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Letter from the Prelate (28 October 2020) | Vocation

Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz offers some reflections on the spirit of Opus Dei and how it is lived in accord with each person's circumstances.

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Dearly beloved, may Jesus watch over my daughters and sons for me.

1 With the centenary of the Work's birth on the horizon, and thinking of the vast apostolic panorama that our Lord is placing before our eyes, I would like us to meditate, slowly and deeply, on St Josemaría's teaching about how the universal Christian vocation to holiness is to become a reality for each one of us. From the beginning, our Father understood

that the universality of this call implied that the fullness of love for God and others was possible also in the middle of the world – in our real world, with its lights and shadows.

I. The gift of vocation

A sovereign grace

2 God chooses and calls everyone: *He chose us in Christ, that we should be holy and blameless in his presence through love (Eph 1:4)*. Our awareness of this gift and of our responsibility in the face of it, nurtured with a youthful soul, will lead us to cooperate in sanctifying the world. In communion with everyone in the Church, let us try to respond generously to that Christian vocation as it is made specific for each one of us in Opus Dei.

Let us see the greatness of this call, which fills our journey in this world with an air of eternity, in spite of our

limitations and mistakes and the difficulties we encounter along the way: “in spite of the in-spite-ofs,” as our Father used to say.

St Josemaría spoke of “the sovereign grace of our vocation.” It is not something temporary, but a permanent grace. “It is a new vision of life (...) as though a light had been lit within us;” and it is, at the same time, “a mysterious impulse, a vital force which is somewhat like a sweeping avalanche.”[1] In short, it is a grace that embraces our whole life and that shows itself as light and as strength: light, so that we can see the way, see what God wants of us; and strength, so as to be able to respond to the call, to say yes and to go forward on the path.

In one of his letters, our Father writes that “in a vocation, the only things that count are the grace of God – which is its cause – and the

generosity of the person concerned, moved by this grace.”[2] God always wants our freedom to have a decisive role in the response and, therefore, in the very configuration of the vocation – together with grace, which does not take away our freedom but perfects it. It is a freedom that, during the prior stage of discernment, also counts on the light shed by the advice of those who can and should give it.

One same spirit

3 Everyone in the Work, each in his or her personal circumstances, has the same vocation. We are called to be and to do Opus Dei, with the same spirit, with the same apostolic mission, with the same means.

We all have *the same spirit*, which moves us to sanctify ordinary life and, in a special way, our work. “There is no noble human work on earth that cannot be divinized,

cannot be sanctified. There is no work that we should not sanctify and make holy and sanctifying for us and for others.”[3] This spirit leads us to seek union with God in whatever we face, at every moment of our lives. And so the sanctification of our work is the *axis* on which our search for holiness, for identification with Jesus Christ turns, through our correspondence to grace.

This brings with it a positive view of earthly realities, which are those God has given us. We love this world, without ignoring what is opposed to the good in it (see *1 Jn* 2:15). Its concerns are also our concerns, and if its joys usually make it easier for us to love it, its sorrows should lead us to love it even more. What a comfort and what a sense of responsibility those words of St Paul should arouse in us: *All things are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's* (*1 Cor* 3:23).

And if the sanctification of our work is the *axis* of our holiness, our sense of divine filiation has to be the foundation. Filiation which, through sanctifying grace, “introduces” us into the divine life of the Holy Trinity, as children of the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit. “By the grace of baptism, we have been made children of God. With this free divine decision, man’s natural dignity has been incomparably exalted. And while sin destroyed this marvellous reality, the Redemption has restored it yet more admirably (see *Missale Romanum, Ordo Missæ*), by bringing us to share even more closely in the divine filiation of the Word.”[4]

As it is the foundation, our divine filiation shapes our whole life. It leads us to pray with the trust of God’s children, to pass through life with the poise of God’s children, to reason and decide with the freedom

of God's children, to face pain and suffering with the serenity of God's children, to appreciate beautiful things as a child of God does. In short, divine filiation "is there in every thought, every desire, every affection."[5] And it necessarily expands into fraternity. *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God* (Rom 8:16). This witness is our filial love for God,[6] which brings with it fraternal love. "Others drink from other sources. For us, the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ."[7]

In short, the centre and root of our spiritual life is the Eucharistic Sacrifice. It is the root objectively, because "as often as the sacrifice of the Cross, in which '*Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed*' (1 Cor 5:7), is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is accomplished."[8]

But whether our life is really subjectively centred on the Eucharist depends also on our personal correspondence to grace: “Keep struggling, so that the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar really becomes the centre and root of your interior life, and so your whole day will turn into an act of worship – an extension of the Mass you have attended and a preparation for the next. Your whole day will then be an act of worship that overflows in aspirations, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the offering up of your professional work and your family life...”[9]

From the Eucharistic centre of our Christian life there arises also the development and effectiveness of our apostolic mission: “If the centre around which your thoughts and hopes turn is the Tabernacle, then, my child, how abundant the fruits of your sanctity and apostolate will be!”[10]

One same apostolic mission

4 We have *the same apostolic mission*. We are all equally called to sanctify ourselves and to collaborate with the Church's mission to transform the world in a Christian way; in our case, by living the spirit of Opus Dei. The mission of the Work can only be properly understood within the great mission of the Church, in which "all of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and his strength, and gives meaning to our lives."[11]

Only in the Church, Christ's Mystical Body, do we receive the strength to serve the world of our time fruitfully. That is why, even with all our limitations, we share the concerns, worries and sufferings of the Church in every age and in every place. Each

one of us can make our own that attitude of St Paul: *Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?* (2 Cor 11:29).

