

# Promoting Racial Harmony in a Multi-Cultural Society

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As a journalist, I face age-old dilemmas and new situations caused largely by advances in technology. Added to that, is the fact that I work in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society that is still accepting immigrants. Singapore, where I live, is a young country which is still putting the finishing touches to nation building. Together, they present a complex set of challenges on a daily basis.

How I deal with them depends on my self-background, education, convictions, character and so forth. But insofar as all these factors have been shaped in some way by the spirituality of Josemaría Escrivá, his influence extends to my professional work in a general way.

Due to his influence, I have, for example, a wider range of interests that gives me a more rounded perspective and a greater empathy with people which is often the catalyst behind a good interview. More specifically, his ideas are reference points that help me to face the challenges I find in journalism.

## 1. IN PURSUIT OF TRUTH

Here, I would like to focus on just one ideal he espoused — the pursuit and defence of truth — in the context of the mass media.

Love for truth was a constant theme in the preaching of Blessed Josemaría. A few short quotes will bear this out.

“Don’t be afraid of the truth, even though the truth may mean your death”<sup>1</sup>.

“You were praying before a crucifix, and you made this resolution: it is better to suffer for the truth, than for truth to suffer because of me”<sup>2</sup>.

“We must also spread the truth, because *veritas liberabit vos*<sup>3</sup>, the truth makes us free, while ignorance enslaves”<sup>4</sup>.

Together with love for the truth, Blessed Josemaría understood the transcendence of mass media.

He used to say those who work in the means of communication, are educators; they play the role — often in a hidden or impersonal way — of teachers: the minds and even the consciences of millions are handed over to them almost unconditionally. Society — with or without reason — looks on them as authorities in doctrine, science and even morals, a stature they would never have attained if those instruments (of mass communication) didn’t exist.

So, in the face of these new realities, we can only have admiration and affection, together with an eagerness that we all contribute — although it may not always be directly in the fields of communication and public opinion — to bring to God, to return to Our Lord, this piece of creation.

Truth in the media was also a subject he occasionally touched on, as when speaking to mass communication undergraduates, “I ask you, then, to spread the love of good journalism. [...] It is difficult for people really to live together harmoniously when there is no real information. And real information does not fear the truth”<sup>5</sup>.

His words opened my eyes to the importance of the media, the nobility of its task and of the good it could do. I can truthfully say that I would not be a journalist today if not for Blessed Josemaría.

The seed was sown but remained latent until I went to Singapore, looking for a job. A former classmate of mine was working in the main daily of the country, ‘The Straits Times’, and suggested that I apply for a job there as well. I remember that the application form asked why I wanted to become a journalist and I wrote I wanted to tell or spread — I cannot remember the exact words — the truth.

<sup>1</sup> *The Way*, 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Furrow*, 567.

<sup>3</sup> *John* 8:32.

<sup>4</sup> *Friends of God*, 171.

<sup>5</sup> *Conversations*, 86.

## 2. OPENNESS TO TRUTH

Before one can tell the truth, one has to search for it. The reality of life is that quite often, a story line is decided on before the reporter is sent out to get the facts. But the facts dug up may not support the premise.

In a news story, it can be just a small matter, in which the true picture emerges clearly without too much effort. Even so, it is necessary to be open to the truth and, at times, to have the humility to acknowledge that one is wrong, as Blessed Josemaría taught. In addition, courage may be required to stand up to the editor, if he is set on the story.

In a long or feature article, what can happen is that a few facts do not support the line of argument but the rest do. Here, the temptation is to ignore these 'inconvenient' facts and highlight only what suits the story.

Again, a belief in the importance of truth, as emphasised by Blessed Josemaría, has helped me avoid taking the easy way out. It is a good defence against a range of temptations from intellectual pride to pressure of time.

## 3. MAKE THE TRUTH PALATABLE

Another facet of telling the truth is to tell it in a palatable way. This is particularly important to get around the sensitivities of a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious Singapore.

Of the population of 4.02 million, 76.8 per cent are Chinese, 13.9 per cent Malay and 7.9 per cent Indian. The Chinese look to China culturally and are mainly Buddhists (54 per cent), Christians (17 per cent) or Taoists (11 per cent). The Malays have an indigenous culture and virtually all are Muslims. The Indians are tied to India culturally and are mostly Hindu (55 per cent), Muslim (26 per cent) or Christian (12 per cent).

As Singapore is a young nation which became independent of the British only in 1965, it has not evolved a Singaporean culture or identity of its own. Race relations are considered fragile: many older Singaporeans can still remember racial riots which took place in the 1960s.

Against such a background, it is understandable that promoting racial harmony is a prime consideration. The policy of The Straits Times is never to mention the race of a person where it could incite racial hatred, e.gr. in the case of criminals.

But, we will always name the person and since the names of people belonging to the different races are very different, the race will be obvious without drawing attention to it.

