

ST RAPHAEL'S WORK (II)

1. Resources and facilities

*The main activity of Opus Dei is offering its members, and other people, the spiritual means they need to live as good Christians in the midst of the world. It helps them to learn Christ's doctrine and the Church's teachings. Its spirit moves them to work well for the love of God and as a service to other men. In a word, it helps them to behave like genuine Christians: being loyal friends, respecting the legitimate freedom of others, and trying to make our world more just.*¹

“The transmission of the Christian faith consists primarily in proclaiming Jesus Christ in order to lead others to faith in him.”² The Christian life consists fundamentally in approaching Jesus and living with him: seeking, finding and loving him continually.³ To identify with the sentiments of his redeeming heart,⁴ we need to know ever more his life and his teaching. As Benedict XVI explains, “the Christian message was not only ‘informative’ but ‘performative’”. That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known – it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing.”⁵

To achieve that “performative” objective, St Raphael’s work has a great variety of means and activities. They include those which St Josemaría called “traditional means”: these express the essence of the apostolate that the faithful of Opus Dei carry out with young people, and should never be omitted (even when there are difficulties), because they have been shown to be very effective for the good of souls. In addition to these, there is a whole range of other activities of various types (cultural, sporting, etc.) of an educational and apostolic nature.

“The paths to holiness are personal and call for a genuine ‘*training in holiness*’, adapted to people’s needs”.⁶ The task of providing that “training in holiness” becomes even more necessary in times of doctrinal confusion, when many young people lack the most basic Christian formation.⁷ The formative activities of St Raphael’s work are an educational process, a school of Christian living, directed to the entire personality: mind, heart and will. It’s not just a question of transmitting some ideas, but of helping the youngsters to incorporate Christ’s message into their lives, freely and actively.

2. Formation courses, meditations, recollections, retreats

At the beginning of 1933 St Josemaría gave the first of what he later called “St Raphael circles”. The St Raphael circles or classes are the pivot around which all the other traditional means revolve. They include the *preparatory course* and *professional courses*.

The *preparatory course* is a cycle of sessions about the Christian life. It is based on the Gospel and on the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and contains explanations about the sacraments, prayer, the cardinal and theological virtues, divine filiation, and how to find God in study, work and social relations. The classes are short, and pitched in an informal and apostolic style, and are

¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 27

² CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 425

³ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 382

⁴ Cf. *Phil* 2:7

⁵ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical *Spe salvi*, 2

⁶ ST JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, 31

⁷ “Believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion” (CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2125, quoting SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Gaudium et spes*, 19 §3).

fundamentally practical: they try to illustrate the attractiveness of faith commitment in the everyday circumstances of life. As a complement to the classes, the moderator chats periodically with those who wish to do so, to resolve their questions and guide their Christian life and apostolate.

To participate in the preparatory course one needs to have a basic knowledge of the Catholic faith. If necessary, before starting the course proper, people can receive a number of classes about the faith (or about human virtues) in order to acquire some basic ideas about Christian life.

On finishing the preparatory course, those who wish to do so may start the *professional courses*. The purpose of these latter is to provide a deep theoretical and practical knowledge of Catholic faith and morals to help people grasp fully the implications of what it means to be a Christian. They address the need, so essential for Catholics, to be able to reason from the faith, from Christ: “Everybody who believes, thinks – both thinks in believing and believes in thinking [...] Because if faith is not a matter of thought, it is of no account.”⁸ “The intellect must seek that which it loves: the more it loves, the more it desires to know. Whoever lives for the truth is reaching for a form of knowledge which is fired more and more with love for what it knows.”⁹

The subject-matter of these courses is quite varied: from fundamental ethical and anthropological topics (marriage, education, respect for life, etc.), to current doctrinal issues, often arising from some recent document of the Magisterium. Normally, the first cycle covers topics of general interest, adapted to the circumstances of the participants. The second cycle can deal with more specialized topics of professional ethics, for example, grouping the participants according to related professions or interests. A basic source reference for both cycles is the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

