

FORMATION

After praying, Jesus chose his apostles (cf. Lk 6:12-16), and formed them, as it were step by step, for their mission. *Jesus began to do and teach*, explains St Luke in the Acts, instructed them through the Holy Spirit and, after his Passion, continued to teach them for forty days *speaking of the kingdom of God* (Acts 1:1-3), giving them many proofs of the Passion and his Resurrection (cf. *ibid.*): a historical fact that is the foundation of our faith (cf. 1 Cor 15:14). In other words, during his public life, as well as after his resurrection, Jesus prepared his disciples to continue his work of evangelization. The Church would be the continuation of Christ himself until the end of the world.

What is the core of his message? In his priestly prayer, Jesus Christ praises his Father God and sums up in a few words the kind of life the human person is called to. *This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent* (Jn 17:3). In this synthesis, our Lord was, as it were, giving an account to the men and women of his time of the mission he has fulfilled: *I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them* (Jn 17:8). He then affirms: *I am praying for them* (Jn 17: 9), because all his teaching is based on prayer, that is to say, on his communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The eternal Word imparted *the words of eternal life* (Jn 6:68), and those words were received by the Church under the impulse of his prayer.

Benedict XVI focused our attention on the social character of man, who “realizes himself in interpersonal relations. The more authentically he lives these relations, the more his own personal identity matures. It is not by isolating himself that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God.”¹ This reality is also verified in the life of faith: in the Church, “teacher of our faith”.² What is the Church? The Church is “the people that God gathers in the whole world. The Church of God exists in local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all, a Eucharistic assembly. The Church draws her life from the Word and the Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ’s Body.”³ The Second Vatican Council has thrown light on the mystery of the Church: “The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”⁴ In some way, each baptized Christian carries the Church within himself and is called to carry out the mission God has entrusted to the Church to be fulfilled in the world.⁵

The Church is “mother and teacher”.⁶ “It is in the Church, in communion with all the baptized, that the Christian fulfills his vocation. From the Church he receives the Word of God containing the teachings of *the law of Christ* (Gal 6:2). From the Church he receives the grace of the sacraments that sustains him on the way. From the Church he learns the example of holiness and recognizes its model and source in the all-holy Virgin Mary. He discerns it in the authentic witness of those who live it. He discovers it in the spiritual tradition and long history of the saints who have gone before him and whom the liturgy celebrates in the rhythms of the sanctoral cycle.”⁷ In her task of formation, the

¹ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, 53.

² CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 169.

³ *Ibid.*, 752.

⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

⁵ Cf. CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 871.

⁶ POPE ST JOHN XXIII, Encyclical *Mater et Magistra*. See CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2030-2051.

⁷ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2030.

Church counts on her faithful to help others: “In the work of teaching and applying Christian morality, the Church needs the dedication of pastors, the knowledge of theologians, and the contribution of all Christians and men of good will. Faith and the practice of the Gospel provide each person with an experience of life ‘in Christ’, who enlightens him and makes him able to evaluate the divine and human realities according to the Spirit of God (cf. 1 Cor 2:10-15). Thus the Holy Spirit can use the humblest to enlighten the learned and those in the highest positions.”⁸ Laypersons participate actively in this apostolate: “The lay faithful who are capable and trained may also collaborate in catechetical formation (cf. *CIC*, can. 774, 776, 780), in teaching the sacred sciences (cf. *CIC*, can. 229) ...”⁹ In this article concerning formation in Opus Dei, we shall first explain (1) the need for formation and (2) its objective; we then discuss (3) the five aspects of formation and the means to carry them out, and (4) the dispositions that, with God’s grace, make formation truly fruitful.

