

KEYS



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Service-learning in Catholic Higher Education

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# Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

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The mission of the University and the charism  
of Opus Dei

3.6

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*Austral: experiencia de campo mission “Puna Solidaria Austral 2011” (Sudamericana, 2012).*

## 6. THE MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE CHARISM OF OPUS DEI

Isabel Egaña

Austral University, Argentina

### Introduction

Fruit of divine initiative and addressed to every man and woman of all times, Opus Dei promotes the sanctification of all human realities—passionately loving God and the world—through work well done with an attitude of service to others.

There are many initiatives that collect this message through education. The Austral University—together with other universities and Opus Dei corporate works—promote service-learning activities<sup>24</sup> as the appropriate way to materialize the message of service and love for everyone, delivered to St. Josemaría Escrivá for the good of humankind.

As an example, I would like to mention some of the initiatives we have been carrying out at Austral University with the aim of making University Social Responsibility not only a reality in the statement of the institution, but a lived and palpable reality in all dimensions of university educational activity.

### Humanize society through work carried out with a service attitude.

When Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer—a young 26-year-old Spanish priest—saw Opus Dei in 1928, he understood that God wanted to remind the world of the supernatural transcendence of work done out of love for God, as a matter of personal sanctification, and as a means to sanctify the world.

Professional work is the means God needs to illuminate and permeate the environment where the Christian carry out his work. On 7th August, 1931, while celebrating the Holy Mass, at the moment of raising the Host, within him, he heard the Lord who told him the phrase of the Scriptures that says: “when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself” (John 12:32). Understanding that the Lord meant:

*“I say it to you meaning that you should put me at the pinnacle of all human activities, so that in every place in the world there will be Christians with a dedication that*

<sup>24</sup> Service-learning hereafter will be cited as SL.

is personal and totally free— Christians who will be other Christs” (Vázquez de Prada, p. 326).

On another occasion, he explained:

*I understood that it will be the men and women of God who will raise the Cross, with the teachings of Christ, to the pinnacle of all human activity... And I saw the Lord triumphing, drawing all things to Himself (Hermida, 2020, p. 43).<sup>25</sup>*

*God led St. Josemaría to believe that the search for holiness in the world included performing the professional work with the highest possible human and supernatural perfection. Through work, the Christian floods society with the values of the Gospel; in this way he humanizes and Christianizes it, proposing work and professional models that ensure the common good of people.*

God led St. Josemaría to believe that the search for holiness in the world included performing the professional work with the highest possible human and supernatural perfection. Work is Christian’s powerful resource available for incarnating the message of the Gospel in his life, making his own all the traits and ways of a man in love with Christ. It is about being like

“Christ is passing by” in the midst of the world.

However, Christians are not a single verse in the poem of society, but part of the social fabric in which their life unfolds and they are called to radiate the evangelical message in that environment.

*Among those around you—apostolic soul—you are the stone fallen into the lake. With your word and your example, you produce a first circle... and it another... and another, and another... Wider each time. Do you now understand the greatness of your mission? (Escrivá de Balaguer, 1996, n. 831).*

Through work, the Christian floods society with the values of the Gospel; in this way he humanizes and Christianizes it, proposing work and professional models that ensure the common good of people.

As the motto of his work, St. Josemaría summed up the style of service that Christians are called to incarnate: “If you want to be useful, serve.” He explained that to serve others we have to be useful and, therefore, educate ourselves.

25 English version retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3q0woVV>

Those who do a job that is useful to others require good professional training. For this reason, he called to consider service as a “great and beautiful mission,” which must permeate all work, giving it supernatural and human meaning. Especially in these times when so many are reluctant to serve and are frightened, due to selfishness and pride:

And so, as the motto of your work, I can give you this one: If you want to be useful, serve. For, in the first place, in order to do things properly, you must know how to do them. I cannot see the integrity of a person who does not strive to attain professional skills and to carry out properly the task entrusted to his care. It is not enough to want to do good, but to know how to do it. And, if our desire is real, it will show itself in the effort we make to use the right methods, finishing things well, achieving human perfection.

*But human service and technique, our knowledge of our job, should have a feature (...) the spirit of service, the desire to contribute to the well-being of other people (Escrivá de Balaguer, 2001, pp.116-117).<sup>26</sup>*

### **Loving the world passionately, daring to seek creative solutions to their problems, in collaboration with others**

In the context of the University of Navarra, Saint Josemaría called on his children to be present in all human activities, to sanctify them from within, in collaboration with others:

*Your ordinary contact with God takes place where your fellow men, your yearnings, your work and your affections are. There you have your daily encounter with Christ. It is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind (Escrivá de Balaguer, 2012, pp. 485-486).<sup>27</sup>*

With these words, he encouraged his children to be present in the full range of human activities, discovering the divine hidden in the most common situations of life.

