

DOCTRINAL FORMATION

1. Piety of children and doctrine of theologians

Spiritual formation, apostolic formation and professional formation need the foundations of a doctrinal formation. For spiritual life, for apostolate and to be able to sanctify the realities of this world according to the spirit of Opus Dei, one needs to know Christian doctrine in depth.

Spiritual life in the first place. Piety and doctrine, while being two different things, are closely linked. There can be people who have very little culture, and nonetheless are very close to God. The Holy Spirit – who is the Master of the interior life – grants them wisdom. But these very people, because of their love for God which moves them, tend to feel a hunger to get to know Christian doctrine better. The Curè of Ars, St Jean-Marie Vianney, is a good example. As a child he had received very little cultural formation. So, it required a great effort on his part and he did not shine in his studies for the priesthood. His love for God led him to achieve great holiness. But throughout his life he made heroic efforts to deepen in doctrine and to teach his faithful.

Piety needs doctrine, because one loves God better as one deepens in knowledge of God. This love for God itself sets alight the desire to get to know more about him: *Our desire to acquire this theological knowledge, in sound, firm Christian doctrine is sparked, above all, by the will to know and love God. It likewise stems from the concern of a faithful soul to attain the deepest meaning of the world, seen as coming from the hands of God.*¹ St Ambrose says: “There is nothing which gives more life to the soul than Christian doctrine: the more the word of God increases in our soul, the better we receive it, and as we understand it and comprehend it more, so grows the life of the soul; on the other hand, when doctrine is lacking, that life diminishes.”²

In the second place, for apostolate. Doctrine – a living doctrine embedded in piety – is also necessary for the apostolate: *Doctrinal apostolate: that will always be your apostolate.*³ To make the mysteries of the faith better known. To resolve difficulties or doubts which people can have. To deal with criticisms which some more or less well-intentioned people can raise. In the means of communication and in education there are a number of distortions concerning doctrinal matters, and the life of our Lord and of the Church. At times these have deep influence on the minds of people; on occasions this can even come to be true slavery. Here too, an abundance of good will overcome evil.

“Faced with such ignorance and so many errors about the most fundamental truths concerning Christ and his Church, we Christians cannot remain unresponsive, for God has constituted us ‘the salt of the earth’ (*Matt 5:13*) and ‘the light of the world’ (*Matt 5:14*). Every Christian has to share in the task of Christian formation.”⁴ *The task for a Christian is to drown evil in an abundance of good. It is not a question of negative campaigns, or of being anti anything. On the contrary, we should live positively, full of optimism, with youthfulness, joy and peace.*⁵

¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 10.

² ST AMBROSE, *Expositio in Psalmum*, 118, 7, 7.

³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Furrow*, 225.

⁴ ST JOHN PAUL II, *Address in Granada*, 5 November 1982.

⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Furrow*, 864.

Ignorance and distortion can be overcome with good doctrine attractively explained, where divine Truth, which is light for the human mind and joy for the heart shines. St Josemaría used to place an emphasis on the “gift of tongues”, the capacity to explain matters and accommodate oneself to the listener, so as to make oneself understood. *Some people know nothing about God... because no one has talked to them about him in terms they can understand.*⁶ *Having the gift of tongues is knowing how to transmit the knowledge of God – an invaluable resource for whoever is to be an apostle. –That is why I ask God Our Lord each day to grant it to every one of his sons and daughters.*⁷ In this regard St John Chrysostom said: “If one does not know how to present doctrine with the condiment of grace and the salt of speaking well (...) nothing is achieved.”⁸

To conclude, both for one’s own holiness and for the apostolate: *Each of us should try hard, as far as he can, to study the faith seriously, scientifically – all of which means theology. We should, therefore, have the piety of children and the sure doctrine of theologians.*⁹

2. Content and style of doctrinal formation

Every one of the faithful of Opus Dei and those who are in touch with its apostolates have the opportunity to receive doctrinal formation in abundance.

It gives initial formation – a course of Christian doctrine – to those who have asked for admission, so that they know sufficiently well the fundamentals of the faith. Later, Numeraries and some Associates attend lectures in Philosophy and Theology, appropriate to their personal circumstances, and at a speed which is appropriate to each one, given their particular circumstances and obligations. The Assistant Numeraries also do Philosophy and Theology, appropriate to their personal circumstances. The other faithful of Opus Dei – the Associates and Supernumeraries – study in a more condensed way the principal content of theology and many current doctrinal issues through talks and annual courses.¹⁰

St Josemaría wanted this teaching to be imparted in a way which would be attractive and pleasant, without loss of depth. It would pay appropriate attention to the cultural situation of different groups of people and of each place, and the conditions of those attending. And, in a direct and close way, so that each can have his doubts resolved and be properly prepared to give the reasons for our hope.¹¹

3. Based always on the Church’s doctrine

Following the Founder’s wishes, Opus Dei does not hold, nor will it ever officially hold, its own doctrines in what refers to the teaching of Philosophy and Theology. Christian doctrine is taught in the same way as the Church receives it and transmits it: with faithful adherence to the Magisterium. Certain and universally accepted conclusions of theological knowledge are also taught. It aims to offer a vision of Philosophical and Theological culture which is appropriate for a Christian of today, and which will help him with his holiness and give him reasons and explanations for the faith: But Opus Dei as an institution has no school of philosophy or theology of its own.¹²

In these areas, the lecturers follow the doctrine of St Thomas Aquinas which has

⁶ *Ibid.*, 941.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 899.

