

# The Discovery of One's Vocation

## *Reflections on Vocation and Discernment in the Teachings of St. Josemaría*

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Discernment is an important topic in spiritual theology. In the classic *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*, “discernment of spirits” is seen as embracing a wide variety of questions, including the reasons for a person’s choices and actions, the signs of the times, charisms, inspirations and interior motions, and spiritual accompaniment, among others.<sup>1</sup> A clear premise here is that people are not determined in their choices. Each is faced with the task of discerning their own path in life based on their convictions and concerns. Thus the relevance of discernment stems from its relationship to freedom, which in turn depends on an understanding of practical truth (“what should be done”).

Much has been written about *spiritual discernment*,<sup>2</sup> that is, discernment regarding the life of the spirit and more specifically the Christian life.<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis has used this term in numerous addresses and documents, in a variety of contexts. In particular, he has referred to the vocation of young people, especially in the recent Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*: “A particular form of discernment involves our effort to discover our own vocation.”<sup>4</sup>

In St. Josemaría’s writings and preaching, we find various reflections on the discovery of our Christian vocation, beginning with the recognition that God is calling each person to holiness in a specific path in life. As we will see below, the founder of Opus Dei rarely used the term “discernment” in this context, perhaps because of the breadth of its meaning that we saw above. Nevertheless,

1. See the extensive article *Discernement des esprits*, in vol. 3 of the above-mentioned *Dictionnaire*, col. 1222-1291 (by different authors, depending on the various parts: Jacques Guillet, Gustave Bardy, François Vandenbroucke, Henri Martin, and Joseph Pegon).

2. In addition to the previous article, a good summary can be seen in Manuel Ruiz Jurado, *El discernimiento espiritual*, BAC 1994.

3. For a more historical view see, among others, Charles-André Bernard, *Spiritual Theology*, Athens 1994, 375-400; A. Cappelletti, *Discernment of Spirits*, in *Dictionary of Spirituality I*, Herder 1983, 628-632; José de Guibert, *Lessons in Spiritual Theology*, Reason and Faith 1953, 321-332.

4. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhort. *Christus vivit*, March 25, 2019, no. 283.

this does not prevent his teachings, like those of so many guides in the spiritual life, from shedding light on vocational discernment, a topic that during these months has been at the center of the Church's reflections. Below we will offer some considerations on discernment understood as the discovery of each person's vocation, based on the teachings of St. Josemaría.

### 1. A new pastoral reality, grounded on the universal call to holiness

In the works of St. Josemaría published up to now, there are many allusions to the discovery of one's own vocation, while specific references to the concept of discernment (*discernimiento* and *discernir* in Spanish) appear only in *Conversations with St. Josemaría Escrivá*, specifically three times in the same interview (nos. 59 and 70). The statements made there are framed within the universal call to holiness, the core of his preaching.

In the introduction to the critical edition of *Conversations*, José Luis Illanes explains why the founder of Opus Dei decided to try to make the message of Opus Dei better known by giving interviews in various public media, including the then *Osservatore della Domenica*, which was linked to official information sources within the Roman Curia and enjoyed special resonance in the Church.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps that is why several references to discernment and discernment of spirits are found there, which isn't the case in the other interviews granted to publications such as *The New York Times* or *Le Figaro*.

The focus, right from the start of the interview, is the vocation of the lay faithful. "The basic characteristic of the development of the laity is new awareness of the dignity of the Christian vocation. God's call, the character conferred by Baptism, and grace mean that every single Christian can and should be a living expression of the faith. Every Christian should be 'another Christ, Christ himself,'<sup>6</sup> present among men."<sup>7</sup>

St. Josemaría's message entails a deep understanding of Baptism as a personal call from God, that is, as a vocational path. This focus makes it easier to understand the vocation proper to the lay faithful, as a specific way of contributing to the Church's holiness and apostolate.<sup>8</sup> The interview stresses that

5. St. Josemaría, *Conversaciones con Mons. Escrivá de Balaguer*, Historical-Critical Edition, edited by José Luis Illanes, Rialp 2012, 13-25. This critical commentary is not yet available in English, although the interview itself has been published in English in *Conversations with St. Josemaría Escrivá*, Scepter Publishers.

6. This Christological formula referring to each Christian is essential in the teaching of St. Josemaría: see Antonio Aranda, *El cristiano "alter Christus, ipse Christus" en el pensamiento del beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, *Scripta Theologica* 26 (1994), 513-570.

7. *Conversations*, no. 58. This interview for *L'Osservatore della Domenica* is entitled "Opus Dei: an Association which fosters the Search for Holiness in the World."

