

Freedom, Divine Filiation, and Secularity

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When considering the topic of religion and all that it includes, few people today think about freedom. For many people, in fact, religion is viewed as something from which one can—and perhaps should—be freed. Whether viewed as positive or negative, the first thing usually evoked are the obligations any religion or specific set of beliefs entails: the obedience and renunciation it requires. Hence it can be surprising for people today to hear that the Christian faith (which still forms the foundation for Western culture, although in an ever weaker and dimmer way) has presented itself right from the start as liberation.

In the Prelature of Opus Dei, freedom is not only greatly respected but holds a prominent place in its evangelizing mission and in the life of its members. So much so that it is almost impossible to describe the Prelature's specific role within the Church without expressly mentioning freedom. Recently the Prelate of Opus Dei dedicated one of his pastoral letters to this topic,¹ echoing Saint Josemaría's abundant teachings about freedom. As the founder of Opus Dei once wrote, there is a great need "to form Christians filled with optimism and drive who are able to live their divine adventure in the world as *compossores mundi, non erroris* (Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 14)—as possessors of the world with their fellow men, but not of its errors. Christians who are determined to promote, defend and protect the interests—the loves—of Christ in society; who know how to distinguish Catholic doctrine from what is simply a matter of opinion, and who strive to be united and compact in what is essential; who love freedom and its resulting sense of personal responsibility."²

This article will not attempt to carry out an exhaustive study of the place of freedom in the spirit of Opus Dei, with all of its ramifications. Rather I will

1. See Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral letter*, January 9, 2018.

2. St. Josemaría, *Letter*, October 2, 1939, no. 6 (General Archive of the Prelature [hereafter, AGP], series A.3, 91-5-2). Both because of his temperament and, above all, because he saw it as an inalienable requirement of the call he had received from God, he loved freedom to the point that he considered himself "the last of the romantics." The Aragonese saint saw himself as continuing the nineteenth-century romantics who fought for personal freedom: "I think that I am the last romantic, because I love everybody's personal freedom—that of non-Catholics too" (Mariano Fazio, *The Last of the Romantics: St. Josemaría in the 21st century*, Scepter, NY, 2019, p. xii).

limit myself to highlighting the central place freedom holds there, and how it accords very well with its essential features.³

Divine filiation and secularity

I think we could define the vocation to Opus Dei as a call to holiness that is characterized externally by *being in the world*—that is, by secularity—and internally by being rooted in *a deep sense of one's divine filiation*. At least Blessed Alvaro del Portillo expressed it in this way: “Holiness in the world and, at the same time, rooted in and nourished by an essential and deep sense of the Christian’s supernatural filiation in Christ. If the first postulate—*being in the world*—could be defined as an external defining quality of the vocation to holiness announced by Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, the second one—its being rooted *in the sense of one's divine filiation*—should be understood as the internal defining quality *par excellence*, the most characteristic, the most important one.”⁴ Here we see reflected St. Josemaría’s clear affirmation that divine filiation or, as he often stressed, the “sense” of one’s divine filiation, is the foundation of the interior life of those who seek holiness through the spirit of Opus Dei.⁵

I will take this “definition” as a guide, since I think the two characteristics highlighted there enable us to set out clearly the various aspects that make up this particular vocation, the spirit that animates it, and the institution that promotes and preserves it.

In particular, the topic that concerns us here, freedom, is explicitly connected with both aspects. Encouraging sanctity in the middle of the world implies affirming the secular condition of those being addressed and the lay mentality that corresponds to them. What characterizes this lay mentality? St. Josemaría tells us that it is “freedom, my children, freedom, which is the key to the lay mentality that we all have in Opus Dei.”⁶ And to grasp the deep union

3. In this regard, see also the article by Francesco Russo, “Freedom,” in José Luis Illanes, (coord.), *Dictionary of St. Josemaría Escrivá of Balaguer*, Monte Carmelo–Historical Institute Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, Burgos-Rome, 2013, pp. 732-741.

4. Alvaro del Portillo, in *Santità e mondo. Atti del Convegno teologico di studio sugli insegnamenti del beato Josemaría Escrivá* (Rome, October 12-14, 1993), Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 1994, p. 225.

