

Serving my Country in the Public Service Environment

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Charles Osezua is a gas engineer with years of service with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation and as a high-level government advisor. He also accepted the challenge of directing a non-profit NGO, the Educational Cooperation Society, which promotes programmes for urban youths and for financially disadvantaged girls, health education for rural women and supplementary management programmes, including business ethics for corporate executives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Let me say at the onset that my testimony on the impact of the teachings of Blessed Josemaría is not an intellectual work, but a personal experience at my work in the Government-owned Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), and the Presidency, where I spent most of my professional life, in public service. There I witnessed the effect of some of the teachings of Blessed Josemaría in the day-to-day events and circumstances in these offices.

For the benefit of those who may not be familiar with Nigeria, let me quickly give a brief insight into the cultural setting in the public service, during my days.

2. NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE ENVIRONMENT

The new Democratic Government of Nigeria is now trying to address the issue of corruption and has embarked on a crusade against it. Prior to this renaissance, one could rightly have described the Nigerian public service system, as a system designed to corrupt. The reason for this is that fifteen years of military rule has destroyed the value system and left most of the social service institutions in a state of decadence.

Wages were generally low, with monthly salaries ranging from N2,500/month (about US \$250 in 1992) to N20,000/month (about US \$2,000) for the junior staff and Directors General respectively. Under the military rule, the public services criteria broke down and the decision process was governed by ‘what the boss thinks’. Professionalism lost its pride of place and to ensure survival and career growth, professionals tended to justify the boss’ position even if it was wrong. With a general sense of uncertainty in career growth in the public service system, low wages and low morale, workers tended to create their own security even if it means using unethical methods. Thus workers ‘moon lighting’ or selling of wares during and outside office hours to earn some extra income to meet their family’s needs was rampant. Others traded on official secrets or set up companies or parallel organizations to seek contracts, within their organizations. Contract fixing and insiders trading was common, and even tolerated. Officers, who could not trade, were expected to pay their bills somehow, collecting commissions or kickbacks.

Most contractors took the payments of bribe or kickbacks as a way of doing business in Nigeria. Thus, it was not uncommon to hear of commission or kickbacks of 10%. Those who could not manage the chain of corruption directly for one reason or the other engaged agents whose primary responsibility was to ‘settle’ obligations to sponsors.

I worked for the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), where I started my career in 1982 as a Gas Engineer. By 1987, I was appointed to a task force, for the Commercialisation, Reorganization & Capitalization of the NNPC. The task force was made up of young professionals drawn from the different divisions of the corporation. Its main objective was to define a way forward for the NNPC under the midwifrage of an internationally reputable consultant. To do this well, we had to acquire new skills in the use of computer, unit review, strategic planning etc. We spent long and sometimes tiring hours, but encouraged by the teachings of the Blessed Josemaría, which teaches us to take advantage of every new opportunity to improve our skills through study, I was able to cope with the new challenges, working at home, late at night to produce my reports. This soon paid off. At the end of the initial training period, I was appointed the leader of the implementation team and after one year was appointed to assist the Group Managing Director as Technical Assistant (Chief of Staff) to continue with the efforts at implementing some of the programmes, aimed at changing the corporate culture and lead the organization towards commercialization. Unfortunately, this process was short-lived as the Group Managing Director, Chief Aret Adams was suspended, nearly two years into the programme. His ‘crime’ was his insistence on merit as the basis for appointment to certain senior level positions. He was eventually retired ‘in public interest’.

3. HIS TEACHINGS IN DAILY ACTIVITIES

The suspension of Chief Adams resulted in the appointment of an Acting Group Managing Director and soon I was advised that I should desist from visiting my former boss. The reason — my continued interaction may lead to a breach of security. This directive was the first challenge to my freedom and commitment to what I thought was right. Chief Adams was my boss, now he is my friend, and we shared in the common principle of justice for which he was being punished. Therefore, it was morally impossible for me to carry out the directive. This would amount to an endorsement of injustice and may also scandalise many of my professional colleagues, who believe as much as I did in the cause for which Chief Adams was suspended. My new boss knew very well that there was no criminal case against Chief Adams, but a simple question of ‘insubordination’. Encouraged by the teachings of Blessed Josemaría — which encourages people to work together, for the common good — I liaised with some of the other Directors and obtained their support to persuade my boss that there was no reason why I could not visit Chief Adams. This apparent victory for justice and professional principles created an uneasy calm in the office.

