

ANTHONY YEOW

## THE ACADEMIC AND SPORTS ENRICHMENT PROGRAM

In 1994, a group of university students from Ernescliff College launched the Academic and Sports Enrichment Program (ASE), a program for inner city boys in Toronto. We were inspired to take this action by the teaching of St. Josemaria Escriva. In July 2000, an umbrella charitable organization was formed, called Toronto Youth Development, which funds ASE and, we hope, will fund a similar program for girls in the future.

Let me begin by telling you two personal encounters I've had with two Regent Park children who have been in our programs, one in Grade 6 and the other in Grade 8. These two encounters are deeply engraved in my mind because they awakened my heart and helped me to understand more deeply the meaning of sanctification of work. The first conversation involved a child whose family has been living in Regent Park for three generations. I asked him a question that we, as adults, like to ask a child: "When you're grown up, what would you like to be?" He responded, "What do you mean by that?" "You know what I mean," I said. "Perhaps you want to be a doctor, a banker, a scientist, some kind of work that you think you would like to do in the future, so that you can raise a family." He answered, "Is it necessary to work? I have not seen anyone in my family work before. Mom is always home and we still have a house to live in, food to eat, and clothes to wear. Work is boring and tiring, just like homework. I think it's more fun to play basketball than to work."

On another occasion, I was talking to a boy, recently immigrated from India. I asked a similar question: "Have you been studying hard, like your mother said?" He replied, "Yup, I have to study hard, get a good job and make a tonne of money." "What do you want to do with all this money?" I asked. He said, "Buy a big house and a Ferrari. I want a lot of money so that I can buy many things for myself and my family, and life will be very happy for all of us."

What a contrast! Even at a very young age, children can form very different attitudes toward the meaning of work. One perceives work as almost a punishment and the other as a means to achieve material comfort. How can we respond to both of them? St. Josemaria gives us the answer very simply and eloquently. In a homily he gave on the feast of St. Joseph in 1963, he said, "Work, all work, bears witness to the dignity of man, to his dominion over creation. It is an opportunity to develop one's personality. It is a bond of union with others, the way to support one's family, a means of helping to improve the

society in which we live and the progress of all humanity.”<sup>1</sup> Work is a means of helping to improve the society in which we live and the progress of all humanity! How many of us actually think work can have such a macro impact? Yet St. Josemaria passionately and insistently preached to the world that work is a means and path to holiness; it is something to be sanctified and something which sanctifies others.

A profound understanding of the real meaning of work will position us to acquire the real meaning of works of mercy. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “The Works of Mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbour in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently” (#2447). The Church has always encouraged the faithful to engage in works of mercy. It is to be hoped that through justice and our charity, we may alleviate another person’s suffering. More importantly, we can help them to sanctify their condition. A work of mercy can do an immense amount of good for the people who are suffering as well as for the people who stretch out their hands to help.

One of the hardest places to try to do it well is the inner city. Just east of Toronto’s Eaton Centre, the Regent Park area (the oldest and largest public housing project in Canada) exemplifies the inner city’s reality. Here childhood is brief. The family, often headed by a single mother, struggles to make ends meet. Drugs and gang violence lure children away from their fragile home lives and into a seemingly never-ending cycle of despair.

Where these children end up is no great surprise: in dead end, low paying jobs, at best. Many join the millions of unemployed, disillusioned young people on the street and in gangs. The basic lessons of what is right and what is wrong often take a back seat to daily survival. The cost of the drop-out rate, along with the pervasive presence of drugs and crime, is enormous and has to be measured in far more than economic or monetary terms. Entire neighbourhoods, whole families and countless individuals are hurt by this failure.

You will be appalled by the statistics I give you. They paint a grim picture. Demographic indicators provided by the City of Toronto show that 55.7% of Regent Park’s families are single parent families. Youth unemployment stands at 32.9%, which is more than double the city’s rate of 16%. The number of youth who do not finish Grade 9 is also twice the city’s average, and only 6.2% of them make it to university, while university attendance in the rest of the city is at 25.7%.

People in Toronto expect only bad news from Regent Park. It is one of those inner city communities condemned in the mind of the public to failure — and certainly to a bad press. Most people only hear about the negative aspects of Regent Park. You do not hear about young people who achieve a lot because that is not news. This bad image needs to be changed.

<sup>1</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, 47.

We launched ASE in the hope of alleviating this situation. We hoped to motivate the children of Regent Park in their studies and to help them discover the value and meaning of learning and work. We realised that to break the cycle of despair, we had to penetrate one generation, and it was clear to us that we’d have to start with children.

We also discovered that there are many existing programs in Regent Park. But they deal mainly with the symptoms of a deeper problem. They try to keep these children out of drugs and gangs by keeping them busy with many sporting activities. But the real solution is to build inner-directed and habitual strengths of mind and will within them. In short, to foster true character, and to help them acquire virtues like responsibility, honesty, respect for self and others, spirit of service, and living out duties to family and community.