5. “Divine filiation is the basis of the spirit of Opus Dei” (St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 64). “The solid foundation for everything done in Opus Dei and the fruitful root that vivifies everything is the humble and sincere sense of divine filiation in Christ Jesus” (*Statutes*, No. 80 §1).

6. St. Josemaría, *Letter*, September 29, 1957, no. 55 (AGP, series A.3, 94-1-3).

between divine filiation and freedom, we need only consider his commentary on Jesus' words *veritas liberabit vos* (Jn 8:32), the truth will set you free: "How great a truth is this, which opens the way to freedom and gives it meaning throughout our lives. I will sum it up for you, with the joy and certainty which flow from knowing there is a close relationship between God and his creatures. It is the knowledge that we have come from the hands of God, that the Blessed Trinity looks upon us with predilection, that we are children of so wonderful a Father. I ask my Lord to help us decide to take this truth to heart, to dwell upon it day by day; only then will we be acting as free men. Do not forget: anyone who does not realize that he is a child of God is unaware of the deepest truth about himself. When he acts he lacks the dominion and self-mastery we find in those who love our Lord above all else."⁷

This intimate tie between freedom and the foundation of Opus Dei's spirit shows how freedom imbues every dimension of this particular vocation. Viewing it also as the key to secularity, another essential feature of its spirit, points to the relationship between the sense of one's divine filiation and secularity, as two defining qualities of the vocation to Opus Dei.

A growing awareness of freedom

The spirit of Opus Dei has come to birth as at a time in the world's history when the importance of freedom is becoming ever clearer. Already in the nineteenth century Hegel had said that "the ultimate goal of the world is for the spirit to become aware of its freedom and thus for its freedom to become a reality."⁸ And at the end of the twentieth century St. John Paul II said in his address to the United Nations: "On the threshold of a new millennium we are witnessing an extraordinary global acceleration of that quest for freedom which is one of the great dynamics of human history. This phenomenon is not limited to any one part of the world; nor is it the expression of any single culture. Men and women throughout the world, even when threatened by violence, have taken the risk of freedom, asking to be given a place in social, political, and economic life that is commensurate with their dignity as free human beings. This universal longing for freedom is truly one of the distinguishing marks of our time."⁹ As the Prelate of Opus Dei stressed: "An ardent desire for freedom, the demand for it on the part of persons and peoples, is a positive sign of our times."¹⁰ Hence it is part of a Christian understanding of history.

7. *Idem*, *Friends of God*, no. 26.

8. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lessons on the Philosophy of Universal History*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1999, p. 68.

9. St. John Paul II, Address to the 50th General Assembly of the United Nations (October 5, 1995).

10. Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral letter*, January 9, 2018, no. 1.

This growing awareness of the importance of freedom is linked to secularization,¹¹ understood as the process by which the secular world has become aware of its autonomy. Secularization, understood as the affirmation of the laws that spontaneously govern the activities of human beings and their mutual relations, is already implicitly present from the beginning in Christian life and preaching.¹² This conviction, at least in Western culture, has led to the recognition of the autonomy of politics, law and science, which have enabled modern societies to arise.¹³ In fact, it is commonly accepted that Christianity has occupied a decisive role in mankind's growing awareness of freedom. For some people, however, this process necessarily leads to secularization understood in another sense, perhaps the most common one in public discourse: the marginalization of religion and its manifestations, viewed as a requirement to bring about a fully free society. This last way of understanding freedom involves a long and complex historical development.

In the ancient world, freedom (*eleuthería*) has above all a social and political connotation, which is linked to the laws that govern the *polis*. A person who is outside the law is not free, but only one who is ruled by it. The free man thus stands in contrast to the slave, who is not recognized as a citizen with full rights nor shares in the collective end of the *polis*, and whose activity is oriented towards the aims of another person. The importance of being ruled by the law explains the gravity of the sentence of exile, which deprives the exiled person of the possibility of developing his or her own humanity. That person is dead from society's point of view.¹⁴

