

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR NATURAL FAMILIES

1. *The Fourth Commandment, “the sweetest precept”*

The fourth commandment of the Decalogue, “Honour your father and your mother”, is the first among those regarding our duty to love one’s neighbour as oneself, and it also indicates the order of charity: “God has willed that, after him, we should honour our parents to whom we owe life and who have handed on to us the knowledge of God.”¹

Jesus Christ wanted to be born and grow within a family, thus sanctifying family relations, and showing us that God’s love and paternity are manifested in the natural affection between parents and children. This fact has at least two immediate consequences for a Christian:

a) A home and family ties (duties, shared joys, difficulties faced together...) are an essential part of ordinary life in which every Christian can find God.

b) Normally, the family is the channel established by our Lord for the person to develop, grow in virtue, reach human maturity and in many cases discern the divine will for one’s own life. St Josemaría made frequent reference to this reality. He emphasized it by saying, in an expressive manner, that the faithful of Opus Dei owe their parents ninety per cent of their Christian vocation,² since God’s ordinary Providence used them, with their virtues, their affection, and at times their struggle for sanctity, to prepare their child’s heart to hear the divine call. In the same sense, he called the fourth precept of the Decalogue “the sweetest commandment”, because its fulfilment is facilitated by the natural affection that arises among the members of a family.³

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* stresses, observing the fourth commandment of the Decalogue produces tangible fruits of peace, whereas neglecting it brings about great damage “to communities and to individuals”.⁴ Nevertheless, beyond the obvious reasons of usefulness and suitability, all Christians can discover in their family a place for their encounter with Jesus Christ by making their family bonds of mutual affection better and stronger.

The love due to parents is expressed through the respect of their children, “whether minors or adults,”⁵ which has in turn two primary manifestations:

*Gratitude*⁶ for the gift of life, which establishes an unpayable debt; for the love and care that parents put into the education of their offspring; and for many other gifts received as fruits of the natural affection of parents for their children.

Docility and *obedience*, which a child should observe regarding whatever his parents establish for as long as he lives in the paternal home, as long as it is not an offence to God.⁷

This duty of obedience is interrupted with the natural independence of children; but the respect due to parents does not cease; it remains and should become better. This obligation is manifested, on the other hand, in different ways, depending on the age of the children, and includes also the pleasant duty of taking care of one’s parents in the final stages of their lives.

¹ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2197. This commandment mentions specifically the honour due to our parents, but it extends to all our family relations (grandparents, ancestors, close and distant relatives), and includes also our duties towards those legitimately constituted in authority.

² Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 104.

³ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, quoted in PILAR URBANO, *The Man of Villa Tevere*, Scepter, p. 190.

⁴ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2200.

⁵ *Ibid*, 2214.

⁶ Cf. *Ibid*, 2215.

⁷ Cf. *Ibid*, 2216-2217.

2. *God always unites, He never separates*

Ordinarily Numeraries who have reached majority and have been incorporated into Opus Dei live in a Centre. It is natural, therefore, that the time comes when they leave the parental home as other adults do when they start a family or just seek more independence. Parents understand that this physical separation is similar to the one they experience regarding other children who do not belong to Opus Dei.

Instead, the home where Associates live their celibate life and their dedication to the apostolic activities of the Work can be quite diverse; and in fact many of them live with their families or wherever it is most suitable according to their personal circumstances.

In any case, the fact of not residing in the parental home for one reason or another doesn't mean the interruption of the duty that every member of the Work has of loving and respecting his parents. Even more, this duty is a requirement of our vocation to sanctity in the same measure that is proper to the Christian virtues that every baptised person should cultivate and foster. Saint Josemaría repeated this idea on many occasions:

*Count on your parents. They have the right to feel that you love them! I love them very much, and I pray for them every day. Bring them closer to God. A good way of doing that is to bring them closer to the Work. How could anything we do be pleasing to God if we neglected the souls of those who have loved us most on earth? You owe them your life, the seed of the faith and an upbringing which has made your vocation possible! Love them and count on them!*⁸

Each member of the Prelature – like any other of the faithful in the Church – has to face his own family issues with freedom and personal responsibility; hence the different ways of showing filial love. Initiative and spontaneity also play an important role in those manifestations of affection, which is creative and effective, always being able to find ways to make life pleasant for one's blood relations and to practise charity in an orderly manner, putting God first. Among other things that might be pointed out, it could suffice to mention here the following:

Praying for parents, siblings and other relatives, not only for their spiritual health, but also in the face of the joys, difficulties or problems that arise in any family, and which one also shares.

Showing with deeds the affection one feels for them, taking into account geographical distance, time limitations and the demands of Christian poverty. Saint Josemaría, for example, would frequently ask the first members of the Work if they were writing letters to their parents.⁹

Letting them know in a warm, positive and affectionate way about their endeavours and projects as members of Opus Dei, and counting on them, on their prayers and their help, as other children also rely on their parents for their own plans and ambitions.

And, naturally, facilitating that their parents have a direct knowledge of the Work and can thus benefit from the formation, spirit and pastoral attention of the Prelature.

In other words, physical separation does not mean spiritual separation, since the Love of God always unites and never separates. The order of charity leads to putting God in the first place and fidelity to Him becomes the only way of being happy on earth and making happy those of one's own family. The effort to grow in love also means, in a natural way, the effective desire to be a better son and a better brother or sister.