We also try to ensure that the minority races are included among the interviewees. Recently, I was copy-editing a news feature to commemorate Nurses Day. I consciously did not edit out a quote from a Malay nurse and leave only quotes from Chinese nurses.

Another sensitive area is culture. From my first days in journalism, I was regaled by the folklore of how different ethnic groups had been upset in the past.

So, I learnt that I should never mention Malays and dogs in the same story (because they consider them dirty animals) or place the photo of a commoner higher in a page than the photo of the king of Thailand (only Thais consider it disrespectful). In this way, sensitivity to cultural taboos was inculcated in me and became like an antenna when interviewing and writing about the different races.

On a different level, is the effect of the culture of respect — which runs through the different ethnic groups — for elders, persons in authority and by extension to state institutions, etc. Due to this, it is not acceptable to oppose policies and schemes directly.

How can one tell the truth while respecting these sensitivities? The solution is to give an alternative point of view without attacking or ridiculing the official position.

Again, how facts and arguments are presented is of utmost importance. Basically, as a feature writer, I would look for reputable, thinking individuals who could articulate another standpoint built up on substantial facts.

The last area of Singapore's peculiar sensitivities is religion. Singapore has chosen to be a secular state and the press is similarly secular and tolerant of all religions.

It will feature religious festivals with an even hand, so that a story about Easter will appear on the same page and with the same sized photo as a story about Thaipusam, a Hindu celebration a few months earlier and so forth.

Similarly, I was able to write a lifestyle feature about how believers practise their faith. But I had to do it by focusing on three persons, each from a different religion.

However, the press will avoid any serious discussions of a religious nature. Generally, there is a nervousness in mentioning God or religion in any serious context.

On the other hand, there is recognition of the good that comes from the moral values associated with faith and a willingness — even eagerness — to promote such values. This applies in particular to the Christian virtues, which are well-known due to English being the medium of instruction and the fact the Christian Churches are making inroads among young professionals (yuppies).

So, at Christmas, which is celebrated in a big way partly due to the legacy of the British who ruled Singapore for 146 years and partly because of commer-

cialisation, there are many stories about the spirit of giving but none about the reason for giving.

#### 4. NATIONAL DEBATE ABOUT VALUES

In the national debate about Eastern vs Western values, mention is made of universal values or core values but never of Christian values.

I believe the reason for this state of affairs is the fear of overstepping the OB markers (out of bounds signs used in golf that has been applied to the Singapore media): it is taboo to proselytise in the secular press.

I appreciate the positive aspect that good values are highlighted in the secular press. But I also have an uneasy feeling that what is being done is to truncate the fruits of the faith from its roots and to foster the former without the latter.

Besides the fact that the branches, much less the fruits, separated from the vine will be sterile, I think it is not fair that the source is not acknowledged.

To my mind, Christians who write should make the connection between values and faith where there is one. I feel it is an application, *mutatis mutandis*, of what Blessed Josemaría said in point 353 of *The Way*: “Have you ever bothered to think how absurd it is to leave one’s catholicism aside on entering a university, or a professional association, or a scholarly meeting, or a Congress, as if you were checking in your hat at the door?”.

As Pope John Paul II put it so beautifully, “it is not a case of imposing on non-believers a vision based on faith, but of interpreting and defending the values rooted in the very nature of the human person”<sup>6</sup>.

I believe that it is possible to state the connection between faith and values as a fact, without the fear that one is upsetting religious sensitivities. Again, it is a question of how, not what, one writes.

I remember writing a viewpoint in which I mentioned Christmas and gave a quick definition of it along the lines of the Son of God coming on earth to save mankind from their sins. My editor wanted to delete the definition. But when I pointed out that good journalism is to give a handle on terms that may not be clear to readers, she allowed it to stay.

The same argument cannot be used for linking values to faith but the point is that ‘sensitive’ information was published without unduly upsetting anyone.

<sup>6</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 51.

## 5. GLOBALISATION: A MONOPOLY ON TRUTH?

A different challenge to telling the truth comes from globalisation in the sense that international news gathering is concentrated in only a few news agencies such as Reuters and AFP. The worry is that they will filter the news through their personal perspectives — cultural, political, ideological, etc. — and only these views will reach the world.

So, for example, a human rights violation may be highlighted by a foreign correspondent who comes from a culture that values human rights highly and believes this to be the news of the day. But a reporter who is more tolerant about violations of human rights may not give it so much play.

So, whether a report is fair or whether it is exaggerated could depend on the standpoint of the reporter. This is true in any report but globalisation means that a false slant could colour public opinion the world over.

The concern in Singapore is that the Asian perspective may be drowned.

Of course, the same argument — that only one viewpoint prevails — could be used against Singapore, where, until last year, all the newspapers in the country were published by the same company. Now, there is one paper outside the Group.