11. "I think Modernity can be identified with a process of secularization, but it has at least two essential meanings. The first would be equivalent to a 'declericalization' of the medieval world, through the rediscovery of the relative autonomy of the temporal. The second, on the contrary, would be identified with the absolute affirmation of man, cutting all bridges with a possible transcendent foundation" (Mariano Fazio, *Secularización y cristianismo. Las corrientes culturales contemporáneas*, Universidad de Libros, Buenos Aires, 2008, p. 15). On the concept of secularization, see José Ignacio Murillo, "Trabajo, santidad y secularidad. Una alternativa católica a la interpretación hegeliana de la divinización del mundo," in Javier López Díaz and Federico M. Requena (eds.), *Verso una spiritualità del lavoro professionale.* Teologia, Antropologia e Storia a 500 anni dalla Riforma, EDUSC, Rome, 2018, pp. 335-349.

12. The Second Vatican Council recognizes the autonomy of temporal realities in teaching that "created things and society itself enjoy their own laws and values, which must be gradually deciphered, put to use, and regulated by men" (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 36). See Elisabeth Reinhardt, "La legítima autonomía de las realidades temporales," *Romana*, vol. 15 (1992/2), pp. 323-335.

13. See Martin Rhonheimer, *Cristianismo y laicidad: historia de una relación compleja*, Rialp, Madrid, 2009; Rémi Brague, *La ley de Dios: historia filosófica de una alianza*, Encuentro, Madrid, 2011.

14. In Plato's *Crito*, Socrates is shown as preferring death to exile from the *polis* of

Socratic philosophy formulates a new meaning of freedom, where being free consists above all in knowing—or at least in seeking—the true good, beyond one’s immediate desires. Hence what is most radically opposed to freedom is ignorance. This Socratic inspiration led to several attempts to achieve the human good, guided by the rational search for the true good and the determination, also rational, of the adequate means to achieve it. One of them—extreme in its manifestations, but very significant, because it highlights the limitation of the social order and the dangers this can pose for the good life—is that embodied by the cynics, who advised people to follow the tendencies they deem “natural” and to reject those imposed by social conventions.

With the spread of Greek culture throughout the known world by the conquests of Alexander the Great, the *polis* or city-state lost its central role. The awareness arose that it is impossible to reduce humanity to the narrow sphere of one’s own society and that law can no longer be viewed as the measure of what is human. In this context, where human actions are no longer measured by social norms, the Stoics formulated, in continuity with the Socratic stress on moral freedom, the concept of natural law. Man is no longer understood primarily as a citizen of a *polis*, but as a citizen of the cosmos and subject to its laws. The rational recognition and acceptance of this higher law frees one from the foolishness of those who are unable to order their desires in accord with reality.

For the Stoics, each human being is called to accept one’s destiny, what we cannot change, and to act according to nature, that is, to seek to bring all human tendencies into accord with the noblest part of man: reason. Here freedom is understood as *apatheia* (absence of passion), seen as the end result of virtue, which bestows self-mastery on a person. Being free means not being at the mercy of one’s passions, which lead to a lack of self-control and subjection to one’s lower appetites, and not being affected by external events.

But it is Christianity that places freedom at the center of our understanding of reality. “Creation itself is a manifestation of divine freedom. The Genesis accounts give us a glimpse of God’s creative love, his joy in sharing with the world his goodness, his beauty (cf. *Gen* 1:31), and with human beings, his freedom (cf. *Gen* 1:26-29). In calling each of us into existence, God has made us able to choose and to love the good, and to respond with love to his Love.”¹⁵ Being free, for human beings, means the capacity to correspond on one’s own initiative to God’s love. Human freedom is thus the reflection—the image—of the freedom of a God who is a loving communion of persons and who creates without any need, out of a free love for his creatures.

Athens. See Higinio Marín, *La invención de lo humano. La construcción sociohistórica del individuo*, Iberoamericana, Madrid, 1997, p. 67).

15. Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral letter*, January 9, 2018, no. 2.

The measure of man is no longer to be a good citizen of a *polis* constituted according to human laws, although Christian inspiration makes use of and reinforces the interpersonal character implicit in it. Thus in St. Augustine we find the new concept of the “City of God.” One of the most striking characteristics of this new community—mysteriously brought about in history, but whose full realization will only be in the next life—is that all men and women are called to belong to it.

