of Saint Josemaría*

After years of intimations, prayers and hope, St. Josemaría, on the 2nd of October 1928, finally “saw” what God was asking of him. The strength of this supernatural event affected his whole life, illuminating his path in a deep and decisive way. This in no way took away his freedom, but rather strengthened it in carrying out the mission that he accepted with a complete self-giving. Until then, he said, he didn’t know what God wanted of him. Now, at last, he realized that God was asking him to spread a clear understanding of the search for holiness in the world, which gives priority to ordinary life and daily work and strengthens the apostolic commitment of the laity. He will later say that this message, of which he now feels himself to be the

bearer, is as old and as new as the Gospel.

“I received an illumination about the entire Work, while I was reading those papers. Deeply moved, I knelt down (I was alone in my room, between talks) and I gave thanks to our Lord. I remember with a heart full of emotion the ringing of the bells of the church of Our Lady of the Angels . . . I put the loose notes I had been taking up till then into some sort of order” (*Intimate Notes*, no. 306).

When St. Josemaría “saw” God’s will for him, he first tried to find out whether there was already an institution in the Church dedicated to this mission or whether he would have to begin it himself. It also took him some time to discern who should be part of it: whether it should include only men or also women, whether it should include priests and

in what way, what canonical structure it should have and what kind of commitment it should involve. One could say, perhaps exaggerating a bit, that on 2 October 2 1928, St. Josemaría firmly decided *to be in Opus Dei* and *to be Opus Dei*, without yet knowing, in all its details, what Opus Dei was. It was a period of gestation, like that of a mother who carries in her womb a new child, whom she already loves and with whom she dialogues, but whose eyes and face she has not yet seen.

To gradually understand better what this path consisted of, what the face of the new creature coming into the world was like, and to speak to God about it, became the central concern of St. Josemaría's own interior life during those years. Opus Dei took shape little by little in his own spiritual life, in his relationship with God, in his prayer and mortification. He began to clarify its aims, also

indicating from time to time the means to achieve them. To go deeper into the mission of Opus Dei, and thus identify its charism, means knowing and inter-relating these different aims, which during these years St. Josemaría was pondering and commenting on. This can only be done by entering into the founder's intimate life, with respect and gratitude to God. We find this itinerary outlined in the sequence of his *Intimate Notes*, testimonies of his personal dialogue with our Lord, against the background of which customs, initiatives and lifestyles gradually began to take shape.

Reconciling the world with God

The available Notes in which the aims of the new foundation seem to be set forth for the first time date from 1931. St. Josemaría speaks there about the need to spread Christ's Kingdom to every setting, giving

glory to God and cooperating in the salvation of souls, probably echoing here Pius XI's encyclical *Quas primas* (1925).

“Christum regnare volumus.” “Deo omnis gloria.” “Omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam.” These three phrases sufficiently sum up the three aims of the Work: the effective reign of Christ, all the glory for God, souls” (*Intimate Notes*, no. 171).

“Aims. That Christ may reign, with a true reign in society: *Regnare Christum volumus*. To seek only God's glory: *Deo omnis gloria*. To strive for sanctity and save souls: *Omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam*” (*Intimate Notes*, no. 206).

More than a geographical extension of Christ's Kingdom (although this is also brought about by every new initiative begun in the world), the founder seems especially interested in an extension that embraces all of

life's circumstances and all professions and trades. It is a mission destined to reach every sector of human existence, especially daily life and work. This is precisely the content of the "divine locution" (a special revelation from God) that he received on 7 August 1931:

"Now we can understand the emotion of that poor priest, when some time ago he felt within his soul this divine locution: *et ego, si exaltatus fuero a terra, omnia traham ad meipsum* (Jn 12:32); and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself. He saw clearly as well the meaning that our Lord wanted to give to those words of Scripture at that moment: that Christ must be placed at the summit of all human activities. He clearly understood that, through ordinary work in all the activities of the world, the earth had to be reconciled with God, so that everything profane,

while remaining profane, would be converted into something sacred, something consecrated to God, the ultimate end of all things” (*Letter 3*, no. 2).