1. The need in Opus Dei for formation

Twenty centuries have passed since the Incarnation of the Saviour, and the Church continues to proclaim his divine words. In the womb of the Church, Opus Dei imparts to her faithful a formation that is none other than the continuation in time and space of the Gospel proclamation. Indeed, one needs formation, involving the help of other people, to know and embody in one’s life the spirit of the Gospel according to the message of St Josemaría Escrivá – to become fully Christian “in the middle of the world”. *The sole objective of Opus Dei has always been to see that there be men and women of all races and social conditions who endeavour to love and to serve God and the rest of mankind in and through their ordinary work, in the midst of the realities and interests of the world.*¹⁰ *To put into practice the supernatural goal of the Work, an intense and specific formation is needed.*

The faithful of Opus Dei know that *sanctity is not reserved for a privileged few; all the ways of the earth, every state in life, every profession, every honest task can be divine;*¹¹ and that *the purpose of Opus Dei is to foster the search for holiness and the carrying out of the apostolate by Christians who live in the world, whatever their state in life or position in society;*¹² *to those who grasp this ideal of holiness, the Work offers the spiritual assistance and the doctrinal, ascetical, and apostolic training which they need to put it into practice in their own life.*¹³ St Josemaría explained that *within the framework of the universal call to holiness, members of Opus Dei receive in addition a special call to dedicate themselves freely and responsibly to look for holiness and carry out the apostolate in the middle of the world, committing themselves to live a particular spirituality and to receive a specific formation throughout their lives.*¹⁴

The texts on personal formation included in these pages comprise, among others, possible support material during the months of spiritual preparation preceding incorporation to the Work. Within the framework of formation given verbally, with examples and personal witness, here ideas are developed of a spirit that is life before it becomes theory.

It is but natural that to form oneself one needs the help of others. The fact that the building up of one’s identity depends much on interpersonal relations has already been pointed out. It is enough to think of the gift of speech, peculiar to the human person, which cannot be acquired without a process of learning where the help of others is essential.¹⁵ The small child is precisely an *infant (infans)*, literally “one who does not know how to speak”. This fact applies also to the development of

⁸ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2038.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 906.

¹⁰ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 10.

¹¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 60. See CODE OF CANON LAW (*CIC*), can. 211 (to spread the Word of God is a juridical right and a moral duty of a Christian); CARLOS J. ERRÁZURIZ M., *Corso fondamentale sul diritto nella Chiesa, I. Introduzione. I soggetti ecclesiali di diritto*, Giuffrè Ed., Milan 2009, pp. 215-216.

¹³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁵ See JOSEPH RATZINGER-BENEDICT XVI, *L’elogio della coscienza*, Cantagalli, Siena 2009, p. 157, quoted in R. Spaemann. The translation is ours.

Christian life.¹⁶ The help of others is needed, together with the grace of God. The contrary – “spiritual individualism” – isolates the person and impedes openness to others and the exchange of gifts.¹⁷

What is the central reality, so to speak, of the formation imparted by Opus Dei? It is Jesus Christ himself. Indeed, Christ “fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”¹⁸ In this sense, the highest and most complete formation of man leads him to know, love, and imitate Christ more and more. *The Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, ‘that all may be one. . . as we are one’* (Jn 17:21-22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for he implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”¹⁹ The formation that is imparted in Opus Dei is a manifestation of the dedication one lives in the Church, where each one collaborates in the formation of the others.

It is a formation that develops by stages, an image of the way God acts on men. The commentary of St Irenæus of Lyon is well-known, where he “repeatedly speaks of the divine pedagogy using the image of God and man becoming accustomed to one another: ‘The Word of God dwelt in man and became the Son of man in order to accustom man to perceive God and to accustom God to dwell in man, according to the Father’s pleasure.’”²⁰

Jesus is perfect Man and perfect God. “For God’s Word, through Whom all things were made, was Himself made flesh and dwelt on the earth of men. Thus He entered the world’s history as a perfect man, taking that history up into Himself and summarizing it. He Himself revealed to us that *God is love* (1 Jn 4:8) and at the same time taught us that the new commandment of love was the basic law of human perfection.”²¹ At the same time as Jesus Christ reveals God to us, he shows us who man is. He also shows how man can become fully himself.

