

Ordinary Life? Discover the Richness!

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1. WHAT IS ORDINARY LIFE?

To most people, ordinary life is what it says-ordinary. It is the life ordinary people live. The kind of life we live from morning till night doing ordinary things. Not like astronauts when they go to the moon, or scientists when they make great inventions; not like the nuns who live a holy life in their convents, or the bishop of the diocese as he confers the sacrament of confirmation; not like generals when they fight a war, nor like the President of the United States as he addresses Congress or the Queen of England as she visits a foreign country, nor even the Pope at beatification ceremonies. Of course when these great men are not at these important posts they may be doing ordinary things like eating their meals, receiving their guests or taking their families on holiday etc. Ordinary life is the life of the people who do ordinary things — simple, routine things, like waking up in the morning, going to school or to work (in the farm or the office), feeding your family, taking your children to school, going to Church, visiting your friends, going to weddings, christening ceremonies and even attending funerals of friends or loved ones. It includes cooking, attending meetings, eating and drinking, settling a quarrel between neighbours, resting or reading, perhaps even fishing and other leisure time activities. Sometimes in the course of doing these things people may achieve spectacular success in their career or in society by doing their ordinary work very well, with a lot of effort and skill.

Most people do not actually achieve spectacular success but make do with whatever results they achieve. Yet both for those who achieve great heights and those who do not, a new (yet old), teaching has changed everything. This is the

teaching of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, born January 9th. 1902 and died on 26th. June 1975. He teaches:

“There is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to every one of us to find it”¹.

When we find this divine side of the ordinary things, he says, then they take on new meanings that urge us on in a new way of life that opens before us. Embracing this new way of life, prompts us to continually live in the presence of God, working for Him, making whatever we do pleasing to Him and attracting others to do the same as we go along. Thus according to Blessed Josemaría, it does not matter whether we are pounding yam or roasting plantain in the kitchen, teaching a class of undergraduates in the University or nursing a sick person; whether we are on holiday at a resort, cutting firewood in the forest or trimming the bushes in the garden. Anybody could do just that. But the person who sees the supernatural side of all these things is doing something more: he/she is seeking God, finding God and loving God. Such a person begins the work with God, sustains the work by the grace of God and ends the work in God and for God. Since most of us live ordinary lives, it is mainly through these ordinary things that we meet God; in them that we fulfil the will of God and through them that we gain heaven, our eternal destination after this short stay on earth. St Paul has said “This is the will of God: your sanctification!”². Blessed Josemaría, building on this by St. Paul, teaches that sanctification for most people, because they are living an ordinary life in the world, is obtained by meeting God in those ordinary things and putting Christ on top of every human activity. He says that: “Today’s Christian does not need to reform anything or ignore contemporary affairs going on around him. He has only to act as the first Christians did, giving life to his environment, putting Christ on top of every human activity”³.

2. MAKING A CASE FOR THE SUPERNATURAL OUTLOOK

Any Christian who takes his/her faith seriously quickly realizes the need to live this life in a way that earns heaven. Therefore we realize the need to fulfill God’s will, as this is the only way to achieve our goal. Discovering that this way, for the greater majority, is in ordinary things therefore becomes a thing of joy that one embraces with gratitude. For we read in the Gospel, “If anyone wants to

¹ *Conversations*, 114.

² *Ephesians* I, 4-5.

³ *Furrow*, 320.

come my way, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me”⁴. And we often wonder where the hideous cross is and how to take it up. We think that the cross must be big and ugly and heavy. And our Lord says “Strive to enter by the narrow door [...]”⁵. And we often imagine this means some kind of self-torture to qualify for heaven. But then He says, “In the world you will find tribulations; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world”⁶. And then we look up with hope having been invited to be of good cheer! If He has overcome the world, how did He do so? By “doing all things well”. This He did mostly in the thirty hidden years of His life. And He invites us to follow Him telling us, “I am the way the truth and the Life”. Blessed Josemaría teaches us that to follow Him, to be like Him we should simply do all things well. This will lead us to be His “brother, and His sister and His mother”⁷. So like the early Christians we should simply put Christ on top of everything we do and that is the trick! Learning this trick is like, “discovering a pearl of great value and selling everything in order to purchase it”⁸. The rest of this paper looks at practical ways to put Christ on top of all human activities especially in Africa, with the difficulties, joys, sorrows and triumphs that this entails.

3. JUST MY HOME, NOTHING MORE!

Having a home is just one of the most ordinary things any one can boast of in Africa. Every body has one — your father’s house or your husband’s or that of any relation of yours, and you are always welcome. So you wake up in the morning and go about your business, eat drink, sleep, fight, make peace etc., and get back home at the end of the day.

