

SOMETHING GREAT THAT IS LOVE (VI): So That the Music Plays

When Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God, He knew it was something quite different from what those listening to Him might imagine—quite different also from what we might tend to imagine today. Hence, rather than giving a definition, He made use of parables: stories and images that invite us to enter more deeply into a mystery. For example, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to *a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade (Mk 4:31-32)*. It is a small grain that disappears into the ground and is forgotten, but that never stops growing, while the world continues on its apparently separate course. It grows even at night, when no one is caring for it or paying attention.

In October 1928 God led Saint Josemaria to discover a seed in his soul that only He could have placed there: a small grain meant to grow in the great field of the Church. A note written down a few months later sketches the “genetic code” of this seed: “Ordinary Christians. Dough being leavened. Ours is to be ordinary, natural. The means: everyday work. All saints! Silent self-giving.”¹ From the day God gave him the mission to care for this seed, Saint Josemaria’s only concern was to see it become a reality. And what was then simply a promise, a hope, today is a leafy tree that gives shelter to many souls and a rich savor to many lives.

The desire to be holy is what is normal

Pope Francis tells us: “Every saint is a message which the Holy Spirit takes from the riches of Jesus Christ and gives to his people.”² Saint Josemaria received a message that he embodied in his own life. He himself became the message, and his life and words began to challenge many people: “Don’t let your life be barren. Be useful. Leave a mark. Shine forth with the torch of your faith and your love ... And set aflame all the ways of the earth with the fire of Christ that you bear in your heart.”³

He carried this fire inside, as one of the first faithful of Opus Dei ordained to the priesthood, Jose Luis Muzquiz, quickly realized. The first time he spoke with Saint Josemaria, he heard something that perhaps he had never heard before: the possibility to be an apostle in his work.

¹ Saint Josemaria, “Apuntes intimos,” no. 25. In *Opus Dei in the Church*, Pedro Rodriguez, Fernando Ocariz, Jose Luis Illanes, Four Courts Press 1994, p. 133.

² Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et exsultate* (19 March 2018), no. 21.

³ Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 1.

And right away Saint Josemaria added: “The only real love is God’s Love; the others are little loves.” These words deeply impressed him: “One could see that it came from the depths of his soul, from a soul in love with God. The mental circuits I had in place all melted down.”⁴

In a Mass of thanksgiving for the beatification of this soul in love with God, the then Cardinal Ratzinger said, with his characteristic simplicity and depth: “The meaning of the word ‘holy’ has undergone a dangerous narrowing over the course of time, and this certainly still influences it today. It makes us think of the saints whose statues and paintings we see at the altars, of miracles and heroic virtues, and it suggests that holiness is for a chosen few, among whom we cannot be included. Then we leave holiness to the few, of an unknown number, and content ourselves with being just the way we are.

“Amidst this spiritual apathy, Josemaria Escriva issued a wake-up call, shouting: No! Holiness is not something extraordinary but rather ordinary; it is what is normal for every baptized person. Holiness does not mean the sort of heroism that it is impossible to imitate; rather it has a thousand different forms and can become a reality anywhere, in any job. It is what is normal.”⁵

The natural thing, then, for a Christian is the desire to be holy. Saint Josemaria wrote, when still a young priest: “The saints were not abnormal beings: cases to be studied by a ‘modernistic’ doctor. They were, they are, normal: of flesh, like yours. And they conquered.”⁶ The call to Opus Dei entails an awareness of the “normality” of sanctity, with the desire to become an “interpreter” of this simple message, of this music. The “musical score” for this message already exists: the life and preaching of Saint Josemaria; the proclamation of the universal call to holiness by Vatican II;⁷ the magisterium of the recent Popes, who have all stressed this teaching,⁸ and above all the Gospels. But this music needs to be heard in every corner of the world, with the infinite variations that still need to become a reality: the individual lives of so many Christians.

So close that we live with Him

In inspiring Opus Dei, our Lord presented his Church with a path, a spirituality “designed” to be embodied in every type of daily setting, becoming part and parcel of the daily work and ordinary, normal life of people who are quite different. “Far away on the horizon heaven seems to meet the earth. Do not forget that where heaven and earth really meet is in your heart of a child of God.”⁹ Hence, although the vocation to Opus Dei spurs a person to have initiative in seeking to better the world, it doesn’t lead above all to doing things, or to doing more things than

⁴ *The Way*, Critical-Historical edition, comment on point no. 417.

⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, Homily, 19 May 1992.

⁶ *The Way*, no. 133.

