

Making the Centre a Home (I)

Open, bright, cheerful homes: this is what God wants. This is the first instalment of reflections on family life within the centres of Opus Dei.

10/13/2023

My daughter, should I not seek a home for you, that it may be well with you? (Ruth 3:1). These affectionate words of Naomi to her daughter-in-law Ruth capture the universal longing for a home. It is a place where one feels loved and

understood, a place to regain strength. Saint Josemaría saw the family in this light: "Every Christian home should be a place of peace and serenity. In spite of the small frustrations of daily life, an atmosphere of profound and sincere affection should reign there together with a deep-rooted calm, which is the result of authentic faith that is put into practice."^[1]

The Hebrew word "*bayit*," meaning house or construction, is also used in Scripture to refer to family. Thus, for example, the "house of Jacob" (cf. *Jer* 2:4) and the "house of Isaac" (cf. *Amos* 7:16) refer to the dynasties of those patriarchs. In contemporary languages, the concept of a house often conveys the idea of belonging to a family. When someone is said to be from a particular house, it signifies more than just a physical location; it represents stable, unconditional, and selfless

relationships that allow each person to recognize him or herself as a person open to the world. They know they have shelter and unconditional affection in that house; they are loved simply because they are part of it.

It will be like a home

Belonging to a house is a facet of one's identity. In Opus Dei, we know we are part of that "family among families"^[2] that is the Church. "All of us in Opus Dei," wrote Saint Josemaría, "form a single home: the reason we constitute one family is not the fact that we live under the same roof. Like the first Christians, we are *cor unum et anima una* (Acts 4:32); no one in the Work can ever feel the bitterness of indifference."^[3] We know, therefore, that we are of God's house, God's family, on the way to the final home where all God's sons and daughters will be gathered.

Although we know little about what God has prepared for those who love Him, He gives us a clue: it will be *like a home*. During the Last Supper, Jesus said, *Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also (Jn 14:1-3)*. We begin to prepare ourselves for the home promised to us in this life, collecting the material of which it will be built — love and communion — each day. Making a home in this life is not an optional precursor to something that will come later but a necessary preparation so our hearts can one day embrace full communion with God and the blessed. It is really possible for us to close ourselves off to this gift and destroy our readiness for love.^[4]

We learn about the gratuitousness of love at home, and it helps us understand something of the immensity of God's love. Saint Josemaría used to emphasize the interconnection between human love and divine love: "Love Our Lord passionately. Love him madly! Because if there is love there — when there is love — I would dare to say that resolutions are not needed. My parents — think of yours — did not need to make any resolutions to love me: and what an effusion of tenderness they showed me, in little details every day! With that same human heart we can and should love God."^[5]

For all these reasons, an important part of the evangelizing mission entrusted to Opus Dei consists of building a home. "This family spirit," Don Álvaro wrote, "is so essential to us that every daughter and son of mine carries it always with them; so

strong that straight away it can be seen in and around us, making it possible for us to create a family atmosphere in any place where we happen to be."^[6] Creating this family atmosphere, as part of the family of the children of God, brings a new kind of logic into the world, a way of loving that prepares hearts for the day when God will be *all in all* (1 Cor 10:28).

"Our homes," the Father told us in a letter, "need to be 'bright and cheerful.' Open homes, in which many people can participate, even those who perhaps lack the warmth of a home."^[7] That is how the homes of the supernumeraries and associates, as well as the centres of Opus Dei, should be. This text, which is divided into two instalments, aims to provide insights for reflection on family life in the centres. However, much of what is said here can be applied to life in any home.

In the present, through freedom, because God wants us to

There are many ways to create a home, but they all share some common features. First and foremost, a home and a family are not static realities; they are always a path, an ongoing construction process. The Hebrew word *bayit*, mentioned previously, derives from *banah*, which means "to build." A home is always under construction, shaped not only by the external circumstances and limitations of its members but also by the care and concern they have for one other. In other words, only part of what nourishes the family can be stored in a pantry. Although "a good remembrance, particularly a remembrance from our childhood, when we still lived in our parents' house" can "save" a person,^[8] families cannot live on memories alone.

If families do not renew themselves and grow each day through the relationships between their members, they may maintain an appearance of good health but actually become collections of isolated pieces, things that meant something in the past but are only held together now by a vague reverence for the family. Experience teaches us that this slow process of drifting apart often comes from the growth of individualistic attitudes in relationships, causing us to lose sight of the value of what is shared. The family then stops renewing itself and settles into a repetition of scheduled gatherings, becoming something that is no longer alive and, therefore, does not nourish the spirit. Family life can then take on an official, predictable, and ultimately burdensome air.

