

Eight Photos of Me, Except for One

Ana Belen, a young Andaluz woman, narrates her life and vocation as a numerary assistant through eight photographs.

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1. My great dream

I am from Cadiz, Spain. My great dream has always been to be a biologist. From the ages of 15 to 18, I spent my summers working in a marine biology lab in my home town,

Linea de la Concepcion. In this photo I am with a friend (she's wearing dark blue).

When I finished high school, in 1999, I had to move to another city for university studies, since La Linea doesn't have a university.

At my high school I was told about a student residence run by Opus Dei in Seville where I could live and pay for the cost of my room and board by helping the domestic staff. It seemed like a great idea to me, and that's how I got to know Opus Dei.

A discovery

I liked the center a lot, especially the joy and good humor, and the concern people showed for others.

Besides the heat in Seville, I made two important discoveries.

First I discovered the meaning of a Christian life, because at home we had drifted far from religion and hardly practiced anything—to be truthful, nothing. When I was a kid I made my first Holy Communion, but after that I hadn't stepped inside a church except for a wedding or baptism. In the center of Opus Dei my eyes were opened to the wonder of a life of faith, and I saw everything in a new perspective and with a deeper meaning.

2. A second discovery

We took this photo on an outing with students from my department, in Cordoba. I don't know what my classmate is holding in her hand, but since we all were studying biology I imagine it has some sort of bug or small creature inside.

During this time I made a second discovery; a professional one. I realized that the work with the

domestic staff in the university residence which was paying for my room and board was something that I was getting to like more and more.

This change in professional interests isn't so surprising—a number of my classmates (some of them appear in the photo) also changed their professional plans over time.

But in my case, more than a change in plans, it was a whole new perspective on my life and work.

3. A choice

Let me explain. In the center of Opus Dei I discovered that what really enthused me was my work with the household staff creating the atmosphere of a home. This was true for a number of reasons, including both the work itself and the spirit of service with which it was carried out. As I said before, I had worked in a lab and continued to like biology,

but what really gave me a sense of satisfaction was this new work, and especially the spirit with which we tried to carry it out.

In this way, little by little, as I improved in my Christian life and got to know Opus Dei, I began to think about a vocation to Opus Dei. This vocation is the same for everyone, whether married, single or widowed. It is all about finding God in everyday life: when working, while resting, in family life, in one's relations with others, in sports....

Each one lives his or her vocation in accord with their own circumstances. Some people marry and live their vocation with their spouse and children, while others like myself choose to live apostolic celibacy and remain single. I am a numerary assistant and my work involves looking after the centers of Opus Dei. As I do my work, I pray in

a special way for the apostolic work carried out by those living there. And like any mother would do, I try to make the house a real home, a Christian home.

This is a photo of my classroom, a typical science classroom.

4. Much more than this

The domestic care for a center, known as the "work of the Administration" in Opus Dei, is not merely the material work involved. In a hotel, at a military barracks, on a ship, someone has to cook, clean, and iron clothing (well, maybe no one actually irons clothing on a ship). But turning a house into a home, into a family home, requires much more than this. For it's only when someone is cared for in a personal way that one truly feels at home.

In a hotel one can find all types of services, but no matter how good

they are it will never be "my home." The difference is that in your home you know that the food was prepared for "you" thinking of your age, health, likes and needs. In your home you are loved for who you are, not for the amount of money you earn. There are no clients or residents, only persons who are unique and irreplaceable.

5. Why this photo?

My work in the domestic staff requires being professionally up to date. Presently I'm taking a course in culinary arts in which I'm learning, among other things, new trends in Spanish cuisine, a style of cooking that is well recognized throughout the world.

I didn't take this photo; I downloaded it from the web. I chose it because it suggests how cooking, besides specific knowledge, is an art that requires a careful touch.

6. Doubts

I want to tell you a bit more about my life. When I first asked to be a numerary assistant, I debated whether or not to finish my degree in biology, now that I had decided to practice another profession. In the end, after giving it a lot of thought, I decided to finish my degree, because any university degree helps one's intellectual growth and discipline. I thought that my biology studies might prove helpful in my work in the Administration, and this has turned out to be the case.

I specialized in Food Processing, a field closely related with some aspects of my work in the domestic staff. This is my graduation photo with all my classmates at the University of Cordoba.

There was another reason for continuing with my degree in biology. This field touches on many

subjects closely tied to the faith, such as evolution. As a Christian I wanted to have a strong scientific background for discussing these questions.

Besides, I really enjoy biology. I love going to the mountains in the Sierra de Hornachuelos to classify plants and wild flowers. I've also organized a seminar for young girls that we call "Natura." I try to help them to get to know and respect nature, and to become familiar with questions about ecology.

7. My parents

I've left my parents for last, but they are foremost in my heart.

Thanks be to God, my parents, who at first couldn't understand my new way of life, have been drawing closer and closer to God.

Now they not only encourage me on my path, but have come to understand and love the Work. My father tells me: "since you're happy, it's right for you."

Both of them receive the sacraments regularly and my mother is a cooperator of Opus Dei. It seems a dream to me. If someone had told me this a few years ago, I wouldn't have believed it.

So these are my photos. I hope you enjoyed them. Good bye!

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