The Stoic vision of freedom as independence from everything external is also transformed by Christianity. Being free is no longer limited to self-mastery and not being affected by what is external. Now we are offered the possibility of uniting ourselves with God, the Supreme Good, and thus share in his sovereign dominion over the whole universe. “Our sense of divine filiation leads, then, to great interior freedom, to deep joy, and to the serene optimism of hope: *spe gaudentes* (*Rom* 12:12). Realizing we are God’s children also leads us to love the world, which came forth good from the hands of our Father God. It leads us to face life with the clear awareness that it is possible to do good, to conquer sin, and to bring the world to God.”¹⁶

Trust in an almighty and benevolent God thus changes the meaning of freedom, which is no longer viewed as the ability to rationally adjust one’s desires to reality. For those who freely decide to correspond to God’s love, everything cooperates for one’s good (see *Rom* 8:28), and we can now aspire to the fullness of the good. Hence what we need to be freed from now is, above all, sin, which is responsible for mankind’s slavery, our submission to lower realities and, ultimately, the isolation that frustrates our personal life.

Accepting the existence of a free, all-knowing and all-powerful God could be crushing if not linked to the conviction that he looks on us with infinite love and seeks our good. This conviction can be tarnished by the awareness of our sin, which, if not united to hope, could lead to fleeing from God, to denying or distorting his image. But it is restored by faith in Jesus Christ. The freedom Christ has won us is that of being God’s children, and a good father does not exercise his authority for his own benefit but for his child’s good. “Grace gives rise to a new and higher freedom for which ‘Christ has set us free’ (*Gal*, 5:1). Our Lord frees us from sin through his words and actions, all of which have redemptive efficacy. Hence ‘this hymn to freedom is echoed in all the mysteries of our Catholic faith’ (*Friends of God*, no. 25).”¹⁷ The assurance that the God who creates and loves us is omnipotent and the Lord of history guarantees our total liberation and gives human dignity a new meaning, the consequences of which are still being drawn out and developed today.

16. *Ibid.*, no. 4.

17. Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral letter*, January 9, 2018, no. 3.

Christian freedom and divine filiation

In modern times, freedom takes on a new prominence. A political manifestation of this new sensitivity are the revolutions in the late eighteenth century, which were followed by theoretical formulations, especially in German idealism. Both inspirations, politics and theory, resulted in various initiatives and movements throughout the nineteenth century, whose consequences reached into the twentieth century and also into the present one.

In particular, in modern times the discovery was made that freedom also means the ability to introduce new realities into history through one's own action.¹⁸ This capacity is experienced as the possibility for progress not only in the moral and personal realm, but also in society. The formulation of this meaning of freedom deepened the perspective of classical thinkers that freedom above all meant following one's rational nature and perfecting oneself through one's own actions. This conviction led to a certain disdain for productive activity and the benefits it can bring about. In recent times, however, confidence has grown in the human being's creative and transformative capacity.

In any case, together with this discovery, a new interpretation of nature and human dynamism has come about. Nature is understood as an environment devoid of ends and subject to laws, and freedom as the possibility of self-determination. This leads little by little to viewing freedom as simply independence and to oppose it to nature, which is seen as a limit that must be mastered or overcome.

Understanding freedom as the independence of an undetermined being capable of self-realization prevents one from recognizing it as a created capacity to respond freely to love and forces one to reject the existence of a nature that can offer criteria about what should or should not be done. We can understand why this concept of freedom, which has taken shape in the modern world, can come to merit the severe denunciation voiced by Cornelio Fabro: "Lacking a transcendent basis, freedom has taken itself as its own object: it has become an empty freedom, the freedom of being free, a law unto itself; for it is in fact freedom without law, its only law being the slavery of the instincts, the tyranny of absolute reason, which immediately becomes the whim of a tyrant."¹⁹ In this complicated history, the contemporary revindication of freedom leads to a distancing from Christianity and even to opposing it and inspiring overtly anti-Christian or even atheistic systems of thought and political movements.

18. See Leonardo Polo, *Persona y libertad*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 2017.

19. Cornelio Fabro, "El primado existencial de la libertad," in *Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer y el Opus Dei*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 1982 (2nd ed.), p. 342.