But fancy what Blessed Josemaría has described as “a bright and cheerful home!” Imagine a well ordered home, with everything in its place, clean and with simple objects kept lovingly to make you comfortable and happy to return to it after the day’s work. And this has been done to imitate the Home in Nazareth and therefore with love for God. Fancy everybody in that home seeing himself/herself as a child of God. Fancy calling everybody to morning prayers at a fixed time. So each member learns to wake up at a particular time and put all the day’s work in God’s hands, offering up the joys, hopes and pains of the day, and

⁴ *Mark*, VIII, 34.

⁵ *Luke*, XIII, 34.

⁶ *John*, XVI, 33.

⁷ *Mark*, III, 33.

⁸ *Matt.*, XIII, 44.

even learns to ask for daily bread! And this is done in the company of everybody else. Then breakfast begins with the “daily bread” which is not taken for granted because it is seen as part of God’s kindness. So we really thank God before and after the meal and any other meal of that day. So on days when the daily bread becomes meagre we thank God for making us even more aware of His goodness as we learn to intensify our plea, while accepting at His hands whatever conditions he allows us to go through. That way we learn like St. Paul to live in want and also in affluence and see both conditions as different ways of relating to God’s will. So when there is a lot, we see this as coming from God, and being God’s children we take it with temperance and when there is not much, there is no undue complaint as everybody finds a situation to offer to God. And once in a while everybody learns to deliberately do without certain foods and luxuries, so as to have something to offer up and so as to train the body to obey.

Everybody then does his/her chores before leaving for school or work. Take the child that sweeps the house or the one that waters the garden. Sweeping the house so it looks like the home in Nazareth (as mother has taught her) makes her think how the Blessed Virgin must have done a thorough job of cleaning or of watering her garden not just for the sake of cleanliness but for the love of God. So if each person has been taught to do his/her work in the presence of God and do the chore well enough so it can be offered to God, then one is really carrying his/her own environment within, holding a small conversation with God, silently, while making everybody else happy through service. The domestic chore takes on a different meaning. Each person’s chore becomes something to be offered up to God, becomes indeed a prayer. And if everybody in the house is thinking the same, how wonderful! Mummy may be making ends meet by managing to put good but perhaps cheap food on the table, smiling and telling God how things have not been easy but how this has been done for Him. And Daddy who might be wondering how to pay school fees seeing that indeed mummy is smiling through tough times and putting every care possible in the management of the home, finds the courage to go on catering for the family even in spite of the bad economy and seeks God’s help in prayer. And they support one another. They accept whatever number of children God sends them, in spite of the values of abortion and contraception that have now been imported to Africa. While it was a traditional African value to have large families, such a couple now adds a supernatural angle to this value. Rather than have babies just to prove one’s fertility and to ensure the survival of some of them from childhood diseases, this couple accepts children so as to participate in God’s creative work. They aim at having more children that would say “Yes” to God in the face of the increasing social ills that are resulting from broken homes and neglected children. They actively aim not to save some but all the children God may give them and to bring them all up

with love and warmth and in the fear of God, even if some of them may have problems or defects that make them difficult to bring up. Or if such a couple does not have children they can still have a bright and cheerful home by accepting God's will for them. This they do, cheerfully bringing up so many children that have no home, instead of resorting to the practice of harmful traditional practices that degrade the woman. These practices include polygamy or betrothal of women to sick or dead relatives or to fellow women, in order to ensure succession in the family. By rejecting such common practices, the couple is Christianizing society.

Or perhaps the family is not poor and does not have to pinch and save. In which case the members of the family if they have learned interior life, live temperance and save to help poorer families etc. And the other difficulties might crop up — sickness, a child that is not behaving well or even a spouse that is going astray. Then family prayers bring people together to share the problem. And the one who suffers more finds solace in the invitation from Our Lord “Come to me all ye who labour and are over burdened, and I will give you rest”⁹. Thus he/she finds cause to cast the moment's cares on Christ, forgiving wrongs done to her and “drowning evil with an abundance of good”, as St. Paul would say. By the end of the day each person looks and sees that some joys and sorrows have been gathered and these are offered up to God. And the children learn that each day there is the need to do the will of God through service to others. So they eat, learning to be considerate of the appetites of one another. Somebody clears the table cheerfully and even washes up on behalf of a sick brother while the sick brother is offering up his ailment to God for the sake of his father or some other thing. Then after school they wash their clothes and do their home work at the stipulated time before going out to play. And even as they play, they are conscious of not offending God by cursing or using profane words. They have come to learn what they can watch on television and what they cannot so as not to offend God in spite of current fashions. And if they have servants they are taught that these too are part of their family. They learn to appreciate the servants and often to help them with some of their duties. They learn that order and punctuality kept at meal times, for example, helps the servant to organize herself well to serve them better and thus have something herself to offer up to God. And when mummy and daddy come home (if both are working), each person thinks about the welfare of the other. “How has the day been?” And perhaps they make the effort to have dinner together. This means some sacrifice on the part of daddy who would want to read the news papers or mummy who would really give anything to eat quietly and go to bed. These are offered up. And these are reward-