8. As a summary of the extensive bibliography, see Ernst Burkhardt – Javier López, *Ordinary*

the specific vocation to Opus Dei brings with it a commitment to respond personally to the call to holiness in ordinary life, and to spread the awareness of this universal call. Incorporation in Opus Dei requires a divine vocation; it is not simply an association resulting from the will of the persons involved.<sup>9</sup>

Understanding this specific vocation in the Church requires appreciating the vocation and mission of the laity, which “brings with it a deeper awareness of the Church as a community made up of all the faithful, where all share in one and the same mission, which each should fulfil according to their personal circumstances.”<sup>10</sup> In order to foster awareness of the lay vocation, a new pastoral approach is needed, “aimed at discovering the presence in the midst of the People of God of the charism of holiness and apostolate, in the infinitely varied forms in which God bestows it.”<sup>11</sup> This in turn requires the organic cooperation of the lay faithful with priestly ministers.

This new pastoral program, as demanding as it is necessary, “calls for the supernatural gift of discernment of spirits, for sensitivity towards the things of God, and for the humility of not imposing personal preferences upon others and of seconding the inspirations which God arouses in souls. In a word: it means loving the rightful freedom of the sons of God who find Christ, and become bearers of Christ, while following paths which are very diverse but which are all equally divine.”<sup>12</sup>

Priests “must truly be servants of the servants of God,”<sup>13</sup> so that the laity can make Christ present in all sectors of society. “One of the fundamental tasks of the priest is and always will be to give doctrine, to help individuals and society to become aware of the duties which the Gospel imposes on them, and to move men to discern the signs of the time. But all priestly work should be carried out with the maximum respect for the rightful freedom of consciences: every person ought to respond to God freely. And besides, every Catholic, as well as receiving help from the priest, also has lights of his own which he

*Life and Holiness in the Teaching of St. Josemaría, Vol I*, Scepter 2017, 146-182.

9. “We are here [in Opus Dei] because God has called us, with a personal and special vocation.” St. Josemaría, *Letter, February 14, 1944*, no. 1; cited in Fernando Ocariz, *Opus Dei in the Church*, Four Courts Press, 93. Although St. Josemaría is referring here specifically to the faithful of Opus Dei, his teachings are useful for all Christians, since they are based on the universal call to holiness inherent to Baptism.

10. *Conversations*, no. 59. These truths capture very well the core of the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on the Church and her mission: see *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 39-40 and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, nos. 2 and 4.

11. *Conversations*, no. 59.

12. *Ibid.*

13. “Servants of the servants of God” is an expression often used to refer to the Popes. In his homily *A Priest Forever*, St. Josemaría said, referring to those about to be ordained: “They will be ordained to serve.” He sees the priestly ministry as service: service to God, to the Church, and to all men and women.

receives from God and a grace of state to carry out the specific mission which, as a person and as a Christian, he has received.”<sup>14</sup> All the faithful are called to carry out this mission, in virtue of the common priesthood received in Baptism.

These words of St. Josemaría present a vision of the Church focused on her mission to bring God to the world. As Pope Francis said, it should be “a Church going out [to the world].” The role of sacred ministers, as “servants of the servants of God,” is to assist the laity and encourage them to discover God’s will, alerting them to their personal responsibility. And the specific mission and identity of the lay person is to make Christ present in all sectors of society, by responding freely to God’s call.

Below we will consider Christian life as a vocation or personal call from God addressed to each person in Baptism in both its theological implications (sections 2 and 3) and its pastoral ones (sections 4-6).

## **2. All men and women have a vocation, each his or her own**

From a theological point of view, understanding the Christian life as a vocation implies emphasizing that God calls all men and women. All the baptized have a vocation, each person his or her own, and therefore their life acquires meaning as a response to God’s initiative of love. “If you are there in the middle of ordinary life, it doesn’t mean Christ has forgotten about you or hasn’t called you.”<sup>15</sup>

The initiative is always God’s: “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (*Jn* 15:16). The Christian vocation is not self-realization, nor a search for getting the most out of life, but an awakening to the concerns of God. Christ has entered our life without asking our permission. “I didn’t think God would get hold of me the way he did either. But let me tell you once again, God doesn’t ask our permission to ‘complicate’ our lives. He just gets in: and that’s that!”<sup>16</sup> Each person can hear the voice of the Spirit and freely guide his or her life in accord with God’s will. This is the key to discernment: where, when, and how God manifests himself in our lives.