It is precisely in this confused context that St. Josemaría's effort to reaffirm the Christian meaning of freedom takes place. "We Christians do not have to ask anyone to tell us the true meaning of this gift," he insists, "because the only freedom that can save mankind is Christian freedom."²⁰ Where he differs most clearly from modern concepts of freedom is perhaps in the close connection he defends between freedom and divine filiation. Leonardo Polo asserts that "one of the most notorious aspects of modern ideologies is not wanting to be a son, considering filiation as an intolerable debt."²¹ Nevertheless, "whatever the duration of his biography, man is always challenged by the question of his origin, a question that leads him to the recognition of his generated being, from which he cannot flee: he cannot ignore or replace it. One's personal identity is, therefore, inseparable from this recognition."²²

This recognition leads us back to our condition as creatures. At times we can tend to undervalue the Christian doctrine of creation, not denying it but treating it as a "fact" that can be dispensed with when trying to understand the human being. One then loses sight of the reality that the creature is absolutely unrecognizable outside the creative act of God,²³ and that to consider the creature as independent from him can only lead to a mirage. Modern thought has discovered the radical nature of freedom. But often, to defend it, it has seen the need to deny all dependence and has fallen into the errors highlighted by authors such as Cornelio Fabro and Leonardo Polo, which deprives the person of identity and destiny, and condemns him to become the result of his own activity.

But for a Christian, to depend on God is to be created as free, with the freedom of those who know they are loved—as a child—and with an unlimited horizon—God himself—to welcome their growth and development. Thus the recognition of one's own identity is resolved in the reality of one's divine filiation: "Each passing day increases my yearning to proclaim to the four winds this inexhaustible treasure that belongs to Christianity: 'the glorious freedom of the children of God!' (*Rom* 8:21)."²⁴ Commenting on the teachings of St. Josemaría, Polo says: "The most intimate interiority from which man lives transcends his entire being. This means that on rising above oneself, one discovers the fatherhood of God. This discovery is never enough, for if God is Father, man starts from beyond his own 'I.' If God is Father, we are children, not

20. *Friends of God*, no. 35.

21. Leonardo Polo, "El hombre como hijo," in Juan Cruz Cruz (ed.), *Metafísica de la familia*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 1995, p. 320.

22. *Ibid.*

23. See Leonardo Polo, *Persona y libertad*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 2007, p. 43 and ff.

24. *Friends of God*, no. 27.

authors of ourselves, but truly co-workers.”²⁵ Thus recognizing our dependence on God is tantamount to asserting the reality of our freedom rather than limiting it.

But it is not enough to be aware of the richness of our divine filiation and the freedom that accompanies it. We also need to make it a norm for our behavior: “I ask my Lord to help us decide to take this truth to heart, to dwell upon it day by day; only then will we be acting as free persons.”²⁶ The Prelate of Opus Dei, in his January 9, 2018 pastoral letter, devotes special attention to the intimate tie between freedom and divine filiation: “Our divine filiation enables our freedom to expand with all the strength that God has bestowed on it. It is not by emancipating ourselves from the Father’s house that we become free, but rather by embracing the reality that we are sons or daughters. ‘Anyone who does not realize that he is a child of God is unaware of the deepest truth about himself’ (*Friends of God*, no. 26). Such a person is unaware of who he is and lives in conflict with himself. How liberating it is, then, to know that God loves us. How liberating is God’s pardon that allows us to return to ourselves and to our true home (see *Lk* 15:17-24).”²⁷

The Christian is aware that living up to his condition requires responding with a loving self-giving to God’s call. This self-giving is not an annoying demand, but the unheard of possibility of treating God as a friend, speaking with him in a personal conversation. “Let us ask ourselves once again, here in the presence of God: ‘Lord, why have you given us this power? Why have you entrusted us with the faculty of choosing you or rejecting you? You want us to make good use of this power. Lord, what you do want me to do?’ His reply is precise, crystal-clear: ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with thy whole mind’ (*Mt* 22:37).”²⁸ Thus freedom acquires its true dignity and the law is no longer seen as a constraint; rather it becomes the means—the language, we might say—to manifest love, correspondence. “It’s because we love freedom that we tie ourselves down. Only pride sees such bonds as a heavy chain.”²⁹

“When we breathe this air of freedom, we see clearly that doing evil is an enslavement, not a liberation.”³⁰ It means placing ourselves at the mercy of

25. Leonardo Polo, “*El concepto de vida en Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*,” in *Anuario Filosófico*, 1985 (XVIII), p. 13.

