

Defending Life in Public Opinion

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I work for an organization, started in the United States, called The Caring Foundation. This is a right to life group with a unique approach to the issue of legalized abortion. Rather than try to outlaw abortion through legislative and political means, we create television ads that appeal to the inner voice of conscience of the women facing the abortion decision. Instead of trying to take away a woman's 'right to choose', we try to help her decide for herself that it is not a positive choice.

I believe this is an approach that would have been very interesting to Blessed Josemaría. And as I reflected upon his teachings and the Foundation I currently work with, I realized that there other parallels that I would like to share with you. With such limited time, I will just list a few.

1. RESPECT FOR HUMAN FREEDOM

I never had the honor of meeting Blessed Josemaría in person, but I vividly remember a scene from a video that left a lasting impression on me. He was addressing a Buddhist, and saying with great affection, as he opened his arms wide, something like: "I would gladly lay down my life to protect your freedom to practice your Buddhist religion". Blessed Josemaría did not attempt to disprove the man's religion through logic or rhetoric, as convicted as he was of the truth of his faith. He chose instead to shower him with affection and to defend a universal principle that he knew they both shared, namely, the importance of

respect for human freedom. In The Caring Foundation, we begin by creating a message not based on our own logic about the evils of abortion, as convicted as we are on the issue, but by asking: “How does a woman really feel about this issue?” and “How can we awaken her own conscience to see that abortion is not a good option?”.

Allow me to share with you an ad to illustrate the point: It shows a woman practicing ballet, and the opening lines are very poetic “Your intuition is a small voice, round and whole. It tells you who to trust, when it’s best to be quiet, and what your best friend is feeling”. Do you see how this beginning transcends politics or geographic or even national boundaries? We are appealing to a characteristic that every woman recognizes and appreciates — female intuition. It is a universal. The ad continues, “It [that voice of female intuition] doesn’t always tell you what you want to hear, but when you think about it, when was the last time that voice was wrong?” So the ad aims to help women to listen to their own higher instincts. It does not try to push them from the outside, but rather to awaken something inside. This was always the approach of Blessed Josemaría, for he always saw the good in others, and tried to draw it out in a pleasant and attractive way.

Once the voice has been gently awoken, the ad ends with an offer of practical help: “If you are facing an unwanted pregnancy, you don’t have to have an abortion, there are other options”. Again, we do not say a woman cannot choose abortion, which would tend to create a defensive psychological reaction, only that the woman should not feel pushed or rushed into it, and we offer a toll-free telephone number in the ad that a woman can call for counseling and free assistance. We show respect for her freedom, while trying to guide her in the right direction.

Let me very briefly mention how effective these types of ads have been. We are able to track the exact number of calls on a toll-free line, month by month, in a given region, and here are some of the increases we have seen: In the Philadelphia television market, calls to the toll-free number increased from a monthly average of 43 calls per month before we began a television campaign, to 1,100 calls per month when the ads were on the air. In Orlando Florida (home of Disney World) calls increased from 15 per month to 573, and in Minneapolis from 26 to 480.

The key to developing this type of ad is that we begin with psychological research on the average woman of today’s secular society. We start with how they view this issue, not how we, the convicted pro-lifers, do, and we develop a message based on what they need to hear, not what we need to hear. And shouldn’t this be the basis of all effective Christian evangelization?

I think that Blessed Josemaría would have been quite interested in the statement made by one of our advertising agents. The agent said: “Sometimes we pro-lifers tend to love our message more than we love the person who most needs to hear it”. This is very profound, and I believe that it is completely applicable to all Christian evangelization. Blessed Josemaría really loved the people around him, of all religions and no religion, and that is why he was so attractive to people of all nations and faiths, and why his message has such a universal appeal.

Allow me to mention more briefly other interesting parallels between the approach of The Caring Foundation and the life and teachings of Blessed Josemaría:

2. AVOID LABELING PEOPLE

Blessed Josemaría encourages us to see each human being as a unique child of God. And, it is interesting to note that at first the Founder of Opus Dei did not even have a name for the apostolic work which God had entrusted to him. He did not start with a grand scheme and flashy name, but rather with an intense drive to serve individual souls.

The Caring Foundation avoids the use of all labels in its television commercials. We do not use the pro-life/pro-choice labels because they tend to polarize people. We try to write each ad as if we were talking to one person. Also, we do not promote our own name, and do not insist that our name even appear on any of our ads. We want to reach the woman in crisis, and any promotion of our own organization that might distract from that goal is discouraged.

Opus Dei is an institution of the Catholic Church which has apostolic work in all five continents, in which hundreds of thousands of people participate. However, the faithful of Opus Dei do not act in groups, but rather they are open and reach out to all other people, as is proper to their identity as ordinary Catholic lay faithful. In accordance with their spirit of personal freedom and responsibility, the faithful promote a great diversity of activities which they aim to inform with a truly Christian spirit¹. Similarly, The Caring Foundation has aired its message to over 90 million adults, and quietly raised over 20 million dollars — while almost no one has ever heard of us. We issue no press releases, we do not give interviews to the press, and we spend no money on self-promotion. Just as Blessed Josemaría wanted to focus on souls and not on a corporate identity, so

¹ Cfr. *Conversations*, 60.

too The Caring Foundation wants to focus on the woman who needs to hear a persuasive pro-life message rather than on improving its own name recognition.

While the political realm is important and to be engaged by every lay Christian, the particular spirit of Blessed Josemaría is to evangelize through personal one on one interaction. While television is very far from one on one communication, The Caring Foundation also avoids any connection with political activity. We avoid airing ads during political campaigns, and we will not allow our ads to be associated with any political party.

3. ENGAGING THE SECULAR WORLD

“The world is good, for the works of God are always perfect, and that it is we men who make the world bad, through our sins”². The message of Blessed Josemaría is not to leave the secular world, but rather to bring a new dimension to it: “Most people have a plane-like vision, stuck to the earth, of two dimensions. When you live a supernatural life, God will give you the third dimension: height, and with it, perspective, weight and volume”³. In the pro-life cause, television and the media have often been seen as ‘the enemy’. The Caring Foundation has chosen to see the positive potential in the power of the media, and to use all the research and sophisticated analysis that is available, in the service of the right to life cause.

Related to the last point, Blessed Josemaría teaches that every lay Christian is called to sanctity, and that this sanctity is normally lived out in the ordinary events of each day. But we cannot sanctify work poorly done. We must strive to be professionals at the top of our field, so that we may be a good example to others and give greater glory to God. As Blessed Josemaría writes, “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’s not enough to want to do good; we must 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”⁴. The Caring Foundation does not rely on its own subjective judgments for any of its commercials. We do not ‘shoot from the hip’ or assume we know what is best just because our convictions are in the right place. Rather, we hire professionals at every step, from research to production to polling. If we take our task

² *Conversations*, 70; cfr. *Christ is Passing By*, 112, 183.

³ *The Way*, 279.

⁴ *Christ is Passing By*, 50.

seriously, we believe we must use the very best resources to create a professional product that is maximally effective in saving lives.

I think that many other people could also learn from this approach. We seek to present our message in a way that is persuasive to the person who needs to hear it, and in a way that affirms the listener and brings out the best in them.