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Joining and leaving Opus Dei

How do people join Opus Dei? Can they leave it again? This article explains some aspects of the stages of discernment involved in joining Opus Dei and the situations of people who leave it, as well as offering some reflections on the phenomena of vocation and accompaniment.

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“I assure you, my sons and daughters, that when a Christian

carries out with love the most insignificant everyday action, that action overflows with the transcendence of God. That is why I have told you repeatedly, and hammered away once and again on the idea that the Christian vocation consists of making heroic verse out of the prose of each day. Heaven and earth seem to merge, my sons and daughters, on the horizon. But where they really meet is in your hearts, when you sanctify your everyday lives.” [1]

Opus Dei’s mission is to help people put this ideal into practice. It is, in the words of its founder St Josemaria, “a great catechesis”. [2] It leads us to discover that God is looking at us lovingly every moment of the day, even the most banal-seeming ones. It also enables us to bring the light of God’s gaze to the whole world, because through Baptism and Confirmation, and in an

inexpressible way in the mystery of the Blessed Eucharist, Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, lives in us and we in him (see Jn 6:55 and Jn 15:5).

There are all kinds of people in Opus Dei. Referring to this diversity, St Josemaria used to say that “we can travel along this path in many different ways: on the right, on the left, or zigzagging from side to side, on foot or on horseback. There are thousands of ways to advance along our divine path.” [3] There are also thousands of different ways that lead people to discover this path and recognize that God is calling them to follow him by it.

Every single person has his or her own story. We are biographical beings – we write our life-story, and the people who journey alongside us also contribute to it in some way. And our Father God writes it too, with the utmost care. Our life is not

written for us beforehand like a contract or a finished design. It is a craft project that sometimes takes unexpected turns and needs the passage of time. Yes, God makes use of time, and for as long as the Holy Spirit continues his work in the world [4] he also relies on our initiative to “find ourselves”, find our place in the world and history, and discover how and where he sees us.

1. Incorporation into Opus Dei

There are many people who share in the spirit of Opus Dei in some way, including in countries that the Prelature has not yet reached. Many of them attend Opus Dei activities for a time, even for many years, without ever feeling called to join the Work. [5] Others do at some point feel that God is calling them to follow him by taking the path of Opus Dei. However, it is one thing feel enthusiasm, and quite another to

know whether it really is the right path for someone, whether they have the necessary conditions to be able to travel along it in hope and freedom, in order to follow Our Lord day after day and year after year.

The necessary formalities

Saying yes to the call, deciding to follow Jesus Christ in Opus Dei, means belonging to an institution, and this belonging is formalized little by little over time. When discussing spiritual accompanying, Pope Francis said, “Reaching a level of maturity where individuals can make truly free and responsible decisions calls for much time and patience.” [6] Accordingly, as in many areas of social and Church life, certain stages, with fixed lengths of time, are required before membership of Opus Dei becomes permanent. Without these stages, the person’s freedom would be diminished, and it would

be difficult for either the person concerned or the Prelature to exercise discernment properly. [7]

The existence of these fixed lengths of time as steps towards final, permanent commitment, as well as the rights and duties in regard to Opus Dei and all of its faithful which are taken on by those who join it, show that the commitments acquired with this vocation are very real.

Without these formal aspects, Opus Dei would just be a temporary place to stay, like a sports club or social club, where people come in and go out all the time. Belonging to Opus Dei is a vocation; in other words, it involves a call from God that encompasses one's whole life. This is why a formal framework is necessary. This framework does not, however, occupy the foremost place in the daily lives of Opus Dei faithful. What they each focus on day by day

is simply living their Christian lives to the full.

The first steps: request and admission

As with other specific vocations within the Church, there is a definite moment that marks the “before” and “after” for those who feel called to Opus Dei: the day when they said yes to Jesus Christ – yes, along this path. A divine vocation means “a new view of life. It’s as if a light was lit within us.” [8] It is a personal commitment by which “Our life, the present, past and future, acquires a new dimension, a depth we did not perceive before.” [9] But that commitment still has to put down roots and mature over time.

Accordingly, that first step of asking to be admitted to the Work, preceded by calm reflection on the part of the person concerned and the Prelature, is then followed by a period of continuing and increasing

discernment, through a process of patient work like that of a gardener. This discernment is needed because “The spirit of the Work, like the Gospel, does not impose itself on our way of being, but rather gives it life. It is a seed destined to grow in the earth of each person.” [10] And it is carried out not only during the initial stages of a person’s vocation, but throughout the whole of their life in the Work.