26. *Friends of God*, no. 26

27. Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral letter*, January 9, 2018, no. 4.

28. *Friends of God*, no. 27.

29. *Ibid.*, no. 31.

30. *Ibid.*, no. 37.

what we have been freed from. A person who acts in this way “has decided for the worst, for the absence of God, where there is no freedom to be found.”³¹ For God is the author of freedom and the only one who can fulfill it. This risk involves the “light and shade of human freedom,”³² a risk that, more than a risk for man, is a risk for God.³³

It is true that the Christian should be aware of the possibility of abdicating his privileged condition, by using his freedom badly. But even this fallible character of freedom can also become a song of gratitude: “Once again I raise my heart in thanksgiving to my God and Lord, because there was nothing to stop him from creating us impeccable, irresistibly drawn towards the good. Nevertheless, ‘he judged that his servants would be better if they served him freely’ (St. Augustine, *De vera religione*, XIV, 27). How great is the love, the mercy of our Father! Whenever I think of his divine ‘extravagance’ for us his children, I wish I had a thousand tongues, a thousand hearts and more, with which to be constantly praising God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.”³⁴

Christian freedom: responsibility and secularity

The founder of Opus Dei’s love for freedom is filled with important consequences for our daily life. According to Fabro, “after centuries of Christian spiritualities based on the priority of obedience, he inverted the situation and made obedience an attitude and consequence of freedom, a fruit of its flower or, more deeply, of its root.”³⁵ This is not, of course, a revolution against Christian spiritualities of the past, but rather the highlighting of one of their key legacies. But this change in perspective and the consequences drawn from it are not a coincidence. They are a requirement of the message and spirituality of Opus Dei, since at least one of its essential features depends on it: secularity.

True freedom can be distinguished from its counterfeits by its accompaniment by responsibility: personal freedom with personal responsibility. At times, responsibility tends to be seen as the reverse side of freedom, but this identification is due, in the end, to a mistaken conception of both. For despite

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, no. 24.

33. “God wants us to cooperate with him in this task which he is carrying out in the world. He *takes a risk with our freedom*. I am deeply moved by the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem: a defenceless, powerless Child, incapable of offering any resistance. God gives himself up to men; he comes close to us, down to our level” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 113).

34. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 33.

35. Cornelio Fabro, *The existential primacy of freedom*, p. 50.

what may seem to be the case at first sight, it is the exercise of freedom that is more costly. This has a great relevance in the spirit of Opus Dei, which rather than suppressing the risk that accompanies personal decision, offers light to exercise it more effectively.³⁶ We also need to keep in mind that we are responsible above all for carrying out the good, and not, as one sometimes tends to think, for the bad, despite our bad actions.

It is not surprising that one of the first manifestations of mistaken freedom, of sin, is that man encloses himself in himself and seeks excuses, even before God, to uselessly try to avoid the consequences of his own actions.³⁷ In psychic life this attitude can also be a manifestation of immaturity. Given this danger, the work of formation that takes place in Opus Dei encourages all of its members to accept their own responsibility and to avoid making excuses.

This norm of behavior is another manifestation of a way of acting that requires the same behavior with other men and women as with God. It is, in my opinion, a consequence of viewing everyday realities as the place where and from which one strives to achieve holiness. As sanctity is not acquired through an interior life separated from one's common life among other men and women, to reach God one needs to begin by exercising with others the conditions needed for a sincere dialogue with God. Thus, for example, to be sincere with God one needs to strive at the same time to be sincere with others.³⁸ The sincerity in spiritual direction encouraged by Saint Josemaría is a clear example of this norm of behavior. To open our soul clearly to those who can help us is the best way to present ourselves before God without anonymity, a condition that is necessary to converse with him in a friendly and filial way, and not with a hollow formalism full of stereotyped formulas: "Sincerity in spiritual direction, which leads us to open up our soul freely in order to receive advice, also leads us to foster personal initiative, to make known freely what we see as possible points for our interior struggle to identify ourselves ever more closely with Christ."³⁹

36. "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" (St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 93).