With the passing of the years and the progressive writing of the *Letters*, *Instructions* and other texts, which were to serve as the basis for much of his preaching, St. Josemaría left his sons and daughters the spiritual and intellectual legacy of a new and consolidated foundation. And thus the aims of Opus Dei were better explained. In many of these texts he uses the verb *suscitar* (“to raise up”), attributing it to God’s action. It is God’s merciful love that has raised up Opus Dei, and he has done so for very precise aims. These objectives form the framework of its mission.

Is there a central idea that sums up these goals? Undoubtedly there is, and perhaps it could be expressed by

saying that our Lord raised up the Work so that ordinary Christians could reconcile their lay condition as citizens in the world with a search for holiness and a spiritual life that would not ask them to abandon the world and its demands, thus resolving a “conflict” that many perceived and that still persists today. In other words, God raised up the Work so that, by *opening up the divine paths on earth*, all men and women could aspire to holiness, to the fullness of divine filiation, through their ordinary life, understood precisely as the place for each one’s daily work.

“In raising up his Work on earth, our Lord has come to resolve this conflict at its root, telling many lay people that it is precisely in the world, in the exercise of their professional work or their job (in any human endeavor), in the fulfillment of their duties of state, that they must strive

for sanctity and help others to do so. And therefore it offers them a fully secular spirit and asceticism, means that are no longer adapted but specific to their situation” (*Letter 23*, no. 18).

“By raising up his Work in these times, our Lord has willed that this truth will never again be unknown or forgotten: that everyone has the duty to sanctify themselves, and that the majority of Christians must sanctify themselves in the world through their ordinary work” (*Letter 3*, no. 2).

“Opus Dei has opened up all the divine paths on earth to all men and women, because it has helped people see that all upright jobs can be an opportunity to find God, thus converting human endeavors into divine work” (*Instruction*, May 1935/14 September 1950, no. 1).

These are the aims that form the framework of Opus Dei's *mission* and make it a *leaven* within the Church and the life of mankind. In a special way, this leaven is simply the Christian life of the laity who, through their work, transform earthly realities *from within*, as the Second Vatican Council will say years later (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31). Thus the new foundation recalls what perhaps had been forgotten, enlivens what was lukewarm and enkindles what had been extinguished, collaborating in the Church's mission to open up new horizons, awaken enthusiasm and spread peace and joy.

In order to grasp how the identity and mission of the new foundation took shape in St. Josemaría's own thought, some authors^[1] have stressed the importance of the founder's statements when they are introduced with a special

“solemnity” by significant phrases such as: “Our Lord has raised up his Work for...”; “We have come to remind people that...”; “Since the 2nd of October 1928...”, etc. These are not statements about circumstances or simply examples. Rather they belong to the core of the message he spread, and therefore to the core of the mission he received from God.

“With the humility of one who knows that he is a sinner and worth little – *homo peccator sum* (Lk 5:8), we say with Peter – but with the faith of one who allows himself to be led by God’s hand, we have come to say that sanctity is not for the privileged few. The Lord calls us all; he expects Love from us all, from everyone, wherever they may be, from everyone, whatever their state, profession or position” (*Letter 1*, no. 2).

“It is important to keep reminding ourselves that Jesus did not address

himself to a privileged set of people; he came to reveal the universal love of God to us. God loves all mankind, and he wants all to love him – everyone, whatever their personal situation, their social position, their profession or job” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 110).

In such significant quotations, the role of the work of the ordinary Christian faithful is always stressed, directly or indirectly, as the place for their encounter with God, as an opportunity to exercise the virtues, as the setting for their apostolate and for giving good example. In short, work is seen as the reality that makes possible the search for holiness *in the middle of the world*.