⁹ *Matt.*, XI, 28-29.

ed! Because the children come up with stories of what went on at school, with their friends etc. Then the parents have the opportunity to get to know the children better and in all naturalness give them useful advice and teach them justice, fortitude, temperance and prudence depending on which is called for. They are taught to see themselves as God's children and to really relate to God as their father. The children also get to know more about their parents and get to feel their love and attention. Joys as well as sorrows are shared and all are offered up at night prayers where God is thanked for everything. At the same time each one examines himself to see how he/she has lived the day and how to serve God better tomorrow, by being a better father, or a better mother, or a better child. Each person asks God's forgiveness for acts of commission or omission and prays for one another. They thus encourage and teach one another to live a happy, cheerful life even with normal family problems. This is normal family life except that this is a prayerful family so the little everyday things have been done and offered to God. This is a family which has learned to support one another and to "cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the development of children into men and women who will be authentic Christians"¹⁰.

4. I AM OFF TO WORK, TO EARN MY DAY'S WAGE!

Work is often seen as a necessity, as a means of earning a living to take care of one's needs and those of the family. It may be used to accumulate more money in order to afford the very many things money can buy for our material comfort. Sometimes work is also used to show off one's educational qualifications especially in the prestigious professions. But Blessed Josemaría teaches us that: "Man's duty to work is an indispensable means which God has entrusted to us here, on this earth. It is meant to fill out our days and make us sharers in God's creative power. It enables us to earn our living and at the same time, to reap 'the fruits of eternal life' (John 4,36)"¹¹.

In other words work is much more than earning a living. Fancy seeing your work as the path to heaven for you. This means that you see the supernatural side of your work. And this means any kind of work, any honest work. It does not matter the profession, for, as Josemaría would say, "before God no occupation is in itself great or small. Everything gains the value of the Love with which it is done"¹². So for me the love with which I do my work is the secret. The love with

¹⁰ *Christ is Passing By*, 27.

¹¹ *Friends of God*, 57.

¹² *Furrow*, 487.

which I begin it, continue it and finish it is what determines whether I have put Christ on top of my profession.

So I begin by being punctual to work. I leave my home in good time, considering how long it would take to get to my place of work. I make my arrival an appointment with God who is awaiting me there and at the time stipulated for me to start. I offer up my punctuality and it is prayer. At the same time it makes others realise that it can be done. In these days of delays in salaries, the temptation would be to repay my employer with a negative attitude toward work. But no, I am not working for my employer only. No, my employer has just offered me the opportunity to have a means through which to serve God and win friends for Him. I am helping Jesus Christ to “set that fire” (Luke 12,49) which he says he wishes were already burning! So I set to work immediately as soon as I tell Jesus that now I begin my work with His help. Of course the work may not be easy. It may be quite tasking. I may have to teach so many hours and the classrooms are small and inadequate. My students coming from varying backgrounds may not be easy to handle. And sometimes the weather is too hot. But I consider that I have to devise ways of doing this job and cheerfully too. I offer up the difficult aspects of my job as prayer. I get the students to help me make the best of the classroom. I see in their faces a hunger for the truth and my role is to help them discover that truth which ultimately is God, whatever their discipline. Their appreciation shows in their faces and with time perhaps the difficult ones stop being unruly. Even the factory worker could do the same with his work and with his colleagues. He takes extra care in the use and storage of his implements. So does the cook in a catering outfit.

