



Unity & Love for the Good Shepherd

Peter at the Helm, God in the Boat
Wanting To Be Children, Finding
the Warmth of a Home



Diego Zalbidea and Andrés Cárdenas Matute

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Introduction

Introduction

The unity of Christians among themselves is a participation in the unity of love among the Persons of the Blessed Trinity. On earth, this "extension of the Love of Heaven"^[1] is realized through affective and effective union with the Roman Pontiff. In Opus Dei, as part of the Church, it is also expressed through filiation with the Prelate.

This ebook contains two articles about expressions of this unity. The first has to do with St. Josemaría and the saints' testimony of love for the Pope. "And to love the Holy Father is to love Christ and his Mother, our Blessed Mother, Mary. And that is all we aspire to: because we love them, we want *omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam* – all to go with Peter to Jesus through Mary"^[2] the founder of Opus Dei said, leaving all Christian a rich heritage of fidelity to the Holy Father and the Church. Reference is also made to other saints, including St. Catherine of Siena, who called the Roman Pontiff the "Sweet Christ on earth," and St. Irenaeus, who said that unity in the Church comes about through the Pope: "in her [the Church], the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition."^[3]

The second article is about union with the Prelate of the Work, exploring paternity and filiation of this supernatural family within the Church. As Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz points out, "the charismatic dimension of the Work invites us to reinforce the family atmosphere of affection and trust: the Prelate must be a guide but, above all, a father."^[4]

Santiago Salcedo Porras

^[1] St. Josemaría, *Alone with God*, n. 143 (AGP, library, P10).

^[2] St. Josemaría, *Intimate Notes*, 17-XI-1930, n. 110.

^[3] St. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, III, 3, 2.

^[4] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, *Message*, 22-VII-2022.

I. Peter at the Helm, God in the Boat

Another exhausting day is ending for Jesus. So many people came to hear him that he had to speak from the boat of one of his disciples. He told the crowd many parables: the sower, the lighted lamp, the mustard seed... Afterwards, as the people began to return home, Jesus and his disciples set out for the eastern shore of Lake Tiberias, perhaps aboard the same boat. A gentle breeze is blowing. Jesus finds a cushion in the stern and peacefully falls asleep. He has full confidence in the expert hands of his apostles in crossing the lake.

But soon the sea becomes agitated. The breeze gradually turns into a strong wind and we witness a new “*parable*,” preached not with words but with the events that unfold. A great storm threatens to shipwreck the boat (cf. *Mk* 4:37). This is not uncommon on the lake, since it is bordered by mountains on the north and is located in a depression two hundred meters below sea level. These storms usually occur when evening is falling and the wind begins to blow furiously from the west, stirring up the water.

On board, not on shore

Many Church fathers have seen an image of the Church in the boat tossed about by the wind and the waves. “The sea symbolizes this life and the instability of the visible world; the storm points to every kind of trial or difficulty that oppresses human beings. The boat, in turn, represents the Church, built on Christ and steered by the Apostles.”^[1] In his final general audience, after almost eight years as Peter’s successor, Benedict XVI confided that he had experienced, along with days of sunshine and gentle breezes, also other times of stormy winds. “But I have always known that the Lord is in that boat, and I have always known that the barque of the Church is not mine but his. And the Lord does not let it sink; it is he who guides it, certainly also through those whom he has chosen, because he so wished.”^[2]

This certainty, which is part of the shadow-filled light of our faith, leads us not to watch the storm from the shore, as though it were something foreign to us. We too are fishermen, co-workers of Peter and the apostles. We are responsible for helping all those who come on board the boat, each from our own place, supporting the Pope who is at the helm.

