

“The Mercy of God Inspired His Work.” Texts of St. Josemaría on the History of Opus Dei

Federico M. Requena

St. Josemaría Escrivá Historical Institute

The title of this study connects the mercy of God with the history of Opus Dei. As will become clear below, these two realities were intertwined in the thought and foundational experience of St. Josemaría. The words cited in the title above—“the mercy of God inspired his Work”—are taken from one of his letters. [1] The Holy Year of Mercy, convoked by Pope Francis, offers us a good opportunity to go deeper into this link.

The fact that St. Josemaría had a strong devotion right from his youth to God’s Merciful Love is well known. “About the Merciful Love,” he wrote in the early 30s, “I will say that it is a devotion that steals my soul.” [2] As we have shown elsewhere, the manifestations of this devotion evolved throughout his life, but the theme of Mercy was always present, and even grew stronger towards the end of his days on earth. [3] Thus, for example, he said in 1972: “I recently discovered more deeply God’s mercy, two or three years ago. Understand what I’m trying to say: the deep riches of his mercy that I need so that our Lord does not take into account so many of my lacks of docility to his grace and so many mistakes.” [4]

The purpose of these pages is not to look at St. Josemaría’s devotion to Merciful Love, nor to study the theme of God’s mercy in his teachings. What I am trying to do now (as the explanation of the title makes clear) is to go more deeply into the relationship between God’s mercy and the very existence and life of Opus Dei, as presented to us in the thought of its founder.

This relationship is studied in various texts in which St. Josemaría carries out a theological reading of the history of the institution he began and its projection into the future: “I see the Work projected through the centuries,” he often said. [5] A reading of those texts shows clearly that for St. Josemaría: 1. the history of Opus Dei is the history of the mercies of God; and 2. Opus Dei is a manifestation of God’s mercy towards humanity. These two ideas—interconnected, but distinct—form the structure of the following considerations. Naturally, these reflections are situated within St. Josemaría’s understanding of Opus Dei as a part of the Church. As Pope Francis wrote, “Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life.” [6]

1. The history of Opus Dei is the history of God’s mercies

St. Josemaría, when speaking to his spiritual children, used to express himself in these terms: “I have always said—and it’s the pure truth—that the history of Opus Dei will have to be written kneeling down, because it is the history of God’s mercies.” [7] And he used similar expressions on various occasions, both in speaking and in writing. [8]

To give these expressions the right context, first of all we need to take into account that for St. Josemaría the whole history of mankind is the domain in which God’s mercy unfolds. “In his letter to the Galatians—a hymn to the riches of the faith—Saint Paul tells us that Christians should live with the freedom Christ has won for us (see Gal 4:3). This was the message of Jesus to the first Christians, and it will continue being the same throughout the centuries: an announcement of liberation from misery and anguish. History is not subject to blind forces nor is it the result of chance; it is the expression of the mercies of God the Father. The thoughts of God are far above our thoughts, says Scripture (see Is 55:8; Rom 11:33). Therefore to trust in God means to have faith in spite of everything, going beyond the appearances of things. The charity of God, who loves us eternally, lies behind each event, even though at times it may be difficult for us to appreciate it.” [9]

In accord with what Saint Thomas Aquinas taught and as Pope Francis recently reiterated, St. Josemaría saw God's mercy as the greatest expression of divine omnipotence. [10] We should also keep in mind that the founder of Opus Dei attributed omnipotence primarily to God the Father and Creator, as the result of his own personal and deeply sensed experience of divine filiation.

God's merciful omnipotence not only tolerates, but requires the existence of real freedom on the part of men and women—a freedom that, in the case of the saints, reaches its fullness through a determined struggle to identify themselves with God's will. With these ideas in place, we can now focus on our main concern: the link between God's mercy and the history of Opus Dei.

