

Education which is Open to Society

Mary Kibera

Director of Institute for Family Development, Kianda School, Nairobi, Kenya.

In the course of my contribution to this workshop, I would like to consider the influence that Blessed Josemaría Escrivá has had in my life as an educator in Kenya. I will begin by talking about my childhood experiences because I am amazed that while they are so different from Blessed Josemaría Escrivá's, I have for the last quarter of a century made his teachings an integral part of my life and have communicated them to others through my professional work.

My parents were baptized Anglicans. My father did not practise at all but my mother went to church fairly often on Sundays. Like the rest of my brothers and sisters, I was baptized in the Anglican Church at the age of nine after learning the catechism. We had no pious practices in my home that I can remember. The most 'religious' thing I recall doing was singing hymns at the house of my grandmother who lived next to us.

My mother was a virtuous woman who had her own deeply religious sense. It was from her that I learned that if you really want to give, you should give generously. If you are going to give in a half-hearted manner, it is better not to give at all. With regard to her children, my mother could tell merely by looking at our faces what was going on. She would prudently wait for a suitable moment to discuss things. How well I understand what Blessed Josemaría used to say that we owe 90% of our vocation to our parents!

When I look back, I am moved to see how the spirit of Opus Dei has helped me to appreciate all that was positive in my family and upbringing, while at the same time creating a hunger in me to fill in what was missing. I came into contact with the message of Blessed Josemaría when I began my studies at Kianda Secretarial College in Nairobi, a school started by faithful of Opus Dei. At this time, it had only been three years since I had been received into the Catholic Church, and I was still struggling to see how my newly found faith fitted in with my ordinary life.

1. THE RICHNESS OF DIVERSITY

While Kianda Secretarial College started in 1961, Kianda Residence opened its doors on 29th January 1967. I was admitted to live in Kianda Residence after an interview with Olga Marlin, one of the first eight women that Blessed Josemaría sent to Kenya to start Opus Dei. I must confess that I might never have decided to study at Kianda Secretarial College had it not been for the very genuine smile with which Olga welcomed me. That smile attracted me, and I felt that it communicated something I was not able to understand at the time, but which I later understood when I heard Olga say: “I do not recall making an effort to love Africans. When I came to Kenya, I felt I was carrying the Father’s love [of Blessed Josemaría] for them in my heart”.

I appreciated the deep respect with which we were treated in Kianda Residence irrespective of our backgrounds. There were over 90 of us in Kianda Residence from 16 different countries — Africans, Europeans, and Asians from different religious and cultural backgrounds. This was only three years after the country’s Independence, which had been preceded by severe racial discrimination. It was because of discrimination that Kianda Secretarial College had had to move to the outskirts of the city, from the residential zone in which it had initially been located. At that time, racial segregation was still obligatory in such neighbourhoods, and the founders of Kianda wanted their college to be open to people of all races and nationalities from the very beginning.

A mixture of young people from different races, colours, creeds and cultures lived together harmoniously in this Residence, very conscious of the richness created by this diversity. We had so much to give and to receive from each other. We learned song and dance from different parts of the world: Tanzania, Greece, Egypt, Uganda, Botswana, Malawi, Ireland, France, Kenya... The teachers too came from different countries: United States, Spain, Mexico and Ireland. We were really a family.

The Founder of Opus Dei gave those first women a special message when they came to Kenya. I have witnessed it lived both by them and by those who came after them. This is recounted in *To Africa With a Dream*, a book written by Olga Marlin, which will be published soon. I want to quote and briefly comment on three pieces of advice that they received from Blessed Josemaría Escrivá.

In the first place, Blessed Josemaría encouraged them to integrate themselves completely into the country, without any traces of paternalism. The author of the book writes: “The Father insisted on the importance of our identifying with the mentality and customs of our new countries. ‘When we begin our work in a country’, he said ‘we cannot isolate ourselves, but must form roots in it’”. Blessed Josemaría explained to them that they should not form a cist but should

melt in with the people of the country. “It wasn’t easy to meet Africans because in Nairobi the races were segregated”, Olga continues. “Buses were divided into two sections — the front for Europeans — and residential areas were also divided according to race”. Despite the difficulties faced by the new secretarial college, by 1965 the Mayor of Nairobi could already say: “If Kianda is now at the forefront of teaching institutions dedicated to the education of women, it is because it has worked with all and for all”.

