

As the Church Wishes to be Served: the vocation to Opus Dei as a diocesan priest

A priest's heart beats with a deep longing to be faithful to God and serve others. Those who discover their call to live the spirit of Opus Dei find in the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross a support on their path to holiness, in full communion with their bishop and the presbyterate.

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Nathanael means “gift of God.” This apostle is featured in only one Gospel scene: the one where Philip, his friend, tells him that he has just found the Messiah. Then both approach Jesus, and unexpectedly, Jesus declares aloud, “Here is a true Israelite in whom there is no guile” (Jn 1:47). They must have been surprised by these words. Nathanael responds in astonishment, “How do you know me?” (Jn 1:48). Had they met before, and he didn’t remember? But where did that statement come from, made as if He had known him all his life, as if He was aware of his deepest dispositions? Jesus then plays his last card: “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (Jn 1:48).

We do not know exactly what Nathanael understood upon hearing these words, but he surrendered to Jesus immediately: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel” (Jn 1:49). Jesus knew He was witnessing the first steps of Nathanael's apostolic life, the initial warmth of a mission that would extend throughout his life.

Therefore, He foretells a future full of fruitfulness: “You will see greater things than these” (Jn 1:50). This is what we experience in every vocation, including that of some diocesan priests who feel the call to become part of Opus Dei: Jesus grants them anew the help and mission to “serve the Church as she wishes to be served.”^[1] These priests have been called where they are, under their fig tree. There, in their profession, in their ministry, they have felt, like Nathanael, loved and called once more by the Master.

These priests, by responding to that vocation, begin to belong to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, an association of clerics intrinsically united to the Prelature of Opus Dei, as we will see later.^[2] This juridical formula allows them not only to maintain their filial relationship with their diocesan bishop, as well as their priestly fraternity with the other members of their presbytery, but to reaffirm them. In St. Josemaría's words, a diocesan priest called to Opus Dei "neither modifies nor abandons any part of his diocesan vocation. His dedication to the service of the local Church in which he is incardinated, his full dependence on his own Ordinary, his secular spirituality, his solidarity with other priests etc., are not changed. On the contrary, he undertakes to live his vocation to the full, because he knows that he must seek perfection precisely in fulfilling his obligations as a diocesan

priest.”^[3] Ultimately, their vocation to the Work commits them “never to neglect their own diocesan ministry, but on the contrary, to exercise it with ever greater love of God.”^[4]

St. Josemaría’s love for priests

In April 1941, St. Josemaría was invited to preach at a spiritual retreat for diocesan priests.

However, during those same days, his mother fell ill with pneumonia. Her condition did not appear grave, so the founder of Opus Dei decided to proceed with the activity, where about fifty priests were waiting for him. Years later, he would recount the event as follows: “I left my mother very sick in Madrid, in order to go to Lérida to give a retreat to diocesan priests. I did not know how serious it was, because the doctors did not think that my mother’s death would be imminent, or that she

might not be cured. 'Offer your aches and pains for the work I am going to do,' I asked my mother as I said good-bye. She agreed, although she could not avoid saying in a whisper: 'This son of mine!' On arrival at the seminary of Lérida, where the priests were doing their retreat, I went to the Tabernacle: 'Lord, look after my mother, for I am looking after your priests.' Halfway through the retreat, at midday, I gave them a talk. I spoke about the supernatural work, the incomparable role of a mother by the side of her priest son. I finished, and wanted to stay for a little while recollected in the chapel. Almost immediately, the bishop who was Apostolic Administrator, and also on retreat there, came up, his face visibly altered. He said to me: 'Don Alvaro is on the telephone for you.' I heard Alvaro say: 'Father, the Grandmother has died.' (...) Since then, I have always thought that the Lord asked me for this sacrifice as an

external sign of my love for diocesan priests, and that my mother continues to intercede for that work in a special way.”^[5]

Losing his mother while caring for that group was a sign that St. Josemaría carried throughout his life as a motivation for his love for diocesan priests and his concern for the holiness of the shepherds of God’s people. Less than two years after that retreat, in February 1943, St. Josemaría “understood that God was asking him to take a new foundational step that would permit Opus Dei to have its own priests. It consisted in creating a priestly association linked to Opus Dei, made up of priests who had previously been lay members.”^[6] In the late 1940s, already having priests to attend to the activities of Opus Dei, the founder made a very painful decision in his prayer: he thought he should leave the Work to dedicate

himself entirely to the accompaniment of diocesan priests. But this was not God's plan. Shortly after, in 1950, he finally understood that these priests could also be part of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, without affecting their belonging to their dioceses. "God our Lord," St. Josemaría wrote, "in his infinite goodness, wished to give me the solution within our Opus Dei, without any need to create another spiritual family. I shall never cease to give thanks for that providence of God."^[7]