*It is about acquiring a solid professional preparation that contains Christian values to be able to provide comprehensive solutions to the complex and constantly changing world.*

It is about acquiring a solid professional preparation that contains Christian values to be able to provide comprehensive solutions to the complex and constantly changing world.

*Your task as a Christian citizen is to help see Christ's love and freedom preside over all the aspects of modern life: culture*

<sup>26</sup> English version retrieved from: : <https://opusdei.org/en/dailytext/if-you-want-to-be-useful-serve/>

<sup>27</sup> Own translation.

and the economy, work and rest, family life and social relations (Escrivá de Balaguer, 1993, n.302).<sup>28</sup>

He proposed to bring the joy, solidarity, desire for unity and peace, etc., that permeate the Christian life, to the small and large world that each one of us has before us. The path to bring the world to God begins by loving him, to be in a position to propose—together with other citizens—wise ways of improvement and growth, as well as to promote peaceful coexistence.

### **The University of Christian inspiration, a place where faith becomes tangible in all its manifestations**

Along with a vast range of apostolic initiatives in the world, Opus Dei promotes and cares for the formation provided in scattered Universities on the five continents.

Escrivá's words spoken at the University of Navarra—the first of the universities run by Opus Dei— just three years before his departure for heaven are a good summary of his feelings:

*The university does not live with its back turned to any uncertainty, to any concern, to any of mankind's need. It is not its mission to offer immediate solutions. But in studying these problems with scientific depth, it must also move hearts, fight passivity, awaken sleeping forces, and form citizens desirous of constructing a more just society. In this way it will contribute with its universal work to lowering the barriers that prevent mutual understanding among men, to alleviating fear of an uncertain future, to fostering, by its love for truth, justice and freedom, authentic peace and concord among peoples and nations (as cited by Mora, 2012).<sup>29</sup>*

*The universities of Christian inspiration are called to mobilize their members to seriously study the issues, generating learnings that have a significant impact on society and on the life of each of its citizens, seeking and creating the conditions to find harmony between reason and faith in all areas of knowledge.*

In other words, the universities of Christian inspiration are called to mobilize their members to seriously study the issues, generating learnings that have a significant impact on society and on the life of each of its citizens, seeking and creating the conditions to find harmony between

reason and faith in all areas of knowledge.

<sup>28</sup> English version retrieved from: <https://opusdei.org/en/dailytext/the-kingdom-of-god-has-reached-your-heart/>

<sup>29</sup> English version retrieved from: <https://en.romana.org/54/a-study/universities-inspired-by-catholicism-identity-cult/>

### **The Austral University, an Opus Dei corporate initiative at the service of society.**

I give way to Saint Josemaría himself who in 1967, on the University campus, explained what the corporate works of Opus Dei are:

*They are not ecclesiastical activities—they do not in any way represent the hierarchy of the Church. They are the fruit of human, cultural and social initiatives of ordinary citizens who try to make them reflect the light of the Gospel and to bring them the warmth of Christ's love (Escrivá de Balaguer, 2012, p. 499).<sup>30</sup>*

The Austral university, as a corporate work of Opus Dei, is built on these tenets that are specified in its institutional mission:

*Universidad Austral intends to serve society by pursuing truth, creating and disseminating knowledge, educating on virtues, and catering to every individual's transcendent destiny, providing intellectual, professional, social and public leadership. (Austral, n.d.)*

In its principles, the foundational features are detailed, among which I highlight those that are directly related to the topic that concerns us today: to carry out a service to society through the professional preparation and comprehensive training of its members; to orient social, scientific and technological changes towards the full development of the individual, seeking appropriate solutions to their problems; to optimise the quality of teaching, research and extension to transform things and society—in accordance with a Christian worldview—and to nourish university extension activity with a close relationship with other institutions in the environment (private and state) as a proposal to society through a sensitive and active attitude towards the major problems that affect the common good.

Although the tenets outlined in the previous paragraph could be statements made by any other university, without explicit reference to service-learning, the words I quote below focus us on the approach to the activities carried out by the Austral University. In an interview on the University at the service of today's society, Saint Josemaría says:

*The University needs to train students in a service mentality: service to society, promoting the common good through their professional work and civic action. University students need to be responsible, to have a healthy concern for the problems of others and a generous spirit that leads them to confront their problems, and to try to find the best solution... the University... must train its students so that their future professional work will be at the service of all. (...) The ideal is, above all, the reality of work well done, the adequate scientific preparation during the university years. (...) The University should not train men who then selfishly consume the benefits of their studies; it should prepare them for a task of generous help to others, of Christian fraternity. I measure solidarity by works of service,*

30 English version retrieved from: <https://stjosemaria.org/passionately-loving-the-world-3/>

*and I know of thousands of cases of students (...) who have given up building their own little private world, giving themselves to others through professional work, which they try*

*The University needs to train students in a service mentality: service to society, promoting the common good through their professional work and civic action.*

*to do with human perfection, in works of teaching, assistance, social work, etc. With a spirit that is always young and full of joy (Escrivá de Balaguer, 2012, pp. 362-364).<sup>31</sup>*

### **The mission of service and professional preparation of excellence: two sides of university education**

In response to Universidad Austral's Mission and to the different needs of students and society, in recent years the University has been carrying out various service-learning activities.