God wants all of us to share in Jesus’ mission: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel” (*Mk* 16:15). Therefore a pastoral plan is needed for fostering vocations. But the question then arises: “what right do I have to involve myself in the lives of others?” St. Josemaría’s response is clear: “Because they need it. Without asking our permission, Christ has entered our lives. He did the same with the first disciples.”<sup>17</sup>

14. *Conversations*, no. 59.

15. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 20.

16. St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 902.

17. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 175.

The approach to fostering vocations changes substantially in light of the universal call to holiness. If all Christians have a vocation, then the aim of pastoral work in fostering and discerning vocations is not to exclude many people and decide who fits into a specific vocation, but to help each person discover his or her own calling from God. Discernment should not be reduced to *who does or does not* have a vocation to the religious life or to the priestly ministry. Rather it is a question of discovering the right path for each person.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the protagonist in discernment is no longer the vocation director or spiritual guide, but rather each person, even though he or she will undoubtedly need advice. Thus each Christian faithful is helped to discern their own path in life and to choose it freely. In the Church many vocations exist that configure the baptismal vocation shared by all men and women: the ministerial priesthood, the consecrated life in its different forms, and the lay life with its various charisms. Which vocation is the best? “For each person, the most perfect thing is, always and only, to do God’s Will.”<sup>19</sup>

Therefore discernment entails the need to listen to both God and to the individual involved when raising the question of a vocation. The one helping another person to discern their vocation—whether a priest, religious, or lay person—should have great sensitivity towards the concerns of God, deep humility so as not to impose one’s own preferences, and the strong desire to assist what God is fostering in each soul. In short, one needs to be moved by love for the legitimate freedom of the children of God.<sup>20</sup> “This way of acting and this spirit are based on respect for the transcendence of revealed truth and on love for the freedom of the human person. I might add that they are also based on a realization that history is undetermined and open to a variety of human options—all of which God respects.”<sup>21</sup>

### 3. History as salvation<sup>22</sup>

In the third text in *Conversations*, where St. Josemaría speaks explicitly of discernment, he says: “Good and evil are mixed in human history, and therefore the Christian should be a person of judgment [*“una criatura que sepa discernir”* in the original Spanish]. But this judgment [*“discernimiento”*] should never bring him to deny the goodness of God’s works. On the contrary, it should bring him to recognize the hand of God working through all human

18. St. Josemaría was looking for a new term to explain this reality, this *call* or *calling*, because at the time he wrote *The Way*, vocation was seen as being exclusive to priests and religious (see *The Way: Critical-historical Edition*, commentary on point 27).

19. *Conversations*, no. 92.

20. See *Conversations*, no. 59.

21. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 99.

22. See in this regard: Joseph Ratzinger, *Teoría de los principios teológicos*, “Salvación e historia,” 181-204; “Historia de la salvación, metafísica y escatología,” 204-227, Herder 1985.

actions, even those which betray our fallen nature. You could make a good motto for Christian life out of these words of Saint Paul: ‘All things are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s’ (1 Cor 3:22-23), and so carry out the plans of that God whose will it is to save the world.”<sup>23</sup>

Here discernment is linked to the statement that the world is good, and even holy. St. Josemaría also said in this interview that sanctifying one’s professional work, sanctifying oneself in that work, and contributing to the sanctification of others through one’s profession, is intrinsic to the vocation to Opus Dei, as part of God’s plan for salvation.

This statement about the world is also a statement about the human person’s freedom and action in the world. History is the place of salvation because it results from the incarnation of Jesus Christ and from the freedom of the children of God assisted by divine grace.<sup>24</sup> Divine filiation—the assurance that God is our Father—leads to a deep contemplative and mystical vision of daily events that enables us to *recognize the divine manifested in the human*.<sup>25</sup>

Vocation is thus seen in the light of a God who is Father and who manifests his love in history, and therefore requires the response of our personal freedom.<sup>26</sup> St. Josemaría views the life of each person with deep trust in the providence of a God who is Father and who cares for his children.<sup>27</sup>

History is seen as a dynamic reality where God the Father intervenes first, and then the human person with the use of his or her freedom. History is shaped by the personal decisions that are inspired by divine love. “If you ask me how the divine call is perceived, how one becomes aware of it, I would say that

23. *Conversations*, no. 70.

24. “God the Father, in the fullness of time, sent his only-begotten Son to take flesh in Mary ever Virgin, through the Holy Spirit, and re-establish peace. In this way, by redeeming man from sin, ‘we receive adoption as sons’ (Gal 4:5). We become capable of sharing the intimacy of God. In this way the new man, the new line of the children of God (see Rom 6:4-5), is enabled to free the whole universe from disorder, restoring all things in Christ (see Eph. 1:9-10), as they have been reconciled with God.” (St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 183) Here we have a summary of his understanding of history and of the Christian’s role in the world.