37. See *Gen* 3:12-13.

38. See *Statutes*, 90. See *Friends of God*, no. 82. This affirmation of the natural as the pathway to grace is clear in St. Josemaría's teaching. When speaking about the human virtues he said: "When a Christian fights to acquire these virtues, his soul is preparing to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit fruitfully. In this way his good human qualities are strengthened by the motions of the Paraclete in his soul" (*Friends of God*, no. 92).

39. Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral letter*, January 9, 2018, no. 11.

Of course, the struggle to draw close to God without anonymity helps us to be sincere with others. But this insistence on one's previous sincerity with others as a path for learning how to draw close to God seems intrinsic to the spirit of the Work and highly consistent with its character.

The very fact that the person at the head of Opus Dei, the Prelate, is viewed above all as a father is also important in this context, where daily life becomes a path for grasping spiritual realities. We learn what a filial relationship means, and at the same time we are helped to understand why obedience does not enslave, since a father's authority is exercised for the benefit of the child and not for external goals. If the relationship with those who govern is lived in this way, a sure path is opened for acquiring a filial and trusting relationship with God.

Since the acceptance of each one's personal responsibility is the best anchor for true freedom, those who govern should strive to strengthen it. And the most effective way to do so is to foster trust: "Governing with respect for souls is, firstly, to delicately respect the privacy of consciences, without confusing government and spiritual direction. Secondly, this respect leads one to distinguish directives from what are only opportune exhortations, counsels, or suggestions. And thirdly—and not, for that reason, less important—is the need to govern with such great trust in others that one always tries to take into account, to the extent possible, the opinion of the people involved. This attitude of those who govern, their readiness to listen, is a wonderful manifestation of the fact that the Work is a family."⁴⁰

Whoever feels trusted feels urged to be responsible. Since the appeal here is directly to one's freedom, it differs radically from coercion. Coercion forces freedom to decide to do something for negative reasons, to avoid an evil, out of fear in the end. In contrast, trust reinforces freedom, because it spurs one to exercise freedom in carrying out the good; and when the fulfillment of duty stems from the depths of freedom, it summons up all the forces in the human heart. This in turn facilitates unity of life, without which the effort to attain holiness in the middle of the world is thwarted.⁴¹

The conviction that God has wanted to run the risk of our freedom, and the Christian demand to imitate God's way of acting—"be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (*Mt* 5:48)—requires us not only to tolerate, but to respect, love and encourage the freedom of others. This applies in a special way to the tasks of formation and government where one collaborates in a special

40. *Ibid.*, no. 13.

41. See Antonio Aranda, *La lógica de la unidad de vida. La identidad cristiana en una sociedad pluralista*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 2000.

way with divine action. That is why St. Josemaría stressed the importance of not imposing personal opinions and, in the case of doubt, always being on the side of freedom.⁴² The founder of Opus Dei did not see freedom as a principle of disorder or anarchy, something that had to be controlled, but on the contrary as a principle of organization and government:⁴³ each one acting with personal freedom and spontaneity.⁴⁴

Rather than the primacy being placed on obedience, freedom comes first, as the most effective way to attain what one wants. Hence the important thing is to truly want it. And this is already something supernatural, and is the most supernatural motive. “Remember what I have so often told you: ‘because I want to,’ seems to me the most supernatural reason.”⁴⁵ Here we see clearly that grace and freedom are not only compatible, but they reinforce each other. The full and radical exercise of our freedom brings us into contact in a special way with divine grace. For God does not want slaves.

This in no way implies failing to value obedience. In fact, just as the redemption was achieved through the Son’s obedience, every Christian can make their own this attitude of trusting and joyful acceptance of the Father’s will, which does not subjugate, but rather frees us in the end. This will is expressed in the moral law, but also in all legitimate authority. With our “intelligent obedience”⁴⁶—using an expression of Saint Josemaría—we identify ourselves with Christ, who does not have to renounce being the eternal Logos to submit himself, as man, intelligently and freely to the Father out of love.