“I always say—and it's the pure truth—that the history of Opus Dei will have to be written kneeling down, because it is the history of God's mercies. This is made especially clear in my own life: our Lord has done everything. I am fifty years old and am still full of defects. In the Work, God has done everything. Humanly speaking, what did I have? Only good humor, a great love for Christ and his Church, and a desire to persevere when faced with the impossible. God has dealt with me as I, when a child, dealt with my little lead soldiers: I placed them wherever I wanted, and at times even decapitated them. That's what God has done with me. He has led me along the paths he wished, and allowed people to give me some really hard knocks, because it was good for me.” [11]

The words cited above make clear that, for St. Josemaría, the statement that “the history of Opus Dei is the history of God's mercies” has two principal implications: that God's mercy is displayed, first of all, in his own biography; and secondly, that it is shown in the development of Opus Dei. Two closely related but distinguishable realities.

The founder of Opus Dei pointed to the action of God's mercy in his own life by stressing the way in which God used him as an instrument (“God has done everything”), moving him around as a child plays with a lead soldier. In the following text, St. Josemaría shows the clear disproportion between the instrument and the Work, between his

personal situation and the mission entrusted to him. “God continues to work his mercies and to carry out the history of his mirabilia (see Ps76:15), his wonderful deeds. And he continues to set his eyes on inadequate instruments, who feel the same holy fear and suffer before the Holy Spirit’s action, which is like a spur of hardened steel. For God, as divine Teacher, guides souls that have no teacher to this extreme: Go down, if you want to go up; lose, if you want to win; suffer, if you want to rejoice; die, if you want to live, says the Spanish mystic.” [12]

St. Josemaría also saw clearly that the principal manifestation of God’s mercy in his life had not been choosing him as an instrument to carry out God’s works. Rather, this had been preceded by an even greater manifestation of his mercy that strengthened his freedom, and prevented any purely instrumental perception of his collaboration with God’s will. For St. Josemaría, the great manifestation of God’s mercy in his life was teaching him how to love: “My children, with contrition comes Love. None of these efforts, no sorrow has made me lose gaudium cum pace, because God has taught me to love, and nullo enim modo sunt onerosi labores amantium (St. Augustine, De bono viduitatis, 21, 26); for the one who loves, work is never a heavy burden. Therefore the important thing is to learn to love, because in eo quod amatur, aut non laboratur, aut et labor amatur (St. Augustine, ibid.): where there is love, all is happiness. God’s greatest mercy has been to lead me like a small child and teach me how to love. When I was barely an adolescent, our Lord sowed in my heart a seed ablaze with love. And today, my daughters and sons, that seed is a leafy tree that gives shade to a legion of souls.” [13]

The close tie between freedom and identification with God’s will in St. Josemaría’s life is highlighted by Cardinal Ratzinger in an article entitled “Letting God Work,” written on the occasion of his canonization. “I have always been struck by the interpretation that Josemaría Escrivá gave of the name Opus Dei—an interpretation that we could call biographical and that allows us to understand the founder in his spiritual dimension. Escrivá knew that he should found something, but he was always aware that it was not his work, that he had not invented anything, that the Lord had simply made use of him. Thus it was not his work, but the Work of God. He was only an instrument through which God had acted.” [14]

Guided by these words of Cardinal Ratzinger, we now turn to the second expression of God's mercy that St. Josemaría saw in his life: the origin and development of Opus Dei. Some words of his, written on the seventh anniversary of the foundation of the Work, are quite relevant here: "Since that October 2 of 1928, how many mercies from our Lord! Today I cried a lot. Now, when everything is going very well, is when I find myself weak, without strength. How clearly I see that everything has been done, and is done, by you, my God!" [15]

Many texts of St. Josemaría make reference to the mercies of God that mark the history of Opus Dei. Two of these can serve as an example. One is taken from his preaching: "The memory of the great mercies of God that mark the history of our Work." [16] The other is taken from his writings: "I want to open my heart to you, on this feast of the apostle to the Gentiles, so that you will be filled with gratitude on considering how God has been leading us along this new path he has provided in Opus Dei. The whole history of the Work is a history of God's mercies. Neither in this letter, nor in the many documents I might write for you, could I finish telling of the providential care of God's goodness, which has always preceded and accompanied the Work's steps." [17]