“By raising up his Work in these times, our Lord has willed that this truth will never again be unknown or forgotten: that everyone has the duty to sanctify themselves, and that

the majority of Christians must sanctify themselves in the world through their ordinary work. Therefore, the Work will exist for as long as there are men and women on the earth. There will always exist the phenomenon of people in every profession and trade seeking holiness in their state, in their own profession or trade, by being contemplative souls in the midst of the world” (*Letter 3*, no. 92).

Thanks to these lights, St. Josemaría seems to envision, as a great endeavor to be carried out, the goal of ordering the world to God; indeed, of reordering it, since it is subject to the sin of Adam and to our own sins. He sees this as a realistic goal, not a utopian one, as a lofty and future objective, but certainly capable of motivating and sustaining a real commitment in daily life.

“This can be done; it is not an empty dream. If only we men would decide to receive the love of God into our hearts! Christ our Lord was crucified; from the height of the Cross he redeemed the world, thereby restoring peace between God and men. Jesus reminds all of us: ‘And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all things to myself.’ If you put me at the summit of all earthly activities, he is saying, by fulfilling the duty of each moment, in what appears important and what appears unimportant, I will draw everything to myself. My kingdom among you will be a reality! Embracing the Christian faith means committing oneself to continuing Christ’s mission among men. We must, each of us, be *alter Christus, ipse Christus*: another Christ, Christ himself. Only in this way can we set about this great undertaking, this immense, unending task of sanctifying all temporal structures from within, bringing to

them the leaven of Redemption” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 183).

The mission of Opus Dei thus enters directly, and not obliquely, into the mission of Christ’s Church, being leaven in the midst of all men and women, so that the Kingdom of God, *already* present but *not yet* fully made a reality, may spread throughout the world. This is precisely the mission of the Son, eternalized in history by the Spirit and entrusted to his Church: to recapitulate, reconcile, reorder all things, returning the world to the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit. It is vision explicitly transmitted by St. Paul and St. John, but present throughout the New Testament and prepared by the Old.

“Our Lord wants us Christians (because we have the supernatural responsibility to cooperate with

God's power, since He has willed it in his infinite mercy) to seek to reestablish the broken order and restore to temporal structures, in every nation, their natural function as instruments for the progress of humanity, and their supernatural function as a means for reaching God, for the Redemption: *venit enim Filius hominis* – and we are to follow in our Lord's footsteps – *salvare quod perierat (Mt 18:11)*" (Letter 12, no. 19).

Particular mission within a general mission

Once the mission of Opus Dei is envisioned as a participation in the Son's mission to recapitulate and reconcile all things (especially through work, the "hinge" of one's holiness), we can understand why St. Josemaría, guided by divine inspiration, insisted in his preaching on certain essential points. Among

others, the *sense of divine filiation*, without which this participation would not be possible; the *importance of Baptism*, because of the dignity it bestows and the tasks it enables us to carry out, as the sacrament that seals our filiation in the Spirit; and the *centrality of the Holy Mass*, where the Son brings about the reconciliation of the world with God, accomplished once and for all on the Cross; and *humility*, as an indispensable requirement for reigning with Christ in serving all mankind, because the very core of the Redemption is to annul the proud prevarication of Adam through the obedience of the humble Servant of Yahweh.

The purpose of the new foundation has a necessary apostolic dimension, since it is part of the *very mission of the Son*, which the Holy Spirit continues in human history and in the Church. Thus we can understand

why St. Josemaría insisted so much, right from the very beginning, on the evangelizing effort required of those who joined the Work and on the responsibility this entailed: everyone is called to be an apostle.

The mission of Opus Dei is thus seen as a *particular* mission within the *general* mission of the Church. The Work cooperates in the mission entrusted to the whole Church – to bring about the Kingdom, calling all men and women to holiness – through a particular light: to make this call a reality *in the context* of one's work and ordinary activities, and to bring about the Kingdom *through* this work.