Despite the unfriendly atmosphere, we provided him with all the necessary support and worked as best as we could. Working conscientiously, with a sense of responsibility, as taught by Josemaría Escrivá, surprised my colleagues and bosses. I recall a conversation with the Group Executive Director - Services, who wondered aloud how I could work cheerfully, when my boss was on suspension. In reply, I explained that I needed to account for my time as any good consultant would. Furthermore, I explained to him that my work is my offering to God, so I had to put in my best to do it well. I assured him that Mr. Adams is my friend whom I still visit almost everyday despite the pressures. He was very impressed and informed me how people have wondered at my loyalty or co-operation with my new boss.

My friendship with Chief Adams afforded me a greater opportunity for apostolate with him. Though not a Christian at the time, Chief Adams decided to attend one of the annual retreats, organised by faithful of the Opus Dei in Nigeria. This was an affirmation of the teaching “Through your friendship and doctrine [...] you will move many non-Catholics”¹. Standing for my freedom and staying on the side of right strengthened a number of my colleagues and friends who joined in the effort to explain or defend the principles for which Chief Adams was suspended.

¹ *Furrow*, 753.

After nine months, a substantive GMD was appointed in January 1990. A few months later, I ran into the former Hon. Min. of Petroleum Resources, who was responsible for Chief Adams' suspension. By that time, he had left the Ministry of Petroleum Resources and was deployed to another Ministry as part of the fallout of the crisis. We greeted very warmly. After a few reflections on NNPC, he said to me "I demand loyalty from my staff and if your loyalty to Chief Adams during the crisis was any less, your career in NNPC would have ended". This statement surprised me, particularly coming from the opposition, but complements the founder of Opus Dei who taught, "Never allow weeds to grow on the path of friendship. Be loyal"².

The new Group Managing Director (GMD) re-organised the office of the GMD and appointed two additional Technical Assistants to work with me. My responsibility was narrower but better focused on my area of core competence, projects and technical services in the office of the GMD. In this position, I remained the Chief of Staff, but emphasis was on project co-ordination. I maintained interaction with lots of people, professional colleagues, politicians, and businessmen and women who came to NNPC in search of contracts or favours. My new boss and I had an interesting relationship. It was generally formal and professional. We resume early, usually between 7:30-8:00 a.m. and stay in the office till about 8:00 p.m. To keep to the practices of Christian life as taught by Blessed Josemaría was always a struggle. To attend the 6 p.m. Mass meant I had to be absent from my office in the evening for about 45 minutes. This did not pass unnoticed by my boss, who commented one evening during a meeting with some directors in his office that I prayed 'like a Muslim'. I used this opportunity to start an apostolic conversation with him and some of the directors on how we must include God in our day in a natural way, and to point out that having a close relationship with our Father God does not imply any sort of fundamentalism. In the process, I gave out several books, including *Friends of God*, by Blessed Josemaría.

My boss confirmed later, like a few others, that my follow-up discussions helped him to understand his faith better. The teachings of Blessed Josemaría *to flee from the occasions of sin*³ also enabled one to face the challenges of some contractors, who believed that they could buy their ways using unethical means. Acting in obedience to this teaching, in the 'settlement culture' that pervaded my work environment had the chilling effect on a number of them who had accepted it as a way of doing business. For others, they just applied more pressure. But as the founder of Opus Dei puts it, for people who know the truth, sacrifice and

² *Furrow*, 747.

³ Cfr. *Friends of God*, 185.

perseverance was the only answer, and to compromise the truth was to crucify Christ again.

A case in point was as a Project Co-ordinator for the NNPC Priority Projects, I had to finalize the terms and conditions for a contract with the winning contractor. At the end of the negotiation, one of the Directors of the company came to me and said, "Charles, you are a very tough man. We have been in this business a long time and we want to continue to work for NNPC. He continued and said, 'I want to assure you we shall come back to say thank you'. I was very surprised and cautioned him not to bother. At that point, I assumed it was all over, but about two months later, an old acquaintance of mine walked into my office and after a few pleasantries, he explained his relationship with the contractor and said "Well, Charles, we know you said no, but we have made a certain provision for you and I have been asked to handle it. He assured me that it was just in appreciation of my professionalism in handling things. I thanked him and explained to him why it was professionally wrong for me to accept any gift from the contractor, since amongst others, it could compromise my ability to make unbiased judgements. We discussed this for a while till I had to order him to leave my office, and he did. A few months later, he showed up again, and said "I could not convince my folks so I have collected the money and I cannot take it back, so you must tell me what to do with it". The guy looked desperate. He needed his fee for performing his job of delivering the said commission. I told him I needed more time to think about it. Two weeks later, he showed up again; I had time to reflect on the moral implications of what he had proposed to me, so I told him that if he wanted to, he could donate the money for use in charitable activities. This singular act had a more profound impact on the agent whom I later found out used to be a Catholic, married previously outside the church, with children. He is married now and back to the Church.

