

PROFESSIONAL FORMATION (V): Finding the Right Path

The life of every human being, including professional life, is a journey made up of stages, crossroads, curves, ups and downs, goals, victories and frustrations. Christ's life was also a journey. He went through the stages of growth from infancy to maturity. He traveled all throughout the Holy Land. And from the moment of his Incarnation in Nazareth He began a long journey up to Jerusalem for his Passover.

In our daily life, Jesus walks by our side in a mysterious way, as with the disciples from Emmaus.¹ He accompanies us in our work, and we try to discover Him in the people we interact with in our profession. The spiritual, doctrinal, human, apostolic and professional formation that we receive helps us to keep alive our desire to encounter Him, and to make it a reality in our own life. And when we don't know what path to take at work or what decision to make, we see ourselves like Thomas appealing to Christ: *Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life."*²

Professional crossroads

Traveling successfully on the path of our Christian life means knowing that what integrates all our choices, routes and projects is the goal: sharing in divine intimacy and accompanying others to discover it. And as Pope Francis said, "the right path is Jesus."³ He calls, guides, sustains and accompanies us through the apparent dispersion of our daily activities and responsibilities.

Despite our desire to faithfully follow our call to sanctify earthly realities, we do not always have a clear vision of what the best professional decision is to achieve this, especially when it affects other equally important aspects of our lives. Is it a good idea to accept a transfer to another country, or would it be harmful for the children? Should a husband and wife start a business together, or would it impact negatively on their relationship? Would it be best to continue studying in order to have more job options, or would it be better to marry young? Is it a good idea to reduce my hours of work or move to another city due to an apostolic need, or would this mean putting my professional future at risk? Should I accept this new job which allows me a wider scope of action, or is my real motive vain ambition or the desire to evade other

¹ Cf. *Lk* 24:13-35.

² *Jn* 14:5-6.

³ Francis, "Making One's Way," homily in Santa Marta, 3 May 2016.

responsibilities? And in each of these questions we are asking Him: “Lord, what do you want from me? What is the best path? How can I better integrate marriage and work, being a mother or a father and work, apostolate and work, availability and work...? Where are you waiting for me?”

The answer will depend on our specific circumstances, but some clear principles should always guide our choice: the priority of people over things, of reality over ideas, of the whole over the part, of the spiritual good over the material. Dialoguing with those our decision affects, seeking advice from someone who knows well our family situation, professional environment and personal characteristics, can also be a big help. And always, turning our heart in prayer to Jesus, “the right path,” because “in that silence, we can discern, in the light of the Spirit, the paths of holiness to which the Lord is calling us.”⁴

An accompanied path

We never walk alone on our professional journey. We always travel it with those with whom we have closer relationships and ties: our family, friends, colleagues. And in a special way, with those we have committed our future to: husband or wife, children, and for those who have a vocation to Opus Dei, the other people in our family that is the Work and those to whom its evangelizing efforts are directed. For they have become part of our own identity and mission.

“Anyone who works and has a family needs to strive to balance these two spheres, both men as well as women, and count on God’s help to sanctify their ordinary circumstances.”⁵ In some professions, being present at home is perhaps more challenging (for example, a truck driver, an airline stewardess, or a deep-sea fisherman) and requires an especially creative and shared commitment.

Sometimes on our professional path we may encounter the need to slow down or recalculate the route, when those accompanying us require it. This may involve a painful renunciation. Popular wisdom tells us that whoever travels alone arrives sooner, but whoever travels accompanied goes further. In the current environment, professional advancement can sometimes seem the only compass to guide oneself by, the only landmark for making decisions. Hence when the need arises to redraw the map for our life, we should renew the meaning of mission in our life and remember the value of human ties, strengthening our gratitude for all the other treasures we have received. We need to risk trusting in God and in the others and not only in the security of having everything in our life under control. “Everything can be accepted and

⁴ Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 150.

⁵ Paula Hermida, *Cristianos en la sociedad del siglo XXI. Entrevista a Fernando Ocariz*, Cristiandad, Madrid 2020, pp. 47-48.

integrated into our life in this world, and become a part of our path to holiness,”⁶ Pope Francis assures us.