In the professional courses, together with the theoretical part, the participants are encouraged to make use of the ideas they receive in order to nourish and strengthen their Christian life and their apostolate with relatives, friends and colleagues. As St John Paul II pointed out, the responsibility that comes with having the faith “also means loving it and seeking the most exact understanding of it, in order to bring it closer to ourselves and others in all its saving power, its splendour and its profundity joined with simplicity.”¹⁰

Apart from the formation courses, every St Raphael centre organizes at least one *weekly meditation* preached by the priest: a period of prayer based on a text of the Gospel, from the liturgy, etc. Prayer is a requirement of the Christian life: “A living relationship with Christ is decisive if we are to keep on the right path [...] People who pray are not wasting their time, even though the situation appears desperate and seems to call for action alone.”¹¹ And so, training in the art of prayer is always a priority in St Raphael’s work.

If possible, the meditation takes place on Saturdays, a day traditionally dedicated to our Lady, as an expression of love for the Mother of God. It is normally followed by Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and the singing of the *Salve Regina* or some other Marian hymn, in keeping with the liturgical cycle. This is another expression of the centrality of the Eucharist in the Church’s life.

Every month there is a *recollection*, and throughout the year there are several *retreats* of a number of days’ duration. Both these practices are recommended by the Church as beneficial to the spiritual life and as a means of conversion of heart.¹² Moreover, experience shows that they are also a good opportunity to introduce relatives and friends to St Raphael’s work.

3. *Catechesis and visits to our Lady’s poor*

Catechesis and visits to our Lady’s poor are also traditional means of St Raphael’s work. They are very well suited for preparing those who will later attend circles, and for furthering the

⁸ ST AUGUSTINE, *De praedestinatione sanctorum*, 1, 5: PL 44, 963

⁹ ST JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 42

¹⁰ ST JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, 19

¹¹ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical *Deus caritas est*, 36

¹² For example, cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 32; CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1435 & 1438

formation of who are already attending.

Catechesis is a spiritual work of mercy (instruct the ignorant¹³) which plays a very important part in the Church's mission. As Blessed John Henry Newman said, "any child, well instructed in the catechism, is, without intending it, a real missionary".¹⁴ St Raphael's work can prepare many catechists who can then help in parishes, schools, etc. Giving catechism classes is very proper to the spirit of Opus Dei: St Josemaría used to describe Opus Dei's role in the service of the Church as *an immense catechesis*.¹⁵

In the *visits to the poor*, the participants practise the virtue of charity, they identify with the needs of others, and discover in a very practical way that the love of God and of neighbour are inseparable.¹⁶ When possible, these visits take place on feasts of the Blessed Virgin, because one of their purposes is precisely to honour her in her poor. From the start of Opus Dei they have always been used in order to put the youngsters in contact with the most needy members of society and bring them comfort and solace. St Josemaría said that *the human strength of the Work was the patients in the hospitals of Madrid, the most wretched ones; the sick who were living in their homes, having lost even the last human hope; the most ignorant in those poorest neighbourhoods*.¹⁷

These visits, as well as being a way to help people mature humanly and in the faith, are everywhere extremely necessary. Even in countries with a high standard of living, there are people who are poor, sick or lonely, with nobody to look after them: "Despite the great advances made in science and technology, each day we see how much suffering there is in the world on account of different kinds of poverty, both material and spiritual. Our times call for a new readiness to assist our neighbours in need."¹⁸

4. Workshops and other auxiliary activities of St Raphael's work. Residences

In addition to the traditional means, St Raphael's work is also bolstered and developed by means of many *auxiliary activities* organized in the centres – conferences, work sessions, etc. – which contribute directly to improving the participants' human, cultural, professional and religious capacities.