25. “Precisely because we are 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.” (St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 65)

26. For an approach to St. Josemaría’s understanding of freedom, see Ernst Burkhardt – Javier López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría II*, Rialp 2011, 161-220; Luis Clavell, *La libertad ganada por Cristo en la Cruz*, Romana 33 (2001), 242-271; Cornelio Fabro, “El primado existencial de la libertad,” *Scripta Theologica* 13 (1981), 323-337; Fernando Ocariz, *Naturaleza, Gracia y Gloria*, Eunsa 2000, 108-121 and 283-298.

27. “Open your own hearts to Jesus and tell him your story. I don’t want to generalize” (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 1).

See especially his meditation “In God’s Hands”: *In Dialogue with the Lord*, Scepter 2018, nos. 125-131.



it is a new outlook on life. It is as though a new light is lit within us; it is a mysterious impelling force, that pushes a person to dedicate his or her noblest energies to an activity which, through practice, becomes second nature. That vital force, somewhat like an avalanche sweeping all before it, is what others call vocation.”<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. Importance of formation

A number of pastoral consequences stem from this view of vocation. If we start from the premise that everyone has a vocation—each person his or her own—and that God manifests himself in history, but always counting on our personal freedom, then it is clear why we need to let the Holy Spirit act. To set out to discover one’s own vocation and apostolic mission requires, therefore, acquiring a deep Christian formation.

St. Josemaría was convinced of the importance of offering a deep formation to all types of persons as a premise for responding to our Lord’s call. Referring specifically to the institution he founded by divine inspiration, he said that it was a “great work of catechesis.”<sup>29</sup> In the *Instruction for the Work of St. Raphael*, on Opus Dei’s apostolic work with young people, he states clearly that the immediate aim of this apostolic effort is the Christian formation of young people, while the secondary aim is to form those who, from among this broader group, will be able to receive the vocation to carry out the apostolic mission of the Work, whether in celibacy or marriage.<sup>30</sup>

An essential guideline for this formation is educating people in freedom. The formative environment fostered by the founder of Opus Dei presupposes a delicate respect for each person’s privacy. Hence the need to create a climate of trust that allows each soul to unleash the energy of his or her personal freedom without falling into hypocritical or narrow-minded behavior. That is why it is based on friendship, which makes it easier to help people “to direct their efforts and to carry out their projects properly, teaching them to consider things and to reason them out. It is not a matter of imposing a line of conduct, but rather of showing the human and supernatural motives for it ... there is no real education without personal responsibility, and there is no responsibility without freedom.”<sup>31</sup>

28. St. Josemaría, *Letter, January 9, 1932*, no. 9: cited in Fernando Ocariz, *Opus Dei in the Church*, Four Courts Press and Scepter Publishers, 1994, 86.

29. On the variety, nature and content of these documents called “*Instrucciones*,” see Luis Cano, *Instrucciones (unpublished work)*, in *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Monte Carmelo 2013, 650-655; José Luis Illanes, “*Obra escrita y predicación de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*,” *Studia et Documenta* 3 (2009), 203-276, on the Instructions: specifically, 217-220 and 257-258.

30. See St. Josemaría, *Instrucción para la obra de San Rafael*, January 9, 1935, nos. 65-66.

31. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 27.

As we said above, in all formation the most important action is God's. Those who help to form others—and, in this context, to help them discern God's will—need to cultivate a humility that leads to recognizing the primacy of the Spirit, who uses them as instruments in his hands. Therefore in order to carry out this mission, the starting point is one's own interior life: to be Eucharistic souls,<sup>32</sup> since it is a supernatural sowing.<sup>33</sup>

In another of his *Instructions*,<sup>34</sup> St. Josemaría emphasizes even more forcefully the care needed to provide adequate formation for those who join Opus Dei as numeraries or associates. The starting point is always the desire to bring all souls closer to Christ, helping each one to discover their own vocation.<sup>35</sup> The formation that these faithful of Opus Dei receive is at the service of their mission. Hence the founder stresses that sanctity in the middle of the world, because of its rich human and divine content, entails the need to form oneself with a special depth.<sup>36</sup>

The pastoral work with those who sense a call to Opus Dei requires helping them acquire a strong piety, a deep doctrinal knowledge of the faith, and solid human virtues needed to sanctify their profession or job and carry out their apostolic mission.<sup>37</sup> St. Josemaría often spoke about five key areas of formation: human, doctrinal-religious, spiritual, professional, and apostolic. This formation is “the foundation of your life as souls dedicated to Jesus Christ.”<sup>38</sup>