Fiunt, non nascuntur christiani, Tertullian says:²² Christians are not born, they have to become so. Baptism makes us Christians, but it is necessary to learn how to know and love God more. The purpose of Opus Dei is to help us love God more, and others in God in daily life, especially in professional work and in the fulfilment of the duties of state. This can be summarized in two phrases: personal sanctity and apostolate. Opus Dei, said St Josemaría, helps people *discover that their normal life in the world, their everyday work, can be an encounter with God;*²³ *it is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind.*²⁴

How does one achieve this? St Josemaría states that a man, a woman, *matures little by little, and never attains all the human perfection that by nature they are capable of. In a specific area, they may even become the best compared to everyone else, perhaps unsurpassable. But as a Christian, their growth knows no limits.*²⁵ In this sense, *our formation lasts throughout our whole life.* It is in particular a consequence of the condition of secularity of the faithful of Opus Dei, who live in a world in constant change and are, at the same time, agents of that change. At the same time, all Christians are on a path that rises up to the Lord, a way where, as St Augustine said about the Christian life, *non progredi, regredi est.*²⁶ one who does not move forward in the spiritual struggle falls back. *Today’s challenge is not just to cultivate what lies uncultivated, but to increase the productive capacity of what has already been planted; to make what is fertile even more so; to get the*

¹⁶ See POPE ST JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 31; SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 12.

¹⁷ See CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*, 3 December 2007, 5.

¹⁸ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁰ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 53, quoting ST IRENÆUS OF LYON, *Adversus Hæreses*, 3, 20.

²¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 38.

²² TERTULLIAN, *Apologeticum*, XVIII.

²³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 24 March 1931*, 9, quoted in JAVIER ECHEVARRÍA, *Pastoral Letter*, 2 October 2011, 3.

²⁶ ST AUGUSTINE, *Sermo* 69, 15.

*workers to think of themselves, too, in terms of harvest.*²⁷

The human person is naturally social, and the first place where he grows is in the family. The formation that is given in Opus Dei leads one to value the beauty of the family, because the home ought to be “the first school of Christian life”.²⁸ St Josemaría taught married people that family takes first place; work comes afterwards. In schools, family also comes first – the parents. They should also do apostolate in their family, from their family, and through their family. The Centres of Opus Dei are an extension of their family.

The means of formation are means of “transformation”, because “the Holy Spirit renews us interiorly through a spiritual transformation (cf. Eph 4:23).”²⁹ These means are “performative”,³⁰ to use a neologism of Benedict XVI: they transform the person, they lead him to his perfection. At the close of his life, whenever St Josemaría was ill he made known his need to attend the Circle – a weekly means of formation given in the Work. He wrote, *Nemo repente fit sanctus. Ut iumentum (Ps LXXII, 23:24)* [that is to say: ‘no one becomes a saint all of a sudden. May I be a donkey.’] *The donkey at the waterwheel ...*³¹ An ass served as our Lord’s mount at his entry to Jerusalem. The Fathers of the Church saw Judaism in the mother donkey, subjected to the yoke of the Law, while her foal would be the Gentiles (cf. Mt 21:2): Christ brought everyone into the Church, the new Jerusalem. St Augustine, in his commentary on Psalm 34[33], saw in this episode a call to humility and meekness. St Josemaría centred his attention on the work of a donkey at the waterwheel and the fruitfulness of its perseverance. No one is made a saint all of a sudden; one has to tread like a donkey. Thus he alluded to the need to persevere, day after day, with a resolution to be docile in the hands of God, while aspiring to a final union with Him, as these verses of Psalm 73[72]:23-24 express: *Yet I am always with you: you hold me by your right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into your glory.*

2. The objective of formation in Opus Dei

Far from suppressing one’s personality, this transformation makes it stronger. One’s own gifts flourish – those “talents”, the personal qualities and potentials, each one has received from God (cf. Mt 25:30). At the same time, in parallel fashion, anything that would ruin the image of Christ, anything that in reality is not really ours but a mask that disfigures us would be cleared away. The purpose of Opus Dei is summed up in two words: holiness and apostolate, which form a unity like the two faces of the same coin. *You cannot separate the fact that Christ is God from his role as redeemer. The Word became flesh and came into the world ‘ut omnes homines salvi fiant’ (1 Tim 2:4), to save all men.*³² The objective of the formation that Opus Dei imparts is to put this supernatural end into effect. In other words:

a) *To improve one’s spiritual life*, which is the life of the Holy Spirit in us, the Christian life, the life “in Christ”.

b) *To understand the Word of God*, since familiarity with Scripture is essential for living a Christian life, as these words of St Josemaría affirm: *To know Jesus Christ. To make him known. To take him to all places.*³³ The word “gospel” (Mk 1:1) signifies first of all the good news of the coming of the Messiah. From there it was used to designate the four books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which were written primarily to strengthen the faith of the believers in Jesus Christ (cf. Lk 1:4; Jn 20:31). A great historian of the twentieth century denounced, what he considered both “an error”

²⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, Letter, 13 January 1945, quoted in ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol 2, Scepter Publishers, New Jersey.