In order to determine the current state of Social Responsibility at the University, the Centre for Sustainable Development (CADS in its acronym in Spanish) at Universidad Austral (Martino S., 2011), has carried out a survey of the different proposals made to promote University Social Responsibility in each academic unit, together with a proposal to define an institutional policy in this regard.

In response to this report and the recommendations of the National Commission of Evaluation and University Accreditation (CONEAU in its acronym in Spanish), the Standing Committee of the High Council of Universidad Austral, in its communication No. 145/2014, created the "University Action" area, which has a person dedicated to coordinating and managing the collaboration of students, faculty and volunteer staff. Reporting to the Department of Studies, it aims at promoting and channelling service-learning and voluntary-service activities developed by the different units.

As part of my work at the Universidad Austral, I have been promoting service-learning over the past decade: from the Institutional Assessment Office —under the Rector's Office—, by coordinating the "Puna Solidaria Austral" social projects, a topic I have developed in previous publications (Bosch, T & Egaña, I, 2012). From the School of Education, as Coordinator of the University Teacher Training Course for Secondary and Higher Education —a course aimed at teacher training for young professionals—offering service-learning workshops for students. For the entire teaching community at Universidad Austral, CLAYSS coordinates Service-learning Conferences.

<sup>31</sup> Own translation

The “Puna Solidaria Austral” programme started in 2011 and 2012, when a group of lecturers and students from the Faculty of Business Studies (Rosario Campus), motivated by a strong social commitment and with the desire to contribute to the development of the area of Jujuy, bordering Bolivia, undertook eight trips of voluntary social work (between 2004 and 2007). The “Puna Solidaria Austral” programme consisted of two subsequent trips to northern Argentina to undertake interdisciplinary activities - previously planned together with the local population - involving students and professors from various academic units at Universidad Austral, in order to work on the needs detected in the communities.

Training was provided to teachers and directors of towns and neighbouring areas, in which anthropological, pedagogical and didactic topics related to language and mathematics were addressed. Onsite training for the Abra Colorada School was also provided—after analysing documents and conducting personal interviews—; in coordination with a local health worker, nurses and medical students conducted workshops for parents on health issues and hygiene care. In addition, various recreational and playful activities were carried out with the children of the schools we visited. The Business Science students exchanged experiences and knowledge with the artisans of the communities, providing them with guidance on the professionalization of the micro-enterprises they carry out and learning about the craft business and the distribution route of the products that reach the cities. In this way, the university students who participated in the programme were enriched by the intercultural dialogue and the coexistence with the Puna communities.

As part of the Teacher-Training Course, in the Integration Workshops for students—throughout the degree course—, different aspects related to service-learning were addressed, where students designed projects that they put into practice in different edu-

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educational institutions in which they work. At present, these classes have been replaced by a service-learning conference so that students can learn about this methodology and propose actions to be carried out in their teaching practice.

The SL Conferences, open to Universidad Austral professors, consisted of courses delivered by María Nieves Tapia,

Isabel Hevia and Enrique Ochoa—specialists in the subject—to raise awareness and guide faculty members on how to apply the methodology in their respective disciplinary areas. From then on, the School of Business Sciences (Buenos Aires campus) began to include service-learning activities in its course curriculum.

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that the founding charism of Opus Dei, embodied in universities of Christian inspiration, such as Universidad Austral, finds in service-learning an opportunity to materialise love for God and mankind, through the transformation of the world by means of a well-done job, addressing real needs—and perceived as such—of the target communities with students taking the lead role in bringing about change.

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*Uniservitate* is a global programme for the promotion of service-learning in Catholic Higher Education. Its objective is to generate a systemic change in Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) through the institutionalisation of service-learning (SL) as a tool to achieve its mission of offering an integral education and training of agents of change committed to their community.

***“We will not change the world, if we do not change education”***

*Pope Francis*

### **3** Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

A research topic that is increasingly attracting the attention of the academic world is the link between teaching and spirituality, understood in its broadest sense. This will be the focus of the volume that we present to our readers today. The aim is to provide, both for Catholic Institutions of Higher Education and universities at large, a space for reflection in their itinerary of discernment about their identity and specific mission.

This book, the third of the Uniservitate collection, explores these topics, bringing together research and experiences of international scope, from the Catholic university world as well as of other creeds and non-religious convictions, which delve into service-learning from the ethics of care and fraternity.

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