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Making the Centre a Home (II)

Christian families are places where everyone lives and works for the others. Some missteps that can undermine this spirit, and ways to reawaken it.

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In one of his last letters to his children in Opus Dei, St. Josemaría reflected on the “new logic” of God's family on earth. Already, during their days of waiting in Nazareth, God introduced Mary and Joseph to the

way of thinking and living of the Child who would humble Himself and give everything, for He had come not to be served but to serve.^[1] God wants the same logic to hold sway in every Christian home:

“Look where Christ is born. Everything there speaks to us of unconditional self-giving. Joseph, whose life is a succession of hardships mixed with the joy of being Jesus’ guardian, risks his honour, the serene continuity of his work, and his tranquil future. His entire existence is ready availability for whatever God may ask. Mary shows herself to be the *handmaid of the Lord* (Lk 1:38), who by her *fiat* transforms her entire existence into an acceptance of the divine plan of salvation. And Jesus? Suffice it to say that our God reveals himself to us as a child. The Creator of the universe presents himself to us in an infant’s swaddling clothes, so we may never

doubt that he is true God and true Man. [...] We must steep ourselves in this new logic brought down to earth by God. In Bethlehem, no one reserves anything for himself. There we hear nothing of my reputation, my time, my work, my ideas, my preferences, my money. There everything is placed at the service of God's marvellous adventure with humanity, the Redemption.”^[2] —

Family life is renewed and grows in this “marvellous adventure” of service, understood not as *servitude* or the cold accumulation of *services* but as a constant willingness to live for others, as instruments of God's daily care. This way of living, which St. Josemaría sometimes called “the healthy psychological prejudice of thinking habitually about others,”^[3] — is meant to be the usual tenor of life in the centres of the Work.

Thankfully, this is what many people who frequent these centres perceive

in various ways: in an underlying disposition of wanting to make life pleasant for others, dedicating time and listening deeply even when there are other demands on our attention, helping solve problems, apologising whenever necessary, greeting others with a smile, completing tasks for others when they are tired or running late, and in many other daily opportunities that come with living together.

However, as can happen in any family, daily life can sometimes have a certain erosive effect, and over time, other dynamics may take root in the house or in our character.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, we can summarise them in four missteps, where there may be an excessive focus on the functioning of the household at the expense of the people living in it, or what we could call “relational misunderstandings,” conflicts arising from mistaken

approaches to living together. Of course, the descriptions below are not of formulas that occur in pure, chemical forms, but of tendencies that creep in gradually, perhaps mixed together, showing how human weakness so often interlaces the most valuable, cherished aspects of our lives. A brief reflection on these tendencies will help us identify *the little foxes that spoil the vineyards* (Song 2:15). The “logic” God wants in all homes, and specifically in the centres of the Work, will also be outlined.

Effective, but cold

The first two missteps that can overshadow the true logic of service are situated in the functional realm. If we think in terms that St. Josemaría frequently used to characterise the Work — “family, and at the same time, a militia”^[4] — the risk here is of a certain imbalance,

where the “militia” overshadows the family, resulting in efficient households but with little warmth, or perhaps with underlying tensions or wounds.

The first misstep in this regard can be referred to as the logic of *synergy*. This way of reasoning has to do with the development of society over the last few decades, which, along with many advances and opportunities, has led to an endless list of activities and tasks to do: bills, administrative notes, messages... We can easily spend all our time chasing events and tasks. As in any family, in which preoccupations related to work, the house, the children, and all the tasks to be done could lead the spouses to neglect their marital friendship (intimacy, mutual affection...), in a centre where many kinds of apostolic work are carried out, the people could start treating each other functionally, limiting themselves to

the “things that have to be taken care of.”^[5] —

The centre would then tend to operate with synergy (*syn-ergon*, the union of action), but with significant deficiencies in sympathy (*syn-pathos*, the union of feeling). Each person would carry out their tasks, responsibilities, and plan of life; the house would function like a delicate mechanism (everything in its place, each person in their tasks...), but the ability to sympathise, *feeling with* others, would be lacking: spending time together, enjoying life together, and suffering with them. St. Josemaría used dramatic language to warn us about this risk: “The day we live as strangers or as indifferent to one another, we have killed Opus Dei.”^[6] — Furthermore, as is the case at a purely human level in any organisation, the lack of sympathy between people would eventually

diminish or even eliminate their synergy.