Defending our professional position is also an element in the teachings of the Blessed Josemaría. With professional guidelines/criteria for doing things, one found himself often in conflict with the establishment; going against the grain. While it was tough, it gave joy to friends and colleagues who were finding out the magic of sacrifice and love of professional work well done. Insisting on pre-agreed procedures and professional criteria for work was not always easy. But occasionally it ended up with dramatic results.

For example, as a member of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of the Board of one of the largest projects ever implemented in Nigeria. I had to disagree with my professional colleagues on the proposal for the final investment decision, because it did not conform with the pre-agreed procedures nor achieve fully the national objective. The request was to endorse for Board's approval the

award of contract for the construction of the Plant to the lowest bidder, based on an apparently inferior technology.

Three shareholders representatives out of four, and my superior colleagues from the NNPC had endorsed the recommendations, but a colleague and I found it unacceptable, because the technology though proven had not been tested. Additionally, it could not meet the national policy objective for associated gas utilization. Consequently, we decided to write a minority report. We were under tremendous pressure from agents of the contractors not to submit our minority report. They made offers of money and there were even threats to our professional career, but we were convinced so we presented the minority report to the Chairman of the NNPC Board, who at that time was my boss. He held meetings with the Group Managing Director, the Honourable Minister for Petroleum and eventually the President. They upheld the minority report, and they took far-reaching decisions; five directors were dismissed from the Board of the company in question and the project was suspended. When the contract was eventually awarded eighteen months later, the organization saved about \$600 million and had a better technology.

Shortly after this episode, a good friend of mine, a Director then at the Educational Co-operation Society (ECS), who was familiar with my challenges at the NNPC intimated me of the challenges they were having at ECS and wondered if I would be interested in managing the organization. The ECS is a Not-for-Profit, Non-Governmental Organization, which for more than 25 years has been promoting educational projects in Nigeria in accordance with Christian principles. At the time of our discussion in 1993, the ECS had promoted over fourteen educational institutions in six states, providing supplementary education for the various strata of the society. These included programmes for urban youths, financially disadvantaged girls who could not obtain formal education, but are interested in careers that will make them more useful to themselves and the society, health education for rural women and supplementary management programmes including business ethics for corporate executives.

Far from the petroleum industry, as the proposal was, I saw a great opportunity for service, without the constraint of corruption in the public sector. For days, I prayed for light. I called on my friend again to inquire about the salary and conditions of service. The ECS offered to pay my current salary and other entitlements. This was quite re-assuring, but I knew it fell short of my gross annual income, as my current job offered me opportunities for frequent overseas trips, which really was the source of the bulk of my family savings. As a Manager with the NNPC, I was paid \$400/day, while on an overseas assignment. With a schedule at the time that calls for quarterly project review meetings and/or operating committee meetings, it was not unusual for me to save more than 50 times my

annual salaries from overseas trips a year. Thus, for weeks, I reflected on my choice. The good life and daily temptations that comes with my continued stay at NNPC or a new career of service with the ECS. For the ECS job, I felt myself highly unqualified for the assignment. I knew very little about the administration of educational projects, and I hated to beg. As I considered the options, I tried to re-assure myself that I was not in any risk at the NNPC. But my mind remained agitated.

I continued praying for light. I knew my chance of offending God was high in NNPC, despite my personal confidence. I reflected on the teachings of Blessed Josemaría in *The Way*, “Don’t show the cowardice of being ‘brave’; take to your heels”⁴. I also reflected on his teaching for us to forget ourselves.