⁷ Vatican II, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium* (21 October 1964), no. 40.

⁸ Cf. Saint John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. *Christifideles laici* (30 December 1988), nos. 16-17; Benedict XVI, Audience, 13 April 2011; and, more recently, the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate* (19 March 2018) of Pope Francis.

⁹ Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 309.

what one was already doing. Rather it leads above all to doing them in a different way, being *with God* in everything we do, striving to share everything with Him. “My children, our vocation is to follow Christ. And to follow Him so closely that we live with Him, like the first Twelve, so close to Him that we identify with Him, that we live his Life, until a moment comes, if we haven’t hindered it, when we can say with Saint Paul: ‘It is now no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.’”¹⁰

One of the first Supernumeraries recalls his surprise when the Founder of the Work told him: “God is calling you to the path of contemplation.” As a married person with children who had to work hard to support his family, this was “a true discovery.”¹¹ Saint Josemaria advised another person: “Talk with our Lord; tell Him: ‘I’m tired, Lord. I’m at the end of my strength. Lord, this isn’t going well. How would you do it?’”¹² This is what contemplation in the middle of the world involves: looking at the real world with love, while also looking at God, in an unbroken dialogue. Saint Josemaria summed up this beautiful challenge in a striking phrase: “the more within the world we are, the more we must be God’s.”¹³ And this closeness, this deep friendship with Him, gives rise to two features that, although not exclusive to the vocation to the Work, have a special importance for those God calls to this path: the call to be apostles, to make Christ known; and the mission to transform and reconcile the world with God through one’s work.

Before considering these features, however, a question naturally arises. If, as Saint Josemaria always insisted, and as the Pope recently reminded us, sanctity is meant for everyone; if our Lord gives all Christians the mandate to make the Gospel known, what is specific then to the vocation to Opus Dei as a response to the call to find God in the middle of the world?

This is fairly easy to explain if we keep in mind that the various vocations found in Christian life are specifications, modalities or channels of the life and vocation communicated by baptism. Specifically, “the vocation to Opus Dei ‘takes up, welcomes, channels’ the self-giving or dedication to God and to others that is required by the Christian vocation; the only special element ‘added’ is precisely the ‘channel’—that this dedication be carried out by forming part of a specific institution of the Church (Opus Dei), which has a specific spirituality and also specific means of formation and apostolate,”¹⁴ aimed specifically at serving God and other men and women through work and ordinary, daily realities. Or to put it another way: those who discover and welcome the call to Opus Dei decide to give their life for others (which is the essence of Christian life), along a specific path led by God’s hand, and with the help of a great family. And therefore they are ready to do all they can on their part to enable this charism to nourish their

¹⁰ Saint Josemaria, *In Dialogue with the Lord*, Scepter 2018, p. 23.

¹¹ Victor García Hoz, “Mi encuentro con Monseñor Escrivá de Balaguer”, in R. Serrano (ed.) *Así le vieron*, Rialp, Madrid, 1992, p. 83.

¹² Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family get-together in Valladolid, 22 October 1972.

¹³ Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 740.

¹⁴ Fernando Ocáriz, “Vocation to Opus Dei as a Vocation in the Church,” in *Opus Dei in the Church*, p. 103.

interior life, illumine their intellect, and enrich their personality, so that they can truly find God in their life and share this wonderful discovery with others.

The divine illumination received on the 2nd of October 1928, and others that followed, showed Saint Josemaria that he needed to dedicate his life to fostering among ordinary Christians—men and women who live in the middle of the world, carrying out a wide variety of different jobs—the awareness that all are called to holiness and apostolate. And to do this through an institution, Opus Dei, made up of ordinary Christians who, in accepting the divine call to make this ideal their own, give witness with their own life to the marvelous possibility, with the help of grace, to put it into practice, even amid their own limitations.

All who have a big heart

On the path from Bethany to Jerusalem, Jesus is hungry. He looks for something to eat and stops at a fig tree (*Mt* 21:18). “Jesus approaches the fig tree: he approaches you, he approaches me. Jesus hungers, he thirsts for souls. On the Cross he cried out *Sitio!*, ‘I thirst’ (*Jn* 19:29). He thirsts for us, for our love, for our souls and for all the souls we ought to be bringing to him, along the way of the Cross which is the way to immortality and heavenly glory.”¹⁵

The vocation to the Work entails a strong “contagion” of this hunger and thirst of God. When Saint Josemaria was struggling to get the first residence of the Work underway, some people advised him not to be in such a hurry. While on retreat he wrote down: “Hurry. It’s not hurry. It’s that Jesus is urging us on.”¹⁶ He was urged on, like Saint Paul, by Christ’s love (cf. *2 Cor* 5:14). And with this same serene urgency God wants us to call at the heart of each man and woman: “Wake up to the fact that you are loved!”¹⁷ And to do so in a normal, natural way, loving and letting oneself be loved by everyone, helping and serving them, passing on what we know, learning from them, sharing challenges and projects, problems and worries, creating bonds of friendship. Right there where we work, rest, shop..., we can be leaven, salt, light for the world.