The second misstep can be called the logic of *order*. Once more, this is analogous to any family: one of the spouses may be excessively worried about “getting things right,” through the schedule, material order, or chores. Every household needs some structure to avoid drowning in chaos, of course, but sometimes we have unrealistic expectations about having ideal homes, doing things the way one person considers “correct,” even when it leads to other problems and is detrimental to the family’s peace. Experience shows that an overemphasis on rules and the neglect of the parent-child relationships can lead to frustration and even rebellion. This is what St. Paul was referring to when he wrote, *Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged* (Col 3:21).

These ways of seeing and doing things are equally problematic in a centre. For one thing, this is because the adults who live there are all free and personally responsible; and for another, it is because the centre is a “functional” apostolic initiative meant to be a home for everyone, and it is also the home of the people who live there. They should be able to feel that it is their home, not just an extension of their professional life. Unlike a conventional family home, a centre of the Work has the peculiarity that home and work coexist in it permanently; and also, that those who take care of these apostolic tasks are there because they want to be. This, being the most supernatural,^[7] and therefore the most radical reason, must also be a principle of tact and sensitivity. “To be very spiritual, very supernatural,” St. Josemaría taught, “one must be very human, and strive to have an intensely human sense of life.”^[8]

Considering these elements shows that placing too much emphasis on criteria, guidelines, objectives, etc., can be problematic. The drawbacks of this logic become clear with the passage of time. The most obvious is that when one focuses exclusively or primarily on “the plan,” they may confuse the importance of means with that of ends and end up limiting the freedom of others in matters that could allow for different approaches.^[9] Another drawback is that if there is a failure to harmonise what is understood as a “duty” with the spontaneity that should characterise family life, the atmosphere may become tense and strained. Finally, there is the fact that those who focus on having things under control always achieve fragile victories: in their prioritisation of efficiency, they may fail to win the others over, gaining their hearts and helping them grow in freedom.^[10] Those who aspire primarily to control situations

quickly wear themselves out, and they may also weary others, who come to feel that they have a minimal role in building their home.

Relational misunderstandings

Two more missteps that can emerge in the life of a household can be defined as relational misunderstandings or “short circuits.” Like the previous missteps, there are analogous situations in some families, and they are characterised by the underlying dissatisfaction they cause in the people who get stuck in them. One of the characters in Jesus’s parables personifies this type of situation: the elder son who reproaches his father for a series of grievances arising from comparing himself with his brother. In the end, the father has to tell him: *Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours (Lk 15:31).*

The first of these missteps can be called the logic of *merit*. This error is committed by a person who may seem very attentive to others, showing a great ability to make sacrifices for household issues and the people nearby. However, this person acts, usually unconsciously, with the expectation that their efforts will earn them the affection of others, as a compensation. This logic can be reasonably applied to many aspects of life, but it does not work in a family because it doesn't correspond to reality. The family is in the realm of gratuitousness: trying to accumulate merits in order to be loved makes little sense.

Certainly, someone who feels that the family is theirs goes to great lengths for it, but without demanding emotional compensation, just as parents don't demand compensation for loving their children. (On the contrary, against all expectations,

they find happiness in their selflessness.) On occasion, we may feel like our efforts do not receive the consideration they are due, but if we habitually expect reward for what we do, our perspective can become self-referential, like the elder son in the parable, who lives in his father's house but doesn't consider it his. This son always speaks in the singular (I, you, he...), with reproaches, comparisons, and complaints. He forgets the plural *us*, which his father tries to bring him into. Over time, his logic reveals a deep dissatisfaction; he compares and monitors the freedom of others (the father and brother), judging them for giving or receiving what he doesn't think they should (cf. *Lk* 15:29-32). What he considers a fair claim is actually bitter jealousy and wounded pride.

Lastly, there is a misstep that we could call the logic of *sentiment*, where the criterion for evaluating

family life centres around one's own sensations: how does family life make me feel? Do I feel good? We should undoubtedly pay attention to these questions; everyone should try to discover both what improves the family atmosphere and what causes discomfort. However, even though *emotional well-being* is an important indicator, it cannot become the primary criterion or the fundamental motivation for contributing to the construction of the home.

When this logic takes hold of a person, good feelings become essential for them to make an effort to care for the family. There are, however, moments in which the family needs us to set aside our personal preferences. As the Father has often reminded us, “We also act with freedom of spirit when we don’t feel like doing something or find it especially difficult, if we do it out of

love.”^[11] A person might find themselves unable to overcome that difficulty because, while feeling they have the “right” to receive affection, and they demand it as part of unconditional family love, they fail to consider their own contribution. This is what happened to the elder brother in the parable, who doesn't consider whether his father needs something extra from him; he only thinks about the party he missed (cf. *Lk* 15:29).