If, after mature consideration, someone formally asks to join Opus Dei, they need the consent of the director of an Opus Dei centre [11] and to be at least sixteen and a half years old. [12] Their request opens a first six-month period during which they begin to live as far as possible in accordance with the call from God that they have accepted in their soul, and they receive initial instruction in the spirit and practice of Opus Dei.

What lies ahead is an ongoing process of instruction and training as they take a firmer grasp of their vocation, but they already perceive God's call as love embracing their whole existence. "All happenings and events now fall within their true perspective: we understand where God is leading us, and we feel ourselves borne along by this task entrusted to us." [13]

Once this initial six-month period is over, the Prelature makes a formal response to their request for admission. This response is called "the admission"; it is not yet incorporation into Opus Dei. For the person concerned, it means a mature decision to try and live out their Christian life and apostolic mission according to the spirit of Opus Dei, in the context of service to the Church and mankind. [14]

Temporary and definitive incorporation into Opus Dei

At least one more year must go by after the admission before the person is incorporated into Opus Dei. The Statutes of Opus Dei call this step the “oblation”, and it can only be done by someone who is at least eighteen years old and who knows and accepts the obligations they are taking on.

The bond which is created between the Opus Dei Prelature and the person by the “oblation”, which is a first, temporary incorporation, is similar to the bond between any member of the faithful and his or her diocese, but with two differences: the bond in this case involves a specific divine vocation, and it is created, canonically speaking, by means of a mutual formal declaration in the presence of two witnesses. [15]

Love does not set conditions; love just says yes, quite simply. But prudence means letting time pass before formally making a lifelong commitment. Therefore the bilateral commitment made through the “oblation” lasts for a maximum period of one year, until the next 19th of March – the feast of St Joseph (when it can be renewed for the next year). This period looks towards definitive incorporation, which can be effected not less than five years after the first temporary incorporation.

During this time each of the faithful gets on with their professional career, social life, etc., in accordance with their vocation, trying to increase their “unity of life”. [16] The Opus Dei Prelature continues helping them to develop their knowledge and practice of the Faith and their understanding of the spirit of Opus Dei, in a climate of trust. Each year

the person renews his or her commitment if they so desire, and if the Prelature does not make any objection. Obviously, during this five-year period they will encounter times of tiredness, and perhaps doubts and hesitations. But they all know that they can rely on the support and strength of everyone else in Opus Dei, support that takes the form of real fraternal help.

After a minimum period of five years from the “oblation”, with the consent of the Prelature, faithful can do the “fidelity”, the definitive incorporation into Opus Dei. [17] In 1950 St Josemaria established that in the case of Supernumeraries, because of the variety of circumstances they may find themselves in and the way they receive formation, the period of time before they make the definitive incorporation is normally longer. This definitive incorporation, like the

previous ones, does not involve any change in people's state as lay faithful. Nor is there any change in the state of the secular priests who, incardinated in their respective dioceses, join the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross.

2. Leaving Opus Dei

The whole of the journey outlined above requires freedom, maturity, hope, and trust in God and in those he has placed at our side. The faithful of Opus Dei rest in the hands of their Father God and rely on each other's support, but this does not mean that they are not exposed to the same difficulties as anyone else, with regard to health, character, family and social surroundings, money crises, unemployment, etc.

As well as their own limitations, defects and sins, Christ's disciples also have to reckon with trials, temptations and persecutions of one

kind or another (see Jn 15:20). [18] In some cases, there may arise errors in vocational discernment (in questions of suitability, maturity, etc.) or spiritual accompaniment. [19] In addition, strong pressure is exerted by present-day society, where being a Christian means “not to be afraid to go against the current and suffer for announcing the Gospel,” [20] and where, in spite of great desires for peace and stability, the value set on faithfulness has declined.

In short, many factors can affect the life-stories of people who, at a given moment, have committed their lives to God. Some of these factors can explain at least in part why someone who had the express intention of being faithful to their vocation to Opus Dei may at some stage in their life wish to leave the Work. In any case, the mystery of the human person demands infinite respect, and prudently avoiding any kind of

judgmentalism. Only God “searches all hearts, and understands every plan and thought” (I Chron 28:9).

