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“I like to think of Opus Dei as a family of families”

Fernanda Lopes is the president of the preparatory Committee for the centenary of Opus Dei. Part of the Central Advisory in Rome since September 2020, she speaks about the recent workshop on the family in which she took part with people from all over the world

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Born in Brasilia and now living in Rome, you have lived with people from various countries, and have come to know many families. So you have a “global” view of the family, its challenges and concerns all over the world.

In fact, I arrived in Rome quite recently, at the end of 2020, in the midst of the pandemic. But Brazil is a country of great variety, which welcomes people from very different origins, and it has many challenges as well, all of which facilitates a universal outlook.

In the globalized context in which we find ourselves, we see a common foundation, stemming from the secularization and undermining of many human goods and ethical values. Then, each continent has its challenges and each country has its specific characteristics. It's hard to

generalize, but I think we could mention:

- In Europe, ageing, loneliness, migration and the need for social integration that this brings with it. We also see that the State cannot claim to be the main provider and we need to move towards family-friendly policies.

- In Latin America, the challenge of seeking social justice: class differences, slums, drug trafficking, corruption... And, on the other hand, great vitality and joy. And a Church that is losing members due to the advance of other Christian confessions.

- In Asia, with cultures of non-Christian origin, we see the absence of certain human values such as forgiveness. In Africa, the presence of polygamy, for example.

- At the same time, we can learn from each continent. For example, in Asia we find positive human values such as respect, veneration for the elderly, love for a job well done, a sense of justice; and in Africa the sense of community and universal fraternity.

A family atmosphere has been a characteristic of the spirit of Opus Dei right from the beginning. As president of the preparatory Committee for the centenary of the Prelature, could you tell us something about these preparations; do they include any initiative especially related to the family?

The Work, as the faithful of Opus Dei call it, is part of the Church, and the Church is a family and Mother. Saint Josemaria spoke of the great family of the Work. I like to think of the Work as a family of families. During these years, we would like to delve

deeper into this characteristic. We want to create spaces for reflection, learning, listening and participation; it is families who will suggest where we can direct our efforts, what we need to look at more carefully. We will do this together.

I can highlight a few points here: supporting projects that already exist in favor of families and considering whether they are in line with current social needs; helping each person in the Work to take the initiative, to respond in a personal and creative way, so that each supernumerary woman or man is a protagonist; encouraging everyone to develop their personal talents and gifts; paying more attention to the poor, the elderly, the vulnerable.

We want to reach the Centenary renewed in our evangelizing mission and strengthened by the human and supernatural ties that unite us.

The *Amoris Laetitia* Year of the Family convoked by Pope Francis ended on June 26, 2022, with the 10th World Meeting of Families in Rome. The International University of Catalonia's Institute for Higher Family Studies organized a workshop recently in which you took part together with more than 800 people from 50 countries.

Families today, faced with many difficulties, can sometimes lose sight of the beauty and joy of family life and love. This workshop provided a professional approach on ways to accompany families better today, and shed light on the leading role that families themselves play in their environment, with their family members and friends. It was also a help to understand in greater depth the challenges of formation that we face in Opus Dei in trying to

accompany supernumeraries and cooperators more closely.

Saint Josemaría said: “The secret of married happiness lies in everyday things, not in daydreams. It lies in finding the hidden joy of coming home in the evening, in affectionate relations with their children, in the everyday work in which the whole family cooperates; in good humour in the face of difficulties”

(*Conversations*, no. 91). Perhaps we should rediscover the value of daily life and small virtues like service and kindness, and idealize less?

I fully agree! Often we can be waiting for better days, a change of circumstances, and we forget about the present and the specific and small realities that we have at hand. The beauty of married love and family life, it seems to me, requires

learning how to appreciate the greatness of small gestures of affection, affirmation and reaffirmation, lived not with routine, but with the newness that the vision of faith gives. Also accepting with peace that at times we will fail, that there will be moments of turmoil in the family. But we each need to strive to be a “guardian of the family's beauty,” as the Pope recently said.

On the other hand, with a realistic outlook, Saint Josemaría said that this strong love we all aspire to includes understanding and love for the defects of the others; we cannot limit our love to ideal situations.

The workshop discussed how to accompany “real,” not “ideal” families. One reality we often see in families today is separation and loneliness. What can be done to help these families?

Yes, it's true. And no one is immune from that risk. What is faithfulness but vulnerability accompanied by God's grace, by one's spouse, by friends?

The accompaniment discussed in the workshop aims precisely at preventing this risk and attaining a better knowledge of what the person and the family are, and a better knowledge of oneself, so that one can be very free and very happy. I also think that the human being's capacity to recover from bad experiences is striking.

Accompaniment is also helping people to receive forgiveness as a gift and learning to forgive oneself, looking for small positive points in each person's life. And seeking the advice of experts when necessary. To be true Christians we need to share in people's lives and walk together with them.

Sometimes we accompany people without knowing it or almost without realizing it. For example: through our friendship, or our witness in social media that it is possible – and attractive – to live according to our convictions. The initiatives change according to the needs and responses that families today require.

What message would you like to leave for families and those who are thinking about forming a family.

Two messages: present a smiling face to others, as this dissolves frictions, shortens distances and facilitates understanding and dialogue; and the Pope's advice to use every day the words *please, thank you, I'm sorry*.

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