

PROFESSIONAL FORMATION (I): Reflecting On My Own Work

A student on a semester abroad, a veteran civil servant, a freelancer doing design work from home, a high school teacher at the start of a new academic year, an engineer who has just immigrated to another country, a nurse grateful for a recent promotion, a sales clerk whose hours and salary were just cut, a hairdresser who had to close her salon during the pandemic, a parent caring for young children, a recent graduate searching for his or her first job... In these and many other personal and professional circumstances we can find Christians trying to follow the example set by Jesus the worker, assisted by the formation offered in Opus Dei. The Craftsman of Nazareth is their main model (*Mt* 13:54-58).

Every person's life contains a past and a future, both lights and shadows, joy and suffering, good and bad decisions, dreams and doubts—with repercussions on one's family and society. Each of us, in our own particular circumstances, is called to sanctify our work, sanctify ourselves in our work, and sanctify others through our work.

To carry out this mission, Saint Josemaria insisted on the need to prepare ourselves well: "If you are to be salt and light, you need knowledge, ability."¹ "But, my dearest children, for that sowing to be effective you need to strengthen a number of different aspects—spiritual, psychological and professional."² "A desire to work for the common good is not enough. The way to make this desire effective is to form competent men and women who can transmit to others the maturity which they themselves have achieved."³

Opus Dei makes a commitment to give Christian formation that reaches all the dimensions of the person, including one's work. However, the intellectual and technical preparation needed for each occupation is acquired in educational and training institutions and in each one's work experience, not in Opus Dei. Neither does Opus Dei offer courses in mentoring, soft skills, or personal branding (to name a few work-related examples). What, then, is involved in this professional formation? The articles in this series will offer some reflections in this regard.

Here and now, for me: formation for my life

Saint Josemaría's message about the sanctification of work, the transformation of the world from within, and the central role of work in the life of society leads Christians to deepen their understanding of work as the axis of their vocation and mission in the world, with all its challenges

¹ Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, 340.

² Saint Josemaría, *While He Spoke to Us on the Way*, p. 226.

³ Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 73.

and potential. Consecrating the world to God from within, giving witness to the Gospel, serving those around them and helping to make social structures more human are some manifestations of the lay faithful's identification with Christ—priest, prophet and king—through baptism.⁴

Whether we work in a highly regulated job or in a creative part-time one, we need to reflect on these important truths. All human tasks share some common aspects, since “the dignity of work is based on Love,”⁵ and it “must be an offering worthy of our Creator;”⁶ work is “a manifestation of love and is directed toward love.”⁷ Each one's job will also involve more personal aspects, reflected in each one's offering of their work closely united to Christ on the Cross and in the Holy Mass, serving those around them in accord with the characteristics of their own professional situation.

Among the many aspects that make up each one's professional work, two require careful personal reflection. What does sanctifying my own work, the work I have before me, consist of? How can I carry it out in my own particular circumstances and environment?

Sanctifying work, for an oncologist, includes staying up-to-date on new research and listening empathetically to patients; for a bus driver, it can mean handling a curve safely and smiling at the passengers; for an architect, listening carefully to what a client wants and striving to ensure that the result is well-done and attractive. The response to the question, “What does sanctifying my work involve?” will vary for a professional athlete, supermarket stocker, lawyer, business manager, cook, soprano, farmer, teacher, and truck driver. Likewise those who are retired, unemployed, or chronically ill will have to reflect on their own personal situation.

Besides the specific characteristics of each one's job, prudence plays a key role in making right decisions here. Someone nearing retirement can choose to undertake the last stretch of their working life either lazily or eagerly. A pregnant married woman may need to confront the challenges of an environment that is often distrustful or disapproving of maternity leave. An economist or lawyer may find themselves in situations that go against what their conscience tells them is just. To make ends meet, a married couple may need to consider whether one of them should move to support the family from abroad. At other times, the question confronted will be whether to reduce one's working hours in order to care for dependent parents, young children, or sick family members.

Legal, occupational, economic, educational, social, and political conditions in each country shape many of the issues that come up in professional life, and prudence helps to assess them and seek the appropriate means to make a correct decision.

⁴ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 34-36.

⁵ Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 48.

⁶ Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 55.

⁷ Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 48.

Some contemporary challenges

The work environment, then, presents complex situations today that we all face, to a greater or lesser degree. Perhaps some of the current challenges, discussed below, can shed light on the ways in which formation helps us to sanctify our work here and now.

