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Life Passed On: “Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions”

Tenth article in the "Combat, closeness, mission" series.
When the relationship between father and child, and between generations, takes the form of a blessing, we can look to the future without any kind of fear.

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This dynamic has been present since the first stirrings of the Church's life: it is intrinsic to her being and, in a way, encapsulates her very essence. Saint Paul identifies it in core activities such as evangelization and the celebration of the Eucharist: *I handed on to you what I also received*, he tells the Corinthians twice (cf. 1 Cor 11:23; 15:3). It is not merely the communication of teaching, but a transmission that carries within it a kind of generation. For this reason, he tells them: *Even though you have countless guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers; for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel* (1 Cor 4:15). What is at stake here is not a simple transfer of knowledge, because the truth of Christianity is not a series of abstract principles; it is something as tangible as a Person, and a Person who imparts his very life to us. Thus, Saint Paul also writes to the Galatians: *My children, for whom I*

am again in labor until Christ is formed in you (Gal 4:19).

This way of speaking is not exclusive to Saint Paul. Saint John also addresses the faithful as *my little children* (cf. 1 Jn 2:1, et al.), and Saint Peter describes them as *newborn infants* (1 Pet 2:2). In Christian life, there is a birth into a new life that demands to be shared with others. This movement originates in the Father and takes flesh in Jesus Christ: *All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Mt 11:27).* Yet Christ does more than reveal the Father; He gives us what He has received from Him. Jesus became man and came into the world so that those who welcome Him *may have life, and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10).* To receive Christianity is to be born *from above*,

to be reborn *of water and the Spirit* (Jn 3:3, 5).

A father's blessing

The transmission of the Covenant is one of the central themes running throughout the Old Testament. In the stories of the patriarchs, the pivotal moment of this transmission is when the father blesses his son. It is impossible to forget the scene in which Jacob steps ahead of his brother Esau to receive Isaac's blessing (cf. *Gen* 27), or when Jacob blesses each of his twelve sons, foretelling what will become of them (cf. *Gen* 49). Equally moving is the passage in which David blesses his son Solomon, choosing him above all others (cf. *1 Kgs* 1–2), as well as the account of Mattathias, in a period of idolatry and persecution, blessing his sons and urging them to zealously uphold the law and to give their lives for the Covenant (*1 Macc* 2:49ff).

In all these cases, the father's blessing passes a gift from God on to his son. There are several prayers of this kind, including the beautiful one pronounced by Isaac over Jacob.

When Jacob approaches and kisses his father, Isaac catches the scent of Jacob's clothing and exclaims: *The fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field blessed by the Lord. May God grant you the dew of heaven and the fertility of the earth, abundance of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you (Gen 27:27–29).*

Other prayers of blessing follow a similar structure. The father recognizes his son as someone endowed by God with the gifts necessary to keep the Covenant alive. He asks God to grant his favor to the

son, foreseeing the challenges that lie ahead, and, lastly, he *passes on* the gift he has received, along with the responsibility that comes with it.

Among the patriarchs and kings, these blessings often occur at the end of life, while in other instances they come earlier. In the Book of Tobit, for example, the father blesses his son when the latter assumes responsibility for the future of the household. Along with this responsibility, Tobit imparts advice that stands as an example of wisdom (cf. *Tob* 4).

In the New Testament, what is transmitted is no longer the promise of the covenant but its fulfillment: the gift of salvation and the mission to bring it to the ends of the earth. This new fatherhood is no longer based on bloodlines, and the transmission happens earlier in life. Saint Paul, for instance, entrusts some of the churches he founded to

Timothy and Titus. In one letter to Timothy, Paul presents himself as an apostle undeservedly chosen: *Christ has made me capable; He has trusted me and entrusted this ministry to me* (1Tim 1:12). He passes that mission to the young man, saying: *Timothy, my son, I am entrusting this charge to you, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, so that by them you may wage the noble warfare* (1 Tim 1:18). The entire letter exudes the atmosphere of a fatherly blessing, filled with wise counsel and words of encouragement, particularly since many thought Timothy too young for such a task (cf. 1 Tim 4:12). Reading Saint Paul's pastoral letters is a continual source of inspiration for Christians called to pass on – or transmit, entering *tradition* – their own faith and mission.

A Father in Opus Dei

When Saint Josemaría faced the delicate question of his own burial, he asked that his simple tombstone bear the words: *Peccator – Orate pro eo.*^[1] Seeing the architects' reaction, he added with a smile, "If you like, you can add a few more words: *genuit filios et filias.*"^[2] While the first inscription arose from his awareness of his own condition, the second expressed the fruitfulness God had brought to his life, a fruitfulness he regarded with wonder.