Different situations

Before the “oblation”, faithful who wish to leave Opus Dei simply need to say so. Additionally, during this initial period the Prelate or the Regional Vicar of Opus Dei can decide that they should leave or advise them to do so, if they think the person concerned does not have the necessary dispositions or aptitudes. [21]

The faithful of Opus Dei who have made a temporary commitment through the “oblation” remain in the Prelature if they renew that commitment on the 19th of March. There is no fixed form for doing this; it is an interior act made in God’s presence, and all that is needed is to let the appropriate person know that they have done it. If someone

deliberately does not renew their commitment on that day, they are by that very fact no longer in the Prelature, without having to do anything else.

If someone has done the “oblation” and wishes to leave Opus Dei before the next 19th of March, or if they have made a permanent commitment through the “fidelity”, then in order to leave they need to request the termination of the bond they have contracted with the Opus Dei Prelature, and thus the ending of the corresponding rights and duties.
[22]

The fundamental importance of decisions about one’s vocation means that especially where someone is thinking of leaving Opus Dei, people will try to help them to weigh calmly, in God’s presence, what is the best for them, so that they do not make an over-hasty decision; always seeking

the good of each soul in making their decision. Sometimes their freedom may be hampered by passion, a passing mood, or external coercion. However, if in spite of everything the person prefers to leave, the procedure is clear.

The termination of the bond between the member and the Prelature

To end the bond between the member and the Opus Dei Prelature it has to be made clear that the person concerned freely wishes to leave. [23] Normally this desire is stated in writing in a letter to the Prelate of Opus Dei, [24] who has the competence to grant a dispensation from the duties contracted. The letter does not need to give any reasons; it simply needs to state the person's free, clear, explicit decision not to continue in the Work. [25]

Confirmation of the termination of the bond between them and the

Prelature is given to the person concerned, and they may be helped to clarify aspects of their new situation. If they wish, they may be offered spiritual help adapted to their circumstances. Normally all this is done within a very short time after the termination of the bond. People who leave Opus Dei very often wish to continue as Co-operators.

After a time, it can happen that someone wishes to return, and is admitted as a Supernumerary with the Prelate's authorization.

3. Past and future: forgiveness and hope

When someone leaves the vocational path they had undertaken, it is not easy to take on board fully what has happened. In some cases the situation may be painful on both sides. Sometimes the problem may have been a series of

misunderstandings, which grew until there was no simple remedy. Other times, prolonged neglect of the spiritual life has finally emptied their commitment of all meaning. Or again, a number of factors may have come together to make the person feel that they did not have the strength to go forward along their chosen way.

But life goes on: for God, there is always a way forward to life. “God can write straight even on the crooked lines of our history. God allows us our freedom, and yet in our failures he can always find new paths for his love. God does not fail.” [26] With his help, people need to develop two approaches that provide healing and comfort: forgiveness, and hope.

Forgiveness means looking back at the past to forgive the hurt one has suffered and recognize the hurt one

may have inflicted; and hope means looking to the future, knowing that God journeys at our side, [27] and that a wound, disappointment, rebelliousness, or sometimes a combination of several of these, may be, for God, an opportunity to propose a new path for us. “A move toward a new path of love after the initial offer was rejected, is entirely plausible. This ‘flexibility’ on God’s part is utterly characteristic of the paths he treads with his people (...) he wait for man’s free choice, and whenever the answer is ‘no’, he opens up a new path of love.” [28]

As well as all this, someone who leaves Opus Dei is someone who has wanted to give themselves to God. That generous gesture leaves a deep mark on their personal identity: God does not forget it, and nor does their own heart. The years of dedication behind them were years of prayer and Christian witness; of time, effort

and contributions given for God's concerns and to help those most in need, often by supporting educational or training centres, social work or health projects. [29] "None of our acts of love will be lost, nor any of our acts of sincere concern for others. No single act of love for God will be lost, no generous effort is meaningless, no painful endurance is wasted. All of these encircle our world like a vital force." [30]

To take another angle, even though for a time all that can be recalled are the painful episodes, someone who once belonged to the Opus Dei Prelature has received a lot, by way of love and care, human and spiritual formation, love for work done well, and openness to others. All of this stays with them and will help them to give their future life a Christian meaning.

The Opus Dei Prelature encourages its faithful in their concern not to lose contact with any of the people who have left, unless someone explicitly does not wish for it. The faithful of the Prelature who have the task of forming others are called to incarnate very especially in their lives, this lesson from Pope Francis: “One who accompanies others has to realize that each person’s situation before God and their life in grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without. The Gospel tells us to correct others and to help them to grow on the basis of a recognition of the objective evil of their actions (cf. Mt 18:15), but without making judgments about their responsibility and culpability (cf. Mt 7:1; Lk 6:37). Someone good at such accompaniment does not give in to frustrations or fears. He or she invites others to let themselves be healed, to take up their mat, embrace the cross, leave all behind and go

forth ever anew to proclaim the Gospel. Our personal experience of being accompanied and assisted, and of openness to those who accompany us, will teach us to be patient and compassionate with others, and to find the right way to gain their trust, their openness and their readiness to grow.”