So I do my work the best way possible. I take care of details. I break it up into manageable bits or units at the beginning and end of which I call upon God to witness what I am doing or what I have finished for Him. I correct what I may not have done well because it is not good enough for God; and I remember to give God the glory for what I may have done well especially if I get applauded. All this I do in a natural way without doing anything awkward. I say short ejaculatory prayers as I work. To remind me of presence of God, I put a few objects here and there in my office — Our Lady’s picture to remind me of her motherly care, a crucifix, a picture of a saint or a ring on my finger which reminds me each time I touch it to offer my work. At different times if I need to fight monotony, I offer small aspects or units of the work for different things — a difficult colleague, a problem in my home, forgiveness of my own sins, souls in Purgatory etc. I pause from time to time to examine my intentions and if I find I have strayed I rectify my intentions immediately and go on. And when I feel like giving up, a glance at any of my “memory objects” will perhaps urge me on to conclude, to finish what I have started so that it would be pleasing to God, since

“Heroism at work is to be found in ‘finishing’ each task”¹³. As a lecturer I find it necessary to improve on my lecture notes each year. With so many responsibilities like committee meetings etc, the temptation is there to repeat the same lectures each year. But an examination of conscience makes me realize that this will neither gain me professional prestige nor keep my students in touch with the latest developments in the discipline. So I make an effort to update the lectures. And then I realize that several lecturers sell lecture notes to students at exorbitant rates against the University regulations. I make sure I don’t do the same, so people see it is possible to obey the regulation even in a bad economy, and I dissuade others from doing so. Then I encourage students to make use of the library rather than rely solely on the lecturer’s handout as has been in vogue with many students in many universities in the country. With time I find that quite a few of these students are appreciative of this and their study habits, as well as their academic performance improves. Such students begin to trust you further and they go to you for personal as well as academic advice, and you use this opportunity to talk to them about a plan of life and offering one’s studies to God and rendering service to make the University a better place.

I may suffer distractions. Some of my colleagues may not want to work. There may be apathy on account of certain grievances. There may be so much dishonesty. But I must set to work because I have learned from Josemaría that, “God wants a handful of His own men in every field of endeavour”. I feel the need to be one of these “handful”. If my work place is good, it could be better. If it is bad, some one has to play Christ and Christianize.

And perhaps there is a pagan atmosphere where I work. At break time, perhaps, or when there is a need for a pause, the conversation may turn to what is offensive to God. Or the attitude to sincerity and accountability may not be very healthy. Then this becomes a challenge to me, to Christ. I pray for God’s grace to resist the temptation. I pray for those who may have got involved. I rectify my intentions and my behaviour if in the past I have inadvertently joined in this in the past. I try to correct with charity those within my reach, be they superiors or subordinates. I do my best by my actions and in a natural way to live christian principles in spite of the environment. I avoid a critical spirit, condemning what is wrong but not the person and realizing that I could be the same or even worse but for the grace of God. I practice “speaking in tongues” by finding the appropriate words for different persons. I offer up these efforts, and this is prayer. It helps me be on my guard and I may have helped save some and for the rest, at least they may have been warned of the possibility of offending God by their

¹³ *Furrow*, 488.

behaviour. I offer some mortification to atone to Our Lord for my offenses and those of my colleagues.

And what about my professional prestige? If Christ is to be put on top of my profession, then I must try to be on top of my profession in order to put Him there. So I employ all the necessary means to improve my prestige — studying, acquiring all the necessary formation, perhaps in-service training, seminars, workshops, further qualifications, all in an honest manner. That way it becomes necessary for me to improve in the way I do my work daily, weekly, yearly and I consider it my duty to do so. This might lead to recognition and positive appraisal of my work and may lead to my rising to higher positions. If this is obstructed for any reason, then one is satisfied that at any time he/she is the best he/she can be in the profession. From this position of prestige it becomes possible to attract all those who look up to me to influence them to also work for God¹⁴. But all this has been done in a natural way, it is just that all along I have held a silent dialogue with God. So, yes, I went to work to earn a wage. I still earn that wage I set out to earn, and I earn more than the wage my employer can afford-I earn God's friendship and teach others to do so.

5. I HAVE TO BE AT THIS MEETING... AND THAT FUNERAL... AND THE OTHER FUNCTION

As one gets older and rises in society, there rises a demand for the person's assistance and attention in many community development efforts. In addition to this it is traditional in Africa, especially in Nigeria, to rally round our friends and relations in times of joyous celebrations and in their grief. This is a very strong source of social support on which most Nigerians count as they get on with life. Thus there are always invitations to community events, to funerals, weddings, to birthdays etc. Often many of these functions conflict and it becomes difficult to cope with these invitations.

