

Reflections on Faith and Politics in the Teaching of Josemaría Escrivá. An Introduction to the Workshop on Participation in Public Life

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I would like to introduce this panel by reflecting briefly on the contexts within which we can study the implications of the teaching of Blessed Josemaría for those who participate in public life.

One of the most important tasks of Blessed Josemaría was the protection of the divine inspiration which he had received and the corresponding mission to found Opus Dei. "For many years now, ever since the foundation of Opus Dei, I have meditated and asked others to meditate on those words of Christ which we find in St John: 'And when I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw all things unto Myself'¹. By His death on the Cross, Christ has drawn all creation to Himself. Now it is the task of Christians, in His name, to reconcile all things to God, placing Christ, by means of their work in the middle of the world, at the summit of all human activities"². This was especially true of those aspects of the spirit of Opus Dei that were particularly likely to be misunderstood due to historical cir-

¹ *John* 12:32.

² *Conversations*, 59.

cumstances. For example, he expended great effort in making clear the secular character of his message, which was addressed to ordinary Christians who were not called to have any religious consecration other than the one already received in Baptism. These were the people to put Christ at the summit of all activities, both public and private.

Another such area was the subject of participation in public life. For a variety of reasons, at different times in the life of Blessed Josemaría there was a tendency of some people to view Opus Dei as having some political goals or aims. First, the political conflict in Spain during the 1920s and 1930s — in many ways a working out of issues that had plagued Europe since the French Revolution, with the added injection of 20th century ideologies — led many Catholics in Spain to align closely their political and religious views. One of the reasons why Blessed Josemaría stood out was because of his practice of never talking about politics. This was due to the fact that he understood that there is never merely one *Catholic* response to social, political, economic, cultural and other temporal issues. Second, in the 1950s and 1960s, the participation of certain of the faithful of Opus Dei in Spanish governments led some observers to conclude that Opus Dei must have a particular political agenda. The difficulty, in a one-party state, of observing diverse political views among the faithful of Opus Dei made this misunderstanding easier, and the tendency of the Western media to politicize religion (especially in the wake of the reported battle between ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’ at the Second Vatican Council) exacerbated the problem.

For this reason, I think, the most consistent theme of Blessed Josemaría regarding participation in public life was the freedom of Christians (including the faithful of Opus Dei) in political affairs. In fact, by my count, the majority of times that Blessed Josemaría uses the word ‘politics’ or ‘political’ in his published writings, he does so in passages that specifically refer to the freedom that the faithful (and in consequence also the faithful of Opus Dei) enjoy in political opinions.

That freedom, however, was not based on a complete separation of faith and politics, which would amount to a form of laicism, which is incompatible with Christian faith. As Blessed Josemaría put it in *The Way*: “Nonsectarianism. Neutrality. Old myths that always try to seem new. Have you ever stopped to think how absurd it is to leave one’s Catholicism aside on entering a university, a professional association, a cultural society, or Parliament, like a man leaving his hat at the door?”³ As we have pointed out, the foundational light and the way of

³ *The Way*, 353.

carrying out Opus Dei, after all, was the call to find Christ in every honest human activity, and that had to include public life as well.

One important aspect of public life lived in the spirit of the Gospel is the understanding of and commitment to live according to the demands of morality, and especially the social teachings of the Church. During Blessed Josemaría's life, perhaps the most salient aspect of that social teaching dealt with questions of labor, property, and economic life, stemming from documents such as *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII and *Quadragesimo Anno* of Pius XI. And Blessed Josemaría did not confine himself simply to abstract references to questions of social justice, but throughout his life actively inspired those he dealt with to engage in works advancing it, without taking any particular political stances on issues. Those questions continued to be important in the second half of the 20th century, with the added dimension of a much greater emphasis on international life (in encyclicals such as *Populorum Progressio* of Paul VI and the social encyclicals of John Paul II), due to the end of colonialism, the birth of many new and poor nations, and, more recently, the globalization of economic life.

The end of the twentieth century also saw a dramatic expansion of issues relating to the protection of human life, the family, and public morality. The emerging salience of these issues has been a new occasion for misunderstandings regarding Opus Dei (and Catholicism in general) and politics. It is ironic, for example, that often, in Western countries especially, the elementary demands of the natural law, which apply to all human beings, nations, and cultures, have come to be identified specifically with the teachings of the Catholic Church — most prominently, on issues of abortion and euthanasia, divorce, and contraception.

At the same time, confusion in the Church (again, especially in the West) has led many Catholics to feel free to ignore both the natural law and the Church's teachings on these issues, so that the teaching of the Church itself in some places is viewed merely as the views of some particular 'conservative' Catholics. Thus, the Church can wrongly be identified with a certain brand of politics.