At other times, obstacles can arise along our professional path, or shortcuts, or new unforeseen possibilities. Since it is a path, a journey, it demands time, patience, renewed effort, stopovers; and traveling it requires putting into play our personal freedom and initiative, with the risk this entails. But we should always remember that, like on the path to Emmaus, God is always waiting for us in these new circumstances, and that his providence guides and sustains us.

The professional journey is always an open path, since we don’t walk it alone; and it is open to God’s surprises. We have all experienced that what seemed like a loss often opens the door to a bigger gain. At the same time, we should always keep in mind our true ambition, because the goal is high: to put Christ at the summit of all human activities.⁷ That is why we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. At times He may encourage us to slow down and stop for a while, like the two disciples from Emmaus, while at other times He sends us out into the deep, like the Apostles.

Raising our sights

Vocation and mission are inseparable for us, as they were in Christ’s life. Our mission is part of our identity and defines us. We live for God and for souls; our whole life is service. We can say, like Him, *for this I was born, and for this I have come into the world.*⁸

We need a big and open heart to accomplish what the Prelate of Opus Dei is calling us to: “We are called to contribute, with initiative and spontaneity, to improving the world and the culture of our time, so that they are opened to God’s plans for humanity: the plans of his heart, which are sustained from *generation to generation.*”⁹ As Saint Josemaría said: “Let us give our lives completely to our Lord, working as perfectly as possible, each in their own professional task and state, never forgetting that we must have a single aspiration in all our works: to place Christ at the summit of all human activities.”¹⁰

This mission involves every dimension of human life: family, work, friendships, rest, illness, etc. Putting Christ at the center of our life also entails putting Him at the center of our professional journey. He is the light guiding us on this path, enabling us to make the right choices at every crossroad.

⁶ Francis, *Gaudete et exultate*, no. 26.

⁷ Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Letter 6*, no. 12c.

⁸ *Jn* 18:37.

⁹ Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

¹⁰ Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 15 October 1948, no. 41; in Ernst Burkhardt, Javier López, *Vida Cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría*, vol. I, Rialp, Madrid 2010, p. 428. Cf. *The Forge*, no. 678.

Benedict XVI once said in an Easter vigil homily: “Christ divides the light from the darkness. In him we recognize what is true and what is false, what is radiance and what is darkness. With him, there wells up within us the light of truth, and we begin to understand. On one occasion when Christ looked upon the people who had come to listen to him, seeking some guidance from him, he felt compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd (cf. *Mk* 6:34). Amid the contradictory messages of that time, they did not know which way to turn. What great compassion he must feel in our own time too – on account of all the endless talk that people hide behind, while in reality they are totally confused. Where must we go? What are the values by which we can order our lives? The values by which we can educate our young, without giving them norms they may be unable to bear, or demanding what perhaps should not be imposed upon them? He is the Light.”¹¹

Unifying in order to advance

Professional life today is a dynamic and ever-evolving reality. We need to continuously strive to detect and understand the needs of those around us, not only in order to confront the changing demands of the world of work, but also to serve others better in our own profession.

Love, which is what vivifies and animates our work, is always dynamic. It needs to grow and strengthen, and spurs us to try to improve in our professional knowledge and competence. This dynamism of love gives us serenity when facing difficulties and tiredness in our work. And it helps us to find unity beyond conflicts, because the look of love is unifying and always seeks the good.

A professional dedication animated by charity is not a mere *curriculum vitae*. The formation that we acquire through the effort to sanctify our work enriches us; it leads us to grow in knowledge and skills; it gives us a broader experience of humanity; it enables us to handle a variety of problems with flexibility; it makes us more thoughtful and decisive. And this in turn helps us to take better care of our family and to widen our circle of friends. It enables us to carry out a more effective evangelization, and broadens our hearts and sharpens our eyes, identifying us more fully with Christ. A demanding and eager dedication to our profession, carried out ardently with a sense of service and mission, is not at odds with an attitude of being available and open to others’ needs, but rather facilitates a more complete availability. As the Prelate of Opus Dei stressed, availability “shows itself fully when we consider what talents we have received from God, so as to put them at the service of the apostolic mission. And we ‘make the first move’: we offer ourselves, with initiative. Therefore availability is not immobility but, on the contrary, the habitual desire to move at ‘God’s pace.’”¹²

¹¹ Benedict XVI, Homily at the Easter Vigil, April 11, 2009.