5 Our apostolic mission is not limited to certain activities, because with the love of Jesus Christ we can transform everything into a Christian service to others. Each one fully carries out the mission of the Work with our own lives: in our families, in our workplace, in the society in which we live, among our friends and acquaintances. This is why we understand St Josemaría's insistence that in the Work, "we give primary and fundamental importance to the spontaneity of the individual, to free and responsible initiative guided by the action of the Spirit, and not to organisational structures."[12] This is also why the main apostolate of the Work is the apostolate of friendship and trust that each one of us carries out personally.

In the light of all this, we can better understand in what sense “all our apostolic tasks and the instruments we use to carry them out are *onus et honor* – a burden and an honour – for all: for the numeraries, the associates and the supernumeraries, and also for the cooperators.”[13] Through the communion of saints, we carry out our apostolic mission all together, wherever we are. And so St Josemaría reminds us, referring to everyone in the Church, that “if we use the means available to us, we will become salt and light and leaven for the world; we will be the consolation of God.”[14]

The same means

6 In order to accomplish our mission, Christ is the way. And to follow him as disciples and apostles, all of us in Opus Dei have the *same means*: the same norms and customs of Christian life, the same means of

spiritual and doctrinal formation. They are lived in different ways according to our personal circumstances, but the whole is always basically the same.

It is good not to lose sight of the fact that they are means (not ends) that lead us, by God's grace, to grow in our contemplative life in the midst of our human concerns, nourished by the superabundance of life in Christ given to us by the Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist.

These practices of piety are part of a loving dialogue that embraces our whole life and leads us to a personal encounter with Christ. They are moments in which God awaits us, in order to share his life with ours. The effort to fulfil them is something we find liberating, because "sanctity has the flexibility of supple muscles (...). Sanctity is not rigid like cardboard; it knows how to smile, to give way to

others and to hope. It is life – supernatural life.”[15]

In this way, trusting in God’s mercy, we will try to live always seeking the perfection of charity, according to the spirit God has given us. Being holy does not mean doing more and more things, or fulfilling the task of meeting certain criteria we have set ourselves. The way to holiness, as St Paul explains, consists in corresponding to the action of the Holy Spirit, until Christ is formed in us (see *Gal* 4:19).

Unity and diversity

7 Our Father saw the Work’s functioning as “one single fabric,” made up of the different ways we live out the same vocation. That is why he insisted that in the Work there are no classes, no first or second-class members: not on account of the different ways in which our vocation is lived out, nor

because of the type of professional work we do. As in any reality of a supernatural character, the essential thing – something that cannot be judged on this earth – is how we correspond to God's love.

St Josemaría expressed this unity of vocation by saying that ours is “only one divine vocation, only one spiritual reality, which adapts flexibly to the personal circumstances of each individual and to his or her state in life. This identical vocation entails an equality of dedication, within the natural limits that differing situations impose.”[16]

Naturally, unity and diversity in the Work includes what corresponds to men and women: there is a unity of spirit, of apostolic mission, and of means, together with the separation of the activities proper to each. Furthermore, in matters common to

the whole Work, there is a unity of direction between men and women at the central and regional levels. The governing bodies of the men and the women have equal initiative and responsibility. In specific important cases established by law, they have the same competence to accept or reject the proposals of the Prelate or, in the regions, those of the Regional Vicar.

With all our life

8 It might seem that some are more dedicated to the mission of the Work than others. This is not the case. All live with *equal dedication*, because being and doing Opus Dei does not consist only, or even mainly, in taking part in certain tasks or in corporate apostolic activities. Our vocation, and the mission that corresponds to it, encompasses our whole life, not just a part of it; our whole life is an opportunity and a

means to meet Christ and to do apostolate.

St Josemaría wrote that our call presupposes a “full vocational encounter, because whatever a person’s marital status, he or she lives a full dedication to their work and to the faithful fulfilment of the duties of their state, according to the spirit of Opus Dei. Hence, to dedicate oneself to God in Opus Dei does not imply a selection of activities; it does not mean dedicating more or less time in our life to doing some good works, while abandoning others. Opus Dei is grafted onto our whole life.”^[17] *A full vocational encounter*, embracing the whole of my own life, with full dedication, because everything contains a call from God to love him and to serve others, with a love that is inner freedom. As Don Alvaro commented, “the Work demands a great elasticity: a minimum of rules, because they are

necessary; but a minimum, so that the letter does not kill the spirit: *Littera enim occidit, spiritus autem vivificat* (2 Cor 3:6).”[18]

9 In these pages I would also like to invite you to renew your gratitude to God for the gift of your vocation. A joyful gratitude, not only for the beauty of the Work, when we see how God wants it to be in its fullness, but also when each one of us sees how that beauty is made fully present in the way in which each of the faithful of the Prelature personally lives out this single vocation: as numeraries (in the case of women, also as assistant numeraries), as associates, as supernumeraries, or as members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross.

