

# An Inspiration for Thinking about Teaching

*Karen E. Boblin*

*Executive director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character and Professor of Education at Boston University. Member of the National Schools of Character Blue Ribbon Panel and the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) National Commission on Character Education.*

Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer played a key role in leading me to the professional platform I enjoy today. His teachings accompanied me from the secondary school English classroom to Boston University's School of Education in 1994. It was during my early graduate study, that I began working with prospective teachers. When I came to discover scholars and teachers who were mapping out thoughtful and philosophically grounded ways to study character formation within the context of teacher education, I was immediately inclined to pursue this work.

Seeing the centrality of virtue to good teaching and learning, I studied ethics and character formation with some of the leading scholars in the field. Many of them are now colleagues and friends whose academic work has been shaped in part by the ideas present in the preaching and example of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá. His writings are imbued with profound insights on the nobility of teaching. If teachers can come to appreciate, as the Founder of Opus Dei so eloquently points out, that every person has enormous dignity and freedom as a child of God, the awesomeness of their task is thrown into sharp relief.

Inspired by the life and spiritual ideals of Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, I could see that this pathway would lead me to explore with teachers — both current and future — the profound nature and impact of their work. One of my mentors, Dr. Kevin Ryan, had been trying to articulate this transcendent dimension of teaching to his students — prospective public school teachers. He described the work of character formation as helping young people come to see their lives as works of art — in progress. Then, in one lecture, he added to this by

citing a friend of his who once said, “The purpose of our life here on earth is to make our lives as beautiful or as pleasing to God as possible”. It struck me that he dared to speak so candidly to future public school teachers who often retain a misguided notion that one cannot speak of God in the public sphere let alone the public classroom. This professor is now a great admirer of Blessed Josemaría.

## 1. AN INTEGRAL VISION OF THE PERSON

Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer did not have a particular view on education “per se”, but his anthropological insights embrace a comprehensive view of the person and how he or she develops. He realized that every human being is endowed with dignity by virtue of being a child of God, and he often said that, “No one can outdo the Christian in terms of his being truly human. All Christians, he contended, should strive to develop, therefore, the various aspects of their personality and character, as they participate in the profound exchange of “divine grace and human correspondence”<sup>1</sup>. This heightened regard for the promise and potential of each individual to become like Christ is an enormously compelling and important message for educators.

The most powerful education in virtue, we know, comes not from a lesson but from a life itself. To help teachers embrace the dignity, demands and complexity of teaching, I try to help them come to see and reflect on the importance of growing in virtue in all spheres of their lives — professional, social, civic, and personal. The goal is to awaken them or to prompt them to cultivate as the Founder of Opus Dei put it, a deep ‘unity of life’. When teachers are struggling themselves to choose and act in ways that are consistent with high ideals and sound principles, they are much better prepared to consider and foster the various and age-appropriate ways to help their students develop virtues of mind and character. In short, they are able to teach with integrity and genuine authority.

The inherent dignity of teaching lies in the teachers’ profound influence on the person of the student. That is, teachers do not simply transmit information about their subjects and help students to perform well. Teachers inevitably help to shape the kinds of persons their students will become, for better or worse. They do this directly in the kinds of relationships they foster with their students and in the way they treat their subject. They do this indirectly by the example they set, professionally and personally. Moreover, many teachers when met with a variety of challenges — from dealing with students who lack basic needs such as food, cloth-

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. *Friends of God*, 7.

ing, shelter, and hygiene, to students who suffer from neglect and abuse; from students who are alienated and depressed to students who are overindulged and entitled — rise to the challenge generously. When children come to schools from homes where they have witnessed examples that are more negative than positive, or where they have not been shown unconditional love, the teacher is faced with an enormous task. He or she cannot simply teach math, science, and reading and help her students to develop virtue. The teacher needs to draw on interior strength not simply to compensate or to secure professional assistance to compensate for what is missing in a child's life, but to maintain a profound vision that each of these children has enormous dignity as a child of God.

## 2. CHARACTER EDUCATION

Some people argue that teachers cannot educate for virtue or character outside of a religious context. They claim that virtue is unattainable or that its study amounts to little more than secular humanism. I disagree with these assertions and have seen from my experience with a wide variety of students, colleagues, and teachers that, in fact, education in virtue is a critical starting point in moral and intellectual maturity that may later open a path for a person's encounter with faith.

Over the past six summers I have directed weeklong Teachers Academies, intellectual retreats for teachers that focus on the study and practice of virtue. When teachers are afforded the time to study (The Old Testament, Aristotle, Shakespeare, and quality contemporary and classical biographies, fiction and film), dialogue and reflect on the virtue and vice as disclosed in a range of human narratives and intellectual arguments, they gain powerful insights about themselves. Among the most consistent personal responses I hear from educators after a week of collegial study and professional planning around this theme are the following: "This is essentially about who I am as a person", and "I appreciate more the means my faith offers me to grow in virtue". It is clear that this invitation to study and improve one's life prepares the way or disposes individuals to be more open to faith.