Just two weeks after that final audience of his predecessor, Pope Francis reminded us that he needs us, which he has often reiterated since then: “Now I would like to give you the blessing. But first, I ask you for a favor. Before the bishop blesses his people, I ask you to pray to the Lord that he will bless me. I ask for the prayer of the people who ask for the blessing for their bishop. Let us silently pray this prayer of yours for me.”^[3] This is what Saint Josemaría also taught us. From very early on, he was eager that all the people in Opus Dei and those who, in one way or another, come close to the warmth of this family, would

pray daily for the Pope, specifically asking God to watch over him, encourage him, make him happy and give him strength amid the storms.[4]

Love for the Pope, a gift we receive

On the evening of 23 June 1946, Saint Josemaría finally had reached Rome after several adventures, including another storm at sea, this time in the Mediterranean. The apartment his children had rented had a small terrace overlooking Piazza Città Leonina. From there they could see the windows of the rooms where Pope Pius XII lived. The founder of Opus Dei spent the whole night awake, praying for the Church and the Roman Pontiff. Years later, he said that some churchmen had made fun of this filial gesture, perhaps considering it naive or useless: “They laughed at me. At first, that gossip made me suffer. Later, a less Spanish love – a love that springs from enthusiasm – for the Roman Pontiff has taken root in my heart. But it is much firmer because it is born from reflection: it is more theological, and therefore deeper.”[5]

Love for the Holy Father, “the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and the faithful,”[6] needs to gradually mature over the years. At the beginning, it can be nourished by a human enthusiasm that, over time, becomes “more theological,” more aware of its reasons, its importance and supernatural origin, difficult to explain with only human parameters.

Saint Josemaría lived under the guidance of various Popes. When he was little, Saint Pius X governed the Church, and to him he owed the grace of receiving his First Communion at quite a young age. Later, when he decided to become a priest, the Pope was Benedict XV. Opus Dei was born during the pontificate of Pius XI and received definitive approval from Venerable Pius XII, who was the first Pope Saint Josemaría met personally. Saint John XXIII received him several times, showing him paternal affection. And after arriving in Rome in 1946, “the first words of kindness and affection” he heard were from Saint Paul VI (then Monsignor Montini).[7] In *The Way*, the founder of Opus Dei points to a gift God had given him in his youth and that would be a common thread during all these pontificates: “Thank you, my God, for the love for the Pope you have placed in my heart.”[8]

Those words suggest to us that love for the Roman Pontiff is something we do not necessarily control with our willpower, with a purely theoretical conviction or a natural sympathy. Through this short prayer Saint Josemaría gives thanks for this love as a gift from God, as something received freely. This helps us understand better what he learned from his first Roman night: to love the Pope with a love received from God, which is not at the mercy of storms, and does not depend on a greater or lesser personal affinity. On the morning of the day he died, the founder of Opus Dei asked a person close to Paul VI to convey the following message to him: “For years, I have offered the Holy Mass for the Church and for the Pope. You can assure him – because you have heard me say it many times – that I have offered my life to our Lord for the Pope, whoever he may be.”[9]

Saint Josemaría, Saint Catherine, Saint Jerome...

In the central offices of Opus Dei in Rome, a small silver chest holds a relic of Saint

Catherine of Siena. On the enamel of the urn an inscription in Latin is engraved, which can be translated: “She loved God’s Church and the Roman Pontiff with deeds and in truth.” The 14th-century saint wrote in one of her letters, referring to the Pope: “Whatever we do to him, we do to Christ in heaven, whether it be reverence, or insults.”^[10] And in another letter she begged: “Humbly would I have us rest our head with love and affection upon the lap of Christ in heaven, and of Christ on earth, who takes his place, out of reverence for the Blood of Christ, of which he holds the keys.”^[11]

This reverence for the figure of the Roman Pontiff – besieged, in that century, by complicated storms – enabled Saint Catherine to share in the immense responsibility that weighs on the shoulders of every Pope, and spurred her to an intense prayer of intercession for them. Saint Josemaría, who was well acquainted with Saint Catherine of Siena’s writings, once said: “I would cut out my tongue a thousand times with my teeth and spit it away, before uttering the slightest murmuring against the one I love most on earth, after our Lord and Holy Mary. The one who is, as I like to say, repeating Saint Catherine’s words, *il dolce Cristo in terra*, the sweet Christ on earth.”^[12] This attitude is the polar opposite of speaking negatively in public about the Pope or undermining trust in him, not even when some specific personal criteria are not shared. If the latter were to happen, we need to render at least “religious assent of the understanding and the will”^[13] to his teachings.