ASE runs a summer enrichment program, led by university and college students who dedicate six weeks of summer holidays to Regent Park youth, giving them a fun-filled and fulfilling summer, as well as a head-start for the new school year. Students take math and English in the morning and participate in competitive sports in the afternoon. The academic courses emphasize and reinforce fundamentals. More importantly, the curriculum is geared to help them discover that learning can be fun and yet challenging.

Character development is an important component; students attend a character class each day. Drills and training form an integral part of the afternoon sports period, emphasizing the importance of teamwork, practice and achievement. Students are divided into groups and participate in competitive sports based on a tournament schedule. Excursions, educational field trips and outdoor camping are organized to complement the summer fun that every child wants.

Throughout the year, career talks are arranged to help the students explore different career opportunities. Community service projects (such as community garden cleaning and visits to old age homes) are scheduled to instil civic and social responsibility.

Discipline often poses a special problem for the counsellors. As Dean of Character Education in Northmount School, I often hear from parents that they have a very hard time disciplining their children at home; they find them very demanding. But I tell them that teachers have unique problems that parents don’t have. No parent, as far as I know, has to discipline 20 children at home.

Talking about discipline, I have to share with you one of the ASE stories. About four years ago, we brought 40 boys from the ASE programs to the Ontario Science Centre. We divided ourselves into five different groups with a university student counsellor leading each group, and happily entered the Science Centre. I was the Program Director that year, so I took a walk around just to make sure that everything was going well. Within half an hour, I heard the fire alarm go off. Then I heard the over the P.A. system, “The person in charge of the ASE group, please go to the security desk.” I proceeded to the security and was informed that two of our children had pulled the alarm. I apologized and took the two boys out. As we were walking out, one counsellor came running to me and told me that he had caught four boys stealing ice

cream from the cafeteria. So we went to get those boys and I was going to call it a day for the field trip. When we reached the foyer of the main entrance, the employee at the coffee counter told me that one of our boys had taken the penny jar and run away.

This field trip was a real disaster. At that moment, all the counsellors and myself were frustrated, furious, and at the same time exhausted. The only thing that could come to mind now was to pray. I said, "God, God, what's wrong with these kids? Guardian angels come to our rescue." You can imagine the anxiety we were going through, but unexpectedly we managed to remain calm and solve all the problems we had—one at a time. Somehow, I understood the meaning of turning work into prayer. St Josemaria once said, "We see the hand of God not only in wonders, but also in an experience of work and effort. Work thus becomes prayer and thanksgiving, because we know we are placed on earth by God...in all that you do, do everything for God's glory (1 Cor 10:31)."<sup>2</sup> He went on to say, "When you feel your weakness, the failures which arise even in human undertakings, you will gain in objectivity, in humility, and in understanding for others. Successes and joys will prompt you to thanksgiving and to realize that you do not live for yourself but for the service of others and of God."<sup>3</sup>

But we do have successes, and they are a great reward. I recently met a former ASE student and he joyfully informed me that he is applying to the University of Toronto and Ryerson University for admission to a Computer Engineering Program. You can imagine my feelings and the feelings of the counsellors who have worked with him.

Toronto Youth Development is a work of mercy inspired by the founder of Opus Dei, St. Josemaria. This work of mercy does not benefit solely the children in Regent Park. It also has a profound and lasting impact on their parents, the counsellors working in the program, and the donors and sponsors of the program. All these people interact with the children in the program. They see that being a role model is not enough. The children need to see that their parents and adults are working too. What will have a lasting impact on them is not the role we play for them but the person we are for them. One person put it eloquently, "This (character education) is really about us, isn't it ... about the way we lead our lives?"

Perseverance is important. Indeed, a work of mercy can be exhausting, discouraging, and at times disappointing. But we must persevere because there is this wonderful gift that God has placed in each of our hearts, your heart and my heart. And that gift is LOVE. Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris*, wrote:

We could say that suffering, which is present under so many different forms in our human world, is also present in order to unleash love in the human per-

son, that unselfish gift of one's 'I' on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer. The world of human suffering, unceasingly calls for, so to speak, another world; the world of human love; and in a certain sense man owes to suffering that unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions.<sup>4</sup>

This is clearly affirmed and reflected in St. Josemaria's teaching and writing. In *The Way of the Cross*, he wrote: "No matter how much you may love, you will never love enough. The human heart is endowed with an enormous coefficient of expansion. When it loves, it opens out in a crescendo of affection that overcomes all barriers. If you love Our Lord, there will not be a single creature that does not find a place in your heart."

I would like to leave you with this thought of St. Josemaria: Because the world is something good, we should love it passionately.

<sup>2</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, 48.

<sup>3</sup> *Christ is Passing By*, 49.

<sup>4</sup> *Salvifici Doloris*, 29.