The solution in the Singapore context is that the foreign press is at hand to give a different slant and their publications are available. But there is no Asian agency in the international arena and the tremendous costs involved in establishing a worldwide network of correspondents make it unlikely that any Asian paper would set up such an agency. At most, as has been done by the big Japanese dailies and The Straits Times itself, the Asian papers will limit themselves to posting overseas correspondents or bureaux in key locations.

Personally, I do not share the concern about an Asian perspective partly because I am very Western-educated and feel quite at home with Western culture. There is trust on my part.

More importantly, I believe people share the same sense of right and wrong across cultures and so, without discounting the nuances in each environment, there is only one, human perspective when we drill down to fundamental issues.

Ideological and political differences could be dressed up as Western and Asian perspectives. At least, that is my inference when I take into account the vested interests of the speaker. In such a case, the supposedly Western and Asian viewpoints do not add up to a variety of cultural perspectives *per se*.

As Blessed Josemaría put it, “There is only one race in the world: the race of the children of God”<sup>7</sup>.

Besides, I believe that ultimately it does not matter who does the reporting since there is a core of objective truth that everyone can agree on.

All well-meaning journalists are in search of accurate facts and so, very often, the facts themselves are not in dispute. To follow through with the example of reporting on human rights violations, I think both reporters will agree on the facts of the violation, which is the objective truth.

The difference is the significance of the facts in the eyes of each, the strength of the language they will use to describe it, etc., which can result in their filing very different stories.

Blessed Josemaría upheld the legitimate diversity of opinions and I feel he would accept a similar range of perspectives, provided, of course, there is no falsehood or sensationalism<sup>8</sup>.

## 6. FACING UP TO PRESSURE

So far, I have only touched on the inherent trials of doing what seems so simple at first sight: tell the truth. There is also the question of pressure, whether from editors, publishers or newsmakers, to twist things just a little or to conceal facts.

I am guided by what a German mayor related of some advice Blessed Josemaría gave him: to make use of his public office to foster co-operation among men; to think of the plus sign, which not only represents the cross but also signifies addition; and not to divide and confront but to trust and work together in harmony.

Blessed Josemaría’s advice helps me to be more accommodating with requests to change my stories instead of starting off with a rigid, black and white attitude of take it or leave it.

I am helped by the culture in Singapore, as in much of Asia, which is to work towards a consensus. So, the tendency is to accommodate requests and to change a story until it is acceptable. Usually, this is a win-win situation.

Occasionally, the point I want to make becomes so convoluted, I wonder if any purpose is served as it will escape most readers. In this sense, truth can be obscured.

<sup>7</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. *Conversations*, 86.

But, the alternative is to ask for the story to be spiked, and that would serve even less purpose, unless the intention is to protest against the editors (NB I am, of course, assuming that there is nothing erroneous in the article, only that it is sensitive in some aspects).

## 7. DAILY TEMPTATIONS

External pressure usually leaves a mark because it is rare and serious. What can pass unnoticed but is insidious is the daily temptation to take shortcuts at the expense of integrity and honesty.

Common examples of this are not double-checking facts out of laziness or due to time pressure, manufacturing quotes for greater impact (based on interview notes, of course) and so on.

## 8. FORMATION FOR ONESELF AND OTHERS

In most cases, these can only be kept in check by personal ethics as nobody else will know about them. Hence, the importance of personal formation, as Josemaría Escrivá was never tired of repeating. And the gratitude I owe to Opus Dei for giving me that formation.

Parallel to that is the urge to foster the same ideals in colleagues. Addressing mass communications students, Blessed Josemaría said, “You can contribute a good deal to promote among your fellow students love for noble ideals and a desire to overcome personal egoisms. You can foster an awareness of social problems, you can encourage fraternity. And let me especially invite you to love the truth”<sup>9</sup>.

I believe that formation is also the answer to the scepticism about objective truth that can be quite common among journalists. The scepticism comes from/is strengthened by practical encounters with the different ways in which the same story is presented: it seems as if facts can be twisted to suit the bias of the writer, thus giving rise to cynicism.

Formation would lay the foundation that truth exists. Starting from such a premise, journalists would soon realise what are the undisputed facts and what are the valid deductions that can be made from them. They can then exercise right judgement about which stories give a true picture, within a certain range of

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.



views, and reject the rest, rather than drawing the conclusion it is impossible to know what is true.

And once the journalists are converted — in their ideas, not in their religion — the credibility of the mass media in the eyes of the public will also improve.

## 9. WORKING TO A STANDARD

As for how I tackle the temptation to cut corners, I work to a certain standard — both journalistic and ethical — that my conscience can live with, even if my boss does not require it of me.

To reach that standard means putting interest and enthusiasm into every story — even if I am doing it for the tenth time, as could happen in reporting annual events.

And maintaining that interest depends on the realisation that it is worthwhile. For me, journalism is not just another job: it has a reach and a purpose to it that makes it meaningful. “Journalism is a great thing”, said Josemaría Escrivá<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.