Therefore it is impossible to try to list all the moments when St. Josemaría discovered God's mercy in carrying out his foundational mission, given the limits of these pages. But we can focus here on two facets of Opus Dei's history: its consolidation and expansion, and the misunderstandings that sometimes arose. Paradoxically, St. Josemaría often united these two dimensions in the history of Opus Dei precisely within the framework of mercy.

Here are two relevant texts. Once again, we begin by choosing one from his preaching: "And now I could continue speaking about so many things: about the mercies of God, because these forty-seven years have been a history of the mercies of our Lord. How much work, how much expansion, how many souls all over the world! Jesus has scattered the seed, pressing it in his bleeding hands, and we have gone with dishonor, with defamations, with calumnies, and with affection: because we have never lacked the affection of good people in every place. For the part that involves you, I thank you; my brothers and sons: thank you, thank you very much." [18] And another quote from his writings: "Then,

from time to time, small waves of mud have been directed at us. The mercy of God, who lovingly cares for his Work, has permitted these campaigns of defamation in order to fill us with fruitfulness. How much good they have done us! Thus the Work and its spirit and apostolic methods—all its teachings—have been, not roughly sketched out, but sculpted in stone.” [19]

For St. Josemaría, all of this meant that the history of Opus Dei should be written and read “kneeling down.” Once more, both his writings as well as his preaching offer us examples of this expression. The first that we are going to cite alludes to the moment when that history would come to be written. “With these Letters that I am writing you, I am not trying to record the internal history of the Work, which will be written when the time comes, and which—as I have sometimes said—will have to be done on one’s knees, since it is the history of God’s mercies. But what I want to do is to explain some points of a juridical and theological nature, and make some observations connected with our history that you should find useful.” [20] The second quote, along the same lines, dates from his last years on earth: “Those who write the internal history of the Work will have to do it on their knees, because it is the history of God’s mercies.” [21] The third speaks rather about the reading of that history, as he himself has told it as the founder: “Some things I have had to write down, because my confessor ordered me to; others, I have written down in conscience, and here is everything that was asked of me. Read them without curiosity, but kneeling down, because it is the history of God’s mercies: the internal history of the Work is incredible! It is impossible, it is having brought about an impossibility. Now everything seems easy. An impossibility!” [22]

It cannot have passed unnoticed to the reader, in the three texts we have just presented, that the founder of Opus Dei, when referring to the history of Opus Dei, uses the expression “the internal history of the Work.” I think it is relevant for our topic to try to understand the meaning that St. Josemaría gave to that expression. I will limit myself to offering an interpretation that, certainly, has to be considered provisional.

One might think that for St. Josemaría, the “internal history of the Work” is identified with the authentic history of Opus Dei, which in turn is identified with what God “has done.” We can recall here the words “God

has done everything” and similar expressions in the above texts. St. Josemaría was a privileged witness (in the strict sense we could even say the only witness) of that “internal history of the Work,” which he himself lived and then transmitted to Opus Dei, in passing on what is habitually called the charism or spirit of Opus Dei. That is to say, the “internal history of the Work” would be the process of decantation or filtration that the founder carried out throughout his life, to give form to and incarnate with fidelity in institutions, norms and customs, apostolic methods and styles of life, the light that he received on October 2, 1928 and on later occasions. The mercy of God had shown itself in making use of an “inept and deaf” instrument, as he sometimes defined himself, to carry out his Work. God “writes with the leg of a table,” or “writes straight with crooked lines,” are expressions the founder often used that can be applied in this context. The “internal history of the Work” would, in short, be the history of God’s action in St. Josemaría and, through him, in the setting up of Opus Dei.