## 5. A free personal choice<sup>39</sup>

32. See St. Josemaría, *Instrucción sobre el modo de hacer proselitismo*, April 1, 1934, no. 3. The word “proselytism” is derived from “proselyte,” which in the Bible refers to someone who, coming from another people, was prepared to accept the Jewish faith. The Church took up this word analogically. St. Justin, for example, spoke of “proselytizing” to refer to the apostolic mission of Christians, directed to the whole world (see *Mk* 16:15). Many spiritual authors, including St. Josemaría, have used the term “proselytism” in this sense, as a synonym for apostolate or evangelization: a work characterized, among other things, by a profound respect for freedom, in contrast to the negative meaning that this word has taken on in recent years. St. Josemaría used the word “proselytism” with the meaning of a proposal or invitation with which Christians share Christ's call with their companions and friends, and open before them the horizon of his Love.

33. In the same *Instruction* cited in the previous footnote, St. Josemaría recalled that, in the early years of Opus Dei's apostolic work, the custom was “not to speak about the Work to any person, without considering the matter slowly in prayer” (no. 11), to ask, “with prayer and sacrifice, for abundant grace from Heaven” (no. 12), and to pray to the person's guardian angel (no. 13).

34. *Instrucción para la obra de San Miguel*, December 8, 1941.

35. See *Ibid.*, no. 2.

36. See *Ibid.*, no. 19.

37. See *Ibid.*, nos. 6-7.

38. *Ibid.*, no. 16.

39. St. Josemaría always understood a vocation in terms of freedom: the freedom of the person, which truly shapes one's vocation and history, both personal and collective. We have to keep in mind that it is really God who calls. The choice involves accepting God's gift. Freedom is the



As a person's formation deepens, a moment of maturing comes when, under the impulse of grace, each one confronts their entire future and the commitments needed to follow their own path in the Church. This moment is usually accompanied by two psychological states: an uneasiness and an attraction.

As in our Lady's life—"she was greatly troubled by these words" (*Lk* 1, 29)—a vocational call is often accompanied by unrest, the awareness of having received a specific task in life. Without the need for any extraordinary supernatural manifestations, a person becomes aware, with simplicity, that *something has happened*. God breaks into our daily events and speaks without words through the human mediation of a friend or a priest, or circumstances such as a book entering one's life or an event. This psychological experience can lead to uneasiness or even to fear, along with a longing to accomplish great things in life. God "acts through those inner inspirations, which begin by taking away a bit of our comfort and tranquility."<sup>40</sup>

A person becomes aware of being called to a mission, with the opportunity to direct one's life to a higher goal. Often this is motivated by the attraction of the lives of others who are following the same path in their own life.

St. Josemaría valued the silent witness of upright behavior, but he knew it was not enough. Each person needs to diligently strive to lead others to Christ through their prayer and example, and their convincing and encouraging words.<sup>41</sup> Hence he liked to use a forceful expression found in the Gospels:

response out of love to a call that is the expression of God's love. Call and response give rise to a process of grace and freedom that shapes the life of every human being.

The difficulty of the subject lies in the concept of freedom that we have received since modern times. Freedom as absolute autonomy of the will has its roots in Luther (autonomy of belief), Kant (autonomy of thought), and Marx (autonomy of action). This view of freedom stems from the emancipatory ideal that was born with Modernity and that can be summed up as the pretension *to make oneself* exclusively with one's own strength, without depending on anything or anyone (see Joseph Ratzinger, in *Truth and Tolerance*, Ignatius Press: San Francisco 2004; Romano Guardini, *Mundo y persona. Ensayos para una teoría cristiana del hombre*, Madrid, Ediciones Encuentro, 2014, pp. 15-43). In the most extreme version of this conception, freedom, in order to be real, should confront God, reject him, or even "kill him" as Nietzsche will say. Only without God can one be free, they think.

It is difficult for someone with this false idea of freedom to understand the meaning of the freedom that the saints intuit in its fullness: the vocation of each person is the vocation to freedom, to the true freedom of children of God, for which Christ has set us free. There is full harmony between freedom and grace, not opposition; there is full harmony between the freedom of the person and the plan of salvation freely willed by God. The only opposition comes from the sin that enslaves us. This very direct relationship between truth, freedom, and divine filiation can be seen in St. Josemaría's homily "Freedom, A Gift of God," in *Friends of God*, nos. 26-27.

40. This was St. Josemaría's answer to the question: How can we be sure that our vocation is this or that? *Notes from a Family Get-together*, May 26, 1974: taken from José Luis Soria, *Maestro de buen humor*, Rialp, Madrid 1994, p. 85.

