

St. Josemaría's Understanding of Work: an Overview

St. Josemaría's preaching contains a clear and very rich theological vision, stemming from the light he received on October 2nd, 1928 and nourished by two main sources: Sacred Scripture and a deep understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word.

It is a wide-ranging message, since it is addressed to all those who live in the middle of the world and work in every sort of secular occupation. At the same time, St. Josemaría's teaching clarifies the Work's specific mission. Many aspects of Christian life that he describes as characteristic of the spirit of Opus Dei stem from an innovative and profoundly Christological understanding of the realities of this world and the possibility of attaining holiness precisely by working in this setting. Therefore, in order to understand better *what Opus Dei is* and its specific mission within the mission of the Church, it is illuminating to go more deeply into St. Josemaría's teachings on work.

Divine and professional vocation

The concept of vocation, as the founder of the Work described it, includes work as an essential component. "Work is man's original vocation. It is a blessing from God, and those who consider it a punishment are sadly mistaken" (*Furrow*, no. 482). In explaining what the call to Opus Dei entails, he often stressed that the professional vocation one intends to take up is part of one's divine vocation. Anyone who didn't feel called by God to carry out some form of work, an activity that can be sanctified in the middle of the world, could not receive the vocation to the Work.

"I have so often told you that your professional vocation is an important part of your divine vocation. That is also why the Work's apostolate in the world will always be up to date, contemporary, and necessary. For as long as there are people on earth, there will be men and women who work" (*Letter 6*, no. 35).

As happened with the apostles, St. Josemaría pointed out that God can call people precisely in the exercise and context of their work (cf. *The Way*, no. 799). Responding to this call does not entail any change of state. Each one remains in the place they occupy in the world, with their professional commitments and family and social relationships (cf. *Letter 6*, no. 37).

The founder of the Work exhorted his sons and daughters to be present in all areas where human beings carry out their activities, firmly rooted in the secular and human reality of the profession to which they dedicate themselves. “You have received God’s call to a specific path: to be at all the crossroads of the world, while you remain – doing your professional work – in God” (*The Forge*, no. 748). Just as one’s work is not simply a task among others, but something that defines the life of the one who carries it out, so responding to the vocation to Opus Dei is not simply a commitment among others, but rather the ‘form’ that defines and characterizes the entire existence of the one who has received it. And this vocation encompasses the many facets of one’s life: social relationships, friendships, family responsibilities, etc.

In order to carry out the mission of the Work of God, St. Josemaría set forth for his sons and daughters a very clear requirement: *to transform work into prayer* and *to live as contemplatives in the middle of the world*. This is a new teaching, since for most people the responsibilities of their family, social and working life are seen as separate from a contemplative life and prayer.

In this sense, the sanctification of work has sometimes been understood in a minimal way. It may have been limited, for example, to beginning a task with a prayer offering it to God and ending it with a prayer of thanksgiving, or to interrupting what one is doing from time to time with a short prayer. All of this, of course, is positive and can help us to be aware of God’s presence during the day. But what St. Josemaría invites his children to do is something deeper: to transform all our work into a loving dialogue with God, in an almost continuous way, to the point that the more immersed we are in the world, the more closely we can and should be united to God. “Our being children of God, I insist, leads us to have a contemplative spirit in the midst of all human activities; to be light, salt and leaven through our prayer, through our mortification, through our knowledge of religion and of our profession. We will carry out this aim: the more within the world we are, the more we must be God’s” (*The Forge*, no. 740).

In the Church, every evangelizing effort presented as a participation in the mission of the Son will always be rooted in a deep sense of divine filiation. In Opus Dei, this takes on a particular emphasis. Transforming the world through work, and thus participating in the mission of the Son to recapitulate and reconcile all things, means imprinting on human activities the *Christi forma*: the form of love, service, charity. It is love that makes small things great, transforming the humblest works into praise of God (cf. for example, *Furrow*, nos. 487, 489; *The Forge*, nos. 684, 686, 742, etc.). Transforming the world with the *forma Christi* also reveals the Eucharistic dimension of work, which can be compared to a Mass

“celebrated” twenty-four hours a day in virtue of the common priesthood of all the faithful, to which Baptism entitles us. As St. Josemaría insisted, we have to serve God “not only on the altar, but in the whole world, which is an altar for us. All the works of men are done as though on an altar, and each one of you, in that union of contemplative souls which is your day, in some way says ‘his Mass,’ which lasts twenty-four hours, in expectation of the Mass to follow, which will last another twenty-four hours, and so on until the end of our lives” (Notes taken in a meditation, 19 March 1968, in Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, *Family Letters*, I, no. 226).