The teachings of Josemaría Escrivá bring our understanding of these responses to a new level. They give expression to the ultimate union between human virtue and supernatural virtue, between nature and grace. In my own experience working alongside colleagues and educators who are exemplary in their justice, diligent attention to details, sincerity, and hard work, I find that there is a natural synergy that develops. Their virtues serve both to edify and help me work better, and our friendship inspires spontaneous and fruitful dialogue about God, prayer, and the dignity of our work.

“In this world there are many people who neglect God”, Blessed Josemaría acknowledged in ‘Friends of God’. But these people are not bad. In fact, we can learn a lot from them. Those who practice tremendous human virtue possess the promise and potential to come to discover God, to learn to sanctify their work. “It may be”, Blessed Josemaría continues, “that they have not had the opportunity to listen to His words, or that they have forgotten them. Yet their human dispositions are honest, loyal, compassionate, and sincere. I would go so far as to say that anyone possessing such qualities is ready to be generous with God, because human virtues constitute the foundation for the supernatural virtues”<sup>2</sup>.

To appreciate the dignity, demands, and complexity of teaching, I invite students, both graduate and undergraduate, to examine what it means to educate the whole person, to study how we can educate young people to use their freedom well. This theme intrigues my students as it is so central to human existence and yet it is so frequently misunderstood.

### 3. EDUCATION AND CITIZENSHIP

One of the great weaknesses of character education as a movement in the United States today is its lack of connection to the overriding telos or purpose. Schools and educators embrace character education for a variety of reasons: to promote tolerance and effective social skills; to improve student behavior; to stem violence; to help student achieve academic success; to foster social harmony and build community in classrooms; to promote citizenship and service. While all of these aims are legitimate and essentially noble, they are limited and incomplete. Some are simply utilitarian or behaviorist in their purpose; others support changing social, political, and ideological agendas; others, while ostensibly promoting social good, may sometimes compromise the particular good or moral convictions of individual students.

The Founder of Opus Dei is a source of clarity in the field of character education because by presenting the purpose of life in a clear and convincing way, he eloquently weds conviction to commitment, conscience to character, philosophy to daily life, reason to faith, faith to deeds, public life to private life. In a word, his teachings support education in unity of life, specifically, Christian unity of life. “There is no clash, no opposition, between serving God and serving men; between the exercise of our civic rights and duties and our religious ones; between the com-

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 74.

mitment to build up and improve the earthly city, and the conviction that we are passing through this world on our way to our heavenly homeland”<sup>3</sup>.

The teachings of Josemaría Escrivá also address the objections that some present to classical notions of virtue: that they are highly individualistic and self-motivated. He offers insights that help to shed new light on this idea: “I am not convinced either when I hear people making a great distinction between personal and social virtues. No virtue worthy of its name can foster selfishness. Every virtue necessarily works to the good both of our own soul and to the good of those around us. We are all of us men and all likewise children of God, and we cannot think that life consists in building up a brilliant ‘curriculum vitae’ or an outstanding career. Ties of solidarity should bind us all, besides, in the order of grace we are united by the supernatural bond of the Communion of the Saints”<sup>4</sup>.

To have education in virtue as the central theme of my professional work is both a daunting challenge and an enormous privilege. There is a growing hunger in the United States for a sense of ideals, high goals, worthy aspirations. Since we are a pragmatic people, however, any glorification of ideals must be wed to an action plan or a practical strategy for achieving them. The teachings of the Founder of Opus Dei respond to this call for not simply theoretical study of virtue, but the daily practice of virtue to sanctify oneself, one’s work, and others.

In these times of uncertainty since the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the teachings of Blessed Josemaría acquire untold meaning. While tragedy casts a spotlight on extraordinary behavior: heroic courage, self-sacrifice, and generosity, it also reminds us that heroic virtue is within our grasp daily. As we move forward from these dark days, the wisdom of Josemaría Escrivá invites all of us, especially educators helping young people to make sense of evil and suffering, to reflect not simply on the historic events that we have suffered through, but also to seek the central virtue which gives meaning to our daily lives: “By living charity Love — you live all the human and supernatural virtues demanded of a Christian. These virtues form a unity and cannot be reduced to a mere list. You cannot have charity without justice, solidarity, family and social responsibility, poverty, joy, chastity, friendship... For when people try to live in this way in the middle of their daily work, their Christian behavior becomes good example, witness, something which is a real and effective help to others. They learn to follow in the footsteps of Christ, who ‘began to do and to teach’ (Acts 1:1), joining example to word”<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 165.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 76.

<sup>5</sup> *Conversations*, 62.

The teachings of Blessed Josemaría encourage us to strive to live the ordinary in an extraordinary way, to live heroism in daily life. This message has a distinctive resonance for the educator. It gives a new impetus and vision to teachers striving to live unity of life and offers fruitful pedagogical insights worthy of our ongoing consideration.