“My daughters and sons, as part of God's providence in caring for ‘his holy Church and keeping the spirit of the Gospel alive, our Lord has entrusted Opus Dei, since 2 October 1928, with the task of making it clear,

of reminding all souls, by the example of your life and your words, that there is a universal call to Christian perfection and that it is possible to follow it . . . God wishes to make use of your personal holiness, which you seek in accordance with the spirit of the Work, to teach everyone, in a simple, specific way, something that you know very well: that all the faithful, incorporated into Christ by baptism, are called to seek the fullness of Christian life. Our Lord wants us to be his instruments to remind people in a practical way – first by the way we live – that the call to holiness really is universal, and not restricted to just a few people, or to a particular state in life; nor is it generally conditional on abandoning the world. Any job, any profession, can be a path to holiness and a means for apostolate” (*Letter 6*, nos. 25-26).

Within the mission of fostering a lay spirituality, which is certainly the mission of the whole Church and not just of Opus Dei, the new foundation inspired by God retains its particular mission, which again revolves around work as sanctifying and sanctified.

“Within a lay spirituality, the specific spiritual and ascetical nature of the Work contributes an idea, my children, that it is important to emphasize. I have told you countless times, since 1928, that work for us is the hinge around which all our efforts to attain Christian perfection must revolve. In seeking Christian perfection in the middle of the world, each one of us must also necessarily seek human perfection in our own professional work. And, at the same time, this professional work is the hinge around which all our apostolic efforts revolves” (*Letter 31*, no. 10).

Since it is a particular mission within a general mission, those who participate in this new foundation employ the means with which the Church cares for the Christian life of all her children, and which naturally other institutions in the Church also encourage and practice: prayer, frequent reception of the sacraments, evangelizing zeal, promotion of the Christian family, spreading the teachings of the Magisterium, etc. These means – necessary for living and acting in the Church – do not make the specific mission of Opus Dei superfluous. Although they are essential for salvation, Opus Dei adds a particular focus: it strives to direct these means towards the sanctification of its members through their work, making them apostles who strive to orient earthly structures towards God. Although in principle all the baptized faithful are called to fulfill this mission in the middle of the

world, the particular role of Opus Dei is to illumine this path, enkindling in them the light that will enable them to travel along it effectively. This is an image that St. Josemaría was very fond of: that of a lantern whose light has gone out, located in the middle of the street, which once again shines forth as it should.

In other words, *there would be no need* to raise up Opus Dei simply to encourage the usual means to attain sanctity in Christian life. These means are also present in Opus Dei, but, as such, they would not justify its mission. In order to carry out its mission, together with these means, a spiritual, intellectual and apostolic formation needs to be provided that is suited to transforming the world and reconciling it with God through work and ordinary jobs, in order to place Christ at the summit of all human activities, by fulfilling the duty of each moment and being

witnesses to our Lord (cf. *Christ is Passing By*, no. 183). Putting into practice the means for Christian life without committing oneself to all of the above would not be sufficient to be part of the new Work that St. Josemaría wanted to begin. Therefore many of his teachings were centered on the concern that to be a member of Opus Dei it is not enough to be good, but that one must strive to work well.

“Professional work, whatever it is, becomes a lamp to enlighten your colleagues and friends. That is why I usually tell those who become members of Opus Dei, and the same applies to all of you now listening to me: ‘What use is it telling me that so and so is a good son of mine – a good Christian – but a bad shoemaker?’ If he doesn't try to learn his trade well, or doesn't give his full attention to it, he won't be able to sanctify it or offer it to our Lord. The sanctification of

ordinary work is, as it were, the hinge of true spirituality for people who, like us, have decided to come close to God while being at the same time fully involved in temporal affairs” (*Friends of God*, no. 61).

In the following articles we will see how this specific concern, which identifies the mission of Opus Dei in the Church, was and is present in the charism given by God to St. Josemaría. And we will also look closely at how he understood the concept of *ordinary work*, with its countless applications in daily life.

^[1] Cf. Antonio Aranda, *El hecho teológico y pastoral del Opus Dei*, Eunsa, 2021.

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