Focusing too much on demanding affection tends to create a form of favouritism: the genuine and open friendship that is characteristic of sibling relationships^[12] is replaced by a dynamic of particular, exclusive friendships,^[13] which are caricatures of fraternal friendship. The person would separate the people in the house into “friends” and “others.” Naturally, an attitude of this sort would harm the atmosphere of the

home, but it would also hurt the individual who adopts it, as they could easily become bitter and devoid of emotional resources. The gift of celibacy, oriented as it is to generate a great “capacity to love everyone,”^[14] would sadly be diminished in this scenario.

The logic of service is the logic of gift

The missteps we have outlined share a common trait, which is an implicit “this far and no farther,” a limitation of our efforts and self-giving.

Sometimes — and this happens in all sectors of society — there is behind certain crises or physical and psychological breakdowns, a mindset and way of acting based on the cold pursuit of efficiency, control, earning merits, or expecting affection; or a mixture of several of these elements, among other possibilities.^[15]

These kinds of crises, which life provokes in order to bring us back to reality, can be an opportunity for purification and correction: they are a chance to realise that we have lost or failed to find the right way.

However, if they are not addressed, they can lead to anxious escapism, a need for extraordinary events to compensate for the frustration; even though, ultimately, they won't be able to quell the frustration because they do not address the problem at its root. It might happen that the more celebratory part of family life — the many moments that depart from the routine — are not enjoyed enough; there never seems to be a sufficiently satisfying return. The person could live happily and gratefully with what they have, but they are constantly yearning for what they don't have.

In contrast to these missteps that diminish life and vocation stands the “God’s marvellous adventure with

humanity, the Redemption.”^[16] The logic of service leads us to give, but not because we expect to receive, but because *we know and believe the love God has for us* (1 Jn 4:16). God is at the centre of our lives, loving us and filling us with grace so that we can give generously: *You received without pay, give without pay* (Mt 10:8). We no longer build our homes calculatingly. The logic of service leads us, little by little, toward the simplicity of fathers or mothers, who do not need to make resolutions or accumulate acts of service;^[17] they simply give of themselves, offering themselves as a discreet cornerstone^[18] to make the walls stronger and the warmth of the home more enduring. And as they contemplate the beauty of the home they are building, they are filled with joy and gratitude.

This is Jesus’s filial logic. He is the Son who can truly tell the Father, *All mine are thine, and thine are mine* (Jn

17:10). The best reward is the love of God, which always precedes us: at every moment, He loves us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:10). The heart is filled with this love when it is with others. It is a love “without needing rest or feeling tired,”^[19] because what is really exhausting is “going in circles around ourselves.”^[20] Serving, on the other hand, living truly for others, may be challenging at times, but it never exhausts.

Different nuances, depending on people and places

*Unless the Lord builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain* (Ps 127:1). These words from Sacred Scripture take on special significance when thinking about the Real Presence of the Lord in the oratories of the centres of Opus Dei: He builds the house and He guards the city, if

we let Him. “If the centre around which your thoughts and hopes turn is the Tabernacle,” St. Josemaria writes, “then, my child, how abundant the fruits of your sanctity and apostolate will be!”^[21] And it is true: the person who lives from God and for others becomes a dynamic force, facilitating and inspiring holiness, which is the firmest foundation of a home.

The way the dynamic of service, “the healthy psychological prejudice of thinking habitually about others,”^[22] manifests itself depends on the people involved. Each centre should be a unique mosaic formed by the talents that each person contributes toward the family warmth. Each person has different expectations about what a *home* means, so it is important not to be governed by a simple list of criteria for application.

Each centre will bring out unique nuances in the way they celebrate holidays, help each other with the material maintenance of the home, drive apostolic projects, or interact with families. There is always something in common: affection, a sense of humour, the supernatural sense, family gatherings, news about the Father and the family of the Work, joyful sobriety, and the supernatural serenity that allows for rest... The same spirit everywhere, vibrantly concretized in each place. That's why we always feel at home when we visit another region or another centre, because we feel the unity and diversity — the richness — of the Work.

