

M. SHARON HEFFERAN

SAINT JOSEMARIA ESCRIVA: AN INSPIRATION FOR WORKS OF MERCY

In Chicago, forty-three percent of high school students drop-out before graduation. As a response to this astounding statistic, there are over 300 after-school academic programs in the city. The Metro Achievement Center and its brother program, the Midtown Center, serve approximately 1000 inner-city children each year. The centers offer academic enrichment, a character education program based on virtues, and individual mentoring to African-American and Hispanic children between the ages of 9 and 17 who come from impoverished urban Chicago neighborhoods. Over the past three years, 95% of our graduating students have not only finished high school, but have continued on to college.

What makes Metro stand out among hundreds of after-school programs in Chicago? I believe that foremost among the defining characteristics is St. Josemaria Escriva's vision regarding the dignity of the human person, his holistic approach to personal and educational development, and his challenge to the laity to take a significant and personal role in carrying out works of mercy. In this presentation I will focus on the features of our program that embody Escriva's vision.

On a personal note, I was delighted that the organizing committee of this conference suggested "Works of Mercy" as the context for our presentation on social programs. Often educational programs such as Metro are considered in relation to social justice, but I think that "works of mercy" more accurately describes our work and captures the teachings of St. Josemaria because it points to the heart and soul of our efforts with inner city children. Mercy goes beyond justice. Mercy encourages us to serve and to meet the needs of others out of love, not just strict duty. Works of mercy include the dimension of divine pity, namely a concern for the poor and underprivileged which is at the same time both human and spiritual.¹

The fifth beatitude reminds us: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall see God." Seeing one race, the race of the children of God, is a major tenet of Escriva's writings. I would add that treating each individual girl as a child of God is the context for all of our educational work at Metro.

¹Gerald Vann, *The Divine Pity: A Study in the Social Implications of the Beatitudes*, Fount Paperbacks, 1985, p. 120.

In this paper I would like to focus on three ideas derived from St. Josemaría's thought that directly influence our work with economically disadvantaged children: Unity of the Human and Divine or "Unity of Life"; Fostering Faith in a Secular Setting; and Primacy of Individuals over Institutions and Structures

Unity of the human and divine

Escriva often spoke of "unity of life" —the harmony between the different facets of a person's life— namely, that the human and divine dimensions of our existence are distinct but intertwined and inseparable. The unity between the human and divine is reinforced in several ways at Metro.

Students are encouraged to work well, not just for themselves, but with an eye to serving others and the common good. Escriva's teaching that work can be a prayer offered to God is often a new discovery for both students and volunteers.

We make a concerted effort to keep the facility clean, orderly, and non-institutional in appearance, thus living out what St. Josemaría referred to as "Christian materialism". We strive to reflect this in the attractive décor and cleanliness of the center itself.

For a social program to be a work of mercy, a Christian spirit is essential to its being. I was reminded of this several years ago by a woman with whom I was speaking about my trips to Lithuania to lead the English Camps organized by Opus Dei. After explaining to her that we offered classes in English, character education, and sports, I mentioned that we also offered religious education. This woman's response was pointed and clear: "I'm sure glad to hear that you include the option of attending religious education classes because Opus Dei isn't here to do social work. There are plenty of wonderful agencies providing social services. If Opus Dei isn't here to help people get closer to God, why bother?" This story brings to mind those words of St. Josemaría which often serve as a reminder to those of us who strive to help the needy: "Until now you had not understood the message that we Christians bring to the rest of men: the hidden marvel of the interior life. What a wonderful new world you are placing in front of them!"²

Part of the effort to "materialize" the faith and facilitate that connection between faith and life is placing a chapel right in the middle of our academic space. The staff, students and volunteers can stop in at any time to pray. We do not have any mandatory religious services as part of the program, yet the chapel serves as a physical reminder of how natural our relationship with God should be in the midst of the simple and ordinary things in life: our learning, socializing, volunteer and service work.

Our holistic approach to education —educating the mind, heart, body, and soul— emphasizes that link between the human and divine in each person and brings about remarkable growth in the girls we serve. It is Escriva's keen

²Furrow, 654.

appreciation for the unity that should exist within the person (and should be therefore reflected in the education of each child) that influences the academic program and curricula in our centers.

Fostering Faith in a Secular Setting

The work done at Metro is directed and carried out by lay persons, and it is not an ecclesial work. St. Josemaría challenged lay people to feel personally responsible for discovering solutions to society's problems; raising up the poor is not a task meant to be left for clerics and religious to solve. Concretely, Metro and Midtown work with approximately 500 professional volunteers from the city of Chicago who are encouraged to engage their hands and hearts by serving inner-city children. We operate with funds received neither from the Church nor from Opus Dei but rather from corporations and foundations that contribute 80% of our income.