A concise expression

St. Josemaría’s central teaching on work can be summarized in one phrase: “To sanctify work, to sanctify oneself in work, to sanctify others through work” (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 45).

“I will tell you once again, my children: God has called us so that, each remaining in our own state of life and in the exercise of our own profession or trade, we may all sanctify ourselves in our work, sanctify our work, and sanctify others through our work. This is how the human work we do can rightly be considered *opus Dei, operatio Dei*, work of God” (*Letter 6*, no. 13).

What does this concise expression mean in practice? A number of people have written about this on various occasions.¹ Let us consider it at some length.

Sanctifying work, understood as the external effect of human action, implies, first of all, sanctifying the professional, economic, social and political structures that result from human work and that, in turn, influence the continuity of that work. In its objective dimension, it means taking on the mission of transforming the world, imbuing it with the charity of Christ in order to offer it anew to God (cf. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 183). This requires a deep knowledge of the dynamics proper to each field of work, together with a respectful sensitivity to the autonomy of earthly realities. It also demands solid professional competence and a joyful readiness for self-sacrifice.

¹ For example, José Luis Illanes in the entry “Work,” in the *Diccionario de san Josemaría* (2013), and Fernando Ocariz, in the article “The Concept of the Sanctification of Work,” in *Naturaleza, gracia y gloria* (1987).

Sanctifying oneself in work, in the subjective sense, means making work the privileged place for exercising the Christian virtues and the “lynchpin” of one’s spiritual and ascetical life, as St. Josemaría advised his sons and daughters (cf. *Letter* 31, no. 10; *Furrow*, nos. 493-494). In the spirit of Opus Dei, virtues that are especially important include charity and justice in human relations, professionalism and the eagerness to learn that enables one to work better and acquire prestige, as well as order, which leads to making better use of one’s time, and therefore to giving more glory to God (cf. *The Way*, no. 80).

Sanctifying others through work indicates the proper setting for the apostolic activity of the members of the Work. To evangelize and spread the Kingdom of God, there is no need to interrupt one’s work or put it in the background. On the contrary, the people of Opus Dei *are apostles* when they carry out their work with justice, competence and charity, giving good example, orienting earthly structures in accord with the Gospel, developing the dimension of service that all professions entail. In short, placing Christ at the summit of all human activity.

In this evangelizing mission, the witness of one’s life is always complemented by one’s words, which enlighten, explain the reasons for the faith, offer help and consolation. Working alongside others and sharing in their daily life makes this evangelizing action an *apostolate of friendship and confidence*. In many of his writings, St. Josemaría stresses the apostolic dimension inherent in work.

“I think it is very natural for you to want the whole world to know Christ. But start with the responsibility of saving the souls of those who live with you and sanctifying each one of your fellow workers or fellow students. That is the principal mission that our Lord has entrusted to you” (*Furrow*, no. 953).

“It can truly be said, my dearest children, that the greatest fruit of Opus Dei’s apostolate is that which its members obtain *personally* through the apostolate of their example and their loyal friendship with their colleagues in the university or the factory, the office, the mine or the fields” (*Letter* 6, no. 55).

“[Those who] are ignorant of what is meant by complete *dedication* to serious *professional* work, to human sciences, will never be able to appreciate the scope and extent of the apostolate which God asks of the members of the Work, or the way in which they are to carry it out” (*Letter* 6, no. 44).

To work *in Christ*, making clear the full meaning of the Incarnation, is the *principal mission* that God entrusts to those who receive the vocation to Opus Dei. Sanctifying work,

sanctifying oneself in work, and sanctifying others through work are not separate or juxtaposed goals, but rather three inseparable dimensions of the same unitary reality (cf. Jose Luis Illanes, in footnote 1).

“To unite professional work with ascetical struggle and contemplation – something that may seem impossible, but that is necessary to help reconcile the world with God – and to convert this ordinary work into an instrument of personal sanctification and apostolate. Is this not a noble and great ideal, for which it is worth giving one’s life?” (*Instruction*, 19 March 1934, no. 33).