²⁸ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1657.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1695.

³⁰ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, nos. 2, 4, 10.

³¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, Discourse in Vitoria, 22 August 1938, quoted in the *Critical-Historical edition of “The Way”*, Pedro Rodríguez, Scepter, 2011.

³² ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 106.

³³ ST JOSEMARÍA, Manuscript note, facsimile published in POSTULACIÓN GENERAL DEL OPUS DEI, *El beato Josemaría Escrivá, Fundador del Opus Dei*, Rome 1992, p. 127 (on the occasion of the beatification of St Josemaría.)

and “a deception”, “the naive idea that one can access Sacred Scripture without any preparation, that good will suffice.”³⁴ He explained: “The Bible has never ceased to live in the Church, by being read in the Church, commented on, understood, applied.”³⁵ The understanding of Sacred Scripture is facilitated by footnoted editions. This is the reason why St Josemaría pushed for an edition of the *Holy Bible* – eventually published by EUNSA (Pamplona 1997-2004) – that provides abundant notes, with texts from the Magisterium, the Fathers, the Doctors and the saints, and introductions, following the guidelines of the Second Vatican Council.³⁶ The abbreviated edition of the New Testament (1999) is also helpful for familiarizing oneself with the sacred books, for understanding its structure and contents.

c) *To know the doctrine of the Church.* The reference texts for this are the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) and its *Compendium* (2005). The *Catechism* was written for the pastors of the Church, for the faithful, and for all who ask Catholics an account of the hope that is in them.³⁷ It was conceived as the expression of the common faith of the Church, and has been thus confirmed. It is a “real support for the faith, especially for those concerned with the formation of Christians, so crucial in our cultural context.”³⁸ Those who have completed or are coursing higher studies cannot be excused from tackling the *Catechism* as a text too difficult for them: they must put in the effort to acquire a theological formation at least of the same level as their professional training. Naturally, the study of the *Catechism* is to be accompanied by the reading of the Bible and a knowledge of the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, and of the Magisterium – we especially note, in our times, the texts of the Second Vatican Council and the encyclicals of Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis.

Precisely in the *Catechism*, explains Benedict XVI, “we see the wealth of teaching that the Church has received, safeguarded and proposed in her two thousand years of history. From Sacred Scripture to the Fathers of the Church, from theological masters to the saints across the centuries, the *Catechism* provides a permanent record of the many ways in which the Church has meditated on the faith and made progress in doctrine so as to offer certitude to believers in their lives of faith.”³⁹ The “fundamental content of the faith”, said the Pope, “receives its systematic and organic synthesis in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.”⁴⁰ Benedict XVI explained that its structure “follows the development of the faith right up to the great themes of daily life. On page after page, we find that what is presented here is no theory, but an encounter with a Person who lives within the Church. The profession of faith is followed by an account of sacramental life, in which Christ is present, operative and continues to build his Church. Without the liturgy and the sacraments, the profession of faith would lack efficacy, because it would lack the grace which supports Christian witness. By the same criterion, the teaching of the *Catechism* on the moral life acquires its full meaning if placed in relationship with faith, liturgy and prayer.”⁴¹

These instruments also contribute to the formation of conscience. “Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.”⁴² This education of conscience, affirms the *Catechism*, “guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart.” And it adds: “In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path; we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord’s Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the

³⁴ HENRI IRENEE MARROU, *Liminaire*, in “Lectures actuelles de la Bible, “Les quatre fleuves” 7 (1977), Seuil, Paris, p. 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁶ See Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 22.

³⁷ See POPE ST JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum*, 4.