In this context, I would like to emphasize what I wrote to you a few months ago: we cannot let ourselves be disheartened by the experience of

our own personal weakness and that of others, compared to the wonderful vista that the Christian faith and the spirit of the Work place before us. In the face of the discouragement that can arise in us when we see the disproportion between the ideal and the poor reality of our lives, let us have the security that we can begin again every day with the strength of the grace of the Holy Spirit.[19]

II. The vocation to the Work as a numerary

10 “At the heart of the Work, the numeraries place themselves at the feet of all their brothers and sisters, in a special mission of service to make their way of holiness pleasant. They look after them in all their needs of soul and body, they help them in their difficulties, and they make it possible for everyone’s apostolate to be fruitful, through their selfless sacrifice.”[20] In this

way the numeraries “give life” to their brothers and sisters. Their work, “by keeping everyone spiritually active and awake, brings about an extraordinary reality of fraternity and unity.”[21]

In the numeraries, the vocation to Opus Dei is determined by the gift of apostolic celibacy and by their full availability for tasks of formation and apostolic activities. This availability, understood and carried out as a special mission of service to others, is facilitated by the fact that, in principle, numeraries live in centres of the Work. However, many circumstances may arise that could make it better not to do so. This does not affect their identity or their mission, since they will always know that they are there to serve all the others, wherever they live.

An available heart

11 The readiness of numeraries to serve others consists in a genuine *availability of heart*: the *effective* freedom to live only for God and, through him, for others, coupled with a willingness to take on the tasks required in the Work.

For some, this availability will involve taking part in tasks of formation and apostolic work, while they also dedicate themselves to some professional work that corresponds to their talents, studies and preferences, in order to bring the joy of the Gospel there. For others, it will be a matter of dedicating themselves professionally to the administration of the centres of the Work, or to tasks of formation, government, direction or cooperation in apostolic activities.

On the other hand, our availability cannot be limited to a passive attitude of doing *what I've been asked*

to do, but shows itself fully when we think about what talents we have received from God, so as to put them at the service of the apostolic mission. And we “make the first move”: we offer ourselves, with initiative. Therefore, availability is not immobility but, on the contrary, the habitual desire to move at *God’s pace*.

We have to understand and live out our full availability as freedom, in the sense of being tied down only by love (that is, not tied down as a necessity to a job, the place where we reside, etc., while also being well rooted where we are). What makes us free is not the external circumstances, but the love we carry in our hearts.

As a specific expression of this particular task of service, our Father foresaw that the work of government in Opus Dei would fall to the

numeraries. We need some people to dedicate themselves to this work, since it sustains the life of the whole. But it would be a mistake to think that those who have this dedication to the tasks of government or formation are more available or are doing *Opus Dei more*. This is what Don Javier meant when he wrote in one of his letters: “There is no other option than for some of my daughters and sons to cut back on their professional activity – or even to leave it completely, at least for a while – in order to devote themselves to helping their brothers and sisters in the spiritual life and directing the apostolic work.”[22]

Our Father expresses this full interior disposition in many places. For example: “all have a divine vocation, but the numeraries have to offer themselves directly and immediately to God in a holocaust, giving everything, their whole heart,

their activities without limitation, their property, their reputation.”[23] It is precisely a matter of freely giving up all their activities, whatever they may be, without setting limits, in order to do the Work. Obviously, there are sometimes circumstances which objectively limit the possibility of their taking on certain assignments or tasks at a given time. So I say again that what is important is their interior disposition of full availability to serve others, for the love of Christ.

A group nailed to the Cross

12 Let us also remember those other words of St Josemaría: “Our Lord does not want his Work to be something merely transient. He wants it to be immortal: he wants there to be in the Work a group nailed to the Cross. The Holy Cross will make us enduring, always with

the spirit of the Gospel itself, producing the apostolate of action as the sweet-tasting fruit of prayer and sacrifice.”[24] Our Father does not indicate who make up this group nailed to the Cross. But Don Alvaro, in his note commenting on this paragraph, points out that the different ways of living one’s vocation in the Work are already announced or alluded to here. From the context we can think that, in this case, it refers above all to the numeraries.

In some other places, St Josemaría also refers to priests as especially nailed to the Cross. In reality all of us, including the associates and the supernumeraries, must be nailed to the Cross, because that is where we find our Lord – as our Father says in words that express a profound personal experience of his: “To have the Cross is to identify oneself with

Christ, it is to be Christ and, therefore, to be children of God.’[25]

Although it may sometimes be hard, from a human point of view, for numeraries to leave their previous profession for a time in order to dedicate themselves professionally to other types of activities (administration of centres of the Work, government, formation, direction or cooperation in apostolic activities), it is a fruitful encounter with the Cross, the place of the most profound identification with Christ and the source of great – and often unexpected – supernatural joy.

13 When we ask for admission to the Work, we understand and freely adopt – out of love! – this attitude of availability, which leads us to plunge into a divine project. At the same time, like everything else in the spiritual life, the effective maturing of our self-giving grows over time.