A healthy family is built one day at a time. Good health does not mean the

absence of problems: just as we will never be perfectly holy in this life, no home in the world — except for the home at Nazareth, which we wish to be a "corner" of — will reach its fulness until we get to heaven. The chronic fragility of the home is a call to work every day to keep it alive, just as a fire must be kept alive; this is the reason for the phrase "hearth and home." This effort can be seen as our response to what Jesus said about Himself: *The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (Mt 8:20)*.

Paradoxically, every home is called to be a place of rest, but its members must remain vigilant to keep it alive.

This dynamic nature of family life leads to a second characteristic: homes are built from the freedom of each of the people who form them. Families are defined not only by cohabitation, living together, but living with the same love, in communion. Each member of the

family is called to build the family up every day with their unique, personal, irreplaceable contribution. "Thus an atmosphere of fraternity is created in which each of us fortifies the others' affection and, all united, we experience the hundredfold that our Lord promised us, as we journey towards eternal life (cf. *Mt 19:29*)."^[9]

In a family, there is a communion of free wills because there is a shared will to keep the home alive. There is also a communion of intellects because there is agreement about what is being built. It is often necessary to explicitly state what is being built, or what might be destroyed or left unconstructed, through each person's free actions or omissions.

The third starting point, and the most important, is that we make a home and a family *because God wants us to*. In *Opus Dei*, the foundation of this process of building a home lies in an

invitation from God and our free, personal decision to respond. *Making a home* is part of the mission God has entrusted to us. Work is, certainly, the "hinge" of our sanctification, but it has a deeper, more comprehensive purpose: our sense of divine filiation, the foundation of our entire spiritual life. Being true children of God makes us part of a family. We belong to God's house and God's family, and so, "if we strive to love, understand, forgive and serve one another, we will also contribute very directly, through the Communion of Saints, to the unity of all believers and of all humanity."^[10]

Family life is, therefore, not something added on: it is one of the fundamental places in which each person is called to be Christ for their brothers and sisters. How we treat those God has chosen to share our home with can shed light on our response to God's call. Saint

Josemaría warned us about the risk of "holiness" without genuine openness to others in no uncertain terms. It can happen even to those who, despite their struggle on different fronts, ultimately have to admit to themselves: You are "not being a good son, a good brother, a good companion, a good friend, a good colleague. And that, since you love 'your holiness' in a disordered manner, you are envious. You 'sacrifice' yourself in many small *personal* details, and so you are attached to yourself, to your own person. Deep down you do not live for God or for others, but only for yourself."^[11]

These words echo those spoken to the Church in Ephesus by an angel: *I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and*

found them to be false; I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first (Rev 2:2-4). The Father has also invited us to reflect on this danger: "If at times you find family life tiring, look sincerely for the cause of this tiredness in order to remedy it. Consider whether it is due only to a shortage of material means, or to the natural effort that diligently caring for others can entail; or whether it is also due to a cooling down of affection."^[12]

Family life is not, therefore, something to be lived only in exceptional moments when we have more time, during vacations, or when our workload is lighter. On the contrary, intense work can create the conditions for a healthy family life. In this regard, our Father wrote that "the children of God in his Work

learn to be good instruments, like learning to breathe. Because we do not prevent them—on the contrary—from taking part in that noble struggle with their peers, to make their way in life amidst inevitable professional clashes (...) which are suitable for removing pride, naiveté, and inexperience."^[13] Thus, contact with the harshness of professional life, tempered by prayer and softened by the delicate fraternity of others, is a natural way for each person to make their personal contribution to family life.

And that delicate and strong fraternity often leads to a decision of self-giving. Yes, our affection for one other can awaken the first questions in people's hearts. *By this, all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*, Jesus told his apostles (Jn 13:35). From the time of the very first generations of Christians, despite the difficulties

and internal conflicts they had to face, others saw them and said, "See how they love one another."^[14] Our evangelizing strength necessarily passes through this; it is not a strategy or a pastoral plan, but authentic fidelity to the Gospel.

^[1] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 22.

^[2] Pope Francis, Address, 6-V-2019.

^[3] St. Josemaria, Letter 11, no. 23.

^[4] Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, no. 45.

^[5] St. Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 503. See also *Christ is Passing By*, nos. 142 and 155.

^[6] Bl. Alvaro del Portillo, Letter, 1-XII-1985, in *Family Letters I*, no. 204 (AGP, library, P17).

^[7] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 16-II-2023, n. 16.

^[8] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Bantam Books, translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew, pg. 934.

^[9] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 16-II-2023, n. 6.

^[10] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 16-II-2023, n. 16.

^[11] St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 739.

^[12] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 16-II-2023, n. 15.

^[13] St. Josemaría, Letter 27, no. 73.

^[14] Tertulian, *Apologetics*, no. 39 (PL 1).

Carlos Ayxelá

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