³⁸ BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Letter “*Motu Proprio*” *Porta Fidei*, 11 October 2011, 12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1783.

witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church.”⁴³

d) *To deepen one’s knowledge of the spirit of the Work.* We are here dealing with something that pertains, so to speak, to Opus Dei, but it is also found in the Gospel. The spirit of Opus Dei has been approved by the Church, in a special way through the Statutes given to it by the Holy See.⁴⁴ The word “spirit” is evocative of giving life in a total manner, of nourishing one’s whole life and each and every human action. It establishes a specific spiritual physiognomy, a “profile”, as the Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, then Prelate of Opus Dei, once commented during a pastoral trip to Japan. The spirit of Opus Dei embraces unity of life, secularity, personal freedom and responsibility in temporal matters, etc. It has two essential aspects:

- Divine filiation in Christ as foundation. It is not only to know that God is a merciful Father, but also to feel and realize this reality throughout the day.

- “The axis, the hinge, on which the whole endeavour of sanctification rests – one’s own and that of others – is professional work carried out as well as possible, in union with Jesus Christ and with the desire to serve others.”⁴⁵

e) *To learn to do apostolate according to the spirit of Opus Dei.* One finds that in the Church there are various ways to transmit the gospel message. The faithful of Opus Dei learn to reproduce in their own lives what the first disciples of our Lord experienced. Andrew meets his brother, Peter, speaks to him of Christ, and takes him to the Master. Philip, who has met Jesus, brings Nathanael over. All is done in the most natural way. In this manner, St Josemaría taught how to exercise an apostolate of friendship and confidence that ennobles authentic human friendship, which assumes a certain mutual openness of the soul and takes it up to the supernatural plane. In many cases, this apostolate is exercised among equals, with the discovery of Opus Dei accompanying a growth of intimacy with Jesus and apostolic zeal. It is God who gives the growth (cf. 1 Cor 3:6). *The seed should sprout and grow*, says the Lord, *and the [sower] knows not how* (Mk 4:28). The Christian can grow in the exercise of the virtues that facilitate apostolate: for example, people skills, the capacity for empathy, good humour, humility, generosity in the use of time.

3. *The five aspects of formation and their channels*

As regards the formation that is imparted in Opus Dei, St Josemaría considered five aspects: *human, spiritual, doctrinal-religious, apostolic, and professional.*⁴⁶ In what do they consist?

- *Human formation:* the human virtues, beginning with the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude), should grow throughout one’s life. Among them, St Josemaría frequently underscored simplicity, sincerity, and diligence.

- *Spiritual formation,* which leads each one to feel at each moment that he is a son of God. Divine filiation is indeed the foundation of the spirit of Opus Dei. This formation includes learning to pray, which is to encounter God, and, hand in hand with prayer, to frequent the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist and Confession.

- *Doctrinal-religious formation,* so as to reach a comprehension of the faith that satisfies St Peter’s exhortation to be *always prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet ... with gentleness and reverence, and keeping your conscience clear* (1 Pet 3:15-16). In any case, all Christians must acquire doctrinal formation: *By doctrine I mean the knowledge which each person should have of the mission of the Church as a whole and of his particular role, his specific responsibilities, in that mission.*⁴⁷

- *Apostolic formation:* consists in learning to give testimony to one’s faith. St Josemaría taught an “apostolate of friendship and confidence.”

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1784-1785.

⁴⁴ Cf. POPE ST JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Constitution *Ut sit*, 28 November 1982; A. DE FUENMAYOR, V. GÓMEZ IGLESIAS, J.L. ILLANES. *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*. Scepter, New Jersey, 1994, chapter X, section 9.

⁴⁵ JAVIER ECHEVARRÍA, *Pastoral Letter*, 2 October 2011, 13.

⁴⁶ Cf. JAVIER ECHEVARRÍA, *Pastoral Letter*, 2 October 2011.

⁴⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 2.

• *Professional formation*, because work is the hinge of personal sanctification. Opus Dei does not impart any prescribed kind of professional formation (though there are many apostolic activities dedicated to that),⁴⁸ but motivates its faithful to study and work well, with professional competence, keeping up to date, with the spirit of service, and to offer one's work to God.