Each country organizes those best suited to its requirements: music, journalism, languages, literature, debating, study techniques, career guidance, or simply get-togethers and cultural activities. Added to that are various types of social outreach programmes: helping developing countries, caring for handicapped people, etc. These activities share some common features: a deep sense of Christian solidarity; some educational content; a lay and secular outlook; carried out in a family atmosphere; a professional approach; and a desire to be of service to society.

Workshops are encounters of young people for all sorts of reasons: a seminar on some current issue, a career guidance program, a study weekend, a sporting competition, a work camp, an outing, etc. They involve a period of shared friendship, character development and intellectual growth, in an overall Christian atmosphere. They are normally held on weekends or during holidays.

The *residences and university academies* are centres of academic and cultural excellence, open to people of all social backgrounds, whose purpose is to help students become professionally outstanding and to acquire ideals of service, love for truth and freedom.¹⁹ They are characterized by their family spirit, and by an atmosphere of study, cheerfulness, optimism and openness, in which the residents behave with naturalness, refinement and friendliness. Living together enables them to practise the human virtues, to be positive and universal in outlook, not to discriminate, and to

¹³ Cf. CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2447

¹⁴ BL. JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *Sermon on the opening of St Bernard's Seminary*, Olton, 2 October 1873

¹⁵ Cf. *Letter 15 August 1964*, 1, in ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III, p. 375; or also, Interview with St Josemaría in the Madrid newspaper *ABC*, 24 March 1971

¹⁶ Cf. *1 John* 4:20-21

¹⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Meditation*, 19 March 1975, in ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, p. 338. Cf. J. GONZÁLEZ-SIMANCAS Y LACASA – J. REVUELTA SOMALO, *San Josemaría entre los enfermos de Madrid (1927-1931)*, "Studia et Documenta", 2 (2008) 147-203.

¹⁸ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical *Deus caritas est*, 30

¹⁹ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 84

develop a true and robust personality. While the residences are avowedly Christian, they are open to non-Catholics, who are always welcomed with affection and regard; and who, when they wish, are invited to take part in the religious formation provided.

5. *Continuity in St Raphael's work. Letter apostolate*

When class was over, I went to the chapel with those boys, and I took our Lord sacramentally present in the monstrance, raised him, and blessed those three, ... and I saw three hundred, three hundred thousand, thirty million, three billion..., white, black, yellow, of all the colours, all the combinations, that human love can produce. And I fell short, because this has become a reality after not even half a century. I fell short, because our Lord has been generous beyond my wildest dreams.²⁰

Within the broad and varied panorama of holiness which so many witnesses to faith in Christ have given in the Church, the faithful of Opus Dei meditate especially on the life of St Josemaría, who for many years carried out an intense pastoral ministry with young people. Moved by his example, all of us in the Prelature feel passionately about apostolate, and in particular about St Raphael's work. *Zeal is a divine craziness in an apostle which I would like you to have, and it has these symptoms: hunger to know the Master; constant concern for souls; perseverance, that nothing can shake.²¹*

As an expression of this spirit, the formative activities of St Raphael's work are always run as well as possible, even if only a single person turns up: professionally, in an attractive style, doctrinally thorough and at the same time accessible, in order to demonstrate the beauty of the faith in all its attractiveness. Just as the Gospel is at one and the same time, both old and new, so too the task of leading people to Christ through the formative activities is always new and alive.

The apostolic activity is carried out systematically and uninterruptedly, and is not suspended at any time of the year. During the holidays it is adapted to the circumstances so that the participants can continue to mature humanly, supernaturally and apostolically. We also keep up contact with those who have gone away. St Josemaría maintained what he termed the "letter apostolate",²² as an expression of genuine friendship and Christian charity, and as a means to strengthening young people's faith.

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October 2010

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²⁰ ST JOSEMARÍA, (cf. AGP, P04 1975, p. 278), in ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, p. 371

²¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 934

²² Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, 976-977