

A HOME THAT REACHES THE WHOLE WORLD

Jesus has been talking about seeds, birds, thorns, and fertile soil. He wants to illustrate the dispositions of those listening to Him, so different from one another. Over time the truth will come to light by the fruit that is produced: *As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience (Lk 8:15)*. Our Lord probably still has this image in mind when, not long afterwards, someone interrupts him: *Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you (Lk 8:20)*. To everyone's surprise, the Teacher replies: *My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it (Lk 8:20)*. It is one of the places in the Gospel where Jesus speaks of a new form of relationship, stronger than the one visibly uniting Him to his mother: the bond of the supernatural family that comes about by listening to and accepting God's word.

In the image of a God who is a communion

The *Catechism* tells us that the Church is "Jesus' true family."¹ Pope Francis reaffirms this: "Jesus has formed a new family, one no longer based on natural ties."² Faith has such a strong power to produce fruit that it generates true new unions. And the same happens in Opus Dei, which is a "small portion" of the Church. Those who have experienced the "intimations of God's love,"³ as Saint Josemaría did, become part of the small family that is the Work. A family that breathes the intimacy of a God who is not loneliness or isolation, but a communion of persons, between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is a family called to be closely united, both because of the love from God's heart that vivifies it and the divine mission to which each of its members has been called: to transmit, each in his or her daily circumstances, the message that God wants us to be his sons and daughters.

During the early years of the Work, Saint Josemaría didn't see clearly how this essential feature of the spirit of Opus Dei – its family atmosphere – would come about. Soon, however, he realized that his mother and sister were in fact helping to create the atmosphere he was looking for in the centers of the Work. After praying about this, he decided to ask them for their irreplaceable help. Blessed Alvaro del Portillo described years later how these two women "transmitted the warmth that had characterized the domestic life of the Escrivá family to the supernatural family our founder was creating. We learned to recognize this in the good taste exemplified in so many small details, in the refinement in mutual dealings, in the care for the material needs of the house, which implied – and this is the most important thing – a constant concern for others and a

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 764.

² Francis, Angelus, 10 June 2018.

³ Saint Josemaría, Homily, 2 October 1968.

spirit of service characterized by vigilance and renunciation. We had observed all this in the character of our Father, and now we saw it confirmed in the Grandmother and in Aunt Carmen.”⁴

How often, on seeing children who grow up sustained by their parents’ affection, or elderly people who are accompanied by the warmth and joyful spirit of their grandchildren, we have realized the vital role of the family! Life is not the same without the support of a family, no matter how successful we may be. Those who know they are loved are capable of overcoming and joyfully coping with any difficulty. The need to know that we are loved, that we belong to a home, is universal: it is part of our deepest identity. The signs of affection and gratuitous love that this requires “can never be lacking, no matter how much humanity progresses.”⁵

When we say that the people of Opus Dei form a family, it is not simply a question of a family “atmosphere,” which can be found in so many other places. It is a family environment that needs to become a tangible reality, with supernatural roots and daily, material signs of affection. Each and every one fosters and strengthens these ties, because it depends on all of us that we not only “breathe” a family environment, but that we truly *are* a family.

Hence the founder of Opus Dei saw clearly the need for persons who, with the wisdom to harmonize the material and the intangible, would look after these ties in a particular way. This mission, including also the smallest material details, corresponds in a special way to the numerary assistants. It is a specific call, which arose among the first women of Opus Dei, to be the “hands” uniting the most divine with what is most human, imitating the hands of the Mother of Jesus, who always harmonized both realities in discerning and fulfilling God’s will.

Gratuitous love that affirms the other person

Perhaps the most visible part of the mission of a numerary assistant is organizing the material care of the centers, so that everyone realizes their own responsibility for their home. As in any family, the tasks are distributed flexibly, according to each one’s possibilities. We could say that the numerary auxiliaries “have the home in their hands” in order to give it to the others.⁶ In some cases, this family bond can be felt through specific deeds such as providing meals, cleaning or decorating, but all this reflects something that transcends the material: their main mission is to *affirm* each person in his or her identity and apostolic mission.

“It is not just a question of carrying out a series of material tasks which between us we can do and must do in one way or another,” the Prelate of Opus Dei writes, “but of planning, organizing and coordinating them in such a way that the result is precisely a home where everyone feels at home, welcomed, *affirmed*, cared for, and at the same time responsible.”⁷ That is why Saint

⁴ Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, *Forty Years with a Saint*, Scepter, p. 68.

⁵ Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, Pastoral Letter, 24 January 1990, no. 44.

⁶ Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Letters* 36, no. 33.

⁷ Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter, 28 October 2020, no. 14. The emphasis is also found in the original.

Josemaría saw this mission as the “apostolate of apostolates,” the “backbone” that allows Opus Dei to act in the world with a family spirit, the “canvas” on which all the other members of the Work can weave their personal friendships.

With their daily life, numerary assistants try to make visible, in a certain way, the words that we pray at the Angelus: *And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14)*. Each day they strive to foster a strong union with the Eucharist, in order to bring God into the world again and place Him before the eyes of others: every gesture, every word, every thought and action seeks to communicate the truth that God is present in the most ordinary daily realities.

As a reflection of Mary’s infinite fruitfulness, God has given Opus Dei the gift of celibacy, the secret root of an authentic fatherhood and motherhood.⁸ In the case of numerary assistants, this has a specific manifestation: “By your work you care for and serve our life in the Work, making each person the focus and priority of your task.”⁹ From here arises (and this is the deepest meaning of their mission) a gratuitous love, expressed in every dimension of their being; a love endowed with “the rich spontaneity of what is alive, of those who seek new opportunities to show that they believe and love.”¹⁰ It is a love that draws each person out of anonymity, renewing their vigor, giving them new strength, since it reminds them that they are loved simply because they exist, and not because of what they have or do.