One might ask: how can these teachings be applied when someone is in a situation of illness, professional failures or unemployment, or when the work we have to carry out involves many difficulties in terms of relationships, the work environment, or other types of problems? In other words, are St. Josemaría’s teachings reserved for people who have ideal conditions or who work in specific circumstances? In reality, the message of sanctifying work is universal, applicable to all people and situations. It doesn’t refer so much to what we do (our work), but to what we are (people who work). We can approach everything we do in this life with this outlook: to do things well, out of love, to serve.

Lynchpin of one’s own sanctification

The sanctification of work also includes study, an important activity for the young people who accompanied St. Josemaría in the first years of his pastoral work. This reality is reflected as early as 1934 in the chapter entitled “Study” in *The Way*, where it is presented as an activity that, in itself, can be transformed into prayer and apostolate. Like work, study has a dimension of service and generates relationships that facilitate an apostolate of friendship and confidence among one’s companions. St. Josemaría stressed the importance, especially for young people, of making good use of time, a teaching that is perennially relevant (cf. *The Way*, nos. 354-355; *Furrow*, nos. 509, 513). And he made clear that resting does not mean giving in to laziness or doing nothing, but rather a change of activity to renew one’s strength (cf. *Furrow*, no. 514).

His preaching on work was often inspired by his deep devotion to Jesus’ life in Nazareth and his daily activity in Joseph’s workshop, recurring themes in his homilies (cf. “In Joseph’s Workshop,” in *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 39-56; “Working for God,” in *Friends of God*, nos. 55-72). St. Joseph, presented as a craftsman and teacher of the interior life, became an emblematic model for the members of the Work. This example led St.

Josemaría to establish that his spiritual sons and daughters renew their dedication to Opus Dei each year on March 19th, Solemnity of the Holy Patriarch.

Together with St. Joseph, Mary of Nazareth is also seen as a model of the sanctification of work. Her ordinary life reveals how the care of the family assists in the redemption and bring order into the world according to God’s plan. And thus we see that family life is, in itself, sanctified and sanctifiable work. In Mary, the dimension of service inherent in all sanctified human work is especially apparent. St. Josemaría summed this up in the motto: “In order to be useful, serve” (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 50). The daily life of the Holy Family in Nazareth also gave him the opportunity to emphasize the importance of humility and contemplative silence as essential elements of sanctified work. To work hard and well, he insisted, does not mean falling into a hasty or thoughtless activism; on the contrary, we need to make the noise of three people while doing the work of three thousand (cf. *Letter 3*, no. 66).

Seeing work as the lynchpin of one’s sanctification naturally gives rise to deep and innovative teachings on the relationship between work and prayer, work commitments and family duties, as well as between working hard and resting. In this context, St. Josemaría offered an original interpretation of the relationship between Martha and Mary in Bethany:

“I will never share the opinion – though I respect it – of those who separate prayer from active life, as if they were incompatible. We children of God have to be contemplatives: people who, in the midst of the noise of the crowd, know how to find silence of soul in a lasting conversation with our Lord, people who know how to look at him as they look at a Father, as they look at a Friend, whom they love madly” (*The Forge*, no. 738).

If the exercise of the Christian virtues is sought in a consistent and sincere way, this harmony, difficult in itself, becomes more attainable.

The integration of work into a virtuous life, understood as an expression of an apostolic mission of service, prevents the risk, so common today, of making work an absolute value. Carrying out one’s work *in Christ* protects it from a reductive vision and prevents its drift towards efficiency alone, which arises when work begins to absorb the whole of one’s existence, and becomes an idol. This pathological view, which St. Josemaría called “professionalitis” (cf. *Furrow*, nos. 502, 503), distorts the authentic meaning of human work.

Sanctified work does not hinder a Christian's unity of life, but rather generates it. For St. Josemaría, restoring this unity of life to Christians is a fundamental aspect of the spirit he received from God:

“Fulfilling God's will in our work, contemplating God in our work, working for love of God and our neighbour, making our work into a means of apostolate, giving divine value to human things: this is the simple, strong unity of life we must have, and teach others” (*Letter 6, no. 14*).

St. Josemaría's vision of working *in Christ* opens up a space for dialogue with key perspectives in the theology of earthly realities, dogmatic theology, ecclesiology and spiritual theology, especially as they relate to the mission of the lay faithful. In the articles that follow, we will explore some of the most enriching aspects of this fruitful exchange.