We could even say about the parents of a Numerary or Associate, that not only do they not lose a son or a daughter, but that they gain many more, since they occupy an important place in the heart of the whole Work. One manifestation among many others is the annual renewal of the Consecration of the families of the members of Opus Dei to the Holy Family of Nazareth that St Josemaría first made on 14th May 1951. The historical circumstances of

⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, quoted in PILAR URBANO, *The Man of Villa Tevere*, Scepter, p. 191.

⁹ Vid. among other texts, PILAR URBANO, *The Man of Villa Tevere*, Scepter, pp. 16 and 331.

that Consecration have been extensively described in the biographies of the Founder.¹⁰ He wanted, at moments of misunderstanding of some of them, to *place under the patronage of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph the families of our members, so that they will come to participate in the Work's gaudium cum pace and obtain from the Lord an affection for Opus Dei*.¹¹ A short time later, those misunderstandings and their consequences mostly ceased. Ever since, in every Centre of Opus Dei that Consecration is renewed annually on the Feast of the Holy Family – Numeraries and Associates on the feastday itself; Supernumeraries, on the nearest occasion when they gather – to ask God to fill with blessings the families of the members of the Work. Specifically, the text asks Our Lord the following:

*Grant them, Lord, to come to know better each day the spirit of our Opus Dei, to which you have called us for your service and our sanctification. Instil in their hearts a great love for our Work, and an ever-growing appreciation of the beauty of our vocation, so that they may feel a holy pride in your having deigned to choose us, and learn to thank you for the honour you have bestowed upon them. Bless especially their cooperation in our apostolic work, and make them always share in the joy and peace that you grant us as a reward for our dedication.*¹²

Besides, the benefits deriving from this Consecration continue to reach the parents of Numeraries and Associates, and the families of the Supernumeraries, since they can gain a plenary indulgence each year on the Feast of the Holy Family.

3. Bright and Cheerful Homes

The sanctification of family bonds for married people in Opus Dei, just as for any other Christian faithful called by God to marriage, naturally entails specific practices and obligations that derive from their state. These form, besides, the main scenario for their search for God in ordinary life. That is why St Josemaría stated: *Christian couples should be aware that they are called to sanctify themselves and to sanctify others, that they are called to be apostles and that their first apostolate is in the home. They should understand that founding a family, educating their children, and exercising a Christian influence in society, are supernatural tasks. The effectiveness and the success of their life – their happiness – depends to a great extent on their awareness of their specific mission.*¹³

Therefore, growth in conjugal love is the primordial matter for the sanctification of spouses. This should not be taken for granted, and it requires constant renewal, specific manifestations of affection, with common sense and supernatural outlook. The latter could be inspired by the fact that love between the spouses should imitate that of Christ for his Church, whose mystery analogically becomes a reality in them.¹⁴ Husband and wife should mutually respect each other's spiritual independence, even when both of them belong to the Work.

Inspired by the example of the Holy Family of Nazareth, the Founder of Opus Dei wrote: *When I think of Christian homes, I like to imagine them as being full of the light and joy that were in the home of the Holy Family.*¹⁵ They are in fact full of light, because noble love radiates the light of God's Love, within one's own family and in one's immediate social environment.

Seeking holiness within the family also demands generous, even heroic, dedication in time and affection, shared by husband and wife, to the formation of their children. The goal of education lies not only in the personal development of talents and gifts, or in a relative happiness or material prosperity, but in the supernatural hope that the whole family reflect

¹⁰ Vid., e.g., ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, III, pp. 188-195.

¹¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, quoted in *ibid*, p. 141.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 91.

¹⁴ Cf. *Eph* 5:22-23.

¹⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is Passing by*, 22.

God's love for his human children, and that they draw closer to the goal of Heaven. Traditionally, Christian homes have been able to transmit these values through family devotions like the recitation of the Holy Rosary or attendance at Sunday Mass, saying grace at meals, means that are still effective to introduce children to Christian life.¹⁶

A part of the natural affection of parents will be to win over their children's hearts and, depending on each one's age and circumstances, to oversee their doctrinal and religious formation. It is a serious duty that will lead them to transmit Christian doctrine personally, even more so if schools or other institutions don't guarantee it. Another not less important aspect of that formation should be guiding their readings, rest and leisure, in such a way that their necessary free time becomes an opportunity to open up to others, to practise Christian poverty and temperance: in other words, to find God in ordinary life.

On many occasions, teaching them how to rest will mean going against current social practices and having a good dose of inventiveness. Nevertheless, in this field Christian families can do a lot of good among their friends through their example, words and life. In fact, social relations always offer great occasions to give Christian example and values, radiating the light of Christ among one's friends.

Finally, it is natural that God makes use of the formation, the prayer and the patient work of parents for children to sense his will for their lives, in other words, their place in the Church. In this regard it is good to recall some lines from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Family ties are important but not absolute. Just as the child grows to maturity and human and spiritual autonomy, so his unique vocation which comes from God asserts itself more clearly and forcefully. Parents should respect this call and encourage their children to follow it. They must be convinced that the first vocation of the Christian is to *follow* Jesus: *He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me (Mt 10:37).*"¹⁷

"Becoming a disciple of Jesus means accepting the invitation to belong to *God's family*, to live in conformity with His way of life: *For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother (Mt 12:49).* Parents should welcome and respect with joy and thanksgiving the Lord's call to one of their children to follow him in virginity for the sake of the Kingdom in the consecrated life or in priestly ministry."¹⁸

Furthermore, just as one day they cooperated with God in the transmission of life, parents can also become co-operators with God in the perseverance of their children in their Christian journey.

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¹⁶ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 103.

¹⁷ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2232.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2233.