42. “When in doubt, always trust in freedom; thus you will always decide correctly. Freedom can only be lost for the sake of Love; I don’t understand any other kind of slavery” (St. Josemaría, AGP, biblioteca, P.10, no. 168).

43. “I am a friend of freedom because it is a gift from God, because it is a right of the human person, because with personal freedom and personal responsibility most of the crimes in the world could have been avoided” (St. Josemaría, AGP, biblioteca, P.10, no. 170).

44. “The Prelature asks of its faithful an intense and constant personal apostolic activity, carried out in the work and social environment proper to each one; an apostolic activity that is free and responsible, deeply imbued with spontaneity” (*Statutes*, 119). Regarding the importance of spontaneity St. Josemaría said: “We give primary and fundamental importance to the spontaneity of the individual, to free and responsible initiative, guided by the action of the Spirit; and not to organizational structures, commands, and tactics imposed from above, from the seat of government” (*Conversations*, n. 19).

45. San Josemaría, *Letter*, August 8, 1956, no. 38 (AGP, series A.3, 94-1-2).

46. “God does not impose a blind obedience on us. He wants us to obey intelligently” (*Christ is Passing By*, n. 17).

Conclusion

Opus Dei offers a spirituality for those living in the middle of the world that does not clash with their secular condition but rather reinforces it; the circumstances of each one's family and social life are seen as the means and path of sanctification. Hence the vocation is not "built around" secularity as an adornment, but precisely through and by means of it, and a greater commitment to holiness can never lead to abandoning the world, but rather to a deeper immersion in it.

But for this to become possible, it is important that one's response to the vocation respects spontaneity, that is, acting on one's own initiative and in the first person, which corresponds to behavior in the world, a domain with its own laws, deduced from its own nature. One can never see oneself as merely a recipient of "orders" that annul or compromise one's own spontaneity. Hence, one manifestation of the love for freedom in the Work is to show the maximum respect for the opinions of each member, especially with regard to professional work and public activities.⁴⁷

On the other hand, to prevent obedience in the spiritual and apostolic sphere from conflicting with one's secular condition, it must be assumed with full freedom, so that whoever obeys is in a position to accept whatever God is asking and to carry it out as one's own decision. If the acting of a Christian in social life required showing publicly a bond of a spiritual nature, that person's behavior would seem to be a result of the renunciation of personal initiative, and therefore as contrary to full identification with the very condition that a lay mentality entails.

Like other family or personal ties freely taken on, the bond to Opus Dei is part of the dynamics of each one's personal freedom. Hence in Opus Dei freedom is not only recognized and respected but, as Saint Josemaría insists, "the constant exercise of freedom, in which the members of the Work are formed, is the very foundation of our asceticism, as something innate and intimately connected with the secular condition of my children, and with what is the cornerstone of our vocation and the specific path of our dedication."⁴⁸

47. "With regard to professional activities, as well as social and political viewpoints, each faithful of the Prelature, within the limits of Catholic doctrine on faith and morals, enjoys the same full freedom as other Catholic citizens. On their part, the authorities of the Prelature must always be careful not to even appear to give advice in these matters" (*Statutes*, 88, 3).

48. St. Josemaría, *Letter*, January 25, 1961, no. 37 (AGP, series A.3, 94-2-2). St. Josemaría, to emphasize that Opus Dei's most important activity is that which its members carry out in their own name, insisted that "the Work itself has as its *exclusive* task the formation of its members" (St. Josemaría, *Instruction for the Work of St. Raphael*, January 9, 1935, no. 11, AGP, series A.3, 89-3).

Clearly an attitude like this can avoid falling prey to deception or, even worse, self-deception, only to the extent that freedom lies at its foundation. And this only seems possible by recognizing our filial condition. The son works in the Father's field according to the spirit of the Father, but at the same time as though in his own field. Probably only this outlook is capable of reconciling loving submission to God's will with the joy and spontaneity needed not to use the world's goods —understood as the field of spontaneous relations between men—as *mere* instruments of a spiritual end separate from them. Only the self-awareness of *the freedom of glory* that the children of God possess (*Rom* 8:21) allows a person to understand their activity as a “transfiguration” brought about from within, thus avoiding the danger of succumbing to the pressure of sin that can deform these activities.