

## APOSTLES IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WORLD: A SENSE OF MISSION

Saint Luke gives a vivid picture of the life of the first believers in Jerusalem after Pentecost: *day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47)*. But soon obstacles would arise: the imprisonment of John and Peter, the martyrdom of Stephen, and finally, open persecution.

In this context, the evangelist relates something quite surprising: *Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word (Acts 8:4)*. It is striking that the disciples did not stop proclaiming the salvation brought by Christ, even though this entailed risking their lives. A little later, we see a similar account: *Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews (Acts 11:19)*. What moved those first faithful to speak about Christ, even while fleeing from persecution? It was the joy that filled their hearts: *we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us (1 Jn 1:3)*. They announce it, quite simply, *so that our joy may be complete (1 Jn 1:4)*. The Love they had discovered had to be shared; their joy was contagious. Shouldn't we Christians do likewise today?

### The way of friendship

A small feature in this scene from the Acts is quite significant. Among those who had been scattered *were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Greeks also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus (Acts 11:20)*. The Christians did not move in special circles, nor did they wait to reach suitable places to announce the Life and Freedom they had received. They each shared their faith quite naturally, in their immediate surroundings, with the people God placed in their midst. Like Philip with the Ethiopian returning from Jerusalem, or like the married couple Aquila and Priscilla with the young man Apollos (*Acts 8:26-40; 18:24-26*). The Love of God that filled their hearts led them to be concerned about everyone, sharing with them the treasure "that can enlarge us and make those who receive it better and happier."<sup>1</sup> If our heart too is filled with God's Love, we will share it with those closest to us. And we will feel impelled to reach more and more people, so as to share with them the new Life that our Lord gives us. And as it was then, now too it will be true that *the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord (Acts 11:21)*.

A second idea that we can consider here, in the light of history, is that the Church grew and continues to grow above all through the charity of her individual members, rather than through structured and organized action. The structure and organization would come later, as the fruit of this charity and in service of it. We have seen something similar in the history of the Work. Those who first followed Saint Josemaría loved the others with sincere affection, and this provided the environment for God's message to open a path forward. We see this in the first student residence

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, March 19, 2018, no. 131.

of the Work: “Those who lived at 33 Luchana Street were friends united by the same Christian spirit that the Father transmitted. Hence a person who found himself at home in the environment created around Don Josemaría and those alongside him, came back again. Indeed, people who first came to the flat on Luchana Street by invitation, kept coming back out of friendship.”<sup>2</sup>

It is good for us to recall these aspects of the history of the Church and the Work, given the risk that, as both have grown so much with the passing of time, we could come to rely more on existing apostolic structures than on each one’s personal apostolic efforts. Recently the Prelate reminded us: “The current situation of evangelization makes it more necessary than ever to give priority to personal contact. This relational aspect is at the heart of the way of doing apostolate that Saint Josemaría found in the Gospel narratives.”<sup>3</sup>

This is only natural. The dynamic force at work in the apostolate is charity, which is a gift from God, and “in a Christian, in a child of God, friendship and charity are one and the same thing. They are a divine light which spreads warmth.”<sup>4</sup> Friendship is love, and for a child of God it is authentic charity. Therefore, it is not that we seek friends in order to do apostolate, but rather friendship and apostolate are manifestations of the same love. Moreover, “friendship itself is apostolate; friendship itself is a dialogue in which we give and receive light. In friendship we mutually open up new horizons. We rejoice in what is good and we support one another in what is difficult; we have a good time with one another, since God wants us to be happy.”<sup>5</sup> We should ask ourselves: How much do I care for my friends? Do I share with them the joy that comes from knowing how much God loves us? And do I try to reach more people, people who may never have known a believer very well, in order to draw them closer to God’s Love?

## **At the crossroads of the world**

*For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor 9:16).* These words of Saint Paul are a constant call to the Church. Similarly, his awareness of having been called by God for a mission is an ever-present example: *for if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission (1 Cor 9:17).* The apostle to the Gentiles was aware of having been called to bring Christ’s name *before the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel (Acts 9:15)*, and hence he felt a holy urgency to reach everyone.