¹² Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 28 October 2020, no. 11.

Personal fulfillment is not reduced to professional fulfillment nor does it depend only on it. The profession (a specific one) is part of that fulfillment, but it does not exhaust it, since we so often change occupations and jobs. Those who lose their job often have to redirect their life to another field. Someone who finds their current job becoming monotonous may try to employ their skills in a new way of earning a living. Those who stop exercising their profession for various years due to family or apostolic reasons, can eventually return with a new impetus.

What has to always be present is the professional outlook with which we carry out all our jobs and tasks. Some characteristics of this attitude are, for example, “caring for details without losing sight of the whole, keeping in mind the way in which our work affects that of others, cultivating the relationships we establish through our work, the readiness and generosity to form others who can go further than us, helping to resolve society’s problems, laying the last stones.”¹³

The professional vocation, then, is part of a much broader prospect for one’s life: the vocation each person receives from God, which is light to see and strength to want to be faithful in all one’s daily situations.¹⁴ This light and strength, nourished by prayer and formation, help us to put our professional work in its proper place, to discern, desire and choose what is best in each circumstance. Thus we try to avoid the mediocrity and conformity that the comfort of a guaranteed salary can produce; or the excessive dedication that turns work into a place of escape, where the demands of one’s home life are set aside and it is easy to find excuses for extending the work day; or the selfishness of reducing our profession to a self-seeking endeavor in which we find personal satisfaction apart from others.

God’s paths

Many people, for personal, family or social reasons, decide to set aside their own profession and dedicate themselves to other tasks. It is often life itself that determines our professional path, rather than the studies we have pursued or the training we have received. In these cases, one’s professional preparation is put at the service of the new path one undertakes, where one’s mission in life is strengthened. This is what happened to the apostles called by Christ on the shores of the Sea of Galilee: *I will make you fishers of men.*¹⁵

Saint Josemaría once said: “The professional vocation is something continually being defined throughout our life. It often happens that a person who began a particular course of studies discovers afterwards that he is better gifted for other jobs, and switches career; or he ends

¹³ Ana Marta González, “World and the Human Condition in Saint Josemaría Escrivá. Christian keys for a philosophy of the social sciences,” in *Romana* n° 65, July-December 2017.

¹⁴ Cf. Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral Letter*, 28 October 2020, no. 2.

¹⁵ *Mk* 1:17.

up specialising in a different field from the one foreseen at the beginning; or he finds, in the full exercise of his chosen profession, a new field of work that allows him to improve his family's social position, or to contribute more effectively to the good of the community; or he is obliged, for reasons of health, to change his environment and occupation.”¹⁶

It is not the material content of what we do that gives meaning and value to our work, but rather its relationship with the human and spiritual well-being of the person who works and of those with whom we have closer ties.¹⁷ Hence we can understand why it is charity ultimately that give meaning and value to our work. “We have to understand and live out our full availability as freedom, in the sense of being tied down only by love (that is, not tied down as a necessity to a job, the place where we reside, etc., while also being well rooted where we are). What makes us free is not the external circumstances, but the love we have in our hearts.”¹⁸

The apostolic mission that God has entrusted to us, to make all the paths of the earth divine, enables us to be light for others, especially in and from our work. “May you come to realize what that word is, the message of Jesus that God wants to speak to the world by your life. Let yourself be transformed. Let yourself be renewed by the Spirit, so that this can happen, lest you fail in your precious mission. The Lord will bring it to fulfilment despite your mistakes and missteps, provided that you do not abandon the path of love but remain ever open to his supernatural action, which purifies and enlightens.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 15 October 1948, no. 33; cited by Ernst Burkhardt and Javier Lopez, *Vida Cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría*, Madrid 2013, vol. III, p. 180.

¹⁷ Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 29 July 1965, no. 13.

¹⁸ Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral Letter*, 28 October 2020, no. 11.

¹⁹ Francis, *Gaudete et exultate*, no. 24.