Blessed Josemaría has taught us to try to be in places where we can influence people and thereby do apostolate. So once again we try to Christianize these civic obligations. Blessed Josemaría insists that as one strives to keep constant dialogue with God, one should "passionately love the world". He enjoins all Christians to freely cooperate with their fellow citizens in whatever affects or concerns them or whatever they may be called upon to do. The difference is that as they do so they put Christ on top of all such activities. Josemaría reminds us that Christ has said that when He is lifted up He will draw all men to Himself. So in every situation, if

¹⁴ See *Furrow*, 781.

you raise Christ up by putting Him on top of human activities, then He automatically draws all men to Himself and you have done apostolate!

“You must understand now more clearly that God is calling you to serve him in and from the ordinary material and secular activities of human life. Our age needs to give back to matter and to the most trivial occurrences their noble and original meaning. It needs to restore them to the service of the of the Kingdom of God, to spiritualize them, turning them into a means and occasion for a continuous meeting with Jesus Christ”¹⁵.

So when there is a seminar on women empowerment, for example, I attend. I want to learn what is going on around the world. But when I hear about contraception and abortion, I find the opportunity to oppose whatever the Church has opposed. I speak out against efforts to approve the so called *alternate families* where gays or lesbians live as families since this destroys the family of man and wife which Jesus Christ promoted. I seek the support of all those present who share my views. I try to organize seminars to teach people to participate in these seminars but to equip themselves with Catholic doctrine as they do so.

Then I must attend funerals. In Nigeria funerals are big ceremonies. Preparations for the burial of the dead may include building a new house for the corpse to lie in state in grand style, even if the deceased had no such comfort in his lifetime. Human consideration makes the deceased family prepare to please and impress the public. Different groups of relations purchase apparels in uniform. The more priests that are invited to the funeral the more prestigious the event. The bed on which the corpse is to be laid out is expensively decorated. Lavish entertainment by way of food and drink are arranged and as soon as the deceased is laid down in the grave an unprecedented merriment follows. By the end of the funeral ceremony the bereaved are reduced to penury, having sometimes even borrowed money for the event. So to put Christ on top of funeral ceremonies I organize prayers for the soul of the deceased stressing to those who join me for such prayers that that is often neglected but is paramount need of the deceased. I try as much as possible to live temperance at the ceremonies without undue attention to myself. And should I be bereaved myself, then a wonderful opportunity to play down the expensive fan fare so that an alternative and Christian style of funerals may be perceived. I might begin by dispensing people from making new uniform apparels for the funeral ceremony, because in the first place this is not necessary. In the second place, many people borrow money to buy it just to please the bereaved, another problem of human consideration. I persuade my family to reduce the degree of entertainment and the number of days such

¹⁵ *Conversations*, 114.

celebration continues. Temperance is thus practiced and attention is turned more to the need to pray for the dead.

But then it is not all funerals. There are happy occasions. There are wedding, christening and title-taking ceremonies that call for big feasts. I attend of course. I love parties! Then I remember that there too God is meeting each and every one of the participants. So I begin with offering the function to God. I wear dress commensurate with my status, but without dressing to compete with other people, or to show off. And I dress with modesty yet in keeping with modern fashion and I don't offend God by my appearance, because I have to be another Christ even there at these parties. I eat in moderation even when there is surplus food. I use the opportunity to make many friends and hope to make it my business to keep in touch with them later. This is with the intention of communicate interior life to them by introducing them to means of Christian formation from which I have personally benefited and which I want to share. And I look out for opportunities to talk to my friends about God, about presence of God, about confession and communion and to invite them to retreats and recollection as well as other cultural activities that are conducive to Christian living. I pay attention to my friends' conversations. One friend may talk about a domestic problem in the family just in response to a casual "How are you?". Another may mention that her children are at the same school with your children and calls your attention to some problems in the school. Another may mention the latest divorce or scandal in town. Each friend has a need and wants to talk about it. Wouldn't it be marvelous if I had enough presence of God myself to recognize these opportunities for apostolate? Perhaps the other young woman with a young family was just looking for support in a decision she has to make to quit a job in order to take care of her three young children! And the other may be toying with the idea of separation from her husband. I perhaps encourage the woman to put her family interests before her own selfish and economic considerations. It is in vogue to take a job in Nigeria even when the financial remuneration is small and does not warrant abandoning young children. Priorities are often mixed up and many people are not clear on what should be their priorities. In each of these cases I find that only genuine interest and friendship will enable me to help such people and that charity demands that I offer such friendship so as to spread the kingdom of God. So while I am eating and drinking with my friends, I am also busy drawing them to God by what I do or say or refrain from doing or saying — all this without doing anything unusual. I am just like anybody else enjoying myself with my friends.