Testimonies to union with the Pope in the lives of the saints are as numerous as the saints themselves. To mention just one more example (a person who lived almost a thousand years before the saint of Siena), we can reflect on the words Saint Jerome addressed to Pope Saint Damasus, in his lapidary and fiery style: “As I follow no leader save Christ, so I communicate with none but your blessedness, that is with the chair of Peter. For this, I know, is the rock on which the church is built! This is the house where alone the Paschal Lamb can be rightly eaten. This is the ark of Noah, and he who is not found in it shall perish when the flood prevails.”^[14]

Finally, we could say that the Church's boat has a guidance system based on three sources. First, Christ who, although he sometimes seems to sleep, is present in each part and in each crew member. Then, Mary, a star who constantly illumines us, even when the waves are huge and threaten to shipwreck us. And finally, Peter, who is at the helm following the command of Jesus himself. “Christ. Mary. The Pope. Haven’t we just stated, in three words, the loves that make up the entire Catholic faith?”^[15]

Praying amid the wind and the waves

When meditating on the storm on Lake Tiberias, Saint Augustine exhorted those listening to him to trust in the one who truly governs not only the boat, but the entire world: “Imitate the winds then, and the sea; obey the Creator. At Christ’s command the sea giveth ear; and art thou deaf? The sea heareth, and the wind ceaseth: and dost thou still blow on? ‘I say, I do, I think that...’ What is all this, but to be blowing on, and to be unwilling to stop in obedience to the word of Christ? Let not the wave master you in this troubled state of your heart.”^[16]

Nothing escapes God's loving providence: neither the roaring winds nor the raging waves. "*Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?* Faith begins when we realize we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we founder: we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God's strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things."[17]

But for this conviction to take root in us, we need to grow in our contemplative life, a life of prayer that is open to God's actions, so often surprising to us. We need to let go of the temptation to try to take hold of the helm ourselves. Saint Josemaria insisted: "Love for the Roman Pontiff must be in us a wonderful passion, for in him we see Christ. If we talk and listen to our Lord in prayer, we will go forward with a clear gaze that will permit us to perceive the action of the Holy Spirit, even when faced with events we do not understand, or which produce suffering or sorrow."[18]

Even Jesus sleeping in the boat is redemptive. This apparent inactivity is how he often acts. He appeals to our freedom, encouraging us to take part in the marvelous mission of bringing the infinite love of his Father to all men and women. His heart is always attentive. "The guardian of Israel does not slumber nor sleep" (*Ps 121:4*). Sometimes we fail to understand his times and ways – his patience. But we can always be sure that, in the end, "while he calmed the storm on the sea, he also calmed the tempest in souls."[19]

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[1] Benedict XVI, Angelus, 7 August 2011.

[2] Benedict XVI, Audience, 27 February 2013.

[3] Francis, Apostolic Blessing *Urbi et orbi*, 13 March 2013.

[4] Cf. *Preces* of Opus Dei, with the traditional prayer *Oremus pro Pontifice*.

[5] Saint Josemaría, *Letter 17*, no. 19.

[6] Second Vatican Council, Dog. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 23.

[7] Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 46.

[8] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 573.

[9] Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, *Forty Years With a Saint*, 2018.

[10] Saint Catherine of Siena, *Letter 207*, I, 436.

[11] Saint Catherine of Siena, *Letter 28*, I, 549

[12] Saint Josemaría, *Letter 17*, no. 53.

[13] Code of Canon Law, no. 752. Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 892.

[14] Saint Jerome, Letter to Pope Damasus, 2.

[15] Saint Josemaría, *Instruction on the Supernatural Spirit of the Work*, no. 31.