The need to study issues in depth, striving to attain the wisdom to determine what is authentically human, has been obvious for some time. This is especially required given the superficiality and human impoverishment that the pervasiveness of technology and hyper-specialization can lead to. An abundance of formation will not be effective without personal assimilation, accompanied by contemplation, reflection, dialogue, and worthwhile reading. “If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple. If we want to bring about deep change, we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behaviour,”⁸ Pope Francis said.

Another current challenge is recovering the joy of sharing and the richness of human relationships when confronting the suffocating culture of success around us. The demand for results, the self-imposed need to perform and measure our own quality, processes that bypass human persons, and workplace bullying can all lead to frustration, exhaustion, failure, or discouragement. At times they also lead to physical or psychological illness. Pope Francis reminds us of the need to hold on to what is most important: “Try to create spaces in which the culture of efficiency, performance and success can become open to a culture of generous and selfless love, capable of offering to everyone ... the possibility of a happy and successful life.”⁹

Another challenge faced today is reconciling schedules and priorities. “The family is a checkpoint. When the organization of work holds it hostage, or even blocks its path, then we can be certain that human society has begun to work against itself.”¹⁰ And this is true not only of the family; we also need time for rest and sport, to visit a museum or meet up with friends, to take classes or visit the sick—time for Christian formation and a life of dialogue with God.

Moreover, the world of work is evolving ever more rapidly. Digital transformation has led to new forms of work, with both positive and negative results. These jobs tend to be more flexible, creative and collaborative, but also more precarious. Few young people seek a permanent position from which one day to retire, as their parents or grandparents often did. At the same time, new platforms for work make it easier for each person’s own knowledge and interests to form the foundation for a professional dedication with which they can earn a living.

These changes in the workplace have led to the rise of new professions. But finding work continues to be a challenge in many countries, still suffering from the economic crisis. Finding a

⁸ Francis, *Laudato Si*, 215.

⁹ Francis, *Meeting with the Bishops*, Tokyo, 23 November 2019.

¹⁰ Francis, General audience, 19 August 2015.

first stable job, returning to work after a period of unemployment in a sector that is changing rapidly, the unsettling prospect of early retirement, are some of the common problems many individuals and families face today.

Finally, we see the clear need to strive to make the world of work more human. Labor legislation, salaries, employment security, contracts, benefits, and so many other facets need to find just solutions. The full incorporation of women in the workforce and public life requires special attention, as do other challenges they face: the “glass ceiling,” wage gaps, maternity benefits....

An integrated life and holistic formation

To meet these personal and professional challenges in today’s society, we need an integral and holistic formation for the whole person in all of his or her dimensions. For instance, strengthening virtues like patience, fortitude, daring, humility and constancy can be a great help for someone preparing to face challenges like the ones mentioned above.

Formation is not primarily the transmission of information or knowledge. Rather, it is a personal process of development, growth and maturity, seeking identification with Christ, perfect God and perfect man, in accord with the spirit of Opus Dei. The various facets of our formation help us to strengthen our relationship with God in our work, discover the truth and good in our profession, exercise the virtues and learn to love the people around us better. This leads to a life marked by great love for freedom alongside a strong sense of responsibility, with a desire to improve each day, relying on the means the Work offers its faithful and those who take part in its formational activities.¹¹

Work is the “backbone” that gives stability to each person’s life. Together with our filiation, work situates us in the world: *Is he not the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother named Mary and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas?*¹² We learn to be citizens alongside our fellow men and women and to lead through a life of service.

Thus formation embraces every aspect of our life: “The formation of the faithful of Opus Dei, which begins when they take their first steps in the Work and lasts until the very moment of their death, includes the human, professional, spiritual, apostolic and doctrinal aspects—aspects that harmoniously interfuse with one another, as befits the strong unity of life characteristic of the spirit of Opus Dei, and which is insistently recommended by the Church to all the faithful.”¹³

This harmonious and balanced development of attitudes and virtues underpins a Christian lifestyle. The call to holiness and apostolate is made a reality precisely in each one’s professional

¹¹ Cf. Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei, *Ratio Institutionis*, Rome, 2007, n.8.

¹² *Mt* 13:55.

¹³ Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei, *Ratio Institutionis*, Rome, 2007, no. 4.

work and through the exercise of that work. With our work we support ourselves and our families, and we help maintain apostolic initiatives for the good of all men and women. We exercise the common priesthood of the faithful through our witness and interpersonal relationships.¹⁴

Turning to the example of Saint Joseph, a hard-working father, “the crisis of our time, which is economic, social, cultural and spiritual, can serve as a summons for all of us to rediscover the value, the importance and necessity of work.”¹⁵

¹⁴ *Ibid*, no. 6.

¹⁵ Francis, *Patris Corde*, no. 6