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An Unbreachable Wall: Days on Guard

The day on guard, or watch day, is a custom in Opus Dei that involves dedicating one day of the week to living Christian fraternity with special intensity, keeping others present in our prayer, mortification, and small acts of charity.

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It is not unusual, when traveling through a country and visiting iconic landmarks, to come across a great stone construction. We are left in

awe of them, thinking of the centuries (if not millennia!) that such edifices have witnessed. Even if they have required some restoration, it cannot have been much, considering how long they have been standing. Some, moreover, do not even have mortar or cement binding their stone blocks together; the sheer pressure of one stone upon another is enough to hold them in place.

Children of the same Father

When contemplating these monuments, we are reminded of that verse from the Book of Proverbs: *A brother helped by his brother is like a fortified city; he stands firm like a royal stronghold (Prov 18:19)*, like one of those stone walls that have withstood the assaults of enemy armies, the harshness of the weather, and the passage of time, and yet remain firm, resilient, and solid.

We are like those stones, and if we support one another, the Work will be like a steadfast city: *I make you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall* (Jer 1:18). “The love that unites us with each other,” the Prelate of Opus Dei reminds us, “is the same love that keeps the whole Work united.”^[1] — We might say, therefore, that unity in Opus Dei — an essential aspect of the Work and one of our dominant passions — depends on our lives. Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz de Landáuzuri experienced this firsthand, and she conveyed it to Saint Josemaría: ““Opus Dei is me, and I couldn’t live in any other way. How glad I am that I’ve always felt that so clearly right from the very first day, and progressively more as time goes on!”^[2] —

We care for the other members of the Work because they are our brothers and sisters. United by supernatural

bonds, stronger than those of blood, we build up Opus Dei. In other words, we help one another to become saints and apostles. But fraternity is not just another task to be accomplished alongside work or the norms of piety: it is a reality that enlivens our daily lives. We live, pray, rejoice, and suffer knowing that we are children of the same Father and therefore brothers and sisters to one another: “Divine filiation ‘is there in every thought, every desire, every affection’ (*Friends of God*, no. 146). And it necessarily expands into fraternity.”^[3] —

Loving watchfulness

The watch day^[4] helps us to reinforce that fortified city. Fr. José Luis Múzquiz recalls the moment he first heard about this custom. It was during a meditation at Diego de León, around 1942, when Saint Josemaría, referring to the fraternal

watchfulness that we should live in the Work, “repeated the words of Scripture: *Custos, quid de nocte?* (Is 21:11). And so we began to live that custom, with each one ‘on guard’ one day a week, striving to embody the spirit of fraternity with greater refinement.”

That verse from Scripture served as inspiration for Saint Josemaría when he wrote this point in *Furrow*:

“Watchman, how goes the night? May you acquire the habit of having a day on guard once a week, during which to increase your self-giving and loving vigilance over details, and to pray and mortify yourself a little more.”^[5]

If we return to the image of a fortified city, it is easy to picture sentries patrolling the walls, keeping watch. Their role is crucial. If they remain vigilant, their brothers and sisters in the city can live in peace,

confident that the enemy will not break through: the city has trustworthy sentinels and is well guarded.

Everyone in a family plays a part in keeping the household running, each in their own way. The parents divide certain responsibilities between the two of them, entrusting others to the children, especially the older ones. When a family member is in particular need, they all come together to ensure that person feels cared for and has what they need at all times.

Family homes cannot be taken for granted: they are labours of love, built one day at a time. This weekly custom invites us to reflect on the way we take care of our homes, in which “each person provides a necessary and irreplaceable value.”^[6] —
We all have unique gifts that can contribute to the others’ happiness.

Our talents and ways of being are part of how we can help our brothers and sisters journey towards holiness. More important than the things we've planned to do over the course of the day, we want to live with a heart transformed by Jesus' sentiments and affections: "Do not be afraid to love one another nobly, holily. Love one another deeply: do not be ashamed of having a heart. It is not enough simply to tolerate one another. That is too little. Cold, impersonal charity is not enough. Human and supernatural affection! We must have the tenderness of Christ, who burned with love for men, for his Mother, for the apostles, for Lazarus. When someone suffers, we all suffer with them. And if someone rejoices, we all share in their joy as well."^[7] —

A spring of fresh water

All of us are called to form strong relationships. Our happiness does not depend so much on the successes we achieve or the goods we acquire, as on how well we have loved and given ourselves to others, like Jesus Christ. Christians are called to step out of themselves and form deep, lasting bonds with their brothers and sisters. True fraternity is “capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbour, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly Father does.”^[8] —

Living with this Christian mindset — drawing close to others and seeking their good — expands our interior world so we can share and receive God’s gifts. It allows us to be that spring that offers fresh water to our brothers and sisters. This is why

everything we do on our day on guard is about cultivating those relationships, going out to meet others and discovering in them the face of Jesus.

On that day, we strive to pray to God for our brothers and sisters, taking greater care in practising our “norms and customs, trying to intensify our usual dealings with God, dedicating more time to prayer, and adding some special mortification.”^[9] Our effort will often be expressed through some aspect of ordinary life: lengthening a regular act of piety slightly, adding a small extra devotion appropriate to the date, offering up a challenge in family life or at work, or taking on sacrifices that make it easier to practise charity. This custom is not about quantity, so the concrete ways in which we live it are meant to be wake-up calls, reminders of something we are already striving to

make a habit: carrying our brothers and sisters in our hearts and minds. We bring the creativity and ingenuity of God's children to this endeavour.

This helps us share in our brothers and sisters' joys and sufferings. In get togethers and other conversations, we will have heard about their interests and aspirations, whether they are apostolic or formational projects, professional developments or family news... If we are attentive and have hearts that care about others, all those things will move us to respond to God's grace. The day on guard brings all this to mind and makes it a driving force for our interior life: *We continually give thanks to God for all of you, remembering you in our prayers. We never cease to recall before our God and Father your work of faith, your labour of love, and your steadfast hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Th 1:2-3).* Our brothers and sisters' faith,

hope, and charity are, in some way, entrusted to our care.

“Realise that the Holy Church is like a great army in battle array. And you, within that army, are defending one ‘front’ on which there are attacks, engagements with the enemy and counter-attacks. Do you see what I mean? This readiness to grow closer to God will lead you to turn your days, one after the other, into days on guard.”^[10] —

Indeed, the spirit with which we live this custom is not something incidental or limited to a single day: it is meant to shape our whole existence, rooting it ever more deeply in the love of the Lord. We are called to be that lamp that illuminates every corner, the salt that disappears so that family life may be full of flavour. In this way, we will live to “make it easier for

souls who give themselves to God to carry out their mission.”^[11] _____

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^[1] _____ Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral, 1-XI-2019, no. 14.

^[2] _____ Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri, *Letters to a Saint*, letter dated 28-V-1959.

^[3] _____ Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 28-X-2020, n. 3.

^[4] _____ This custom is referred to as a “day on guard” in some countries, and a “watch day” in others. In this article, the terms are used interchangeably.

^[5] _____ St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 960.

^[6] _____ Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Message, 19-III-2021.

^[7] _____ St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a get together, 1-XI-1964.

[8] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 92.

[9] *De spiritu*, no. 124.

[10] St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 960.

[11] St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a get together, V-1955.

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