From a young age, Saint Josemaría was keenly aware of his calling to be "a father, a teacher and guide of saints."^[3] This was how he was to spread the light he had received from the Lord; "as faithfully as it does reflect the spirit of Opus Dei, the internal law of the Work would be a dead letter if the founder had not transmitted something living: a style, a tradition, a spirituality, that would give a historical continuity to that

way of sanctification.”^[4] — Thus, he worked tirelessly to help his spiritual children embrace this life, encouraging them to grow in that spirit. This effort also inspired his dream of having many people go through the Roman College, starting in the late 1940s. One anecdote from those years illustrates this vividly. During a gathering in Rome with members of Opus Dei, the conversation turned to books. Don Álvaro was preparing to publish a study, and Saint Josemaría mentioned a few works he himself was planning. Suddenly, he shifted the tone of the conversation and, gesturing toward the people present, said: “Look at this library! These are my works!”^[5] —

He formed his spiritual children according to the spirit he had received while entrusting that same gift to their care. Even in the early years, during a time of religious

persecution in Spain, he would ask the young people following him, “If I were to die, would you continue the Work?”^[6] In doing so, he involved them in the responsibility God had placed on his shoulders. Later, as the time came to spread the charism of Opus Dei to new countries, he sent his daughters and sons with very modest means and often tenuous lines of communication. This demonstrated his great trust that they could take the spirit they had received from God and bring it to the farthest corners of the world.

It is well-known that Saint Josemaría suffered greatly in the final years of his life due to the crisis enveloping the world and, especially, the Church. Doubts were cast on everything, every tradition was scrutinized, and people sought to discard whatever had come before. In the face of this turmoil, it is striking that he chose to surround himself in Rome with

young people. After all, they were born into those times and were best equipped to discern and channel what was good in their era while carrying forward the hopes for renewal. Perhaps this was why he summoned them: the future rested on their shoulders. Many recall a fatherly gesture of his during those years, placing his hands on the shoulders of some of these young people and telling them, “I lean on you.” It was his way of entrusting to them what he had received from God. He conveyed this same confidence in countless ways, not only to directors and senior members but also to those who had recently joined Opus Dei.^[7] It was a profound expression of the fatherhood God had granted him.

Fatherhood passed on

This fatherhood remains unforgettable for those who

experienced it firsthand and is also part of the legacy Saint Josemaría wished to leave his spiritual children. Indeed, anyone who has reached a certain level of maturity, anyone with something to share with the world, recognizes within themselves a form of fatherhood. The Founder of Opus Dei fostered this awareness in those around him from a young age. One area where he did this with particular clarity was in teaching. In *Furrow*, for instance, there is a timeless piece of advice: “Teacher: may you be eager to make your pupils understand quickly what has cost you hours of study to see clearly.”^[8] Álvaro d’Ors, a supernumerary member and professor of Roman Law, expressed a beautiful reflection in his personal notes. Over his lifetime, he trained many Roman law scholars. Recalling his students, particularly those who were now occupying the same academic chairs he had once held, he

remarked: “To have successors is always a reason for satisfaction. Dying without an heir is as sad as – or sadder than – having no inheritance to pass on.”^[9] —

The same holds true for countless other professions, especially those rooted in passing on inherited knowledge. Saint Josemaría applied this principle, with particular emphasis, to those entrusted with tasks of government in Opus Dei. Pedro Casciaro recalled how the Founder would insist on “the moral duty they had not to make themselves indispensable.”^[10] — On the contrary, he would often warn against a certain attitude by sharing a negative example he had encountered in his youth. In a letter to directors, he recalled: “I recall, as a vivid example, a cook in a seminary I stayed in during one of the trips I took to do priestly work in Spain. When he was preparing some dish

he considered extraordinary (which it never was, actually), he would chase all the helpers out of the kitchen, so that they wouldn't learn the recipe.”^[11] In contrast, Saint Josemaría pointed out that a director should be “someone who knows people, teaches them, and assigns them.”^[12] —

But this is not only for directors: we are all called to live out a kind of parenthood that involves recognizing ourselves as heirs to a great gift while at the same time being responsible for transmitting it as life to the next generation. How can we do this? Perhaps the first step – because it underpins everything else – is to recall that the Church is a *communion*: communion with the Trinity and communion among human persons. The Father emphasized this recently, speaking about the Work: “To think of a communion of persons is to think of

a communion of freedoms, a communion of personal initiatives that are also ‘doing Opus Dei,’ and a communion of generations.”^[13] These freedoms, initiatives, and generations come together in communion, and each one has its own indispensable role. When there is a shared origin, inheritance, and mission, communion gives rise simultaneously to expressions of both unity and plurality.^[14] This can lead to misunderstandings or even tensions, which are common both within and outside the Church. In fact, in sociological terms, the speed at which generational differences have developed in recent years has recently been noted.^[15] However, rooted in the awareness of belonging to a communion, differences can be reconciled through love, through charity. Saint Josemaría wrote that “charity does not consist so much in ‘giving’ as in ‘understanding.’”^[16] In a recent gathering with families, the

Father commented on this teaching, explaining that understanding does not primarily mean excusing faults or accepting differences but rather “understanding their good qualities,” adding: “We will always find the positive, if we are moved by love.”^[17] In this way, we recognize the value in others, and it becomes possible to trust them. Indeed, valuing – *affirming* – people is the first way of loving, particularly for a mother or a father.