From another perspective, one might say that the “internal history of the Work” is distinguished in the mind of its founder from what we might call, in academic language, a “history of Opus Dei” that includes the consequences of the purely human actions of those involved, with their limitations, errors and infidelities. That is, what cannot be included in “God has done everything,” or in other words, the weakness and even the infidelity of those involved, and not as transformed by divine mercy and converted into an instrument of that mercy. Obviously, to attain this “internal” perspective a theological reading of events is required, which is that which St. Josemaría carried out. A “simply” historical approach would not be sufficient. At the same time, we need to point out that we are speaking of two distinct, but not conflicting histories of a single supernatural and human reality. To use an analogy, we could think of a Church historian who needs to integrate into his narrative both the sanctity that comes from what “God provides” for his Church through the fidelity of the saints—through every Christian’s holiness—as well as the limits that Christians also introduce through their imperfections and unfaithfulness. In the end, to speak about writing a history of Opus Dei, in the academic sense of the expression, is to speak about writing a history of the Church, with all its possibilities and limits. [23]

In any case, independently of the question raised, I think that the texts cited in the preceding pages clearly show the depth with which St. Josemaría considered the origin and maturing of Opus Dei as a “history

of God's mercies." A mercy that was shown in his own life, in his mission as founder, in the growth of Opus Dei, in the features of its spirit, in its consolidation and extension, and even in the misunderstandings that accompanied this growth.

At the same time, we need to add that St. Josemaría's considerations on the relationship between Opus Dei and the mercy of God are not limited to this dimension, which we might call the history of the development of Opus Dei. In St. Josemaría's mind, Opus Dei, which was born and matured through the mercy of God, becomes in turn and inseparably an instrument to make this same mercy present in the world, among men and women. Let us now turn to this point.

2. Opus Dei as an instrument of God's mercy in the history of mankind

The texts cited above allow us to intuit that for St. Josemaría God's mercy was not expressed only in the great gifts that marked the history of Opus Dei from its beginning and in its development: "how God has been leading us along this new path he has provided in Opus Dei." For St. Josemaría, the mercy of God is also shown, and even more strongly, when Opus Dei is seen in the Church, fulfilling the mission in the world that God has entrusted to it. As we saw above, God's mercy, which reaches its pinnacle in the redemption, is a manifestation of divine power even greater than the original creation. The nothingness that is man in his condition as a sinner becomes an instrument of redemption (see 1 Cor 1:27-28).

Moreover, for the founder of Opus Dei, God's mercy is shown not only in the possibility of becoming an instrument of redemption, but also in the call to carry out that mission, precisely in the middle of the world. We will provide context for this view by citing two texts from St. Josemaría.

In the first, St. Josemaría directs himself specifically to the faithful of Opus Dei, to remind them that they should recognize the greatness of God's gifts and strive to share them with others, while respecting each person's freedom. "Each day, my dear children, should witness our eagerness to fulfill the divine mission that, by his mercy, God has entrusted to us. God's heart is a heart of mercy, which has compassion on mankind and comes close to them. Our self-giving in the service of souls is a manifestation of this mercy of God, not only towards us, but towards all mankind. For he has called us to struggle for sanctity in ordinary, daily life; and to teach others—*providentes, non coacte, sed spontanee secundum Deum* (1 Pt 5:2), prudently, without coercion, spontaneously, in accord with God's will—the path for each one to attain sanctity in their state, in the middle of the world." [24]

In the second text, St. Josemaría speaks of "us Christians," stressing the idea that the members of Opus Dei are "ordinary Christians," sharing in the mission of the baptized to sanctify the world from within. "God wants it to be us Christians—because we have the supernatural responsibility of cooperating with God's power, since he has disposed it thus in his infinite mercy—who strive to reestablish the broken order and return to temporal structures, in all nations, their natural function as an instrument for mankind's progress, and their supernatural function as a means for reaching God, for the Redemption. *Venit enim Filius hominis* (and we have to follow in our Lord's footsteps) *salvare quod perierat* (Mt 18:11). Jesus came to save all mankind. Being Himself the life, the truth, and the way (see Jn 14:6), he wanted to teach the way, the truth and the life to all men, in every age." [25]