This growth occurs through our formation, through our interior life and through our various experiences of self-giving – in small changes of plan, tasks, etc. – which prepare our souls for larger changes, if necessary. Naturally, when it comes to major assignments or changes, the directors always seek first the opinion of the ones concerned; though the latter, while pointing out with simplicity any difficulties they may see, at the same time try to maintain a willingness to be available for whatever is needed, out of love for God and souls.

What is decisive, I insist, is that each one should have this habitual interior disposition of dedication to our brothers and sisters and to so many other people who are waiting for our Christian service: *Lift up your eyes and see how the fields are already white for harvest (Jn 4:35).*

This attitude is perfectly compatible with a healthy professional ambition and with a natural and responsible concern to support ourselves economically and to attend to the needs of our supernatural family. Our willingness to change professional tasks, if the Work requires it, precisely in order to dedicate ourselves to the formation of others, goes hand in hand with the conviction that we are women and men who want to take part in the challenges of the world, like our peers, because our mission is to help transform the world and bring it to God. And this is also done in a very effective way from the positions of direction and formation in the Work.

You, the numeraries, live the gift of apostolic celibacy as the fullness of love in Christ, which opens up a spiritual fatherhood and motherhood. You are called to be living witnesses of total dedication to

God, in the middle of the world, being fully available to serve everyone: in love with Jesus, with those around you, and with the world. You have received a special call to watch over a supernatural family and to care for your brothers and sisters.

You have a very broad horizon: with your committed life, at times perhaps hidden and without any human brilliance, you reach every corner of the world with your fruitfulness.

III. The vocation to the Work as an assistant numerary

14 You, the assistant numeraries, have a special function of serving, which you carry out by creating and maintaining the atmosphere of a Christian home in the centres of the Work. You make this task a reality through your professional work, which in your case is the Administration. As you know, it is not

just a question of carrying out a series of material tasks which between us we can do and must do in one way or another, but of planning, organising and coordinating them in such a way that the result is precisely a home where everyone feels at home, welcomed, *affirmed*, cared for, and at the same time responsible. This task, which is of great importance for every human person, has repercussions on the physiognomy and spirituality of the whole Work, of each and every one of its members. You women thus become “an irreplaceable support and a source of spiritual strength for others, who perceive the great energy”[26] of your spirit.

The priority of the person and the family

15 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. You remember how our Father so often told us that the bonds in the Work are stronger than those of blood, something which also has consequences in terms of affection and mutual love.

St Josemaría often reflected on the fact that the work of the Administration is the same as the one Our Lady did. Thus the “family air” of the Work must be like a duplicate, a continuation of the atmosphere (although we have not seen it, we can imagine it) of the home in Nazareth.

Although the work of the Administration of our centres is called by different names in different cultures, in reality you assistant numeraries are sisters, mothers, an integral part of the family, just like the Father and the other children.

Because of the grace you have received from God to take care of everyone in the Work, St Josemaría used to say that if he had been able, he would have become an assistant numerary. He called you his “little daughters” because you were the last to arrive in the Work, not because he considered you to be minors: on the contrary, he relied in a special way on your mature and firm faithfulness in order to carry out the great plans of the Work.

From all environments

16 It is a wonderful reality that you, the assistant numeraries, come from all walks of life. In fact, people are sometimes unsure whether God is asking them to be a numerary or an assistant numerary. One element (among others) to keep in mind is the person’s inclination towards tasks more directly oriented to serving and caring for people. Of course,

discernment depends ultimately on each individual, with the guidance received in spiritual direction and from the directors.

In any case, we understand that the work of the Administration takes on a great dignity: that of imparting and maintaining the warmth of the home in a family. Furthermore, those who work in the Administration, “through this profession – because it is a true and noble one – have a positive influence not only on the family but also on a multitude of friends and acquaintances, on people with whom they relate in one way or another, sometimes fulfilling a much more extensive task than other professionals.”[27]

Apostolate of apostolates

17 St Josemaría valued the work of the Administration to the point of considering it the *apostolate of the*

apostolates: without it, the Work could not move forward.

It is the apostolate of the apostolates, in the first place because it is in itself a very direct apostolate. I repeat that it is not limited to providing material services, although these are necessary and important in themselves. Above all, this task – transformed into prayer – has a very direct influence on the human and spiritual formation of the people in the centre being administered. The environment you create is formative, very formative.

In fact, your well-done work makes our spirit something palpable and communicates it effectively by way of deeds, in a tangible and constant way. That is why you try to give the greatest possible professionalism to your housework, just as each one of my children does with their own task. And by raising it to the ambit of

sanctified work, you put your professional competence directly at the service of persons, making it a factor to humanise and inspire the professional work of all.

In the second place, the work of the Administration is the apostolate of apostolates because it makes the other apostolates possible, acting like the sap and stimulus for each of them, especially to the extent that you try to transform your work into a dialogue with God. “When you work in the Administration,” St Josemaría wrote, “you take part in all the apostolates, you cooperate in all the work we do. The good progress of your work is a necessary condition, the greatest impulse for the whole Work, if you do it with love for God.”^[28] It is very noticeable when, at the beginning of the apostolic work in a country or a city, there is no Administration yet; it is also noticeable that, when there is one,

the Work becomes more alive and more dynamic. In addition, it is logical that the assistant numeraries should take part in many other apostolic activities, as far as it is possible for each one.