St Josemaría always expended his energies in forming his spiritual sons and daughters. Blessed Alvaro del Portillo recalls: "I will never forget how, when I asked for admission to the Work in the month of July 1935, the Father, exhausted as he was by the amount of work, did not hesitate beginning a cycle of formation classes solely for me: an added burden to the already numerous activities that filled his workday."⁴⁹

Very soon afterwards, however, St Josemaría ceased to handle personally any means of formation. Andrés Vazquez de Prada explains that in 1940, he had to "start relying more on people who had been in the Work for some time and involve them in the giving of apostolic formation and spiritual direction. In the same period (1940), the founder gathered together his older sons one day and told them that he would no longer give formation classes to the students – they would be the ones giving them."⁵⁰

Among the means of formation that St Josemaría recommended as part of the living experience of the Church, one must highlight the sacraments because of their extraordinary significance as regards divine action *ex opere operato*. And among the sacraments, two stand out as being those more frequently received: the Holy Eucharist and Confession.

If one participates "in a faith-filled and attentive way", the Holy Mass, the end towards which all the sacraments converge, "is formative in the deepest sense of the word, since it fosters configuration to Christ."⁵¹ The sacramental celebration of the Paschal Mystery is united to divine worship in all its existential depth.⁵² In the Mass, the Church "asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit to make the lives of the faithful a living sacrifice to God by their spiritual transformation into the image of Christ, by concern for the Church's unity, and by taking part in her mission through the witness and service of charity."⁵³

In the meditations, the preacher prays and endeavours to get the participants to pray, beginning with the Gospel: *It is Christ we must talk about, not ourselves*.⁵⁴ Those who attend come with the desire to receive what the Holy Spirit wants to put into their hearts.

There are personal means of formation – these are necessary because each person is unique, free, and responsible. The Second Vatican Council prompted a new push for the Sacrament of Penance, "toward a more frequent celebration of the sacrament which is seen to be completely filled with the Lord's merciful love."⁵⁵ It is also called "Sacrament of Reconciliation" and can incorporate, in addition to the essential acts of the sacrament – confession of sins, contrition, absolution, and the penance imposed by the priest – true spiritual direction:⁵⁶ the confessor can give counsel and encouragement, giving evidence always of the infinite power of the divine mercy.

There are also collective means of formation given to groups of persons.

The Circle (called "brief" for numeraries and associates, and "study" for supernumeraries) ordinarily lasts no more than 30-45 minutes. In addition to a brief commentary on the Gospel of the day, a talk is given on an aspect of the spiritual life, and an examination of conscience.

The Retreat, which covers a few days, is ordinarily done once a year. It is the appropriate time for disconnecting oneself from the hustle and bustle of everyday life in order to return afterwards with greater spiritual energy and stronger apostolic desires. It is the opportunity for a new conversion.⁵⁷

Formation is not limited to "the means" (or channels). The whole of human life contributes in

⁴⁸ See ERNST BURKHART, *Corporate Works of Apostolate* (in this series).

⁴⁹ ALVARO DEL PORTILLO, *Immersed in God*, pp. 80-81

⁵⁰ ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol 2, Scepter Publishers, New Jersey.

⁵¹ BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 80.

⁵² Cf. *ibid.*, 70-71.

⁵³ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1109.

⁵⁴ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 163.

⁵⁵ POPE ST JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Pœnitentia*, 31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁷ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 32.

some way to the forging of personality, particularly personal example, because Christian formation takes place in existential contexts. *Constantly call to mind that every moment you are cooperating in the human and spiritual formation of those around you, and of all souls – for the blessed Communion of Saints reaches as far as that. At every moment: when you work and when you rest; when people see you happy or when they see you worried; when at your job, or out in the street, you pray as does a child of God and the peace in your soul shows through; when people see that you have suffered, that you have wept, and you smile.*⁵⁸ One finds a paradigm of formation in the Centres through the work of the Administration. It forms through deeds.

4. Some dispositions for receiving formation

The dispositions of a person who is admitted to Opus Dei are those of a heart open to divine grace. The Work commits itself precisely to give a formation that the member of the faithful of the Prelature commits oneself to receive. An older person, with much experience in life, including perhaps Christian living, does not for these reasons listen as if he already knew everything. He would do well to engage an effort of self-renewal, aware that “for new wine, new wineskins” (Mk 2:22). This youthfulness of spirit is not a forced ingenuousness; rather, it is the enthusiasm of the beginnings, an active attitude by which he brings everything he hears to an examination of his own life. For example, one does not seek to know how to offer one’s work to God, but to see whether one is doing so.

