

## Working for Life in India

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Blessed Josemaría often said that the faithful of Opus Dei owe ninety percent of their vocation to their parents<sup>1</sup>. The deep life of faith and piety of my father and the generosity of my mother were certainly fertile ground in which the seed of my vocation could take root. They were true promoters of the culture of life. The value that my mother placed on life was exemplified by the case of my youngest brother. That was her tenth pregnancy and she was already 45 at the time.

In terms of my career, my parents and my older brother really wanted me to study Medicine at a good foreign university. While I applied to several universities, it was the quick response of the University of Navarre in Spain that convinced my father of their professional seriousness. The influence of Blessed Josemaría's spirit of doing work well was fruitful even in this little detail. Around that time, my brother had also met two students at Harvard who were faithful of Opus Dei and they had made a very good impression on him. They also recommended that I attend this university.

I studied at the University of Navarre and did my internship at the university clinic. When I was living in one of the university residences, I started to read *The Way* and other writings of Blessed Josemaría. I remember the impact that the chapter dedicated to study had on me. It was there that I encountered something which was completely new for me: the fact that I could sanctify my professional work!

At that time, my country, India, was experiencing a *boom* in 'family planning', with the government organizing large-scale campaigns to promote it. How-

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. *Conversations*, 104.

ever, appreciation for children was very deeply rooted in the country. In addition, Catholics had received the grave and clear message given by Pope Paul VI in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. My parents never doubted that they were called to obey the Pope on this matter; they consciously chose to live in accordance with life values once again. I, on the other hand, was not quite sure what to think of the matter. It was true that we needed to resolve many urgent problems in the country with such a large population faced with hunger and other forms of human misery.

It was then, while reading the points of *The Way* and other writings of Blessed Josemaría about marriage, that I started to get a glimpse of other alternatives, and little by little I began to realize the great value of every human life. Thanks to the clarity of the doctrine of Blessed Josemaría and his positive influence on the University and Clinic of Navarre, I learned about Medicine as an authentic instrument with which I could work for a culture of life, rather than as a mere laboratory science. I began to see that my country — and so many others that are heading in the same direction — could find better solutions to their problems.

While I have thousands of beautiful memories about my years at university, there is one which I hold especially dear. It was a manifestation of the family spirit which Blessed Josemaría, as Grand Chancellor, had sown in this university. When I received my grades for my thesis, Eduardo Ortiz de Landázuri, another promoter of the culture of life, immediately sent a telegram to my parents to let them know the grade that their daughter — already a doctor — had received.

My desires and my drive to defend life grew progressively, due in part to the energetic and optimistic spirit which I found in all that I heard and read of Blessed Josemaría. Soon I even had the opportunity to meet him personally. While I had looked forward to that meeting, I never expected it to have the impact on my life that it did. When he saw me, he spoke about one day returning to India and helping to start the apostolic work of Opus Dei there. This meeting with him encouraged me many times afterwards to prepare myself better to defend life at all stages so that I could better serve my country and the whole human family, which is so seriously threatened by the looming culture of death. Many years passed, however, before this desire shared by Blessed Josemaría and myself became a reality. In the meantime, I practised medicine in Spain and in Nigeria where I acquired experience both of life, and unfortunately also of death.

A few years before, thanks to the good advice of a close friend, I had decided to specialize in Gynaecology and Obstetrics. In Spain, I was fortunate to work with professionals of the calibre of Eduardo Ortiz de Landázuri and Juan Jiménez Vargas, who taught me with mastery and with a true Christian outlook on life, to value every human life regardless of whose it is or in what condition it is in. They worked inspired by the spirit of Blessed Josemaría. From Dr. Jiménez

Vargas I learned about healthy and upright natural family planning, which could make the desire of the parents to live in accordance with the designs of God compatible with the need to take various other circumstances into account and enable them to live in every moment in accordance with the natural law and with the law of God. I also learned how to find convincing arguments to persuade women to carry their pregnancies to term despite external pressure. I remember one case of a drug-addicted girl who was admitted to the Emergency Room of the clinic. She was pregnant and wanted to have an abortion. The example of the patience, affection and understanding of a mother and a father which Dr. Ortiz de Landázuri showed to that girl, coming to see her at the clinic at midnight, marked my professional life and strengthened me in my desires to defend the unborn. It goes without saying that he convinced her to keep her baby.

In Nigeria, I met truly beautiful and heroic women who were dealing with difficult pregnancies and precarious economic situations, but who brought their children into the world despite the dangers of terminal diseases. One sickness in particular, called thalasemia is quite frequent there. I remember one woman from the north of the country who had had various Caesarean sections, and who had scarce economic resources, but who was willing to undergo any type of treatment so that she could carry her child to term. Many couples with incompatibility of blood group attended consultations with a genuine hunger to have children. Other women, apparently less generous at the beginning of their visits, wanting to end their pregnancies, left convinced of the treasure that they carried within: a new life with all of its possibilities, with all of the blessings that this baby would bring to the family. It was a cause of joy to see these families embrace the truth, since the idea of a child as a blessing lies so deep within the African soul. It is the propaganda of anti-life campaigns that so often seeks to rob Africans of their natural and traditional values.

Another time a former patient came to the hospital, moved by what had just happened to her. She had been going with her husband directly to a hospital in Enugu in order to abort her child. However, as the car passed by our hospital (the Niger Foundation Hospital), and she saw the sign, she realized that she could not commit this crime and she changed direction, returning to the NFH.

After a number of years, we were finally able to fulfil the desire of Blessed Josemaría to start to work in India. I arrived in Delhi thinking that things would be easy. I had not realized the changes that my country had experienced since I had left to attend university in Spain 30 years earlier. Nevertheless, with the support and the encouragement that I have always received from Blessed Josemaría and from so many people committed to the same struggle for life, I started a medical dispensary in Delhi.

I have witnessed many marvellous things since 1997. I have seen many people change their attitude about life and we have saved the lives of many children who have had to struggle to survive in the wombs of their mothers. And the best part was seeing the joy of these parents when they held their children in their arms. These parents, influenced as they are by cruel propaganda which makes them believe that each couple should only have two children at most, see abortion as the natural solution when any additional children are conceived. I have to admit that I commended myself to Blessed Josemaría before every consultation, and if it was a difficult case, I redoubled my petitions. I also tried to keep the guardian angel of each of my patients very busy, as he advised.

We also give classes about different topics from the Women Health Center. We held sessions for several months with postgraduate students of the most prestigious hospital in India (AIIMS) about the different methods of natural family planning. At the end of these sessions, which were mostly scientific in content, one postgraduate student approached me, amazed at the new horizons that had been opened to her. In all her years of studying Medicine, no one had ever explained these things to her. There were only two options presented: either contraception or abortion. These are signs of a return to a culture of life.

One Hindu doctor and mother who works with me is also changing her personal and professional outlook on life. She realizes that what they taught at medical school was imbued with the culture of death, and that now with us, a culture of life is beginning to take root. Now it is she who studies the ways of helping patients to find the solutions within the framework of life, in accordance with matrimonial dignity. We also attend many patients at a dispensary that we have set up in one of the poorest areas.

What I have just said is a pale reflection of the reality of what I experience every day. I would like to express my profound gratitude to Blessed Josemaría and to all of my teachers at the University of Navarre. I am especially grateful for that seed that was sown in me in my first meeting with Blessed Josemaría and the inspiration of his message, full of life and optimism, that has been guiding my life.