

## THE SPIRITUAL FEATURES OF OPUS DEI

The spirit of Opus Dei, present in the Church by God's Will to foster the search for holiness in the middle of the world and to carry out an apostolate which is wide ranging and constant, has four basic aspects that are closely united among themselves, viz., unity of life, the sanctification of work, divine filiation and doctrinal piety.

### 1. *Unity of life*

*One Lord, one faith, one baptism,*<sup>1</sup> says St Paul, thus describing the reality of Christian life. We can add that the Christian life is, and ought to be, *one sole life*, unique and unified. However, because of sin, both original and personal sin, a person feels divided, fragmented, not only in one's relation to God and to others, but even within oneself. Jesus takes note forcefully of the inclination of man to hypocrisy,<sup>2</sup> to living a double life, i.e. the tendency to profess a religious life, to show outwardly a moral uprightness that simply does not correspond to reality. Furthermore, our Lord taught openly that pretence, guile, craftiness, falsehood, all of which is hypocrisy, a lack of unity of life, constitutes a formidable obstacle for Christian apostolate. We know well how unconvincing a person is, whose life is not coherent. The greatness of the Christian vocation can increase the likelihood of considering oneself to be or to act in a manner different from what one truly is, when in reality the only thing that we can say, with St. Josemaria, is *pauper servus et humilis* (a poor and humble servant),<sup>3</sup> Besides, the faithful of the Prelature live happily in the middle of the world, are involved in the hustle and bustle of society, are immersed in situations which are rarely ideal, are committed to the same toil as their fellow citizens, often in an environment little in accord with Christian faith. This requires of them a special effort to not let themselves be drawn far from our Lord. Without formation and a contemplative life, they would not be able to direct either social structures to God or the fruits of their work. *Coepit facere et docere – Jesus began to do and then to teach. You and I have to bear witness with our example, because we cannot live a double life. We cannot preach what we do not practice. In other words, we have to teach what we are at least struggling to put into practice.*<sup>4</sup> Therefore the formation imparted in Opus Dei leads us *to maintain our supernatural point of view in all our actions, and never lose it at all. We do not live a double life, but a unity of life, which is simple and strong and in which all our actions are united.*<sup>5</sup>

The struggle to achieve unity of life, counting on the grace of God, is directed primarily to two areas. First, to recognise sincerely the faults against coherence, against unity of life. This, with the aid of an examination of conscience made "conscientiously" at the end of the day and with the help of personal spiritual guidance. Second, to struggle

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<sup>1</sup> Eph 4:5.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 6 and 23.

<sup>3</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, quoted in ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, III, Scepter

<sup>4</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 694

<sup>5</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 6 May 1945*, 25, quoted in ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, II, Scepter.

to overcome them, with perseverance and confidence in the grace of God, since only He is capable of repairing what has been broken by sin, what an infidelity has fractured. In a word, to persevere in a Christian life and to stay in the state of grace, we need to be sincere about our life and to have complete trust in our Lord.

## 2. Sanctification of work

A second aspect is the sanctification of work, the *hinge* of sanctification in the middle of the world, according to the spirit of Opus Dei. Besides, it is, as St Josemaría said, a condition *sine qua non* for the apostolate. All who seek admission to the Work know that they have to work a lot, until the end of their lives, to thus die *squeezed out like a lemon*,<sup>6</sup> with both human and supernatural perfection. It's necessary to work well because God wants us to concern ourselves with the world that He himself created<sup>7</sup> in order to bring all created things to Him.<sup>8</sup> Work is the primary *vocation* for every man, called to perfect the world in which we live and to offer our labour as something pleasing to the divine majesty. What is more, the Gospel points out that Jesus Christ himself *bene omnia fecit* (he did all things well).<sup>9</sup>

With human perfection, first of all, that is to say, with order, intensity, constancy, competence and with a spirit of service and collaboration with others; in a word, with professional expertise. *We have to work like the best of our colleagues. And if, possible, better than the best. A man without professional ambition isn't of use to me.*<sup>10</sup> As ordinary citizens, which the faithful of Opus Dei are, they have to work at a specific professional task. And that is where they will seek and find their human fulfilment. *The Lord God took the man and put in the garden of Eden to till and keep it,*<sup>11</sup> in order that it produce fruit and that he might better it.