But then, of course, "Time is a Treasure". So if the party becomes unduly long, I remember that there is a time for everything. The family duties left behind, professional duties of the next day to be prepared, my times for person-

al prayers according to my own plan of life. So I cannot indulge my whims. I stay only for as long as is decent and as long as my other appointments allow. Blessed Josemaría teaches that this attention to duties and details may seem trifling, “but they are the oil, the fuel we need to keep our flame alive and our light shining”¹⁶.

For reasons like the above I realize that I do not have to accept all the invitations I receive. I may, out of pride and feelings that I am indispensable, take on so many activities that I become like Martha in the Bible, with no time for contemplative life and teach others to do so. I therefore practice temperance by declining some invitations when they are not necessary, and this might require fortitude as some of our friends may not take no for an answer while we know in justice that we have duties to perform that are priorities over these social functions and prudence dictates that we give good excuses but remain firm in declining so as to reduce our activism. Sometimes we need to go aside from the crowd so as to grow in interior life — “withdraw into yourself. Seek God within you and listen to him”¹⁷.

6. OH - I AM TIRED! ‘GOT TO REST!

The business of family, work and civic responsibilities often get one exhausted. So one has the need to switch off from hectic life — to rest and recuperate. People go on leave, take vacations and travel to see places just to get away from their usual or hectic routine. This is also normal and ordinary. This too has drawn Josemaría’s attention. He also calls on us to sanctify our rest! Hear him: “I have always seen rest as a time set aside from daily tasks, never as days of idleness. Rest means recuperation: to gain strength, form ideals and make plans. In other words it means a change of occupation, so that you can come back later with a new impetus to your daily job”¹⁸.

Blessed Josemaría drew examples from the Gospel. When Our Lord sent out His disciples to preach, upon their return, He gathered them together and invited them to a desert place by themselves to rest. But this time was not spent sleeping or lying about in idleness. Our Lord must have spent time teaching the disciples many things that they were yet to learn¹⁹. Also when Jesus Christ Himself got tired, as He was truly man, He went to rest at Jacob’s well while His disciples went to find food. There He met the Samaritan woman. The Gospel of St.

¹⁶ *Friends of God*, 41.

¹⁷ *The Way*, 319.

¹⁸ *Furrow*, 514.

¹⁹ See *ibidem*, 470.

John, chapter 4, verses 5 to 26 tells us in great detail how he spent that time of rest teaching and converting the Samaritan woman. This is to teach us that even in our time of rest, we must continue that quiet dialogue with God. We must continue to live presence of God and look out for opportunities to save souls. Rest he says does not mean “doing nothing”. It means a change of activity, from one that is strenuous to one that is perhaps less strenuous or is at least of a different nature. There, too, at that leisure activity, we also must discover something divine, because even in that, God is waiting to meet us.

So how is one to sanctify one’s rest? As we have mentioned earlier, those who work outside the home come back at the end of the day tired. Love of God urges them not to switch off and fall on their bed. The children need them, several things in the home need attention. So we plan the evening rest with the children. For example, parents can plan to relax with a television program with their children. This gives them the opportunity to talk to their children about what to watch on television and what not to watch and why. This is a change of activity and has been utilized for the proper upbringing of children. Going to bed upon return from work would have given the parents some temporary comfort but could have resulted in some harm to the otherwise unsupervised children.

Then there are the bigger holidays and vacations. And I remember all the teachings of Blessed Josemaría. And these are really no different from what the Catholic Church teaches. It is just that it is reemphasized and practical examples are given. Examples include planning to go on vacations with the entire family and to choose places of interest that would suit all and that would not lead to offending God. Notorious hotels or holiday resorts are avoided. The opportunity is created for some activities that would teach some virtues to the children. Books are selected for them beforehand and they are encouraged to read them. They may learn some vocational skills or develop hobbies according to their age. They do things with their parents who now have all the time in the world to live family life to the full. Prayers are said as usual, because we don’t take a holiday from God. We make sure that in all we do at leisure and holidays, we still put Christ on top of these activities.

Often we find that working parents in Nigeria never find time to rest. Even when they obtain their well earned annual leave, the tendency is to go to the village for other community development efforts or to work on their farms. The children are then left to their whims and caprices. Most of them watch video taped films most of the time, visit friends or sleep. Then I see the need to run holiday camps for such children. I arrange for those with the right kind of professional, doctrinal and religious formation to assist with the program. Supervision is provided and the children are kept busy, educated and entertained at the same time. Once in a while parents are invited to some of the ceremonies and the

opportunity is used to talk to parents on the need for meaningful holiday activities for and with their children. Samples of censored books, films and other entertainment packages are introduced to the parents and they are grateful you have done the job for them. Then I encourage them to run a lending library for books and video tapes and link them up with organizations who provide information on materials that are safe for Christian families. So we all enjoy ourselves during the holidays and we still get families to do so doing something beneficial to the family and things that do not offend God. So whether for short periods of rest or for long vacations, we try still to continue our dialogue with God as a loving father and we try not to offend Him. Holiday therefore becomes prayer.