[16] Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 63, no. 3.

[17] Francis, Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Times of Epidemic, 27 March 2020.

[18] Saint Josemaría, *In Love with the Church*, no. 13.

[19] Saint Cyril, in *Catena Aurea*, Lk 8:22-25.

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II. Wanting To Be Children, Finding the Warmth of a Home

Each time a new successor to St Josemaria is elected and subsequently appointed by the Pope, that person passes from being a son to being a Father of this supernatural family. The Holy Spirit carries out a transformation in his heart. It happened in 1975, the year in which the founder passed away, likewise in 1994, in 2017, and will continue happening as the Work continues on its path. When this succession takes place, each faithful of the Work also learns to be a child in a new way. In reality, it is an opportunity that presents itself to us every day, all our lives.

Though one may be a child by natural generation or by spiritual ties, that relationship can remain simply as a "fact", as something that is there, perhaps forgotten, and it is not chosen *in the present* moment by exerting any effort. Because, besides that "fact", we can also choose to "live as children", in the same way that a father of a family goes beyond merely "knowing himself a father" to effectively choose to "live as a father", to assume the beauty of that relationship. That choice means not being satisfied with "being children", which is already a lot, but also "wanting to be children", opening ourselves to the warmth of a home.

The Holy Spirit: school to become children and a Father

St. Josemaría had to learn to be a father. "Until 1933, I was embarrassed at the thought of referring to myself as 'Father' of all these associates of mine," he said, referring to the first years following the founding of Opus Dei. "For this reason I almost always called them brothers, instead of sons."^[1] He nevertheless listened to the Holy Spirit, and soon he perceived in his expressions that feeling of a healthy pride in his followers: "I cannot help raising my soul in thanksgiving to God, from whom proceeds all fatherhood in heaven and on earth, for having given me this spiritual fatherhood which, with his grace, I have taken on in full consciousness of being on earth for this purpose alone. And so I love you with the heart of a father and a mother."^[2]

Many times, the founder of Opus Dei confessed that, inexplicably, he felt his heart widen more and more every time more people approached the warmth of this family. At the same time, he was aware that, personally, he was not indispensable. He knew that we would be well cared for when he was no longer physically on earth to exercise his fatherhood: "My children, I love you more than your parents do. I don't mind saying so because I'm not exaggerating. And I am certain that in the heart of those who succeed me, you will find the same affection. I was about to say more, even though it seems impossible, because they will have this family spirit which fills the whole Work, very deeply engraved on their souls."^[3]

The family is bigger than the part

The decision to assume paternity or assume filiation – to truly want to live as

parents or as children – means overcoming the logic of isolation and entering into the logic of a family. Saint John Paul II said that "God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude, but a family, since he has in himself fatherhood, sonship and the essence of the family, which is love."^[4] For this reason, his word always germinates in the fertile ground of these human bonds: a family, a group, a people... until we reach the universal community that is the Church. From God the Father, St Paul points out, "from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph. 3:15).

An African proverb goes: "If you want to go fast, go alone: if you want to go far, go together." Family gives us a broader vision; we are enriched by others' sensitivities and perspectives. In the case of the Work, we are enriched by the faithful who come from many different places, guided by the Father. Pope Francis has spoken many times about the beautiful task of combining our holy zeal to improve what we have at hand and belonging to a family that extends beyond what we can reach: "The whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts. There is no need, then, to be overly obsessed with limited and particular questions. We constantly have to broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all. But this has to be done without evasion or uprooting. We need to sink our roots deeper into the fertile soil and history of our native place."^[5]

As the children get older, their father confides important things to them, and they enthusiastically accept their increased responsibilities. Feeling valued is part of the process that makes them grow into adults. And these acts of trust tend to grow over time. The request does not always need to be expressed. When the son has learned to anticipate the needs of his family, a hint is enough. He tries to understand his father's will; he wants to assume it as his own, and he offers to carry it out. In the family of the Work, these indications from the Father can be received through the messages and letters we regularly receive; having one's attention alert to detect his concerns when participating in meetings or interviews; trying to recognize his guidance in the orientations and suggestions that he sends us for the whole Work that, in some way, take priority over local matters. Children seek to surprise the father by showing him that they not only understand his words but try to go farther and carry them out: they remember them at every moment, they are driven by them and make them fruitful.