It is against this background that our panelists engaged the teaching of Blessed Josemaría and ask themselves: "how, concretely, can we respond to God's invitation to sanctify our professional work?", which in this case is the work of pursuing the common good through political and other social or public activity. Effective attainment of the common good requires the recognition of the legitimate freedom of all persons (including all the faithful) and also the recognition of our call to find the supernatural meaning of all temporal realities, including public life.

In the give and take of political life, it can be a great challenge to maintain openness, civility, and respect, so as to cooperate with all others (including others with whom we may have deep differences on crucial social issues) in securing various aspects of the common good, and, at the same time, to pursue with fortitude the demands of natural law and of the Gospel; that is, to pursue unity and civic friendship, on one hand, and the demands of truth and justice, on the other, striving to harmonize them all.

Our distinguished panelists come from different continents and different sectors of public life and provide us with a range of fascinating perspectives on the effort to bring the teachings of Blessed Josemaría to bear on public life. They speak to issues of personal freedom and responsibility, professional excellence, respect and civility, loyalty, honesty and integrity, fortitude, a spirit of service, cheerfulness, and forgiveness. They give us an opportunity to reflect on how we can pursue these aspects of the lay vocation in our daily lives, and help others to do the same.

João Bosco Mota Amaral, from his vantage point of twenty years as president of the Government of the Autonomous Region of Azores and then Vice-President of the Parliament of Portugal, emphasizes especially Blessed Josemaría's call for mutual understanding and cooperation. Together with the virtues of order and dedication to excellence in work, a spirit of service to one's fellow citizens and the promotion of open and sincere relationships with one's opponents are necessary elements of public service by Christians. Amid the tensions and differences of opinion in politics, we must remember Christ's call to charity.

Mariano Brito, who has held various important positions in the government and higher educational institutions of Uruguay, describes public life as an arena in which we can and must use our God-given gift of freedom. He reminds us of the special imperative to defend human life and the family, which are so often and in so many ways under attack in the modern world. In some cases this will require prohibitory legislation (forbidding, for example, manipulation of or experimentation with nascent human lives) and in other cases it will involve government assistance to support efforts of families to raise and educate their children.

François Komoin, an important Magistrate of the Ivory Coast, gives us insights into the tremendous importance of professional excellence in developing countries. In particular he emphasizes the importance of legal knowledge, in the society at large, among various professionals (not only in law, but in business and health services, for example), and for the underprivileged. Through seminars, journals, and legal clinics, he has been able to cooperate with others to make a genuine contribution to the well-being of his society.

Bernadette Wanyonyi Musundi, one of only three women Permanent Secretaries in the Kenyan Government, presently being in charge of the Office of the Vice President, Ministry of Home Affairs, Heritage and Sports, and a mother of four, describes some of the challenges of being a government administrator, trying to be both just (resisting the demands of the merely self-interested, from both citizens and politicians) and charitable. The detachment from material things that Blessed Josemaría preached helps fortify one against temptations to corruption. The proper exercise of power demands both obedience to conscience and a spirit of service.

Charles Osezua describes the conditions of public service in Nigeria, and especially the challenge of acting in accord with the highest professional standards in the face of corruption and political infighting. He reflects Blessed Josemaría's teaching on apostolate, pointing out that loyalty and professional competence make it possible to develop deep friendships and bring others closer to Christ.

Marie-Thérèse Pallut, a mother of four children, has been Professor of Applied Linguistics at the Sorbonne since 1976. Her participation in public life originally took the form of participation in student union activities, and it was during a period of discouragement about the dominance of ideologies and a temptation to withdraw from public life that she discovered the writings of Blessed Josemaría which taught her that to change society it is first necessary to change oneself. Her commitment to contribute to society has taken many different forms, including activity in her children's schools, volunteering on local committees, and participation in the trade union for teachers at the Sorbonne. In all these places, and so many more, it is possible to find solutions to problems in order to enhance social justice and human dignity.

Rick Santorum, a member of the United States Senate, appreciates Blessed Josemaría's point in *The Way*: "Have you ever stopped to think how absurd it is to leave one's Catholicism aside on entering a university, a professional association, a cultural society, or Parliament, like a man leaving his hat at the door?"⁴ In his legislative efforts to protect the dignity of unborn human beings, he seeks to defend fundamental human rights, in the face of a moral relativism that is often very influential. Like Blessed Josemaría he loves personal freedom but recognizes that freedom is not licence. Guided by faith, and informed by charity, men and women in public life must steadfastly pursue the truth, acting as witnesses to Christ and his teaching.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

The participants on the panel have come from different countries and continents, but they show how the spirit of Blessed Josemaría’s teaching can inform public life in many different kinds of circumstances. That teaching is summed up in an expression of St. Paul: “doing the truth in charity”⁵.

⁵ *Ef* 4:15.