On his second trip, when the Holy Spirit led him to Greece, Paul’s heart expanded and he sensed a thirst for God around him. In Athens, while waiting for those who had stayed in Berea, Saint Luke tells us that *he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols (Acts 17:16)*. As usual, he went first to the synagogue. But the response there was half-hearted, so Paul went to the Areopagus, where the Athenians asked: *may we know what this new teaching is that you are*

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<sup>2</sup> José Luis González Gullón, *DYA: La Academia y Residencia en la historia del Opus Dei (1933-1939)* (Madrid: Rialp), p. 196.

<sup>3</sup> Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral Letter*, February 14, 2017, no. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 565.

<sup>5</sup> Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral Letter*, January 9, 2018, no. 14.

presenting? (Acts 17:19). And so, in the Athenian Areopagus, where the most influential currents of contemporary thought were debated, Paul announced the name of Jesus Christ.

Like the Apostle, we too “are called to contribute, with initiative and spontaneity, to improving the world and the culture of our times, so that they open themselves to God’s plans for mankind: *cogitationes cordis eius*, the plans of his heart, which remain from *generation to generation* (Ps 33:11).”<sup>6</sup> It is only natural that in the hearts of many Christian faithful the desire is born to reach those places that “have a great impact on the future make-up of society.”<sup>7</sup> Two thousand years ago, the key places to reach were Athens and Rome. What are those places today? Are there Christians there who can spread the *aroma of Christ* (2 Cor 2:15)? And couldn’t we do more to give light to those who have to make important decisions for today’s world? In today’s cities, neighborhoods, workplaces, how much good people can do when they try to foster a more just and authentic view of human relationships, not distinguishing between rich or poor, healthy or sick, native-born or foreigner!

When we think about it carefully, we see that all of this forms part of the mission of the lay faithful in the Church. As the Second Vatican Council taught, “they are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity.”<sup>8</sup> This call, common to all the lay faithful, is specified in a particular way in those of us who have received the vocation to Opus Dei. Saint Josemaría describes the apostolate of his daughters and sons as “an intravenous injection in the bloodstream of society.”<sup>9</sup> He envisioned them as being zealous to bring Christ to every sector of human work: “the factory, the laboratory, the farm, the trades, the streets of the big cities and the trails of the mountains.”<sup>10</sup> Through their work, the laity strive to put Christ “at the center of all earthly activities.”<sup>11</sup>

With the desire to strengthen this essential feature of the Work, the Father encouraged us, in his first letter as Prelate, “to foster in everyone a great professional eagerness: in those who are still students and who should harbor great desires to build up society, and in those who are carrying out a profession. With a right intention, they should foster the holy ambition of going far in their profession and of making an impact.”<sup>12</sup> This does not mean mindlessly following the latest fashions. Rather the faithful of Opus Dei should strive “to be up to date with modern developments and to understand the world. Together with their fellow citizens, who are their equals, they are part of the contemporary world and make it modern.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral Letter*, February 14, 2017, no. 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Instrucción*, March 19, 1934, no. 42.

<sup>10</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 105.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 183.

<sup>12</sup> Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral Letter*, February 14, 2017, no. 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Conversations with Saint Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 26.

This is a beautiful task that requires from us a constant effort to get out of our small world and raise our eyes to the immense horizons of the work of salvation. The whole world awaits the vivifying presence of true Christians! Nevertheless, “how often we are tempted to keep close to the shore! Yet the Lord calls us to put out into the deep and let down our nets (cf. *Lk* 5:4). He bids us spend our lives in his service. Clinging to him, we are inspired to put all our charisms at the service of others. May we always feel compelled by his love (cf. *2 Cor* 5:14) and say with Saint Paul: ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!’ (*1 Cor* 9:16).”<sup>14</sup>

### **Availability to do the Work**

Along with the desire to bring salvation to many people, the heart of the Apostle is vigilant for all the churches (cf. *2 Cor* 11:28). The Church has had many needs right from the very beginning. The *Acts of the Apostles*, for instance, tells how Barnabas sold his field and placed the proceeds at the apostles’ feet (cf. *Acts* 4:37). In many of his letters Saint Paul mentions the collection he was taking up for the Christians at Jerusalem. The Work is no exception here either. Just a week after arriving in Rome, on June 30, 1946, Saint Josemaría wrote to the members of the General Council, then located in Madrid: “I am planning to go to Madrid as soon as possible and then return to Rome. Ricardo! We urgently need six hundred thousand pesetas. Considering our financial problems, that seems like sheer madness. But it is imperative that we get a house here.”<sup>15</sup> The need for buildings in Rome had only just begun and, like the first Christians, everyone in the Work considered these material needs as something very personal. In more recent years, Don Javier spoke about the first two priests who went to Uruguay to begin the apostolic work of Opus Dei here. After some time in the country, they received a large donation that would have been a great help to solve their own financial problems. Nevertheless, without any hesitation, they sent all of it to Rome for the centers there.