God doesn’t call “superheroes” to his Work. He calls normal people, people who have a big, magnanimous heart, in which all men and women find a place. In a document from the first years, Saint Josemaria wrote about those who could receive God’s call to the Work: “There is no room in the Work for those who are selfish, cowardly, indiscreet, pessimistic, tepid, foolish, lazy, timid, frivolous. There is room for the sick, God’s favorites, and for all those who have a big heart, even though their frailties may have been quite big.”¹⁸ Those who discover that God is calling them to Opus Dei can be people with defects and limitations; but they need to have big ideals, the eagerness to love, to enkindle in others God’s love.

¹⁵ Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 202.

¹⁶ “Apuntes intimos,” no. 1753, cited in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. I, p. 394.

¹⁷ Saint John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 9 (introduction to Spanish edition).

¹⁸ Saint Josemaria, *Instruction*, 1 April 1934, no. 65.

Loving the world as God loves it

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (*Jn* 3:16). God loves the world He has created “passionately.” Hence it isn’t an obstacle to holiness but rather its “native place.” The core of Opus Dei’s message is contained in this conviction: we can be holy not *despite* living in the world, but rather by taking advantage of it, being deeply immersed in it. Because the world, this mysterious amalgam of greatness and wretchedness, love and hate, rancor and forgiveness, war and peace, “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (*Rom* 8:19).

When speaking about mankind’s relationship with the world, *Genesis* employs two verbs: “keep” and “cultivate” (cf. *Gen* 2:15). With the first, which is also used to express the fulfillment of the commandments, we are shown our responsibility for the world, and the fact that we can’t make use of it in a despotic way. While the second verb, “cultivate,” which means both “to work” (usually the earth) as well as “to offer cult” (cf. *Num* 8:11), unites work to worship. By working we not only attain self-fulfillment; we also offer a pleasing worship to God, because we love the world as He loves it. Therefore sanctifying our work means, in the end, making the world more beautiful, making room in it for God.

He Himself has wanted to keep and cultivate the world that came forth good from his hands as Creator, by working with the hands of a man, of a creature. For centuries our Lord’s years of hidden life in the workshop at Nazareth were viewed as years of obscurity, lacking in light. But in the light of the spirit of the Work they become “filled with bright sunlight that illumines our days and imbues them with meaning.”¹⁹ Therefore Saint Josemaria encouraged his sons and daughters to reflect often on these hidden years of work, which recall for us the “hidden and silent” growth of the grain of wheat. This is how Jesus grew up—later He will even compare Himself to the grain of wheat (cf. *Jn* 12:24)—in the workshop of Joseph and his Mother, in that workshop that was also a home.

The Holy Family’s humble life shows us that there are jobs which, although they may seem of little importance to earthly eyes, in God’s eyes have immense value, because of the love and care put into them, with the desire to be useful. Hence “sanctifying work does not mean *doing something holy* while working, but rather *making the work itself holy*.”²⁰ Thus “work humanly well done has become a healing ‘salve’ for people’s eyes so that they can discover God in every circumstance and facet of life. Moreover, this has happened right in our times when materialism is bent on turning work into mud which blinds people and prevents them from looking at God.”²¹

¹⁹ Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 14.

²⁰ Fernando Ocáriz, *Naturaleza, gracia y gloria*, Eunsa 2000, p. 263.

²¹ Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, *Letter*, 9 September 1975.

To bear fruit, the grain needs to hide in the ground, to disappear. This is how Saint Josemaria saw his own life: “my role is to hide and disappear, so that only Jesus shines forth.”²² And this is also how God wants all the men and women He calls to the Work to see their lives. Like the first Christians: normal, ordinary people who, if they raised their voices, it wasn’t to seek the applause of others, but rather to make God shine forth. People who, above all, “lived in union with Christ and who made him known to others ... sowers of peace and joy, the peace and joy that Jesus has brought to us.”²³

²² Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 28 January 1975.

²³ *Christ is Passing By*, no. 30.