St. Josemaría also discovered God's mercy in other features of the spirit of Opus Dei. Thus for example, in what we might call the "style" of formation in the Work, which carries out its formative activities in a fraternal and family context: "Jesus goes in search of the lost sheep with a word of affection and consolation, with a clear indication of your directors, with the affection of your brothers, with a correction filled with supernatural and human meaning, with a reading that moves us..." [26] Also in the way that spirit harmonizes the divine and the human: "You have to be very grateful to God, because he has given us this spirituality that is so sincerely and simply supernatural, and at the same time so human, so close to our noble earthly endeavors. It is a very special grace—a light from God, as I said—that we have received

through his mercy, and that we have to pass on to many other souls with humble fidelity.” [27]

We can end with a reference to confession, the sacrament of God’s mercy, par excellence. The sacrament of Reconciliation holds a prominent place in St. Josemaría’s preaching. Mercy is here the expression of the love of a Father who loves his children infinitely and always forgives them when they go to him with humility (expressed in contrition). Both the spirit and the pastoral work of Opus Dei are imbued with this conviction. St. John Paul II on various occasions referred to the charism of confession that he saw in Opus Dei: “The upcoming canonization of Pope John Paul II reminds me,” wrote Bishop Echevarría in April 2014, “of how frequently this holy Pontiff remarked that the faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei have received the ‘charism’ of Confession: a special grace from God to bring many souls to this tribunal of mercy and of forgiveness, and thus to help them recover their Christian joy.” [28]

The writings of St. Josemaría that mention this feature of the spirit and the pastoral practice of Opus Dei are quite numerous. We will offer here only one, directed to a group of faithful of Opus Dei who were preparing to receive priestly ordination. “You are going to be ordained, my sons, to administer the sacraments and to preach the Word of God. Especially the sacrament of Penance has to be for you a ‘dominant passion.’ You have to dedicate many hours to administering it in the confessional, through auricular confession, urged on in your charity by the merciful love of Jesus, thus reproducing in yourselves the divine image of the Good Shepherd, who looks for the sheep one by one.” [29]

In summary, for St. Josemaría Opus Dei will be an instrument of God’s mercy towards mankind, in the measure that its faithful welcome the mercy of God and pass on with “humble fidelity,” through their own lives, what they have received.

Conclusion

Our reflections on the writings of St. Josemaría regarding the history of

Opus Dei show that he discovered divine mercy not only in his own life, but also in the birth and expansion of the Work. God's mercy and the existence of Opus Dei in the Church are closely intertwined in the thought of its founder, giving us the key to correctly grasp its history.

The history of Opus Dei is seen as the history of God's mercies and Opus Dei as an instrument of divine mercy in the history of mankind. The link between God's mercy and the history of Opus Dei—and analogically, the history of the Church—can be summed up in the following way. On the personal level, the greatest expression God's mercy is that he loves us and teaches us to love. The fact that the faithful of Opus Dei—and every Christian—have become an instrument of co-redemption, in spite of their personal limitations, is also a manifestation of his mercy, as is the reality of being called to carry out this mission in the middle of the world. To be a son or daughter of the Church and to receive the specification of Christian life that is the call to Opus Dei, is to receive God's mercy, and, at the same time, to become an instrument to spread mercy in the world.

The mercy of God is, therefore, not only an important dimension in the spiritual experience of St. Josemaría, but a reality that is presented in his thought as the *raison d'être* of Opus Dei as a whole and, ultimately, of the Church herself.

[1] See Letter (January 25, 1961), no. 12, in AGP, series A-3, 94-2-2.