After weeks of prayers and reflections on my options, I decided to discuss with my wife. I explained the options and the implications, my concerns and fears. After a lengthy discussion, she queried my understanding of the Lord’s prayers. In her words, “when you say, your will be done on earth, who is to do it, if not you?” I think its God’s answer to your prayers, that you should be a worthy instrument of service and apostolate. Finally she reminded me of the teachings of the founder of the Opus Dei: “You realise you are weak. And so indeed you are. In spite of that — rather, just because of that — God has chosen you. He always uses inadequate instruments, so that the ‘work’ will be seen to be his. Of you, he only asks docility”⁵. If God lays the burden, he assured that he will also give the strength. By August 1993, I decided to work for the Educational Co-operation Society. I resumed formally as the Managing Director of ECS on the 14th of February, 1994.

My resignation from NNPC shocked some of my friends and colleagues. But their curiosities and inquiries offered a unique opportunity to explain the essences of life and the teachings of the founder of Opus Dei. A number of them are much closer to the Church; now, they have decided to take their Christian lives more seriously and to receive the sacraments more frequently; some are involved in various works of corporate apostolate, serving as patrons or helping in various forms to raise funds for some of the ECS projects.

On a personal level, ECS offered me a wonderful opportunity to serve and learn more about myself, my limitations and inadequacies. A great organization peopled by individuals of diverse social, economic and religious background, and united by the common goal to serve for the good of humanity and society. I met

⁴ *The Way*, 132.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 475.

people of like minds united by the spirit of service, forgetting themselves completely for the good of others and for the glory of God.

Between 1994 and 1998, working with three full time staff and lots of volunteers, ECS raised funds for the implementation of a number of projects in response to varied social needs. These included the Hill Point University Study Centre, Enugu, and the Bodija House, Ibadan, both aimed at providing co-curricular and supplementary education to university students and other intercity students at Enugu and Ibadan respectively, in response to the near collapse in the tertiary school system. Additionally funds were raised for the Irawo rural community medical centre, Iroto, and the start up of the Niger Welfare Foundation Hospital, Enugu.

The ECS also re-organized itself for greater effectiveness by granting nearly full autonomy to the Women's Board and spinning off the Lagos Business School to a new NGO. With this re-organization, I was sufficiently freed to work part time. This allowed me to set up a small engineering and multidisciplinary oil and gas service company to supplement my income from ECS.

My second adventure into the public service sector came in October 1998, when I was invited to work at the Presidency as the Special Assistant to the Head of State, in the office of the Adviser on Petroleum Resources. This was not a vindication, as I was reuniting with my old boss (Chief Adams) who had been re-appointed as Special Adviser to the Head of State. In this new assignment, I learnt two new lessons. Firstly, that being invited does not mean being welcome. Secondly, that the system was much weaker; corruption was more rampant and people were more vicious in their opposition to professional views.

On the first lesson, we soon found out that Chief Adams' reputation as a professional generated a lot of apprehension in the system. The government was in transition, so we had a very short time. Consequently, at the onset, we resolved that emphasis should be placed on addressing policy issues that would free the nation from the embarrassing fuel shortage and position the country to take advantage of the anticipated benefits accruing from the introduction of democratic government the following year. This objective was seen as a threat by a number of people in government. As experience soon taught us, the introduction of simple guidelines and criteria for doing routine office business generated disaffection amongst staff, since it opens the system up for monitoring and audit.

On a larger scale, our efforts were frustrated, and at a point, the office of the Special Adviser on Petroleum Resources was forcibly shut by armed police guards. Coming at the heat of efforts to deregulate petroleum products importation, this was a major challenge.

But as Blessed Josemaría would put it, we have to overcome any obstacle with the help of grace. Thus, we moved into my private office in Lagos to com-

plete the study. Eventually, the policy instrument was approved and Nigerians enjoyed a brief reprieve from the stranglehold of fuel scarcity. With perseverance, working with a number of people, we struggled to professionalize some of the activities of the petroleum sector and the results soon convinced more people that serving the interest of the nation, the common good, will benefit all more including themselves.

By February 1999, Nigeria elected its first civilian president in fifteen years. On the 29th of May, 1999 he was sworn in to office.

4. CONCLUSION

The reflections above have revealed some of the struggle to put into effect some of the teachings of Blessed Josemaría. Making Christ known in the ordinary professional circumstance of every day. There is no doubt that his teachings manifested in both the dramatic action as well as through the insignificant happenings of each day. The need for criteria for work or for decisions, need for study and ideals, and the need to flee from occasions of sin, are elements in his teachings, which became very handy in my everyday experience in the public service sector in Nigeria.