A true power to transform society

In a world that often stresses notoriety and noise, the work of a numerary assistant can seem discreet and quiet, but it is endowed with a true power to transform society. No human device can measure the energy released by the willingness to constantly direct attention towards each person, always placing persons at the center, seeking to enrich every aspect of their life: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social. This genuine interest in each and every person spreads to society as a whole, beginning with the faithful of the Work, who in turn bring this humanizing touch to their own professional environment. The mission to unite the divine and the human, so intrinsic to Opus Dei, extends as though in concentric circles to everyone who draws close to this family, and reaches the whole of society. “With God’s grace, if you want,” Bishop Javier Echeverría told the numerary assistants, “you can be like a spiritual, apostolic atomic power station, capable of extending its effects to the whole world.”¹¹

Each numerary assistant enriches, with her own personality, the life and work in each center of Opus Dei. Likewise, she tries to acquire the preparation and competence needed to carry this out. This professional outlook can also encompass the areas of financial and business management,

⁸ Cf. Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter, 28 October 2020, nos. 13 and 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 15

¹⁰ Saint Josemaría, *Letters* 36, no. 62.

¹¹ Bishop Javier Echeverría, Pastoral Letter, 23 October 2005, p. 6.

optimization of resources, team leadership, nutritional knowledge, the ability to adapt to the people of each place, sustainability, etc. All this requires a continuous learning process, in step with the advances in society and in the various professional sectors, but without losing sight of the essential thing: an ever-renewed concern for the care of the family. A person called to live this vocation “places the highest professional competence directly at the service of people and shows how the same spirit can be embodied in different historical circumstances.” This effort “becomes a vanguard factor for ‘humanizing’ culture, and therefore an inspiration for everyone’s professional work.”¹²

Caring for people and the home is a privileged area of dialogue with the contemporary world. “You have an exciting mission,” the Prelate of Opus Dei writes, addressing numerary assistants: “To transform this world – so imbued with individualism and indifference today – into a real home. Your task, when carried out with love, can reach all environments. You are building a more human and more divine world, because you are dignifying it with your work turned into prayer, with your love, and with the professionalism you put into looking after people in their entirety.”¹³

Choosing, self-giving, happiness

The discernment needed to discover one’s own vocation as a numerary assistant is not based primarily on the inclination to a specific type of task, such as those most directly related to the caring and service professions. Any field of study or professional profile can contribute to this desire to affirm each person in his or her integrity. God gives this mission to whomever He wishes. All that is needed is the desire to look closely at Christ, and through Him at the other members of their family and those around them.

Generally, nothing prevents numerary assistants from continuing their training and personal development in any field. This training enriches them personally, and also their relationships and their work. The important thing is to integrate this professional and personal development into their deepest identity, grounded on the firm and mature decision to be faithful to God’s call.

However, it can also happen that the dedication of a numerary assistant requires giving up a previous profession. This is something that happens to so many people, especially those who decide to spend more time directly caring for a home. But it is not simply a blind sacrifice; rather it is a mature decision, based on the joy of embracing what one loves, the happiness of choosing to give life. The Pope points to this reality in the life of Saint Joseph: “Joseph found happiness not in mere self-sacrifice but in self-gift. In him, we never see frustration but only trust . . . Every true vocation is born of the gift of oneself, which is the fruit of mature sacrifice . . . Whatever our vocation, whether to marriage, celibacy or virginity, our gift of self will not come to fulfilment if

¹² Cf. “Reflections on the Administration in Opus Dei: Richness and Perspectives,” in *Romana*, no. 72, 2021.

¹³ Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter, 28 October 2020, no. 17.

it stops at sacrifice; were that the case, instead of becoming a sign of the beauty and joy of love, the gift of self would risk being an expression of unhappiness, sadness and frustration.”¹⁴

The vocation of a numerary assistant, like every vocation in Opus Dei, is “all-encompassing,” that is, it encompasses every aspect and moment of one’s life.¹⁵ It is not a professional call put into action only during the working day. The same mission of making God’s love visible enriches the moments of formation, rest, family life, friendship, or in any activity. God wants there to be people in Opus Dei who, in love with Him, transmit with their presence God’s affection, caring for his incarnate Son present in the Eucharist, and for their fellow men and women, children of God.

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The afternoon is growing late. The people stand listening to every word of our Lord. Jesus has compassion on their tiredness. He knows that most of them are far from home, and asks his closest disciples to organize the people in groups on the grass. Jesus performs the miracle of feeding them with only five loaves and two fish, and they all recover the strength needed to continue on their way with Him: men, women and children (cf. *Jn* 6:1-15).

Later, Jesus will again ask the disciples to prepare a meal. In the Upper Room, with the same gesture of blessing as before and with his eyes raised to heaven, Jesus gives Himself to us in bread and wine, before suffering his Passion (cf. *Mt* 26:17-27). Our Lord “materializes” his immense love for us in two humble sources of nourishment, and thus ensures his presence on earth until the end of time, as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. Drawing on the Love hidden in the bread and wine, present in the Tabernacles of the centers of the Work, the numerary assistants protect its family spirit. They highlight the unique value of each person and teach the world to build relationships of true affection, service and support.

¹⁴ Francis, Apostolic Letter *Patris corde*, no. 7.

¹⁵ Cf. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 28 October 2020, no. 8.