41. After praying and having others pray, the topic is then raised "as something possible, as

*compelle intrare*, “compel people to come in” (*Lk* 14:23). This requires accompanying people in an encouraging way, always in the context of authentic friendship. It is “an invitation, helping the person to make up their mind, and never—not even remotely—a coercion.” This attraction “is not a material push but an abundance of light, of doctrine; the spiritual stimulus of your prayer and your work, which bears authentic witness to doctrine; all the small sacrifices you offer; the smile that comes to your lips because you are children of God; your human bearing and charm.”<sup>42</sup>

Although God may intervene with a sudden illumination, or a person may sense a natural desire to embrace a certain form of Christian life, the normal path for discovering one’s vocation is reason illumined by faith and moved by charity.<sup>43</sup> The first recourse is always prayer.<sup>44</sup> Reflecting on the truth that we have been created to love God, meditating on the Gospels, considering the ways of life authorized by the Church, seeking the best path in order to serve God, the Church and all men and women, in light of one’s personal qualities and talents. Naturally, a clarity of vision and intention is not always present right from the start of an authentic vocation, but it is important to achieve this during the period of trial that every life given to God involves.

With this awareness of God’s call, the person feels challenged to discern the signs of God’s will in their life: striving to grow in their faith and deepen their relationship with God; considering the possible paths in the Church and the people whose example they are drawn to; reflecting on the “coincidences” in their life that have put them in a particular place and time; the personal qualities they possess and can employ in the service of others; and above all, the inspirations received in their prayer. In short, reflecting on their own experience, since God makes use of each one’s life story to manifest himself.

## 6. Discerning one’s vocation

Vocational discernment requires a deep understanding of the nature of the vocation to which each person senses a call, along with the necessary qualities for making its ideals a reality in their own life and the right intention to act out of love for God.<sup>45</sup>

a hypothesis, the need for the apostolate that we are carrying out” (*Instrucción sobre el modo de hacer proselitismo*, no. 15).

42. St. Josemaría, *Letter October 24, 1942*, no. 9; cited in Guillaume Derville, “Proselytism,” in *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Monte Carmelo 2013, 1030.

43. See St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 177. For a more detailed description: Juan Batista Torelló, *Psicología y vida espiritual*, Rialp 2008, 179-205.

44. For example, St. Josemaría advised some young people who were considering a vocation to Opus Dei to pray to the Holy Spirit for three days, asking for light: see José Luis González Gullón, *DYA*, Rialp 2016, 95-96.

45. Among others, see Enrique de la Lama, *La vocación sacerdotal*, Palabra 1994; Luis Maria

Regarding the first aspect, St. Josemaría asks: what are the special characteristics of the vocation to the Work? And he replies: “A definitive state of seeking perfection in the middle of the world,”<sup>46</sup> similar to the life of the first Christians, grounded on the practice of the virtues.<sup>47</sup> And he adds: “we do not take anyone out of their place.”<sup>48</sup>

Discernment is also needed to ensure that the person is acting with a right intention, which is not always easy to establish; and also to determine where best to employ the talents that each one has received. Both discernment by the person concerned (assisted by spiritual accompaniment) and ecclesial discernment of the suitability of the candidate are needed.

*(a) A right intention*

Vocational discernment is also concerned with the person’s right intention: what he or she really wants and loves. The decision to follow a specific path should depend directly and exclusively on love for God. Since egocentrism is a frequent defect, a person is wise to accept advice in evaluating the uprightness of their intention. A vocational path is chosen with the commitment to follow it forever out of love for God, to help build up the Church.

Thus the response to a vocation should stem from the desire to serve God, “because I want to,”<sup>49</sup> and not be the result of a calculation of personal benefits. It should be a choice made out of love that leads to recognizing one’s responsibility for the Church and for the salvation of all men and women. This is the vocational question: deciding to commit one’s life to God in order to build up the Church and society in a specific way. Personal maturity is attained by rising from the “I” to the “we,” insofar as the person takes responsibility for others. United to Christ in the Spirit, one truly decides to help bring about the redemption. The person takes on this mission through a specific and determined path, presented here and now through the Church.

Accompaniment means giving each person the help needed so that they can freely decide to undertake their path in life, relying on the Church’s human and divine experience. The role of the spiritual director is “to help the person

García Domínguez, *Discernir la llamada: la valoración vocacional*, San Pablo 2008; Juan Carlos Martos, *Abrir el corazón: animación vocacional en tiempos difíciles y formidables*, Publicaciones Claretianas, D.L. 2007.