The logic of service does not spare us from our own faults or those of others; it doesn't prevent us from feeling more or less comfortable with those we live with; or stop the house and activities from being better or

worse organised; or save us from the need to make an effort to understand those around us^[23] and to ask for forgiveness or forgive whenever necessary.^[24] But — and this is crucial — this logic always allows us to find resources to move forward and get closer to God.

When you build a home with a focus on service, everything comes to life: during get-togethers and in conversations over meals, you pay more attention to generate discussion so that others can relax; fraternal correction is carried out with great affection for the other person, not out of the annoyance their limitations may cause us; and so many things can be overlooked with a smile and a shrug, without irritation.^[25] Authentic service, while it requires the effort to move away from our small selfishness, is a win-win; it is always valuable for both people, the one serving and the one

being served. And because it's so natural, it can even be a bit embarrassing to call it "service." It is simply fraternal love.

Each person has an irreplaceable role in building a home

In his letter on the modes of vocation to the Work, the Father reminded us of the decisive influence of the administrations in creating the family atmosphere of the centres:

“By your work you care for and serve our life in the Work, making each person the focus and priority of your task. This is a very palpable expression of the fact that the Work is a family; a family in the true sense, not the metaphorical.”^[26] It is a performative work, in the sense that it creates a conducive environment and sets an example in which everyone can contemplate their contribution to the family atmosphere. However, to become

incarnate, to come to life, this foundation requires the irreplaceable role of everyone in the house.

For the members of the local council of a centre, the task of service that God entrusts to them through the Work primarily consists of ensuring that each person receives the necessary formation and spiritual accompaniment, as well as adequate material well-being. St. Josemaría summarised it thus: “With paternal and maternal concern, take care of the souls and bodies of those entrusted to you.”^[27] This task requires responsibility on their part, but also requires a lot of patience and abandonment to God. They accept the need to understand each person's personality and strengths, upon which they will support their growth, both individually and as a centre. They see more clearly that what is truly important is that

everyone draws closer to God, rather than making sure things happen in a certain way. They are also ready to ask for forgiveness, because it not only does not discredit them but brings them closer to others. When the organisation of the centre is approached in these terms, the atmosphere maintains its inherent demands for holiness but gains more of the joy and serenity that make this pursuit authentic.^[28] The whole centre can then identify itself with the purpose of that home: everyone together, with common and individual objectives.

The priest, on the other hand, can frequently serve as a listener who provides serenity, helps gain perspective with keen insight into different aspects of daily living, and instils hope. “Priests,” St. Josemaría wrote, “should have the same spirit as everyone else, but especially a spirit of understanding, charity,

living with everyone, not being scandalised, uplifting, and helping, like a mother.”^[29] More than anyone else, the priest must be an instrument of unity and hope, not “encumbered by timidity [or] complexes, which usually indicate human immaturity, or by clerical tendencies which denote supernatural immaturity.”^[30] While the danger for directors may be a logic of demands, for the priest, it may be that of merit: he is always in the service of others in a palpable, differentiated, and irreplaceable way and might unintentionally foster a sense of victimhood if he feels that his efforts are not appreciated. Don Álvaro addressed this mentality: “If you truly want to know how the priestly soul is recognized, I’ll summarise it with our Father’s words: *never say ‘enough.’* Never say ‘enough’ to love, never stop in front of sacrifice, like Christ.”^[31]

“In many families, it is normal for people of different generations (grandparents, parents, children) and temperaments to live together [...]. While it is true that all this can sometimes lead to making unity in the family challenging, it is also true that very often these and other difficulties can unite families more closely, when there is true love.”^[32] —

Therefore, all those living in the same centre, from the most experienced to the newest arrival, have the mission of building the home with the talents God has given them and their unique personalities, so the house may become a place of intimacy, unconditional love, and peaceful rest for each individual. Everyone has an irreplaceable role in this task because we each know which talents God has given us to serve others creatively and generously. The fraternity experienced in each of our centres will then also become a haven of

peace and a source of inspiration for the lives of associates and supernumeraries, as well as all those who come to the warmth of the Work.

Last but not least, the sick have a special role, not only because “in children and sick a soul in love sees Him,”^[33] but also because they provide the most direct and practical challenge to the negative missteps we saw earlier. By allowing themselves to be cared for, contributing what they can in their state, and not succumbing to the logic of not feeling sufficiently loved, they can be a unifying force in the centre, uniting efforts in the service of those who need it most. The home life of the centre, built on these foundations, radiates the love of God to those around it and gradually opens the doors to the home He has prepared for those who love Him. “If you love each other,” St. Josemaría said, “each

of our homes will be the home that I want for my children, what I want in every corner. Your brothers will feel a holy hunger to come home after a day of work; and they will be eager to go out into the street [...] into this war of peace.”^[34] —

^[1] Cf. *Phil* 2:7; *Mt* 20:28.