⁸ ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *In Iohannem hom.*, 53, 2.

⁹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 10.

¹⁰ Cf. *Codex iuris particularis seu Statuta Praelaturae Sanctae Crucis et Operis Dei*, 101 (28 November 1982).

¹¹ Cf. *1 Pet* 3:15.

¹² Cf. *Codex iuris particularis seu Statuta Praelaturae Sanctae Crucis et Operis Dei*, 109 (28 November 1982).

repeatedly been praised and recommended by Roman Pontiffs.¹³ It is the same criterion which the decree of Second Vatican Council regarding priestly formation, recommended: “Learn to penetrate the mysteries of salvation more deeply with the help of speculation (...) under the guidance of St Thomas.”¹⁴

The wide freedom which the Church leaves to its faithful in matters of opinion, which are the vast majority, also includes the fields of philosophy and theology. This, accompanied by a sense of responsibility, leads them to be seriously concerned with attaining the truth, to being prudent in areas which are sensitive and disputed among specialists, always showing respect to others. And, when it is a matter of Christian theology, one should never lose sight of the value merited by the things of God and the mystery which envelopes them.

Piety needs doctrine and doctrine needs piety. Pope St Gregory the Great wrote: “Piety is useless if it lacks the discernment of knowledge”; but also “Knowledge is nought if it does not have use for piety.”¹⁵ A theology unsupported by piety would float around and be at risk to drift. Instead of setting alight the love for God, it could become deformed by serving one’s vanity or justifying one’s deviations.

4. A great catechesis

St Josemaría sometimes defined Opus Dei as *a great catechesis*, because the principal and almost exclusive activity of Opus Dei consists in *teaching doctrine*, in offering spiritual and doctrinal formation to its members and those who take part in its apostolates.

This is done through the means of personal formation, for example, spiritual direction. And the collective means, for groups of people, for example, meditations, recollections, retreats, seminars, study weeks, and formation courses.

It expects a lot of those who prepare these activities and those who give them. They have to be conscious of the importance of organizing them well, of preparing them to the required depth and looking for ways of presenting the material in an attractive and deep way at the same time: these have to be helpful as well as illustrative.

They also require a lot of effort on the part of those who receive them, so as to make good use of them. To keep up the enthusiasm and the desire of wanting to continue learning with *the enthusiasm of the first time*, St Josemaría sometimes used to say. The doctrine of the Church is always a joyful and youthful reality, from which one can draw light and a new life. But it requires concentration to capture it and reflection to deepen in it.

In the case of studies of philosophy and theology, St Josemaría used to ask the members to make the same or greater effort as they did for their civil studies. The seriousness of study is fully reflected in this point of *The Way: An hour of study, for a modern apostle, is an hour of prayer*.¹⁶ It refers to the importance of imbuing all human environments and knowledge with the light of the Gospel. He was very aware of the formidable obstacle which some sciences can create if they take on an anti-Christian approach. That is why *when a person can become learned we cannot excuse him if he does not*.¹⁷

But this needs at the same time a knowledge both of one’s own profession – which is deep and reflected upon – and of doctrine which has to illuminate it. Each one has to carry out this task, responsibly, in one’s own area of knowledge: *Student: train yourself in a solid and active piety, excel in study, have firm desires of doing apostolate in your profession. –And, on*

¹³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Optatam totius*, 16.

¹⁵ ST GREGORY THE GREAT, *Moralia*, I, 45.

¹⁶ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 335.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 332.

*the strength of your religious and scientific training, I promise you rapid and far-reaching developments.*¹⁸ *There is an urgent need for spreading the doctrine of Christ. Store up your training, fill yourself with clear ideas, with the fullness of the Christian message, so that afterwards you can pass it on to others. –Don't expect God to illuminate you, for he has no reason to when you have definite human means available to you: study and work.*¹⁹ *Study. –Study in earnest. –If you are to be salt and light, you need knowledge, and suitable training. Or do you imagine that an idle and lazy life will entitle you to receive infused knowledge?*²⁰

In each circumscription where the Prelature operates – which often coincides with the territory of a particular country – the Regional Vicar establishes a *Studium Generale*, with the confirmation of the Prelate. This has a body of lecturers for studies in philosophy and theology. It looks after the doctrinal formation of courses of formation. Each circumscription also has a Centre of Studies for men who are Numeraries and one for women Numeraries, where more intense formation is given over a period of years. Something similar is sought for the Associates and Supernumeraries; this is called the Course of Studies. And all improve their doctrinal formation in annual courses, which are organised, usually, during vacations. The pace of this formation is adapted to, and made compatible with, the professional and family obligations of each one. In addition, the Prelate establishes Interregional Centres for the spiritual, philosophical and theological formation of lecturers in these subjects, of other faithful of the Work who will carry out tasks of formation, and of candidates for the priesthood.²¹ Currently these Interregional Centres are the Roman College of Holy Mary (in Rome) and the Colegio Mayor Goroabe (in Pamplona, Spain) for women; and the Roman College of the Holy Cross (in Rome) and the Colegio Mayor Aralar (in Pamplona) for men.

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¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹⁹ *Id.*, *The Forge*, 841.

²⁰ *Id.*, *The Way*, 340.

²¹ Cf. *Codex iuris particularis seu Statuta Praelaturae Sanctae Crucis et Operis Dei*, 109 (28 November 1982).