We also say that the Administration is the “backbone” of the Work because it supports the whole body, which otherwise could not stand upright. And this is the truth, thank God; it is something we must always remember and value. Naturally, you other numeraries who work in the Administration also make up this backbone and this apostolate of apostolates.

You, my assistant numerary daughters, have an exciting mission: to transform this world – so full of individualism and indifference today – into a real home. Your task, when it is carried out with love, can reach all environments. You are building a

more human and a more divine world, because you are dignifying it with your work turned into prayer, with your love, and with the professionalism you put into looking after people in their entirety.

IV. The vocation to the Work as an associate

With its own character

18 You, the associates, carry out Opus Dei mainly through a deep personal apostolate in your own professional and family environment, and by working with the numeraries in caring for the other faithful of the Work. By your lives you show the completely free nature of the apostolic activity of every baptized person, carrying it out with all the energy of a celibate heart. That is why St Josemaría could say to you: “I am envious of you: your dedication to God is total and complete just like mine, but you can reach further.”[29]

What did he mean by this? He meant that the key thing is to be in the middle of the world, in the middle of its activities, its work, its families, in order to lead a Christian life there.

You find yourselves in quite varied circumstances and you move in all kinds of professional environments. Your life is open to an unlimited field of possibilities in which to embody and spread the spirit of Opus Dei. Because your origins are so varied, you reach out into the whole social fabric; because you stay longer in each place, you make it much easier to implant the apostolates in the area; your way of life allows you to cultivate a great multiplicity of relationships, and to do so in a very stable way: in your family and your profession, in your neighbourhood, in the town, city or country where you live. “You reach further,” as St Josemaría said, not only in terms of the breadth of your apostolate, but

also in its depth, because you show in your own lives what it means to give yourself to God in the *middle of the world*, with an undivided heart.

So we can understand very well why our Father wanted there to be twice as many associates as numeraries: because the key thing is our work in the middle of ordinary circumstances, the work that belongs to each one of us.

If someone, when considering their possible vocation to the Work, were to hesitate between becoming a numerary or an associate, we might have to make them see that it would be a mistake to think that being a numerary is better than being an associate. This is very important in discerning a vocation. There are cases where the way in which the vocation to the Work is specified is obvious: for example, a married man can be a supernumerary, but not an

associate or a numerary. But there are other cases which are less obvious, and the final discernment must be made by the person concerned: he or she is the one who experiences what God is asking specifically of them, within a single and common vocation. Logically, as a matter of prudence, it is very good to seek advice in spiritual direction, and also to speak to the directors, who know the person and wish to discern with him or her what God's will is.

The fragrance of Christ

19 Referring specifically to the associates, St Josemaría wrote: “Through their work, in all walks of life, in all places (at times in corporate apostolates), in the most diverse corners of the world, they bear with them everywhere, among their companions, the fragrance of Christ; and they strive to give a

Christian meaning to the social, professional and financial undertakings, both public and private, of those who come from the same background and have the same social position. And all this is normally done without having to change their work or place of residence.”[30] I myself have heard Don Javier say – picking up a teaching of St Josemaría’s – that you associates express what Opus Dei is in a particularly clear way, through the sanctification of your ordinary life, your professional work and your family life, without changing your place.

You, the associates, sometimes work in corporate educational establishments or other apostolic activities. But that is not the main way you participate in the mission of the Work, for the whole of it is in your hands. Sometimes you have to take on these tasks, but your main

way is to sanctify your ordinary life, treating people with friendship and trust and, when appropriate, accompanying your friends to the means of formation of St Raphael's and St Gabriel's work... In a word, God is calling you to be leaven within the dough. The important thing for you, I repeat, is your apostolic work in the middle of your ordinary circumstances and the professional work that belongs to each of you.

V. Priests of the Prelature

20 From among the numeraries and associates come the vocations to the priesthood in the Work, which are as essential as the laity in the theological and juridical reality of the Prelature. This call is not a crowning of the vocation to the Work, but a new way of living it, with "a greater obligation than the others 'to put their hearts on the floor like a

carpet, so that their brothers and sisters can tread softly’.”[31]

Together with the tasks belonging to their priestly ministry in the Church, which is centred on the Eucharist, the priests of the Prelature dedicate themselves chiefly to their ministerial service to the other faithful and to the priestly care of their apostolic activities. Specifically, in accord with the particular pastoral mission of the Prelature, they are concerned above all with celebrating the sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance; preaching the Word of God; spiritual direction; and an extensive task of doctrinal formation.

The fact that the priests of the Prelature live the spirit of the Work, just like everyone else, implies a certain priestly style. They necessarily reflect a secular tone in their ministry; they are very careful to respect and promote the

responsibility and initiative of the lay faithful; they act in a supernatural way in order to bring people closer to God; they foster in those around them that freedom of spirit which is love; they use their initiative to build up an abundant priestly work. Naturally, as far as possible, they also cooperate in the activities of the diocese where they live.