If we return to the Gospel scene at the beginning, when Jesus describes the "greater things that Nathanael will see, He speaks of heaven being opened and "the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (Jn 1:51). On 2 October 1928, on the feast of the Guardian Angels, when St. Josemaría founded Opus Dei by divine inspiration,

diocesan priests were already present among many ordinary people from all walks of life and professions. “You are as much a part of Opus Dei as I am,” the founder would say to the members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross.^[8] Somehow, that day, St. Josemaría intuited those “greater things” to which any vocation invites us. Inspired by God, he felt an urgent desire to care for his diocesan priest brothers and to share with them the message of the universal call to holiness in the midst of the world, through their pastoral work and other ordinary circumstances. Like every person called to Opus Dei, these priests were another “gift of God.”

More united with the bishop and their fellow priests

The vocation to the Work is not separate from the priestly vocation

received years earlier; rather, it is added to it, propelling and guiding it. ^[9] It involves “a total and habitual availability for seeking holiness according to the spirit of Opus Dei,” ^[10] concretized in “an eagerness to fulfil perfectly the pastoral task entrusted to him by his own Bishop, knowing that he is accountable only to the local Ordinary regarding the fulfilment of that task.” ^[11]

Priests incardinated in dioceses who feel called by God to be part of Opus Dei can be either associates or supernumeraries of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, according to their availability to accompany their fellow priests. In both cases, because the call to Opus Dei reinforces their previous baptismal and priestly call, they are in no way distinguished from their brothers and strive with all their might to live deeply the unity of the presbyterate, united with their head, the bishop,

embodying the motto of the early church: *Nihil sine episcopo*, “nothing without the bishop.” This communion drives them to live a fraternal charity with the other members of their own presbyterate and to absolutely avoid any shadow of division, fostering the greatest unity among all priests.^[12] They care for the other priests of their presbyterate and feel accompanied by them, enjoying the gift of those brothers. As Pope Francis affirmed, “fraternity means choosing deliberately to pursue holiness together with others, and not by oneself.”^[13]

The Prelate of Opus Dei told diocesan priests in the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross: “Moreover, you are especially concerned to promote priestly vocations; and you are called to be a leaven of unity with the bishops, and of fraternity within the presbyterate of your diocese.”^[14]

There, under their fig tree, God blesses them and fills them with fruitfulness. There, alongside their fellow priests, they become saints. There, in the faithful fulfillment of their diocesan duties, they find God. And there they follow St. Josemaría's paternal advice: "Strive to accompany each other, including humanly. Have a heart of flesh, for we love Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit with that heart of flesh. If you see one of your brothers in need, go to him, do not wait for him to call you!"^[15] Each brother priest has his fig tree and needs to know he is not alone.

St. Josemaría said that Opus Dei comes to serve the Church as the Church wishes to be served, and this is especially true for diocesan priests who discover their vocation in Opus Dei. The Church, in its original Greek word, *ekklesia*, refers to an assembly, a community of people. This is what

the seed of Opus Dei does in them: it strengthens their communion with God, thanks to the support of the family of Work, so that each priest, in turn, strengthens communion with his bishop, his fellow diocesan priests, and all the faithful.

^[1] St. Josemaría, *Letter 8*, no. 1.

^[2] Cf. Statutes, no. 36 § 2.

^[3] St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 16.

^[4] Statutes, n. 69.

^[5] St. Josemaría, *Letter 26*, no. 45.

^[6] J. L. González Gullón and J. Coverdale, *Opus Dei: A History*, volume I, Scepter Publishers, 2022, pg. 96.

^[7] St. Josemaría, *Letter 26*, no. 44.

^[8] Qtd. on F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 26.

^[9] Cf. Statutes, no. 58 § 1.

^[10] Statutes, no. 61.

^[11] Statutes, no. 61 § 1.

^[12] Cf. Statutes, no. 69.

^[13] Pope Francis, Address for the International Theological Symposium on the Priesthood, 17-II-2022.

^[14] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 26.

^[15] St. Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering with priests, 26-X-1972. AGP, P04 1972, II, pg. 767.

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