

# ACADEMIC LIFE IN A UNIVERSITY OF FORMER «GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC»

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When asking myself how the spirit of Blessed Josemaría influences my life as a university professor of Neuropathology I have to think about it for a while. Unfortunately, I had not the opportunity to meet him personally. It is thus obvious that his spirit has more impact on my life than his personality. Please permit me to write the following lines in a very personal and subjective way, not as a systematic paper.

From the very beginning, my life after my first contact with the message of blessed Josemaría was determined by one main idea: the personal transmission of faith. To bear witness of God in the midst of the world as an ordinary Christian and thereby to put apostolate into practice, fascinated me tremendously since knowing Opus Dei, in 1977. Moreover, it was the manner how apostolate can be done what strongly impressed me. Blessed Josemaría called it, «apostolate of friendship»<sup>1</sup>: *«Those well-timed words, whispered into the ear of your wavering friend; the helpful conversation that you managed to start at the right moment; the ready professional advice that improves his university work; the discreet indiscretion by which you open up unexpected horizons for his zeal. This all forms part of the 'apostolate of friendship'». This particular hallmark of our*

friendship as ordinary Christians with those people which we meet during our lives –supposed to be purely accidentally– is new. It is not necessary to go to 'special' locations to make apostolate. One can be –and one must be– apostle at the place where we live, where we work.

I came to Jena five years ago. Jena has a time-honoured university which bears the name of Friedrich Schiller. It was founded in 1558. The number of Christian students is lower than in other university towns reflecting the small portion of Christians in that local region being about 5% Catholics and 15% Protestants. When I came to Jena the situation of working in a diaspora was not new for me. Berlin where I worked for many years showed a similar situation. New, however, was the fact that I took over a position as a university professor of medicine and had thereby contact to more different groups of people, i.e., university professors, and doctors, scientists, technicians, and students. Moreover, it was obvious that I had my own students now. This meant to have a particular responsibility for them. I like it very much to come into personal contact with them on behalf of the

<sup>1</sup> *The Way*, 973.

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various opportunities which a place like a university harbours. These opportunities are in particular my ordinary lectures on Neuropathology, the interdisciplinary seminar on medical ethics which I organise with great resonance since 1998, and the work with doctor candidates in my laboratory. Quite a number of true confidential conversations emerged from these occasions. It is very delightful to get to know what are students thinking about not only in terms of medicine and study. What their dreams are, what their problems, what their guidelines of acting are, what their opinion about morality, whether they think about the responsibility they will have for the society, what they think about friendship among students, and what about egoism. In this context I learned from Blessed Josemaría that one has to study not only having in mind a very limited piece of life but including all fields of professional and personal life. In an interview in 1967 he said: «*The ideal I would propose is, above all, one of work well done and of adequate intellectual preparation during their college years. Given this basis, there are thousands of places in the world which need a helping hand, which await someone who is willing to work personally with effort and sacrifice. A university should not form men who will egoistically consume the benefits they have achieved through their studies. Rather it should prepare students for a life of generous help of their neighbour, of Christian charity*»<sup>2</sup>. «*A university must educate its students to have a sense of service to society, promoting the common good with their professional work and their activity. University people should be responsible citizens with a healthy concern for the problems of other people and a generous spirit which brings them to face these problems and to resolve them in the best possible way. It*

*is the task of universities to foster these attitudes in their students*»<sup>3</sup>.

This marvellous comprehensive view of university life naturally also concerns my medical colleagues at the institute where I am working and the other professors.

Without any pride but with the deep conviction that God made it, I must say that I found many good friends in all groups of ages. Moreover, I feel that quite a number of them got closer to God or at least were inspired to think about the meaning of man's life. I know that this would not have happened without knowing of Blessed Josemaría's work.

Another issue which is connected to that of «apostolate of friendship» and which is of special importance in a university where most people are non-Catholics or non-Christians is dealing with people who do not believe in God. Blessed Josemaría called «apostolate *ad fidem*», that apostolate with people far away from faith: «*You have heard me speak many times about the apostolate ad fidem. I still think the same way. What a marvellous field of work awaits us throughout the world with those who do not know the true faith and who, nonetheless, are noble, generous and cheerful*».<sup>4</sup> This, however, does not mean that the personal freedom we all have is ignored. Blessed Josemaría loved personal freedom extraordinarily and defended it emphatically. However, he felt a particular responsibility to speak about God to everyone including to those who do not have the Christian faith. Many, many times he said, «*Out of a hundred souls we are interested in a hundred*» indicating that one is not allowed to exclude people

<sup>2</sup> Conversation with Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer, 75.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation with Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer, 74.

<sup>4</sup> *The Forge*, 944.

from the great joy which is bound up with God who wishes salvation for all people. In that sense it is a great challenge to bring Jesus Christ to as many people as possible.

In my personal experience here in Jena –especially on behalf of the ethics seminar I organise for medical students– I must say that most people were very open-minded, and many stimulating anecdotes happened. For instance, one of the professors I invited to take over some sessions of the seminar was an obstetrician. Since the beginning of my seminar in 1998, he held the session on «Pro and Contra abortion» three times. He stems from the former «DDR» and has a high position at the University Clinic. He knows well my Christian background. After the third time he gave his lecture (that was in 2000 in which euthanasia of sick children during the Third Reich was intensively discussed in Jena and in Germany due to the possible involvement of Professor Jussuf Ibrahim, a famous professor of Paediatrics of Jena, in the Nazi euthanasia program) he told me: «Over the last couple of years, in which I gave my lecture in your seminar, I changed my mind. Now I could say that I would be more critical with the abortions I did during my life».

In spite of the many positive things, it must be said that especially with non-Christians it is often difficult, to find the same language. Most obviously it is difficult to explain that God is personal. Furthermore, people very often have difficulties to bring faith and science into a common line.

This situation is not typical only for Jena, it can be found in many other places. For me it is fascinating

to talk to many different kinds of people. I always learn many new things from them. Blessed Josemaría had the same experience. He said: «*If you are sensible and humble, you will have realised that one never stops learning. This happens in every field; even the wisest will always have something to learn, until the end of their lives; if they don't, they cease to be wise*»<sup>5</sup>.

We all are aware that our daily work is not an easy job, and we do realize how difficult is to carry out ideas mentioned above. But it is a tremendous natural and supernatural panorama, for me as a university professor and for many, many others in very different professions, something worthwhile to work for. What is needed, is to be optimistic. Blessed Josemaría was a very optimistic person which can be testified by a multitude of citations, for instance, «*Don't be a pessimist. Don't you realise that all that happens or can happen is for the best? Your optimism will be a necessary consequence of your faith*»<sup>6</sup>, and –being very characteristic for Blessed Josemaría– «*The task for a Christian is to drown evil in an abundance of good. It is not a question of negative campaigns, or of being anti anything. On the contrary, we should live positively, full of optimism, with youthfulness, joy and peace. We should be understanding with everybody, with the followers of Christ and with those who abandon him, or do not know him at all. But understanding does not mean holding back, or remaining indifferent, but being active*»<sup>7</sup>.

I wish to conclude saying that Blessed Josemaría really stimulated me to dedicate my daily work to God. I hope that many others will discover the spirit of Blessed Josemaría.

<sup>5</sup> Furrow, 272.

<sup>6</sup> The Way, 378.

<sup>7</sup> Furrow, 864.