At the service of others

21 At the beginning of one of his letters, which was addressed especially to his priestly sons, St Josemaría wrote: “My priest sons, you have been ordained to serve. Let me begin by reminding you that your priestly ministry is a mission of service. Since I know you well, I am aware that this word ‘service’ expresses all that you wish and all that you are. This good and sincere desire of yours to be forever occupied in doing good to others, just

like your brothers and sisters, is for me a source of great pride and consolation, and is why I can say that you are *gaudium meum et corona mea* (Phil 4:1): my joy and my crown.”[32]

As priests, your spirit of service moves you to feel – and to be, in practice – just one more among your brothers, aware that in the Work there is “only one class, although it is made up of both clergy and laity.”[33] At the same time, with your example and your word you try to be like alarm clocks to awaken the desire for holiness in others, and to be instruments of unity in the Work. While staying very close to everyone, try to maintain a proper human level, a priestly seriousness in your appearance, your conversations, etc.

My children, if St Josemaría said to everyone that “it is Christ we must talk about, not ourselves,”[34] you

priests must make a special effort not to shine, not to take the lead role, trying to ensure that the lead role and the brightness in your life are those of Christ, and that in any case it is your sisters and brothers who shine. To do this – you know it very well and are already trying to live it – you have a special need for union with God, prayer and joyful sacrifice, in a unity of life.

VI. On the apostolic celibacy of the numeraries and associates

22 In the numeraries and associates, the vocation to the Work involves apostolic celibacy, which is a gift from God and a response to that gift through a correspondence of love for Love. “Always bear in mind that Love is the reason for our celibacy – the Love of all loves.”[35] Hence we should not think of celibacy only or mainly as a functional choice: that is, as something that enables us to

dedicate ourselves more to the tasks of the Work or go from one place to another. It is true that celibacy makes this possible, or easier, but its fundamental motive is that it is a special gift that identifies us with Christ's life. "Celibacy must be a witness of faith: faith in God becomes palpable in this form of life, which can only draw meaning from God. To base our life on this, renouncing marriage and the family, means to welcome and experience God as a reality, so as to be able to bring him to others." [36]

Apostolic celibacy does not separate us from others. But because it means making a commitment to God with an undivided heart, it has to be noticed in the tenor of our dedicated life, analogous to that of a married person, who cannot behave as if they had not made a commitment of faithfulness to their spouse.

A vocation, when lived radically, will sometimes clash with the standards of the world. Here, too, we can apply those more general words of St Josemaría: “And in a paganised or pagan environment, when my life clashes with its surroundings, won’t my naturalness seem artificial?’ you ask me. And I reply: Undoubtedly your life will clash with theirs; and that contrast – faith confirmed by works! – is exactly the naturalness I ask of you.”[37]

Let us renew, once and again, our conviction that the gift of apostolic celibacy is a special sign of divine love, a call to a particular identification with Jesus Christ, which also brings with it a greater capacity to love everyone – even humanly speaking, but above all supernaturally. Thus it is that celibacy, in forgoing physical paternity and maternity, makes a much greater spiritual motherhood

or fatherhood possible. But in any case, it is those who love God more, whether they are celibate or married, who will in fact be more identified with Christ, for marriage is also a “divine path on earth.”[38]

VII. The vocation to the Work as supernumerary

It is a great grace from God

23 The majority of the faithful of Opus Dei is made up of you, the supernumeraries, who strive to sanctify all the dimensions of your lives, especially your married and family life, since you are usually married. In 1947, in response to some reflections he had received about supernumeraries, St Josemaría wrote to his children in Spain: “I read your notes on supernumeraries. (...) I’ll give your notes back to you next week with some specific comments. Anyway, I’ll say now that we cannot lose sight of the fact that

we are not talking about the inscription of some gentlemen in a particular association (...) To be a supernumerary is a great grace from God!”[39] It is God who gives the grace, “a great grace,” says St Josemaría: that of the vocation to the Work. For supernumeraries, this vocation is a special help for them to travel along their own path of sanctification: the path marked out by baptism and, in most cases, by the reception of the sacrament of matrimony and the formation of a family.

The call presupposes a choice and, as I wrote earlier, it is directed to a mission: to be and to do Opus Dei in the Church. In the *Instruction on St Gabriel's work*, referring to supernumeraries, St Josemaría wrote: “I see now this great team of men and women in action (...) each one, conscious of having been chosen by God to achieve holiness in the

middle of society, precisely where he or she is, with a solid and learned piety, striving to fulfil joyfully the duty of every moment – although it requires an effort.”[40] So let us never see our vocation as a set of demands, of obligations (although it has them, of course), but above all as a choice made by God, a great gift from God.

The horizon that gives meaning to your mission is to be “a leaven that will divinise men and, in making them divine, will make them at the same time truly human.”[41] Like Aquila and Priscilla, who welcomed St Paul in Corinth (see *Acts* 18:2) and who proclaimed the Gospel to Apollos and many others (see *Acts* 18:26; *Rom* 16:3; *1 Cor* 16:19); like so many of those first Christians who led a life as normal as that of their contemporaries and who, at the same time, were salt of the earth and light of a world that was in darkness.