[2] Intimate Notes, no. 510, December 25, 1931, cited in *The Way*, Critical-Historical Edition, prepared by Pedro Rodríguez, Scepter, London – New York, 2009, pp. 853-854.

[3] See Federico M. Requena, "San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y la devoción al Amor Misericordioso (1927-1935)," *Studia et Documenta*, 3 (2009), pp. 139-174. For more about the spread of this devotion in

Spain, see *Idem.*, *Católicos, devociones y sociedad durante la dictadura de Primo de Rivera y la Segunda República. La Obra del Amor Misericordioso en España (1922-1936)*, Ed. Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 2008.

[4] Notes from a family gathering, November 19, 1972, in the volumes of “Catechesis” 1972/2, p. 480 in AGP, Biblioteca, P04.

[5] Letter (July 16, 1933), nos. 3 and 26, cited in Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III, Scepter, New York, p. 164.

[6] Francis, *Bull Misericordiae Vultus* (April 11, 2015), no. 10.

[7] Notes from a meditation, April 11, 1952, in AGP, series A.4.

[8] See for example: Letter (February 14, 1944), no. 4, in AGP, series A.3, 92-2-2; Letter (January 25, 1961), no. 1, in AGP, series A.3, 94-2-2; and notes taken at a family gathering, February 9, 1975, in the volumes of “Catechesis,” 1975/3, p. 142, in AGP, Biblioteca, P04.

[9] Article “The Riches of the Faith,” from the newspaper ABC, Madrid, November 1, 1969, in José Antonio Loarte (ed.), *Por las sendas de la fe*, Ediciones Cristiandad, Madrid, 2013, pp. 31-32.

[10] See Pope Francis, *Bull Misericordiae Vultus* (April 11, 2015), no. 6.

[11] Notes from a meditation, April 11, 1952, in AGP, series A. 4.

[12] Letter (May 6, 1945), no. 5, in AGP, series A.3, 94-4-2.

[13] Letter, (January 25, 1961), no. 3, in AGP, series A.3, 94-2-2. The italics are ours.

[14] Joseph Ratzinger, "Letting God Work," L'Osservatore Romano, October 6, 2002.

[15] Apuntes Intimos, no. 1283, cited in Andrés Vázquez de Prada, The Founder of Opus Dei, vol. I, Scepter, New York, p. 479.

[16] Notes from a meditation, January 15, 1959, in AGP, series A.4.

[17] Letter (January 25, 1961), no. 1, in AGP, series A.3, 94-2-2.

[18] Notes from a family get-together, June 26, 1974, in the volumes of "Catechesis," 1974/1, p. 684, in AGP Biblioteca, P04.

[19] Letter (September 14, 1951), no. 7, in AGP, series A.3, 93-3-2.

[20] Letter (February 14, 1944), no. 4, in AGP, Series A.3, 92-2-2.

[21] Notes from a family get-together, February 9, 1975, in the volumes of "Catechesis," 1975/3, p. 142 in Biblioteca, P04.

[22] Notes from a family get-together, June 1, 1974, in AGP, series A.4.

[23] I have had occasion to deal with this question, with the collaboration of José Luis González Gullón, although from a different perspective, in “Escribir la historia del Opus Dei: Algunas consideraciones historiográficas,” in Luis Martínez Ferrer (Ed.), *Venti secoli di storiografia ecclesiastica: Bilancio e prospettive*, Edusc, Rome, 2010, pp. 413-425.

[24] Letter (March 24, 1930), no. 1, in AGP, series A.3, 91-1-3.

[25] Letter (April 30, 1946), no. 19, in AGP, series A.3, 92-5-2.

[26] Notes from a meditation, January 15, 1959, in AGP, series A.4.

[27] Letter (March 11, 1940), no. 17, in AGP, series A.3, 91-6-2.

[28] Bishop Javier Echevarría, Pastoral letter, April 1, 2014.

[29] Letter (June 10, 1971), no. 5, in AGP, series A.3, 95-2-1.