7. I AM MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER

I heard an important TV star say this over the CNN(Cable Network News) based in the United States of America. She was being interviewed by one of the important journalists in the organization. "I am my father's daughter", she proudly announced. I don't know who her father is of course. But I know from the way she makes this announcement that her father must be an important man, that she was proud of him and that she would like to be associated with him. This brings home clearly to me what Blessed Josemaría teaches about divine filiation which has been the basis of much of his teaching.

"My life has led me to realize in a special way that I am a son of God and I have experienced the joy of getting into the heart of my Father to rectify, to purify myself, to serve him, to understand others and find excuses for them on the strength of His love and my own lowliness"²⁰.

The realization that I am a child of God should inform every other thing that I do or say. My life in the family, at my place of work, at leisure or civic occasions is the life of a daughter of God. This privilege that allows us to cry out as St Paul would say "*Abba!*, Father!" enables us, as Josemaría would say to

Rectify — ensure that we are behaving in accord with divine daughtership; and all is for God's glory.

Purify — try hard to be like Him, our Father, God, since He is the vine of whose branch we are.

Serve Him — by doing his will and doing all things well.

Understand Others — by practicing charity.

On the strength of His Love — relying on God's strength and grace in anything we achieve.

²⁰ *Friends of God*, 143.

My own lowliness — realizing that we have not merited this filiation and that we are nothing except an instrument it has so pleased God to use.

Summarizing all this would mean that as a daughter of God I realize that what I am is purely out of God's benevolence, and with that and for that I really owe Him a lot, especially by proving to be a worthy daughter in the way I imitate Him and by loving and serving others for His sake.

I therefore see it as a challenge to behave like Christ, my brother, in all the things I do. That is that I strive always to do the will of God, be eager to do it, be proud to do it, showing others it should be done and can be done and eager to make everybody do it, so as to please my Father and so He will have many followers. Josemaría teaches us that the more childlike we are before God, the better God likes it and the more our achievement. This is because children are daring and can ask for the moon; are not ashamed to make mistakes, and are so very trusting.

So for anybody to play son or daughter of God, he or she has to seek Him, find Him, and love Him. We find that these requirements are not easy since we are mere earthenware vessels. The spirit may be willing, but often the flesh is weak. To play a good mother all the time, keep a bright and cheerful home all the time, to do my work well all the time, to attend so many civic responsibilities and attend to leisure hours with rectitude of intention, sounds like a tall order and certainly is not easy to achieve. Josemaría agrees and reminds us that Christianity was never presented as an easy way of life.

"Sanctity" he says, "is more attainable than learning, but it is easier to be a scholar than to be a saint"²¹.

One can study in three years for example and obtain a Ph.D., but to live a holy life on a day to day basis in ordinary things is not easy. But he encourages us to try our best, beginning and beginning again on a daily basis, and never giving up until the end. He tells us the secret — to use the means of formation. These include prayers, the sacraments, (especially of Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist), spiritual direction, mortification, recollections, constant recourse to Our Lady and the Guardian Angels, etc. He reminds us that:

"The life of man upon earth is warfare — So said Job many centuries ago —. There are still some easy going individuals unaware of this fact"²².

"The Supernatural way of conducting yourself is real military strategy. You carry on the war — the daily battles of your interior life in positions far from the main walls of your fortress. And the enemy comes to meet you there: in your small mortification, in your daily prayer, in your orderly work, in your plan of

²¹ *The Way*, 282.

²² *Ibidem*, 306.

life. And only with difficulty does he get close to the otherwise easily scaled battlements of your citadel. And if he does he arrives exhausted”²³.

So we have the means to fight. As baptized Christians we are already children of God. Our sole destiny is to return to Him. We have our brother, Jesus Christ to show us the way and He has done so. He prayed to His father, He fasted, He taught the way and the truth and did everything well. He taught others to do the same and said the fire which He lit must be made to burn quickly. Souls must be won and won quickly. We need priestly souls who hunger to win other souls. This hunger should be in every daughter and son of God. But still for most of us it is achieved by doing ordinary things.