46. *Instrucción sobre el modo de hacer proselitismo*, no. 20.

47. See *Ibid.*, no. 21.

48. *Ibid.*, no. 23.

49. “I opt for God because I want to, freely, without compulsion of any kind. And I undertake to serve, to convert my whole life into a means of serving others, out of love for my Lord Jesus.” (St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 35).

to truly *want* to do God's will." <sup>50</sup> This requires "helping each person to face up to all the demands in their life and to discover what God wants from each person in particular—without in any way limiting that holy independence and blessed personal responsibility which are the features of a Christian conscience." <sup>51</sup>

It is essential here to get to know each person very well and help them to truly know themselves. Only in this way can the person concerned really decide, with a knowledge of their weaknesses but also with a strong hope. Hence one needs to consider the person's intention and motives, and therefore the right intention of their vocation.<sup>52</sup> This right intention is clearly required in both the person involved and in the one accompanying them in their choice.

The decision to follow a vocation stems from the person's freedom as a response to God's love. Every vocation in the Church is exclusively a response of love. A path is chosen in order to help carry out the Church's mission, taking into account its diversity. But the reason for the choice is always love, and not simply "this has to be done," "so I can be saved," etc. It is a response to God who comes to meet us.

*(b) The person's suitability*

A vocation involves the free offering of one's life for love and with love, in the priesthood, in the religious state, or in the lay life. No one is excluded *a priori* from a specific path; one's personal biography points to the most suitable path for each person.<sup>53</sup> All men and women have the possibility of embarking on a life of service and complete self-giving.<sup>54</sup> The Christian vocation received through Baptism is made specific through personal and ecclesial discernment, and can be a call to marriage or to apostolic celibacy. The beauty of the vocation to marriage is stressed by the Church, as well as the beauty of celibacy for the kingdom of heaven.<sup>55</sup>

50. St. Josemaría, *Letter August 8, 1956*, no. 38, cited in Guillaume Derville, *Dirección espiritual*, in *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Monte Carmelo 2013, 343.

51. St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 99.

52. In the *Instrucción sobre el modo de hacer proselitismo*, St. Josemaría deals with some examples related to a person's rectitude of intention, and offers some practical judgments based on personal experience and the psychology of the spiritual life: nos. 44, 46, 50, 54-61.

53. An example of how St. Josemaría recognized a variety of paths, all with a vocational sense, can be seen in the multiday workshops that he organized for a number of young people who he thought might have a vocation to the Work in the marriage state. Some discovered their vocation to Opus Dei in marriage, others in apostolic celibacy. See Luis Cano, "Los primeros supernumerarios. La convivencia de 1948," *Studia et Documenta* 12 (2018), 251-302.

54. See Wenceslao Vial, "Psicología y celibato," *Scripta Theologica* 50 (2018), 139-166.

55. St. Josemaría also explained the vocation of lay faithful in this way, both in marriage and in celibacy: see *Conversations*, no. 92.

The vocation to Opus Dei implies having the qualities required by this specific path and mission, in order to make love for God and neighbor the driving force of one's actions and attitudes in daily life. In short, it requires that the person be mature and well-formed humanly and spiritually. St. Josemaría gave some guidelines for getting to know the person in depth, each one's aptitudes and qualities. He stressed that each person should possess the qualities and social standing needed to be able to radiate Christ's charity in their own environment (which can be quite varied); also it is important to know the circumstances of each one's family background, childhood and adolescence that shape one's character; and above all, the virtues each one possesses, the good habits that make possible sound judgment and decision making, and the carrying out of an ideal in life.<sup>56</sup>

St. Josemaría also said that there is room in Opus Dei for “all those who have a big heart, even if they have had greater weaknesses,”<sup>57</sup> while the selfish, lukewarm, or frivolous would fail to fit in it. The capacity to love generously is highlighted as the only indispensable quality, which, over time and thanks to formation, will give rise to virtues that make the vocational commitment effective.

Discernment includes a judgment about a person's aptitudes and suitability. This involves the qualities a person possesses now, and not in the more or less distant future. One's future involves a growth that requires corresponding to God's grace. But each person needs to employ all of their talents, as St. Matthew's parable teaches us (25:14-30). Nothing can be held back; every corner of one's life needs to bear fruit: “When they talked to him about committing himself personally, his reaction was to reason in the following manner: ‘If I did, I could do that... I would have to do this other...’ The answer he got was: ‘Here, we don't bargain with the Lord. The law of God, the invitation of the Lord, is something you either take or leave, just as it is. You need to make up your mind: go forward, fully decided and without holding back; otherwise, go away. *Qui non est mecum...* Whoever is not with Me is against Me.”<sup>58</sup>

### **Conclusion: Fidelity to the vocation**

Since the vocation is lived out in time, only in living it is the person's suitability fully verified.<sup>59</sup> This involves both personal and ecclesial discernment, which are parallel paths since their origin is the same: God's love for each man and woman.