We work also with Christian perfection, putting God first. The professional vocation is an essential part of the divine vocation designed for everyone on earth. When we talk of "Christian perfection", according to the spirit of Opus Dei, we understand the perfection with which the virtues needed to work well are completed by *charity*, the love of God and our neighbour, taking care of little things, and giving *the dynamic echo of eternity*<sup>12</sup> to all that we have in our hands, doing it for the glory of God. By rectifying our intention, we have to try to work with complete interior detachment from any human recognition, only for our Lord to be happy with our task, even though in the eyes of the world it seems to be of little worth. *Deo omnis gloria* (all the glory for God). In this struggle to progress day by day, perseveringly, whether we like it or not, we forge unity of life with the aid of our Lord. *I measure the value and effectiveness of undertakings by the degree of holiness achieved by the instruments who carry them out. With the same insistence with which I previously invited you to work, and work well, without fear of tiredness, I now invite you to have interior life.*<sup>13</sup> The direct fruit of unity of life and the sanctification of work is apostolate. *We have to keep coming back to this: everything is*

<sup>6</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, quoted in PILAR URBANO, *The Man of Villa Tevere*, Scepter.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Gen* 1:27, 2:15.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Jn* 12:32.

<sup>9</sup> *Mk* 7:37.

<sup>10</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 15 October 1948*, 15, quoted in ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, III, Scepter.

<sup>11</sup> *Gen* 2:15.

<sup>12</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 917.

<sup>13</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 15 October 1948*, 20, quoted in E. BURKHART – J. LOPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría, Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols, Rialp, Madrid 2010, III, chap. IX, 5.3).

*prayer, everything can and should lead us to God, nourish our intimate dealings with him, from morning to night. Any honourable work can be prayer and all prayerful work is apostolate. In this way the soul toughens into having a simple and strong unity of life.<sup>14</sup> For a Christian, apostolate is something instinctive. It is not something added onto his daily activities and his professional work from the outside. I have repeated it constantly, since our Lord chose us for the foundation of Opus Dei! We have to sanctify our ordinary work, we have to sanctify others through the exercise of the particular profession that is proper to each of us, in our particular state in life.<sup>15</sup>*

*Let me remind you once more, my daughters and sons: work to please God, without seeking any human glory. Some people regard work as a means of gaining honours, or of acquiring power or wealth to satisfy their ambition, or a source of pride in their own achievements. As children of God in Opus Dei, we never regard our daily work as something related to selfishness, vanity or pride, All we see is the possibility of serving everyone for the love of God.<sup>16</sup>*

### **3. Divine filiation: presence of God, the desire to imitate Jesus Christ, life of faith, serene and joyful surrender to the divine Will**

We work at every moment with God and for God. But God, Creator of heaven and earth, Lord and Judge of all history, is our Father. This is the third of fundamental characteristic of the spirituality of Opus Dei: *divine filiation*. Jesus Christ, in revealing himself to mankind as *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*<sup>17</sup> (perfect God and perfect man), revealed, at the same time, that God is, in the depth of his being, a Father. All his attributes, in a manner of speaking, are paternal: his love, his mercy, his fidelity, his justice, his truthfulness, etc.