Guillaume Derville and Carlos Ayxelà

[1] St Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 116 [see whole quotation].

[2] St Josemaria, notes taken in a family gathering, 6 February 1967, quoted in Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter , 14 February 2017, no. 7.

[3] St Josemaria, Letter dated 2 February 1945, no. 19, quoted in Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter , 9 January 2018, no. 11.

[4] Cf. Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer 4.

[5] “Opus Dei” is Latin for “the Work of God”, and so the Opus Dei Prelature is also familiarly known as “the Work”.

[6] Pope Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium* , no. 171.

[7] The stages in joining and leaving Opus Dei are set out in the Statutes of the Opus Dei Prelature (*Statuta vel Codex Iuris Particularis Operis Dei*), available [here](#) in Latin, or [here](#) in Latin and Spanish. This document will be referred to hereafter as *Statuta*.

[8] St Josemaria, Letter dated 9 January 1932, no. 19, quoted in A. Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, p. 227.

[9] St Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 45 [[see whole quotation](#)].

[10] Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter , 9 January 2018, no. 11.

[11] This request is made in a simple handwritten letter stating the writer's desire to join Opus Dei. See *Statuta*, nos. 14 §1, 19, and 63.

[12] If the person is younger than this they can be considered a “junior candidate”.

[13] St Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 45 [see whole quotation].

[14] See *Statuta*, nos. 20 §1 and 22.

[15] See *Statuta*, nos. 20 and 27, which give the contents of this declaration. In it, the faithful state their lasting, sincere commitment to respond faithfully to their divine vocation to Opus Dei, recognizing their personal weakness and limitations, but relying on God's grace. For the admission and incorporation of members of the

Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, what is established for the Associates and Supernumeraries of the Prelature is applied, replacing “Prelature of Opus Dei” with “Priestly Society of the Holy Cross” as necessary, and “faithful” with “members”. See Code of Canon Law, canon 278; and Apostolic Constitution *Apostolic Constitution Ut Sit*, preamble and Article 1. The fact of belonging to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross without being incardinated into the Opus Dei Prelature underlines and strengthens the full dependence of the Associate and Supernumerary members on their Diocesan Ordinary, and their service of the diocese; they have no other superior than their own Bishop, just like all other diocesan priests.

[16] In this expression, St Josemaria summed up a central aspect of Opus Dei’s spirit. For more on unity of life,

see article “In spirit and truth:
Creating unity of life (1)”.

[17] The same formal declaration is made between the person and the Prelature, as is used for the “oblation”, but specifying that this time it is for life. Only some of the Supernumeraries make this definitive incorporation; normally they renew their commitment every 19th of March.

[18] See Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 530.

[19] St Josemaria used to say that at the “basis of the science of governance” in Opus Dei there had to be these elements among others: “love for other people’s freedom – listen to them! – and for one’s own [sc. freedom]; the conviction that governance must be collegial; the conviction that the directors can make mistakes and, when they do, they are obliged to put them right”

(Instruction dated 31 May 1936, no 27).

[20] Pope Francis, Letter to the Prelate of Opus Dei, 26 June 2014.

[21] See *Statuta*, no. 28.

[22] See *Statuta*, nos. 28-35. During the time of the temporary incorporation, or after the final incorporation, someone who wishes to leave Opus Dei needs a dispensation that can only be granted by the Prelate (see *Statuta* no. 29).

[23] See *Statuta*, nos. 27 and 33.

[24] Members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross also write to him, but as President of the Society.

[25] See *Statuta*, no. 29.

[26] Benedict XVI, Homily, 8 September 2007.

[27] See Pope Francis, General Audience, 7 December 2016.

[28] J. Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, pp. 120-121.

[29] On one occasion, when blessed Alvaro del Portillo (the then Prelate of Opus Dei) was in a family gathering with some Opus Dei directors in Paris, someone referred to a person in another country who had left Opus Dei years before. Blessed Alvaro spoke in terms of heartfelt praise about what the person had done to develop a highly-regarded apostolic venture (recalled by Guillaume Derville, August 1988).

[30] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 279.

[31] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 172.

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