The Founder of Opus Dei also spoke to them about the necessity of learning from the people of the country. Olga Marlin writes: “The Father reminded us that we were going to learn. Our role, he said, was to be like that of the stick placed beside a young tree to help it grow strong and upright until it can stand on its own. The deepest work would be done by the people we formed in the countries we went to”. And this is what has happened: Kianda and all the other educational institutions started by faithful of Opus Dei are now almost fully run by people of the country.

Finally, Blessed Josemaría also trusted these women to start activities that would improve the condition of African women. “The condition that the African women were in was of great concern to the Father”, continues Olga Marlin, “Our job was to help change this through education and by upholding the Christian view of the dignity of women”.

Soon after arriving, the first faithfuls of Opus Dei met a lady relative of the soon-to-be President, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta who told them: “You have arrived at a very good time to open a school for girls. Our women need education in order to become self-reliant, respect themselves, and make themselves respected. This can only happen when they are financially independent. Your school should provide them with the necessary skills”.

As Olga Marlin said, African women were in a vicious circle. They needed ‘education for freedom’ and ‘freedom to be educated’. In those days, fathers educated their sons while their daughters got married at an early age.

Within a year of opening, Kianda Secretarial College was already turning out young women who were competent and well educated, and who had many employment opportunities. The first to benefit from this education were their families, because being a secretary meant there would be an immediate rise in the standard of living, and further educational opportunities for the rest of the siblings.

I can truly say that Kianda Secretarial College is one of the institutions that has had the greatest impact in the transformation of our society by giving women the dignity to fully participate in the social and economic development of our country. The name Kianda is known in every corner of the country.

2. EDUCATION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

On the socio-cultural level, I have seen many changes over the years that I have worked at Kianda. In traditional African culture, children and wives did not discuss anything with the father or spouse. It is a reality that many families who have passed through Kianda have changed their way of relating to each other. There is a lot more communication and a lot more respect.

The mothers we worked with in the early years admitted that African men had certain difficult attitudes because of the way that mothers brought up their small boys. For example, boys were supposed to be ‘manly’ in the sense that they did not cry or show any emotions and they were not supposed to do any job in the house. On the contrary, their mothers and sisters were to serve them in every way. Without being too conscious of it, mothers often taught their sons to be hard and unaffectionate with women, and consequently, with their future wives and children.

When we started Family Development activities with mothers in 1984, we heard comments such as: “The African man does not discuss things with his wife. They are the bosses. They decide what has to be done and they give the orders”. With regard to the education of children they said: “Men pay the school fees and women do the rest: attend school meetings, look after children’s homework, timetables, and their whole upbringing”. Husbands tended to refer to “your children” when the children failed or did something wrong.

These two attitudes show how difficult family life was, especially for wives and mothers. They found the teachings of the Founder of Opus Dei to be both welcome and innovative. One such idea is as follows: “I always advise parents to try to be friends with their children. The parental authority that the rearing of children requires can be perfectly harmonised with friendship, which means putting themselves, in some way, on the same level as their children. Children — even those who seem intractable and unresponsive — always want this closeness, this fraternity, with their parents”¹.

Another recent testimony manifests the transformation that is taking place in our society due in part to this method of education. One of our senior students wrote the following in a magazine article entitled “Parent-teenager Relationships”: “Both parents and teenagers need to discuss *why* they feel the way they do. When was the last time that you had a serious discussion with your parent or child? How can you build a relationship when there is no communication? That is why I feel that parents and teenagers can really benefit from the occasional *family meeting*”.

¹ *Conversations*, 100.

“One of the things I found hardest”, one father of a Kianda student said, “was the number of meetings I had to attend at this school, but now I realize that this greater commitment pays off. We now come to the school out of interest in the education of our children — not just to find out their grades”.

Another father, whose daughter finished school last year, is a lecturer in the university. Recently, he came to tell me that he had agreed to be on the Parent-Teacher Association of another school because he wanted to pass on to other parents what he had gained in Kianda. “What you have is unique, and I am also proposing to help draw up a curriculum on parenting to make it a university programme”.