This also applies to those who have been years in the Work. While they can already anticipate “what they are going to tell us”, they are fully aware that a person keeps young when he sustains an eagerness to learn, not only to improve himself but also to help others in the new evangelization.

To profit from the means of formation, the following dispositions are important:

- Humility, which leads to the truth not only that one does not know everything, but also that there are many things one does know but does not put into practice. *At times, we would like to be outstanding in everything. And since this is impossible, it leads to confusion and anxiety or even depression and boredom ...*⁵⁹

- Rectitude of intention, which counters “learning merely for the sake of knowing more” and instead promotes learning in order to love God more, and to love others more by assisting them, and rejecting the absurd temptation to be the best in everything. It moves one to assimilate into one’s life what one hears. James instructed Christians along these lines: *Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves* (Jas 1:22-22). Only in this way does one grow in divine filiation: *My mother and my brethren are those who listen to the word of God and do it* (Lk 8:21). This attitude impels one to take down notes of ideas that one finds appealing and can serve Christian living.

- Simplicity, so that one is not ashamed to ask a question when he has not understood.

- Abandonment of self in the hands of God. A voluntarist attitude tends to make the will autonomous with respect to intellect, and makes intellect dependent on the will. It is important not to fall into sentimentalism or voluntarism, which sets reason aside. God is not a stranger to reason: *In principio erat Verbum, In the beginning was the Word*, says John’s prologue; that Word, *Logos* in Greek, is the divine Word, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, whose words are of reason; Christian discourse is rational, *logos*, and speaks of God and his works. From here one discerns the importance of the intellect’s efforts to assimilate well what it hears and to do it properly. When Pilate asks Jesus, *Are you the King of the Jews?*, our Lord replies, *Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?* (Jn 18:33-34). In that moment when the essential question about Jesus Christ’s identity was put forward, our Lord indicated the importance of a search and a personal response. At the same time, reason must know how to humble itself, must allow itself to be illuminated by faith, and understand, as Pascal did, that “we know the truth not only with reason but also with the heart.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 864.

⁵⁹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 88.

⁶⁰ BLAISE PASCAL, *Pensées*, in *Œuvres complètes*, presentation and notes of L. Lafuma, Seuil, Paris 1963, Lafuma-Brunschvicg, pp. 110-282.

Together with personal responsibility, the exercise of personal freedom is essential. When St Josemaría recalled the essentially spiritual character of Opus Dei and its work of formation, the notion of freedom immediately came to his lips. He explained that the formation the Work imparts *not only respects the freedom* of its faithful, but in fact *helps them to become fully aware of it*.⁶¹ He added that *to achieve holiness in their profession or job*, the faithful of Opus Dei *need to be formed in such a way that they can administer their freedom in the presence of God, with sincere piety and with doctrine*.⁶² because *men need to be and to feel personally free*.⁶³

In the entire effort of formation, we cannot lose sight of the primacy of God – the reality that the demand for formation rests on the love and the grace of God. We know well how Pelagius, an Irish monk of the fifth century, rejected the doctrine of the transmission of original sin and thereby minimized our need for divine grace, as if that was merely a light about the end and the crowning of all our efforts. Hence his excessive preoccupation with the ascetical struggle, which made him lose sight of the importance of God's gift and which finally led to the Church's condemnation of these perspectives.⁶⁴ In God, the being that the intellect apprehends is itself the rule of love. Not all of one's life consists in repetition of acts. It is necessary to know how to give meaning to our life, by discovering the love of God, and by loving others in their day-to-day struggles.

In the final analysis, all formation speaks of God and teaches us how to love God and neighbour. When one is receiving Christian formation, it is good to turn to the Virgin Mary who, in the mystery of her Visitation to her cousin Elizabeth, while carrying the Word in her womb, expressed the sentiments of her soul with a song of praise to God. *Magnificat anima mea Dominum* (Lk 1:46): Mary proclaims the greatness of the Lord; the Blessed Virgin declares that her soul magnifies itself for the Lord. Let us have recourse to her intercession so that the formation we receive enlarges our heart to receive God and in Him open itself to all humanity.

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⁶¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 53.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁴ In the COUNCILS OF CARTHAGE (418) and ORANGE (529), and in a letter of POPE CELESTINE I (431).