The immediate consequences of divine filiation in daily life are several. First, a spirit of continual prayer, lived with great freedom and in every circumstance, since everything human interests our Father God. *There are countless ways of praying, as I have already told you. We children of God don't need a method, an artificial system, to talk with our Father. Love is inventive, full of initiative. If we truly love, we will discover our own intimate paths to lead us to a continuous conversation with our Lord.<sup>18</sup>*

Afterwards, a great confidence in God who knows us, calls us, forgives us, understand us. This confidence gives us a constant serenity and joy. *Cheerfulness is a necessary consequence of our divine filiation, of knowing that our Father God loves us with a love of predilection, that he welcomes us, helps and forgives us.<sup>19</sup> Rest and repose in the fact of being children of God. God is a Father who is full of tenderness, of infinite love. Call him 'Father' many times a day and tell him –alone in your heart – that you love him that you adore him, that you feel proud and strong because you are his son.<sup>20</sup> Divine filiation fills all our spiritual life, because it shows us how to speak to God, because it shows us to know and to love our Father in heaven. And it makes our interior struggle overflow with hope and gives a trusting simplicity of little children. More than that: precisely because we are*

<sup>14</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 122.

<sup>16</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter 15 October 1948*, 18, quoted in E. BURKHART–J. LOPEZ, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría. Estudio de Teología espiritual*, 3 vols., Rialp, Madrid 2010, II, chap IV, 3.21)

<sup>17</sup> Athanasian Creed.

<sup>18</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, 255.

<sup>19</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 332.

<sup>20</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*. 150; cf. *The Forge*, 331.

*children of God, we can contemplate in love and wonder everything as coming from the hands of our Father, God the Creator. And so we become contemplatives in the middle of the world, loving the world.*<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the fact of being children of God leads us to use our best efforts to further the mission of the Church, which in our case are the apostolates that the Church has entrusted to the Work, with finesse and constancy, as something proper to the spirit of our family.

The principal way to live our divine filiation more consciously is a vital union with Christ, the only-Begotten Son of the Father, in our prayer, in our work and in our apostolate. St Josemaria characterized the living out of divine filiation *as the desire, both ardent and sincere, tender and deep at the same time, to imitate Jesus Christ as his brothers, children of our Father God, and to be always in the presence of God. Divine filiation that leads us to live a life of faith in Providence, and that facilitates the serene and joyful dedication to the divine Will.*<sup>22</sup>

#### **4. Doctrinal piety**

In fourth and last place, *doctrinal piety*. St Josemaria taught that piety was the remedy of remedies. A man in love needs to cultivate a deep piety. What is more, piety is the virtue par excellence of children. *The piety which is born of divine filiation is a profound attitude of the soul which eventually permeates one's entire existence. It is present in every thought, every desire, every affection.*<sup>23</sup>

But the Founder of Opus Dei also insists that it is matter of “doctrinal” piety, stressing that holiness without doctrine is not the holiness that our Lord wants for the faithful of the Work. *God has called us with a divine vocation to be saints. And what are we going to do to become saints? Let's be pious, and acquire the doctrine necessary to know Jesus Christ well, and thus to love him. In order to know the things pertaining to God well, it is necessary to have the piety of children and the doctrine of theologian. And you will see how well off we are.*<sup>24</sup> And therefore piety without doctrine would make intimacy with Jesus Christ superficial, merely external and sentimental. Both aspects are necessary at the same time, without neglecting one or the other: doctrine to feed the life of piety; piety, to enliven doctrine. We need this doctrinal piety to achieve unity of life, to sanctify work, to live as children of God. St Josemaria concludes: *Take care that even when you are old and decrepit, you keep on wanting to be better trained.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 65.

<sup>22</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, testimony of BISHOP JAVIER ECHEVARRÍA, Prelate of Opus Dei, *Summarium of the Cause of beatification and canonisation, Positio supra vita et virtutibus*, Rome 1988, quoted in ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, III, Scepter.

<sup>23</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, 146.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 10. For a study of the expression “piety of children and doctrine of theologians”, cf. M. P. RIO, *Piety, doctrine and unity of life according to the teaching of Blessed Josemaria Escrivá*, in A.A.V.V., *The greatness of ordinary life*, vol V/1, pp. 281-292.

<sup>25</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Furrow*, 538.

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