The material needs of the Work never ceased during Saint Josemaría’s lifetime, and they will always be a reality. Thank God, the apostolates are multiplying all over the world, and the need to maintain those that already exist is a constant concern. Therefore we need to keep alive our sense of responsibility to meet these many needs. As the Prelate reminds us, “our love for the Church will spur us to obtain resources for the development of the apostolates.”<sup>16</sup>

The same thing could be said about another marvelous expression of our faith in the divine origin of the call to do Opus Dei on earth. We know how joyful Saint Josemaría was at seeing the cheerful self-giving of his daughters and sons. In one of his last letters, he thanked God for their “complete availability—within the duties of their personal situation in the world—to serve God in the Work.”<sup>17</sup> That period of uncertainty and confrontation in the Church and in the world made

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 130.

<sup>15</sup> Andrés Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei* (Scepter 2005), Vol. III, p. 35. As General Administrator, Ricardo Fernandez Vallespín was in charge of the economic needs of the Work.

<sup>16</sup> Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral Letter*, February 14, 2017, no. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, February 14, 1974, no. 5.

their generous self-giving shine forth with a very special light. “Young people and those not so young have gone from one place to another with the greatest naturalness, or have persevered faithfully in the same spot without growing tired. When needed they have completely changed their work, leaving behind what they were doing and undertaking a different task of greater apostolic interest. They have learned how to do new things. They have joyfully consented to hide and disappear, letting others move past them: going up and coming down.”<sup>18</sup>

Although the principal apostolic work of Opus Dei is the personal apostolate of each of its faithful,<sup>19</sup> we should not forget that in addition, the Work corporately supports specific social, educational and charitable activities. These are all manifestations of the same ardent love that God has placed in our hearts. In addition, the formation given by the Work “requires a certain structure,”<sup>20</sup> minimal yet essential. The same sense of mission that spurs us to get close to many people, and to strive to be leaven wherever important decisions affecting the welfare of humanity are made, leads us to harbor a healthy concern for these needs of the Work.

Many faithful of Opus Dei, celibate as well as married, work in a wide variety of apostolic activities. Some take care of tasks of formation and government in the Work. Although this kind of work is not the essence of their vocation, it is a specific way of being Opus Dei. That is why the Prelate encourages the celibate members of the Work “to have an active and generous availability, when necessary, to dedicate themselves with that same professional eagerness to tasks of formation and government.”<sup>21</sup> People do not accept those roles as an imposed assignment, which has little to do to with their own life. On the contrary, they accept them out of an awareness of having been called by God for a great mission and, like Saint Paul, wanting to be *a servant to all, so as to win over as many as possible (1 Cor 9:19)*. These internal tasks are, in fact, a “professional job, which demands specific and careful training.”<sup>22</sup> Hence when people accept jobs of this type, they should receive them with a *sense of mission*, with the desire to add their own “grain of sand” to the immense task. For the same reason, these jobs should not separate anyone from the world, but rather are the specific way for them to remain in the middle of the world, reconciling it with God. And then that work will become the “hinge” of their sanctification.

In the early Church, the disciples had *one heart and one soul (Acts 4:32)*. They loved one another truly, and lived in marvelous fraternity: *Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? (2 Cor 11:29)*. From the place where they had first encountered the joy of the Gospel, they filled the world with light. All of them felt the urgent need to bring Christ’s salvation to as many people as possible. All wanted to collaborate in the work of the apostles: by their own life of dedication, their hospitality, their material assistance, or by placing themselves at their service, like the people who accompanied Saint Paul on his journeys. This is not just an image of the past, but a wonderful reality today, which we see embodied in the Church

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Conversations with Saint Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 51.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 63.

<sup>21</sup> Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral Letter*, February 14, 2017, no. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, September 29, 1957, no. 9.

and in the Work. And all of us are called to embody it in our own lives, through our free and ever-renewed response to God's gift.