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Time for God and My Whole Family

Pedro, who lost his mother when he was five, studied architecture at the university. Now married and with 8 children, he talks about how he came to realize the need to put God first in his life, along with his whole family.

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I was born in Oporto, Portugal, in a family like many others. I didn't lack anything, except my mother who died when I was five.

Although I attended Catholic schools, my family didn't practice our religion, nor did we have the custom of praying as a family. But my grandmother always told us to pray for my mother's soul.

Everything I knew about Jesus' life came from catechism classes at school and from my primary school teacher Sister Graça David. When I was about 7 or 8 years old, I was especially drawn to the message of Fatima. The idea of having a mother in heaven who especially loves children and teaches us the meaning of suffering was very important to me.

My father wanted me to be an engineer, but I got it into my head that I was going to be an architect. I liked drawing and designing with its patterns and colors. I went out at night with friends whenever I could. My father didn't lay down many

rules, but he demanded that I do my homework on time. He always gave me great freedom along with a good deal of responsibility, under penalty of a strong slap at the right time, when a more serious rebellion arose!

At the age of 15, I began attending activities in a club for boys in Oporto. I got to know about it through a good friend from school who invited me to a marathon study session. The Vega Club had a good study room and lots of outdoor activities, camps, and rugby games on the beach. The strong intellectual environment there attracted me. We discussed art, philosophy, history, music, but also sports and soccer, and all with a good deal of humor and fun!

It was there that I learned to pray, because in my house it was as if God didn't exist. I began to read the Gospel and tried to spend some time talking with God on a regular basis. I

started going to Mass on Sundays and also sometimes during the week. Until I was 17, I was going to confession quite regularly. But about that time I decided to put God in second place, an “acquaintance” as it were, like a friend I had lost touch with. School friendships and soccer games seemed more important. When I was 17, I had my first girlfriend, but after two or three months I broke up with her because I thought that the relationship would have no future.

At the age of 18 I began studying architecture at the university. I was living alone, an excellent opportunity to give wings to the freedom I’d been seeking. God still played a secondary role in my life, but at least I continued to go to Mass on Sundays and also to confession from time to time.

At the age of 21, I applied for the Erasmus Program to do the 4th year of architecture at another university. Brazil was my first preference, but I received an offer from the Netherlands that was too good to reject.

Some months before I left for Holland, I once again met up with my first girlfriend and we renewed the relationship that had ended four years earlier. I knew the time we were going to spend away from each other would be a big challenge, and I said, “Raquel, if when I return from Holland you are still free, it’s a sign we’re going to get married!”

When I arrived in Holland, in the city of Eindhoven, I searched for a Catholic church. And I began drawing closer to God with a new commitment. In a foreign country, without my old friends around, God was the only Friend I could turn to.

I came to see that I could no longer be just a Sunday Christian. I no longer could live a lukewarm commitment. I realized that God has very few friends, and in Holland this perception grew even stronger. I felt God's presence in a way I had never felt it before. I spoke to Him often during the day and entrusted all my work to Him.

I started attending Mass each week in Dutch and got in contact with Rafael, a Portuguese who lived in Utrecht, and who put me back in touch with Opus Dei's formational activities. I began to appreciate much more what in Oporto had been so close at hand, a center of Opus Dei. But in the Netherlands getting there required many kilometers by bike and train with fortnightly trips to Utrecht and Amsterdam.

I finally decided I had to be a true and loyal friend of God. At the end of

the Erasmus Program it was clear to me that when I returned to Portugal I would give myself to God, and this path was going to be through a total self-giving in Opus Dei, which would help me to integrate God into my life as an architect. “But which path within the Work would be the best for me?” I asked myself.

I returned to Oporto after 9 months in the Netherlands. Raquel was still waiting for me. While I was away Raquel had even begun going to activities at a center of Opus Dei in Oporto at my suggestion. We were very happy to be on the same wavelength.

When finishing my architecture degree, I went to Mass daily before the classes started. My friends were surprised to see this. I started talking about God with them in a natural way as one talks about the news of the day.

At the beginning of the academic year I decided to attend a retreat for university students. I told our Lord, "This is where you're going to show me what you want from me!" I spent the whole retreat asking: "Lord, what do you want from me?" "You know I'm willing to give you my whole life. What is your will for me?"

On the third day of the retreat, on Sunday, after beseeching God for light and only finding silence, I heard a quiet voice in my heart: "Use your freedom!"

It was the light I was looking for! The weight I had borne for months disappeared. Now I knew that God wanted me to act freely and I freely chose to be a Supernumerary, to raise a family, to be a husband and a father.

How wonderful is this Father of ours who created us free and made our freedom coincide with his

Providence. What a great mystery and what a great grace!

Since then his hand has always guided us. First my marriage to Raquel in 2010, then a reasonably stable job for the two of us, and then came the children!

Maria arrived in 2011 and then Clara in 2012. It was when Raquel was pregnant with Clara that I began to ask God, through our Lady's intercession, to enable me to have another job that would allow me to spend more time with my children. I remember making a pilgrimage with a good friend to the chapel of Our Lady of Conception in Foz asking for this grace from Heaven.

And it became a reality. Without any great expectations, at the beginning of 2012 I started an agricultural company while still working as an architect in Oporto. In 2013 I quit the architecture firm and dedicated

myself full-time *to* agriculture. Today I export dried organic herbs to five European countries. The challenge now is to develop a cooperative of producers that can obtain a substantial market share. Our mission is based on social and environmental responsibility.

In the meantime Grace arrived in 2013, Helena in 2015, Afonso in 2016, Isabel in 2018, Luísa de Guadalupe in 2019, and Joaquim in 2021. I ask for your prayers for all of them so that we may know how to raise them in an atmosphere of joy and freedom.

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