Bearing these things in mind then I strike out on my daily journey. I have a plan of life, an ordered way of living that enables me to pray, (mentally or orally) and work (at home or away from home) and do other things at appointed times all for God. As a mother, I try then to run my home as Our Lady would, maintaining a constant presence of God and conversing with Him. I take the daily joys and sorrows and “drown evil in abundance of good” when necessary. I do my work in the office without neglecting my home. Often some conflicts arise. There are days that it is all tears. There are days of triumph. When my children behave themselves, pass their exams, and join in the family prayers, I am happy. When my teenage son makes me cry in my pillow, or my husband seems totally inconsiderate, I realize I need more supernatural means. Often confession and spiritual direction helps. And when I do my meditations and fulfill the other norms in my plan of life especially at the appointed times, I receive a lot of consolation and make resolutions to try harder and realize that this is my path to sanctity. Then the office job brings its temptations. The need for sincerity and accountability and for presence of God in a pagan atmosphere which is regarded as the norm. And it is easier to join them, in fact more materially comfortable. Then I do a norm, perhaps my spiritual reading of a few minutes each day. And I find St. Theresa telling me that “All that passes away and is not pleasing to God, is nothing, and less than nothing!”²⁴. Then I remember to fight evil and comfort and forgo certain privileges. Later I am happy that I did so, and then I am proud that I have behaved like a daughter of God. At times when it is harder, I find weekly confessions a source of strength. And of course when I make out time for long retreats when I “go aside from the crowd”, I find more time for reflection, for self examination, for more fruitful readings — and for more resolutions. Then I get back to the crowd with more energy and vigour, more eager to prove a worthy daughter and prove it is worth while, and therefore more keen on doing

²³ *Ibidem*, 307.

²⁴ St Theresa of Avila, *Life*, 20, 26.

apostolate. And I have the interesting feeling that I cannot quite explain, a feeling that God, my Father is happy. I could see Him smile down at me at times like this and that cheers me up and makes me smile. And my friends wonder what is making me so cheerful! When I forgo these norms, daily or weekly or yearly, I find my charity diminishing and lukewarmness creeps in and with it depression and some kind of restlessness. But once I am able to beat it back to spiritual direction — bang! — I get the support I need and I remember I have not been faithful and that's the major source of my uneasiness. Then I see the need to remain faithful. I rectify my intentions and resolve to begin again and this is always a happy stage, beginning again with hope and gratitude that indeed I am always welcome to begin again. And this assurance makes me want to help people solve their problems. I tell them my own secret. I tell them my own ups and downs and how I have been helped to go through both as a child of God. They see we all have similar problems and circumstances. So I make a few recommendations and they follow. Then perhaps I get carried away and forget them. And they slip through my hands and slip back to their old ways of life. When I see them again I realize that it was my fault. I neglected them. I should have followed up our first conversations and lead them on a little longer until this new style of life catches on. I then realize I must make time for them otherwise I wasn't bringing them nearer my Father after all and that was my intention wasn't it! I go back to spiritual direction and make further plans to help people, but to take on a few at a time, and develop genuine friendship with them and not to try the fantastic feat of pulling an entire crowd. So I begin again!

Then I find in all this that I have to fight. Beginning with myself. I do small mortifications to fight my body and make it obey me like St. Paul says. Like eating on the dining table instead of in front of the television, small but sometimes difficult, but good for the children's discipline as well. Like kneeling down for family prayers instead of sitting. Like eating food that I don't like and forgoing the ones I like and without anybody knowing the difference. Like smiling at my husband on the days I would really wish to hang him. Like carefully marking the examination script with a very bad handwriting. Like going for my means of formation on foot and on time when my car breaks down. All this I learned from Josemaría, because he says you must grow in interior life and then automatically apostolate will follow as your life will touch others. Every baptized christian has been chosen and called to sanctity. This call:

“Puts you under obligation to cultivate interior life and to struggle daily to practice the Christian virtues; and not in any way whatsoever, nor in away which

is above average or even excellent. No, we must strive to the point of heroism, in the strictest and most exacting sense of the word”²⁵.

So this is the story of ordinary life. On the surface we are doing nothing spectacular. But as baptized Christians called by God to live a holy life in order to see Him, we believe that we must, “live as the others around you live, with naturalness, but supernaturalising every moment of your day”²⁶.

It is this attitude of supernaturalising ordinary things and events in life that has provided the richness that I have attempted to describe. Looking at the experience and intentions under the surface, it is a wealth that is not ordinary.

²⁵ *Friends of God*, 3.

²⁶ *The Forge*, 508.