“Among the Supernumeraries there is the full range of social backgrounds, professions and jobs. All kinds of circumstances and situations are sanctified by my children, men and women who within their own state in life and situation in the world dedicate themselves to seeking Christian perfection with a ‘fullness of vocation’.”[42] Note how our Father insists on the “fullness of vocation.” As far as variety is concerned, this clearly follows from the fact that the Work is a path of sanctification and apostolate in ordinary life; an ordinary life that admits all the variety of whatever is honest and human.

Marriage and family

24 The vocation as a supernumerary in the Work develops in the first place in the family sphere. “Your first apostolate is in the home.”[43] St

Josemaría dreamed that the homes of supernumeraries would be “bright and cheerful, centres for the spreading of the Gospel and its message.”[44] This is the heritage you leave to society. That is why he also wrote to you: “The formation that Opus Dei gives you leads you to appreciate the beauty of the family, the supernatural work entailed in forming a home and the fount of sanctification that lies hidden in your conjugal duties.”[45]

Moreover, you are called upon to influence other families positively: in particular, by helping them to make their family life more Christian and by preparing the youth for marriage, so that many young people will be enthused and will be able to form other Christian homes, from which the many vocations to apostolic celibacy that God desires will also arise.

Even if you are single or widowed – or, of course, couples without children – you can see in the family your first apostolate, because you will always have, in one way or another, a family environment to nourish.

Having a Christian influence on our own environment

25 St Josemaría saw in you a great mobilization of Christians, who would radiate the love of Christ in their work and in their social surroundings, principally through their apostolate of friendship and trust; and who, in doing so, would also contribute to improving the structures of society, making them ever more human and suited to the life of God's children, taking an active part in solving the problems of our time. "You are doing a most fruitful apostolate when you strive to orient in a Christian way the

professions, institutions and human structures in which you move and work.”[46]

So it is clear that the vocation of the supernumeraries, and the mission it entails, cannot be limited to living some practices of piety, attending some means of formation and participating in some apostolic activity. Rather, it encompasses your whole life, because everything in your life can be an encounter with God and a form of apostolate. To do Opus Dei is to do it in our own lives and, through the communion of saints, to cooperate in carrying it out throughout the world. Or, as our founder reminded us in a graphic phrase, to do Opus Dei *by each one being Opus Dei*.

When you feel the Work as your own, you will have a lively interest in forming yourselves, in bringing Christ to others, and in giving an

account of your faith. In fact, “the formation you receive in Opus Dei is flexible; it adapts to your personal and social situation like a glove to the hand. (...) While we have only one spirit and only one set of ascetic means, these can and should become a reality in each situation without being rigid.”[47]

This flexibility that avoids rigidity does not mean that being a supernumerary entails a lesser demand to be heroic or radical in our following of Christ. Hence we should not focus so much on the diversity of your circumstances as on the real essence of what, in those circumstances, is your call from God, your God-given mission. In any situation, it is a question of being with Christ, loving Christ, working with Christ and taking him everywhere.

When St Josemaría wrote that “the supernumeraries dedicate themselves partially to the service of the Work,”[48] he was referring to your actual availability for specific apostolic undertakings, and not to your doing the Work partially, since – I repeat again – we carry out this task of doing the Work with our whole life. This is why our Father also wrote, when speaking about the apostolic mission of supernumeraries: “This apostolate is not carried out in a sporadic or fortuitous way, but habitually and by vocation, such that it becomes a life-long ideal.”[49]

God is counting on you to fan out, spontaneously and with initiative, and to bring the joy of the Gospel to all kinds of people. “In your apostolic action you have to take the initiative, within the very wide margin indicated by our spirit, to find the activities that best suit the

circumstances – whatever the place, the environment and the time.”[50]

This is the great mission of my supernumerary sons and daughters, a mission that has no limits. “There should not be a single village without some Supernumerary there radiating our spirit.”[51]

VIII. The vocation to the Work as an associate and supernumerary of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross

26 “You are as much a part of Opus Dei as I am,” said St Josemaría to the priests and deacons, associates and supernumeraries of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, who are not incardinated in the Prelature.

Naturally, the call to holiness in the middle of the world also includes secular priests incardinated in their dioceses. The vocation to the Work is the same: the divine call to seek

holiness and to exercise apostolate in each one's circumstances and in the fulfilment of the duties proper to each one, with the same spirit and the same ascetic means, and forming part of the family of Opus Dei.

The juridical manner of belonging to the Work is certainly different for the faithful of the Prelature and for the members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross who are not incardinated in the Prelature.

However, the difference in the juridical bond (respectively, of jurisdiction or association) does not detract in any way from the fact that the call is identical, to pursue holiness with the same spirit and the specific means of Opus Dei.

This juridical difference allows you to receive the call to the Work without being taken out of your place, as you remain incardinated in your respective dioceses without the

slightest change in your relationship with your bishop and your fellow-priests. By providing the appropriate means, your vocation strengthens and facilitates the faithful and generous fulfilment of your priestly commitments and ministerial tasks, making your path to holiness more lovable. Moreover, you are especially concerned to promote priestly vocations; and you are called to be a leaven of unity with the bishops, and of fraternity within the presbyterate of your diocese.