Our academic and character programs are offered to all students. Students interested in learning more about the Catholic faith need to "opt-in" to religion classes with parental permission. At Metro you will find a natural and positive approach to faith, a respect for all faiths, and an opportunity to explore the Catholic faith, if interested.

In this way, Metro is a fabulous meeting ground and environment where students and volunteers of all faiths can grow both humanly and spiritually. When a professional woman or college student comes to tutor and help a child academically, they often discover in the process something deeper; friendship and love of God. At Metro we prefer to speak of "self-worth" rather than self-esteem precisely because true self-esteem springs naturally from a girl's awareness of her personal dignity and her value in God's eyes. It is precisely in this pro-faith environment in the center that students, their families, and volunteers often discover—or rediscover—the faith that they may have abandoned years ago. It is precisely in our secular setting that laity have the unique opportunity to bring the faith beyond the walls of the parish church and faith community.

Priority of the Individual over the Institution

In Chapter 5 of the Gospel of St. Luke we read about the parables of God's mercy: the lost sheep that God seeks out among the other 100; the joy of God over one sinner who repents; the Father's desire to forgive and welcome back the prodigal son. In all of these parables we are reminded of the value of the individual, of the importance of each person who is loved and sought out by God's mercy.

Our modern age is one of elaborate structures and institutions. Financial and commercial institutions influence and regulate our monetary well-being. Global networks of communication and technology have institutionalized and revolutionized the way we work and communicate. Even in the Church, in recent decades, religious institutions have developed and served the needs of the poor by establishing global structures. Metro itself is a large institution that

serves the needs of the Chicago poor through its after-school and summer programs. However, St. Josemaria would warn us against developing an institutional or collective mentality towards helping the less fortunate. He reminded us that God cures and reaches out to souls one-by-one and that we too are most effective when our works of charity reach the individual person. We must therefore take care not to get lost in building programs or institutions if this endeavor leads us to lose sight of the individual people we are serving.

A few months ago a young woman came to Metro looking for a job. When we spoke about the needs of inner city children, she appealed to the reformation of structures as the answer to their plight. She commented, "If we could just reform the structures in the Chicago school system we'd have justice for the poor." I appreciated her youthful insistence but I challenged her. I told her that our educational philosophy at Metro is to focus on the *person* rather than the structure. I agreed with her assertion that just structures and institutions certainly facilitate justice. However, I argued that structures themselves are not the ultimate cause of injustice, nor are they the solution. St. Josemaria (and John Paul II) would argue that the answer to injustice lies with *individuals* who act justly. If individuals are just, over time the structures and institutions that employ them will be just.³ Taking this line of reasoning one step further, one must serve not only with justice but also with charity. In the words of Escrivá, "justice alone is never enough to solve the great problems of mankind... The dignity of man, who is a son of God, requires much more. Charity must penetrate and accompany justice, because it sweetens and deifies everything: 'God is love'."⁴

It is this personalistic approach, this focus on the individual, the concern for their spiritual well-being and eternal happiness, as well as their physical and academic progress, that helps the children we work with blossom into the strong and caring adults they were created to be.

Precisely because of our conviction that people, not structures, are what really count, each girl in our program receives individual attention either from a tutor or a mentor, or both. At any given time, approximately 200 professional and university women work with 300 young girls to make this personal attention a mainstay of our program. I firmly believe that individual attention and our faith-inclusive approach to education is what brings about such far-reaching and positive results in the lives of the people we serve.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to emphasize that St. Josemaria's love for each human person as a child of God who needs to be nurtured and loved for who they are is the vision that shapes the work that we do in the inner city of

³José-Luis Illanes, "Work, Justice, Charity," *Holiness and the World*, Scepter, Princeton, N.J., 1997, 226-227.

⁴*Friends of God*, Scepter, 172.

Chicago. Escrivá's belief that a deep furrow of true human development can only take place when there is an appreciation of both the human and the divine, gives our work of mercy the impetus and strength to build up the inner city poor from within. The hidden work of education is always effective when we treat others as children of God. Of that St. Josemaria was convinced. I quote from his writings: "A son of God cannot entertain class prejudice, for he is interested in the problems of all men. And he tries to help solve them with the justice and charity of our Redeemer."⁵

⁵*Furrow*, 303..