

## ST RAPHAEL'S WORK (I)

In 1932, during a retreat, St Josemaría was inspired by God to invoke for the first time the patrons of the different apostolic activities of Opus Dei: the Archangels St Michael, St Gabriel and St Raphael; and the Apostles St Peter, St Paul and St John. Under the patronage of St Raphael and St John is placed the work of St Raphael, the name given to the apostolate which, without constituting any form of association or grouping, the faithful of Opus Dei carry out with young people.<sup>1</sup>

The pastoral task that the Work carries out in the service of the Church can be summarized as teaching people that every moment and circumstance of life can become an occasion to love God and a joyous and simple service to souls. Although Opus Dei and its apostolates are open to everybody, the apostolate with young people, who are the hope of the Church, will always be a priority.<sup>2</sup> And so, whenever the apostolate starts in a new place, it begins with the work of St Raphael, and all the faithful of the Prelature, each one in accordance with his or her possibilities, give it great time and attention.

The essential and immediate objective of the work of St Raphael is to provide Christian and human formation to university students, secondary school-goers, and young people from various professional and social backgrounds. In accordance with their circumstances, it helps them in practical ways to deepen in the treasures of the faith and to live their lives in keeping with the Gospel and the promises made in baptism. In a word, it enables them to develop their human and spiritual abilities and place them at the service of God and of others: forming faithful sons and daughters of the Church, exemplary citizens, Christians who act freely and uprightly in professional, family and social life.

“The fundamental objective of the formation of the lay faithful is an ever-clearer discovery of one’s vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfil one’s mission [...] In the life of each member of the lay faithful there are *particularly significant and decisive moments* for discerning God’s call and embracing the mission entrusted by Him. Among these are the periods of *adolescence* and *young adulthood*.”<sup>3</sup> The work of St Raphael helps young people to encounter Christ personally and, in consequence, to discover new horizons and respond to their ecclesial calling.<sup>4</sup> This supernatural task of formation is imbued with the respect for freedom which is characteristic of the spirit of Opus Dei, and aims to awaken in young people a complete commitment to the Christian ideal. “A true education must awaken the courage to make definitive decisions, which today are considered a mortifying bind to our freedom. In reality, they are indispensable for growth and in order to achieve something great in life, in particular, to cause love to mature in all its beauty: therefore, to give consistency and meaning to freedom itself.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Devotion to St Raphael is rooted in Holy Scripture, which describes how Tobit the elder asks St Raphael the Archangel to look after his son Tobias, to accompany and guide him on a long journey in which the young man will discover God’s plan for his life (cf. *Tob* 5:11).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis*, 2

<sup>3</sup> ST JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 58

<sup>4</sup> “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical *Deus caritas est*, 1).

<sup>5</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Address to the Fourth National Italian Ecclesial Convention, Verona, 19 October 2006

That deep spiritual and human formation enables many young people, who are sufficiently old and mature enough to know what they are doing, to embrace and respond to their Christian vocation freely, joyfully and responsibly. As is to be expected, the greater part of those who participate in the formative activities of Opus Dei will eventually become parents. All of them are taught, as St Josemaría emphasised repeatedly, that marriage is a genuine vocation, in which one serves God by creating a bright and cheerful Christian home. If they wish, those youngsters can in future take part in the work of St Gabriel. Others experience God's call to Opus Dei through the gift of apostolic celibacy, a loving choice whereby they give themselves to God with all their heart. In their case, St Raphael's work is the normal channel whereby they receive the divine calling to Opus Dei as Numeraries or Associates. And with God's grace, there will also be others who feel called to the priesthood or religious life, if that is their vocation.

### ***1. St Raphael Centres: atmosphere***

St Josemaría stipulated that in every St Raphael centre there should be a framed copy of our Lord's new commandment,<sup>6</sup> as a reminder of the atmosphere of charity, of human and supernatural fraternity, which should imbue everything that happens there. That climate of affection, cheerfulness and openness (of a Christian family) should enable everybody who goes there to feel that the house is theirs, and to learn how to serve others readily and take their share of the jobs that have to be done.

Through the various formative activities youngsters come to learn that, like Christ, *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo* (perfect God and perfect Man), in order to achieve holiness they have to be fully human. To be a good son of God means being a good student, a good worker, a good son, a good brother, a good friend. They learn through concrete examples how to practise Christian virtues, which is nothing other than becoming identified with the sentiments of Christ himself:<sup>7</sup> spirit of service, generosity, friendliness, cheerfulness, fortitude, temperance, sincerity, etc. In particular, they are reminded frequently of the human and supernatural value of study – a serious obligation<sup>8</sup> – and the importance of justice and charity in the fulfilment of their duties, as well as the need to acquire a solid professional formation so as to be able to serve society better. That spirit (sanctification through ordinary work) creates in the St Raphael centres an atmosphere of industriousness and good use of time.