^[2] St. Josemaría, Letter, 14-II-1974, no. 2.

^[3] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 861.

^[4] "Opus Dei is certainly a family and, at the same time, a militia. A family united by a joyful and kindly affection; a militia, especially suited to the spiritual struggle" (*De spiritu*, no. 64 (unofficial translation)).

^[5] To this can be added another trait of the present culture: the tendency

to consider "free time" individually, so that everything that is not work revolves around my interests, my tastes, my activities, my social life, etc. Logically, such an attitude would significantly compromise the warmth of the home.

[6] Quoted in F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 16-II-2023, no. 9.

[7] Cf. St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 17.

[8] St. Josemaría, *Letter 27*, no. 34, quoted in E. Burkhart - J. López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, Rialp, Madrid 2013, vol. III, pg. 600.

[9] Cfr. F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 9-I-2018, no. 8.

[10] "The formation that we receive throughout our whole life, without disregarding its necessary demands,

tends to a large degree to *open up new horizons*. In contrast, if we limit ourselves to just making demands and being demanded of, we can end up seeing only what we are not managing to do, our defects and limitations. We can forget about the most important thing: God's love for us" (F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 9-I-2018, no. 11).

^[11] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 9-I-2018, no. 6.

^[12] Cfr. F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 1-XI-2019, nos. 14-17.

^[13] The notion of "particular friendship" has a long and complex history in the Christian tradition. First mentioned in the writings of St. Basil of Caesarea, it develops in the West with the *Imitation of Christ* and the works of St. Teresa of Avila and St. Francis de Sales. For St. Josemaría's understanding of this

notion, cf. *The Way*, historical-critical edition, no. 366.

^[14] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 22.

^[15] At the same time, St. Josemaría writes, "the Directors would commit a grave error if they permitted a child of mine, without true necessity, to remain in circumstances that require of him continual heroism, forgetting that these situations should be temporary and that we must use the appropriate means to ensure that they end as soon as possible" (*Letter* 27, no. 38).

^[16] St. Josemaría, *Letter*, 14-II-1974, no. 2.

^[17] "Where there is love, I would dare to say that we do not even need to make resolutions. My mother never made a resolution to love me, and you can see how affectionately she cared for me" (St. Josemaría, notes

from a family gathering, quoted in S. Bernal, *Monseñor Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer. Apuntes sobre la vida del Fundador del Opus Dei*; Rialp, Madrid 1980, 6th ed., pg. 37).

[18] Cfr. St. Josemaría, *Growing on the Inside*, 233-239 (AGP, biblioteca, P12).

[19] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 296.

[20] "What truly wearies, my children, is pride, going in circles around myself. And, in addition to tiring us out, it prevents the soul from feeling close to God" (Bl. Álvaro, in *Crónica*, XI-1989, pg. 1141; AGP, Biblioteca P01).

[21] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 835.

[22] *Ibid*, no. 861.

[23] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 16-II-2023, nos. 3-6.

[24] *Ibid*, nos. 7-8.

[25] "Saint Joseph is so wonderful! He is the saint of humble abandonment, of a permanent smile and shrug of his shoulders." (St. Josemaría, quoted in A. Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei* (III).

[26] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, no. 15.

[27] St. Josemaría, *Letter 27*, no. 39.

[28] "'You are all so cheerful, and one doesn't expect that,' I heard someone say. It has been happening for a long time; insistently and with diabolical determination, Christ's enemies never tire of complaining that the people who give themselves to God are all sullen. And, unfortunately, some of those who wish to be 'good' have lent support to those words, with their 'sad virtues.' We give you thanks, Lord, because you have chosen to count on our cheerful, very happy lives to erase that false

caricature. I also ask You that we may not forget it" (*Furrow*, no. 58).

[29] St. Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 19-III-1961, in *Crónica* II-1993, pg. 189 (AGP, Biblioteca, P01).

[30] St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, n. 4.

[31] Blessed Álvaro, *Family Letters*, n. 377 (AGP, Biblioteca, P17).

[32] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 16-II-2023, no. 14.

[33] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 419.

[34] St. Josemaría, *Crónica* VII-1956, pg. 7 (AGP, Biblioteca P01).

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