How our Father encouraged you in this! “Try to accompany each other, even materially. You have to have a heart of flesh, because the heart with which we love Jesus and the Father and the Holy Spirit is a heart of flesh. If you see one of your brothers in difficulties, go, go to him: don’t wait for him to call you.”[52]

It should give us joy to consider that the sanctification of work (which is the *axis* of our spiritual life) fundamentally means, for the members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, sanctifying their priestly activity. In its main aspects it is already, objectively, a sacred activity; but at the same time, like any work, it can also be a place and a means of personal sanctification and apostolate.

* * *

27 We are approaching the centenary of that 2nd October 1928 when God showed the Work to St Josemaría. Since then, in the world and in the Church, and therefore also in the Work, there have been and continue to be so many joys and so many sorrows.

On 27th March 1975, as he preached a meditation, our Father recalled in prayer the relatively brief history of

Opus Dei: “An immense panorama: so many sufferings, so many joys! And now, all is joy, all is joy... Because we have experienced the truth that suffering is the hammering of the sculptor who wants to make each one of us, of that shapeless mass that we are, a crucifix, a Christ, the alter Christus that we have to be. Lord, thank you for everything. Thank you so much!”[53]

The beauty of the Christian vocation, as God has determined it in the Work for every one of us, must fill us with joy: on the one hand, a healthy human joy when we see so many good people and good things; on the other hand, that very special supernatural joy which, as our Father assured us, has “roots in the form of the Cross.” It fills us with joy to know (let us reflect on it again) that “the Holy Cross will make us enduring, always with the spirit of the Gospel itself, producing the

apostolate of action as the sweet-tasting fruit of prayer and sacrifice.”[54]

We ask our Lady to bless us and to remind us in her motherly way that we all have the Work in our hands. Thus, if we follow God’s will and correspond to his grace, the story that began on 2nd October 1928 will continue, despite our weakness and our mistakes, until the end of time. We will continue to work with joy, seeking to put Christ at the summit of all human activities, for God’s glory.

With all my love, I bless you

your Father

Rome, 28th October 2020

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[1] *Letter 9 January 1932, 9.*

[2] *Letter 12 December 1952*, 35.

[3] *Letter 31 May 1954*, 17.

[4] *Letter 19 March 1967*, 93.

[5] *Friends of God*, 146.

[6] See St Thomas Aquinas,
*Commentary on the Epistle to the
Romans*, ch. 8, lec. 3.

[7] Pope Francis, Encyclical *Fratelli
tutti*, 277.

[8] Second Vatican Council,
Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 3.

[9] *The Forge*, 69.

[10] *Ibid.*, 835.

[11] Pope Francis, Apostolic
Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 121.

[12] *Conversations*, 19.

[13] *Letter 31 May 1954*, 34.

[14] *Christ is Passing By*, 74.

[15] *The Forge*, 156.

[16] *Letter 24 December 1951*, 137.

[17] *Letter 25 January 1961*, 11.

[18] Bl. Alvaro del Portillo, note 135 to the *Instruction on St Michael's work*.

[19] *See Message*, 20 July 2020.

[20] *Letter 29 September 1957*, 8.

[21] *Ibid.*, 76.

[22] Javier Echevarría, Pastoral Letter, 28 November 1995, 16.

[23] *Instruction on St Gabriel's work*, 113.

[24] *Instruction on the supernatural spirit of the Work*, 28.

[25] Notes from a meditation, 28 April 1963.

[26] St John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, 30.

[27] *Conversations*, 88.

[28] *Letter 29 July 1965*, 11.

[29] Notes from a get-together, 15 September 1962.

[30] *Letter 29 September 1957*, 13.

[31] *Letter 8 August 1956*, 7.

[32] *Ibid.*, 1.

[33] *Ibid.*, 5.

[34] *Christ is Passing By*, 163.

[35] *Instruction on St Michael's work*, 84.

[36] Pope Benedict XVI, Address, 22 December 2006.

[37] *The Way*, 380.

[38] *Conversations*, 92.

[39] Letter to the General Council of Opus Dei, 18 December 1947.

[40] *Instruction on St Gabriel's work*, 9.

[41] *Letter 9 January 1959*, 7.

[42] *Ibid.*, 10.

[43] *Ibid.*, 53.

[44] *Christ is Passing By*, 30.

[45] *Letter 9 January 1959*, 53.

[46] *Ibid.*, 17.

[47] *Ibid.*, 33.

[48] *Instruction on St Gabriel's work*, 23.

[49] *Ibid.*, 15.

[50] *Letter 24 October 1942*, 46.

[51] *Letter 9 January 1959*, 13.

[52] Notes from a family meeting with priests, 26 October 1972, in the General Archives of the Prelature, Section P04 1972, II, p. 767.

[53] Words taken from his preaching, in the General Archives of the Prelature, Section P01 1975, p. 809.

[54] *Instruction on the supernatural spirit of the Work*, 28.

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