Together with acquiring human virtues, the youngsters discover and grow in friendship with Christ in their everyday activities. In this regard, the first idea they have to grasp is that the Christian life requires a solid doctrinal formation, which begins with the study (or revision) of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. At the same time, they learn that “the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate”.<sup>9</sup> And so, genuine progress in the spiritual life (which can be summed up as progress in charity) is expressed through an intense apostolate with relatives, friends and colleagues: praying for them, taking an interest in their welfare, humanly and spiritually, and trying very tactfully to lead them closer to God. In summary, they are taught the true meaning of Christian charity so that they very naturally acquire an effective desire to be apostolic. *Just live your ordinary life; work at your job, trying to fulfil the duties of your state in life, doing your job, your professional work properly, improving, getting better each day. Be loyal; be understanding with others and demanding on yourself. Be mortified and cheerful. This will be your apostolate. Then, though you won't see why, because you're very aware of your own wretchedness, you will find that people come to you. Then you can talk to them, quite simply and naturally – on your way home from work for*

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<sup>6</sup> *Mandatum novum do vobis: ut diligatis invicem, sicut dilexi vos, ut et vos diligatis invicem. In hoc cognoscent omnes quia discipuli mei estis, si dilectionem habueritis ad invicem:* “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Phil 2:5 ff*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 334

<sup>9</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2; cf. CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 863

*instance, or in a family gathering, on a bus, walking down the street, anywhere. You will chat about the sort of longings that everyone feels deep down in his soul, even though some people may not want to pay attention to them: they will come to understand them better, when they begin to look for God in earnest.*<sup>10</sup>

## **2. Spiritual direction**

Spiritual direction has a long tradition in the Church as a means of accompanying and guiding the Christian soul.<sup>11</sup> *You well know the obligations of your Christian way of life; they will lead you safely and surely to sanctity. You have also been forewarned about the difficulties, or practically all of them, because you can already get a rough idea of them at the beginning of the road. Now I wish to emphasise that you must let yourselves be helped and guided by a spiritual director, to whom you can confide all your holy ambitions and the daily problems affecting your interior life, the failures you may suffer and the victories.*<sup>12</sup>

In Opus Dei we have a wide experience of the value of spiritual direction, given by both priests and laity. It is a great support, humanly and spiritually, for people to encounter Christ, with the help of grace, in the generous exercise of their personal freedom and responsibility. It is normally carried out in the St Raphael centres, but it can also take place in a church, in a university chaplaincy, in a school run by friends or faithful of the Prelature, etc. Naturally, when explaining it to people, one always does so respecting the freedom of consciences: it is of great value in the interior life, and is offered to whoever freely wants it, without ever seeking to impose it on anyone. In places where it is not widely appreciated, it needs to be explained carefully, calling it something else if needs be, so its importance and value can be properly grasped.

*Spiritual guidance should not be used to turn people into beings with no judgment of their own, who limit themselves to carrying out mechanically what others tell them. On the contrary, it should tend to develop men with their own Christian standards. This requires maturity, firm convictions, sufficient doctrinal knowledge, a refined spirit and an educated will.*<sup>13</sup> In spiritual direction the soul receives nourishment for its Christian life; it acquires a deep life of piety, grounded on divine filiation, directed to knowing and loving Christ, and with Him and in Him, the Father and the Holy Spirit, as well as confident recourse to the Blessed Virgin, love for the Church, and veneration and affection for the Pope and the Bishops; frequent reception of the sacraments is encouraged, and to begin to struggle anew cheerfully and humbly, and with confidence in divine grace.

In spiritual direction one addresses how to sanctify daily life, how to convert work into prayer, how to fulfil one's Christian obligations of justice and charity, especially towards those most in need, and how to safeguard purity of heart and the virtue of chastity, so necessary to achieve intimacy with Jesus,<sup>14</sup> and a bulwark of human personality. One is led to imitate integrally Christ's fidelity to his Father, always being the same person at home as at work, with one's friends, when relaxing, instead of adapting to the environment in which one finds oneself. One is helped to become united to Christ's Cross, especially through acts of service and attention to everything, small and large, which makes life agreeable for others. In a word, one is helped to live uprightly in accordance with the faith, which is the way to be happy on earth and happy hereafter in heaven.

## **3. Human and supernatural friendship**

*The principal apostolate we Christians must carry out in the world, and the best witness we can give of our faith, is to help bring about a climate of genuine charity within the Church.*<sup>15</sup> This spirit of charity, which imbues all the formative activities of the St Raphael centres, is expressed through

<sup>10</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, 273

<sup>11</sup> For example, CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1435, 2695

<sup>12</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, 15; cf. *The Way*, 59, 60, 62, 63

<sup>13</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 93

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Matt* 5:8; CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2336

<sup>15</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, 226

human and supernatural friendship. *For this world of ours to set its course in a Christian direction – which is the only one worth while – we have to exercise a loyal friendship with all men, based on a prior loyal friendship with God.*<sup>16</sup>

As St Josemaría always did, one has to learn to listen, to understand, to forgive and to encourage by one's example, while at the same time challenging people affectionately and patiently. Formation is not a matter of lecturing people; teaching and learning goes hand in hand with serving one another cheerfully. Our supernatural and human desire to help young people improve spiritually, leads us to care for them solicitously and tactfully, so that they manage to deepen progressively in love for Christ. Thanks to God's grace and our deep and sincere friendship, the youngsters who take part in the formative activities of Opus Dei gradually draw closer to God and become enamoured with the fire of his love.

Friendship, in addition to supernatural means, also requires time and generosity. *When I speak to you about 'apostolate of friendship', I mean a personal friendship, self-sacrificing and sincere: face to face, heart to heart.*<sup>17</sup> It presupposes openness of mind and heart and also means making a heartfelt effort to understand the convictions of our friends, even though we may never come to share them or accept them.<sup>18</sup> Naturally, apostolate may also entail inviting people to things, but this is merely an aspect of something much deeper and more essential than taking part in particular activities. St Josemaría used to say that one has to give each soul the time it needs, and used to quote the example of a medieval monk patiently illuminating a manuscript, page by page. One facilitates the soul's progress by accompanying it unhurriedly, sympathetically, without coercion, always seeing first the person's positive aspects. And when someone doesn't seem to respond well, or even seems to be going backwards, it is necessary to be even more patient, and to help with prayer and friendship; here too one demonstrates the uprightness of true friendship.

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<sup>16</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 943

<sup>17</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Furrow*, 191

<sup>18</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Furrow*, 746