56. See *Instrucción sobre el modo de hacer proselitismo*, nos. 63-64.

57. *Ibid.*, no. 66: in Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei I*, Scepter 2001, 444.

58. St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 9.

59. “The decision must be tested on the facts in view of its confirmation. Time is of the essence in order to verify the effective orientation of the decision taken.” Synod of Bishops, *Preparatory Document for the 15<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly “Young people, faith and vocational discernment,”* January 13, 2017.

St. Josemaría understood the vocation in this way. Therefore he followed the Church's tradition when he established, for the specific call to Opus Dei, special times of discernment, temporal incorporations until the definitive incorporation,<sup>60</sup> to emphasize the freedom of each person in his or her self-giving.

This process of discernment is grounded, first of all, on the person's freedom. The response to a vocation is the free choice of a commitment made out of love, in response to a divine initiative, to the action of God. And since grace assumes and elevates all that is human, the response needs to mature over time. Hence formation is required, as a consequence of the interplay between freedom, grace and each person's life.

A vocation is part of each person's life story; it is the fruit of a free response to the gifts that God freely offers.<sup>61</sup> Hence everything depends on God and everything on oneself, on the specific decisions taken, on the struggle today-and-now that makes possible future advances. Thus it is also clear why to change one's path, when one has already begun on it, requires justification. Every decision or choice requires justification, but this justification needs to be directed towards God and not towards oneself. And it needs to be totally free: because one truly wants to, the person takes a stance in life directed towards God and not towards one's own will or self-love.

"Vocation leads us, without realizing it, to take a stance in life which we will maintain eagerly and joyfully, filled with hope until the moment of death itself. It is something that gives a sense of mission to work, that dignifies and gives value to our existence. Jesus authoritatively comes into the soul, into yours and mine; that is what vocation means."<sup>62</sup>

The first decision, the first step in the vocation, requires a sustained correspondence over time. Realizing that one still has a long way to go to configure one's life in accord with the divine call should be an invitation to decide again to give one's life to God. It is true that the ideal then can appear to be costly, and disillusionment can try to worm its way in, with a stronger feeling of going against the grain. It is in this scenario that crises can arise. At times, these crises

60. See *Statutes of the Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei*, nos. 17-27. A Spanish translation of this document is available at <https://opusdei.org/es/article/estatutos-del-opus-dei/>.

61. "Our calling discloses to us the meaning of our existence. It means being convinced, through faith, of the reason for our life on earth. Our life, the present, past and future, acquires a new dimension, a depth we did not perceive before. All happenings and events now fall within their true perspective: we understand where God is leading us, and we feel ourselves borne along by this task entrusted to us" (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 45).

62. St. Josemaría, *Letter, January 9, 1932*, no. 9; cited in Fernando Ocariz, *Opus Dei in the Church*, Four Courts Press 1994, p. 86. These words refer to the specific vocation to Opus Dei, but they apply to every vocation to holiness in ordinary life.



can take on a positive meaning if they are transformed into crises of growth. But the sad possibility also exists of going backwards, looking back to the past.

The peace and joy of one's self-giving is a sign that the right path has been undertaken. Crises often involve a darkening of this peace and joy, as a consequence of following one's feelings. But these moments of darkness and trial, when the joy of a life given to God grows weak or the reasons of the intellect and the decisions of the will that had led to the happiness of the vocation become clouded, can help to purify us and lead to a deeper trust in God and a stronger self-abandonment.

The struggle between love for God and disordered self-love is permanent. The key for discerning one's path is: am I going towards God, towards a more mature opening to others and a more realistic love, or am I closing in on myself and withdrawing, following my own will? Therefore, as Pope Francis said, the great question of discernment is not *who you are* but *who you are for*.<sup>63</sup> The gospel guideline is "by their fruits you will know them." Our feelings are not what is paramount. Guided by love for God, each person needs to educate their feelings and grow in freedom through a daily self-giving to others.

63. "You can keep asking, 'Who am I?' for the rest of your lives. But the real question is: 'For whom am I?' Of course, you are for God. But he has decided that you should also be for others, and he has given you many qualities, inclinations, gifts and charisms that are not for you, but to share with those around you." (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus vivit*, no. 286).