Like a great symphony

The assimilation and embodiment of a charism does not happen automatically or spontaneously. This is why the Church foresees more intense periods of formation, discernment, and maturation for people. At the same time, once a person’s maturity has been verified, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that they are not called to be

some sort of “copy” of anyone else. Every charism that is truly alive unfolds in a healthy plurality of styles, like the differences that existed among the apostles or those found among the saints throughout history, even within the same vocational path. What is decisive is learning to see the value in each different way of viewing and living, to recognize the good in each of them, to understand what they are. When this happens within a communion of faith, the climate of coexistence among people and generations becomes a shared blessing: the young look at their elders with gratitude, and the older ones look at the youth with serenity and trust. The latter is easier when they have lived spiritual fatherhood, because a father does not replace his children: he generates them, educates them, helps them to grow... and accompanies them so that they can flourish and take the reins of

their own life and of the life both have received.

Finally, within this communion, each person is called to discover their own role, like in a great symphony. Pope Francis often cites in this regard the words of the prophet Joel: *I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your elders shall dream dreams, and your young people shall see visions* (Joel 3:1; cf. Acts 2:17). On one occasion, he commented on it thus: “When young and old alike are open to the Holy Spirit, they make a wonderful combination”^[18] which leads both to grow. One passes on “rootedness” in a past in which God has acted; the other, nourished by those roots, opens up the future. Thus, “If we journey together, young and old, we can be firmly rooted in the present, and from here, revisit the past and look to the future. To revisit the past in order to learn from

history and heal old wounds that at times still trouble us. To look to the future in order to nourish our enthusiasm, cause dreams to emerge, awaken prophecies and enable hope to blossom.”^[19] —

Each generation has its own unique and irreplaceable role in the unfolding of salvation in history. It is like in a symphony: the violin cannot take on the part of the timpani, nor can the brass replace the woodwinds. What is decisive is that while each person interprets their own part, everyone remains united in a shared work, in which each person is valuable. From there stems the importance of knowing one another, of sharing times and places, of showing interest in others. Even among different generations, something the Father describes in one of his letters comes true: “Beginning with the simple relationship of being children of the

same parents, fraternity becomes friendship through love and affection among the siblings, with all that implies of shared interests, understanding, communication, attentive and perceptive service, material help, etc.”^[20] And all this stems from awareness of one’s own fatherhood and filiation.

Transmission, generation, is at the heart of the Church. Just as Jesus came from the Father and placed salvation in the hands of his disciples, it is up to every generation to pass that heritage full of Life on. *The fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field blessed by the Lord*, Isaac said when blessing his son. Saint Josemaría echoed these words when he spoke about the Work as “a ripe field.”^[21] It is an expression he repeated many times, often in front of his younger

children, and it conveyed his trust and healthy paternal pride.^[22] When the relationship between Father and children, and between generations, takes the form of blessing, it becomes possible to look to the future without fear of anything. Then filiation and fraternity shine, stemming from an awareness of the same divine vocation, which is transmitted from generation to generation.

^[1] In English, “Sinner – pray for him.”

^[2] Translated, “He begot sons and daughters.” Cf. P. Urbano, *The Man of Villa Tevere*, New York, Scepter Publishers, 2011.

^[3] St. Josemaría, Intimate notes, no. 1725.

^[4] A. Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei: Volume III, The Divine Ways on Earth*, vol. III, New York, Scepter Publishers, 2005.

^[5] *Ibid.*

^[6] S. Bernal, *Msgr. Josemaria Escriva: A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei*, London, Scepter Publishers 1977, pg. 338.

^[7] Msgr. Julián Herranz recalls some gentle ways in which Saint Josemaría used to remind others that he would pass on, but the Work would continue; cf. J. Herranz, *En las afueras de Jericó*, Madrid, Rialp 2007, pg. 173–174.

^[8] St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 229.

^[9] Qtd. G. Pérez Gómez, *Álvaro d’Ors. Sinfonía de una vida*, Madrid, Rialp 2020, pg. 539.

^[10] P. Casciaro, *Dream and Your Dreams Will Fall Short*, New York, Scepter Publishers, 2008, pg. 151.

^[11] St. Josemaría, *Letter 27*, no. 52; qtd. A. Vázquez de Prada, *The*

Founder of Opus Dei, vol. III, New York, Scepter Publishers, 2005.

^[12] St. Josemaría, *Instruction 31-V-1936*, no. 20; qtd. A. Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III, New York, Scepter Publishers, 2005.

^[13] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 10-II-2024, no. 13.

^[14] Cf. Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Communio Notio*, 28-V-1992, no. 15.

^[15] For example, a recent study has identified up to six generations currently living together; see J. Twenge, *Generations*, New York, Atria Books, 2023.

^[16] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 463.

^[17] F. Ocáriz, Meeting with families, 16-VII-2024.

[18] Pope Francis, *Christus vivit*, 25-III-2019, no. 192.

[19] *Ibid.*, no. 199.

[20] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 1-XI-2019, no. 14.

[21] St. Josemaría, Letter 29, no. 9, in direct reference to *Gen* 27:27.

[22] See, for instance, the homily “Our Dreams Have Come True,” delivered on 9-I-1968, to the young people of the Roman College, published in *In Dialogue with the Lord*, no. 1.