In order for things really to function properly, there has to be an inner transformation of the person. The spiritual ideal communicated by Blessed Josemaría is a deeply transforming spirit because it leads one to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. It elevates all noble human realities to the supernatural plane. “There is no other way. Either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or else we shall never find Him. That is why I can tell you that our age needs to give back to matter and to the most trivial occurrences and situations their noble and original meaning. It needs to restore them to the service of the Kingdom of God, to spiritualize them, turning them into a means and an occasion for a continuous meeting with Jesus Christ”².

3. THE EXPERIENCE OF KIANDA HIGH SCHOOL

Kianda High School was born from the experience of Kianda Secretarial College, and it continues trying to apply the pastoral message of Blessed Josemaría. In 1973, an alumna of Kianda Secretarial College said; “My daughter is in primary school now, but I would so much like her to benefit from the personal attention given at Kianda, as I did. Couldn’t you start a secondary school?” By that time, a good number of past Kianda Secretarial College students had daughters old enough for high school.

It was in 1976, two years after I finished university when the Steering Committee for the incipient Kianda High School asked me if I would like to help to start the school the following year. I was teaching in Kianda Secretarial College and the only working experience in secondary schools that I had were two teaching practices I undertook when I was doing my degree course. I had so often listened to stories about the beginnings of Kianda Secretarial College and even witnessed some of those beginnings myself, that the idea that God makes use of us

² *Ibidem*, 114.

as instruments was very clear to me. The eight women who arrived to start Opus Dei in 1960 realized on their arrival that what women in Kenya needed was not a finishing school which they had planned to set up, but a secretarial college. Although only one of them had secretarial skills, the college started the following year, and soon became the most famous college in English-speaking Africa. It was thus that I started working on this new project.

Kianda High School has become a catalyst for new initiatives for the family and society at large. Currently, it is rated academically as the top girls' day school in Kenya, and overall it is among the top ten out of over 4,000 schools. We have just received a letter from the Provincial Education Board congratulating the "students, staff and the entire school community". It says: "Your continued good performance over the years is a clear indication of a well focused effort towards imparting positive attributes to the Youth of this nation as we mould them to be responsible citizens".

Because of the outstanding success Kianda High School has attained both academically and in giving an all-round education, we are now having frequent visits and enquiries from parents and educators. Many of our past students are studying in universities all over the world: in Australia, in the United States of America, in Britain, in Canada, etc. Quite often, we get reports praising them in their achievements. From a university in the United States, we received a letter from which I quote the following:

"I am writing to thank you for your past recommendations of fine young students to our University and to invite you to nominate 5 students for the Scholarship Program [...] We seek candidates who have exhibited a capacity for service and leadership, as well as academic excellence, and who will embrace the challenges of a rigorous curriculum. We are especially interested in students who stand out among their peers for their maturity, strong moral character, selflessness, and commitment to community".

We are happy to note that in these letters, there are words such as responsible citizens, capacity to serve, maturity, moral principles, commitment to the good of the community and academic excellence because they simply reflect our desire to put into practice the spirit of Blessed Josemaría in each situation.

Linda, an Ugandan past student writes from the United States to her "Dear Alma Mater". She says, "I graduated in Biochemistry and I am currently teaching at a high school here in Los Angeles. I am quite surprised at my employment. I am forever grateful to all the teachers I had during my time at Kianda. Your instruction and example have stayed with me and return to my mind as I attempt to walk in your footsteps".

The Chairperson of the Past Students' Association who is also a Professor of Molecular Biology gave a speech on the School's 20th Anniversary: "I'm proud

to be a Kianda graduate. What I appreciate most is the training we were given. We were helped to grow in self-confidence. Each one was treated as an individual and encouraged to be herself. We learned to be independent, to do things because we wanted to and not because we were forced to. You don't know how it is out there [...] We Kianda alumnae want to change that”.

We are glad to see that our past students have assimilated and personalized the message of Blessed Josemaría with a sense of freedom and a readiness to communicate it to others wherever they go.

Finally, I would like to mention that in January 2002, we started the Institute for Family Development with a group of parents, some of whom are past students. The Institute is currently training couples to be trainers for other parents in family education. Parents in general are coming together to study and share experiences on different aspects of family life.

As time goes by, I am more and more convinced of the need to start family education early when virtues can be cultivated with greater facility. With the demand made on modern parents that both mother and father work outside the home, coupled with the ever increasing external influences which are often negative, families need help as early as possible. Our next project is a nursery school to be run by parents. It would be a wonderful present on Blessed Josemaría's centenary as well as Kianda High School's 25th anniversary.