Difficulties in moving to the divine rhythm

Looking at the life of Christ, we understand well that sonship and the cross are not incompatible. On the contrary, both are marked with the promise of the resurrection. All natural and spiritual sonship contains this double dimension in some way. Its foundation is love, so there can also be pain, which, far from ruining things, shows how firm, safe, and resilient the relationship is, no matter what tremors it has to suffer. Being a child means being lovingly united to the father's will. It comes as no surprise that, at times, this requires suffering.

This attitude does not discard the difficulties that we may encounter, nor does it even assure us that the best solution will always be chosen from a human point of view, because we can all make mistakes. What we do know is that the Holy Spirit is the one who guides us, and that for him no obstacle is insurmountable and no

detour is a dead end. This dynamism is part of knowing that we are living within a supernatural logic. God's logic has many more dimensions than just the *length and breadth* that we see. So many saints have moved in this way, following the melody the Holy Spirit inspires even when they did not fully understand it or lacked human approval. "To be a good dancer, with you as elsewhere," said a twentieth-century writer, speaking about docility to that divine music, "we must not know where it leads. We must follow, be cheerful, be lightweight (...). Do not want to move at all costs: accept to turn, to move sideways. We must learn to stop and slide instead of walking."^[6]

That cross that can come with sonship is ordinarily great or burdensome. We do not expect to carry all the weight, only that which a child can carry. It is our greatest desire to contribute, with our *savings*, a grain of sand to the *family business*.

A veiled message

Daily prayer and mortification for the Prelate are among the customs that St. Josemaría, inspired by God, wanted the people of Opus Dei to live. To human eyes, it may seem little, but when they are united to and enlivened by the love of God that prompts them, they become a powerful channel for grace.

Understandably, St. Josemaría's successors felt the weight of that *blessed burden* that God placed on their shoulders. At the same time, it is the Holy Spirit who truly carries out the supernatural mission entrusted to them as shepherds. At the end of his letter of February 14, 2017, a few days after being appointed Prelate of Opus Dei by the Pope, the Father confessed: "My daughters and sons, if in this world, so beautiful and yet so tormented, anyone at any time feels alone, let them know that the Father is praying for them and is truly accompanying them in the Communion of Saints, and that he carries them in his heart. Here I like to recall how the liturgy sings of the Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple (...) It seemed, the liturgy says, that Simeon was carrying Jesus in his arms; in reality, it was the other way around. (...) it was the Child who sustained the old man and guided him. That is how God supports us, even though at times we can only perceive the weight of souls."^[7]

Behind these words, we may be able to intuit a veiled and discreet message for each of us. It is as if the Father were telling us that we support him. He feels the weight of being the Father, of having become the guide and shepherd of this flock, but he is relieved to discover that we back him up with our prayer, sacrifice, and eager assumption of the adventure he proposes to us. God uses us to support him.

^[1] St. Josemaría, *Intimate Notes*, 28 October 1935. Quoted in A. Vázquez de Prada, *El Fundador del Opus Dei*, Volume I, Rialp, Madrid 1997, p. 555.

^[2] St. Josemaría, *Letters* 11, no. 23.

^[3] St. Josemaría, Communication read by Don Alvaro del Portillo at the beginning of the Elective Congress of the first successor of Opus Dei, September 15, 1975.

^[4] St. John Paul II, Homily, January 28, 1979.

^[5] Francisco, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 235.

^[6] Servant of God Madeleine Delbrêl, "The Dance of Obedience."

^[7] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter 14-II-2017, no. 33.

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