

# Breaking the Mould: The Experience of a Kenyan

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I am a human resources consultant working in a Nairobi based firm. Through my work I come to meet many professional people in diverse fields. I take a keen interest in family development affairs and I am the first Chairman of Family Network International (FNI), an association registered in 1996 to help build stronger families for a better society. Under this umbrella, we have participated in a number pro-life activities, run a large number of seminars and workshops for couples and potential parents, and campaigned for the right of parents to educate their children in love, amongst other things. FNI has also published a quarterly newsletter and a booklet.

## 1. FAMILY LIFE

I am 52 years old and have been married to my wife Veronica for the past 22 years. Our marriage has been blessed with five children, four boys and one girl whose ages range from 21 to 9 years. The eldest is a law student at the university while his follower is waiting to start a university course; the others are still at school. Also living in our home is my youngest brother as well as two young ladies who help with the domestic chores. We live in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, East Africa.

One of the key things I have learned from the teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá is the importance of the family in my life. A practical consequence of this is that I try to spend as much time with my family as is possible. This means having to plan the day well making sure that I have a predetermined time to leave the office. Experience has shown me that unless this is done, I would end up spending a lot of time in the office since there is always much work to be done.

In our country, it is customary for working men to frequent a pub or club on the way home and have a few alcoholic drinks before going home. For many, this is a daily routine and after quite a few drinks one will get home late, well after the children have gone to sleep. This was once my routine but since coming across the teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, such a life style is not for me. It is not compatible with the “bright and cheerful homes” which he encourages us to maintain.

Talking about bright and cheerful homes reminds me of the effort we have made at home to make every one in the home play a part in keeping things tidy and in good shape. We have a list of duties shared out at a fortnightly family meeting. The family meeting, whose chairmanship rotates to each member of the family, has been a great learning instrument for all of us.

One idea borrowed from the work place and brought into family life is the need for fixed family meetings. There is no business, which can run effectively unless the various executives have a regular meeting at a fixed time. We have tried to apply the same to family life and have a few fixed time events at which we all try to be present. We try to have dinner together everyday — making use of the opportunity to converse in our native dialect so that our children can improve their mastery of the language. This proves to be a great help when we travel upcountry to our rural home where our aged parents live. Without a mastery of the native language our children would not be able to communicate effectively with their grand parents. In this way we try to put into practice Blessed Josemaría’s teaching that there is an important role for grand parents in the all round education of their children’s children. After or before the family meal — depending on the workload of the children— we also strive to say the Holy Rosary together everyday.

## 2. WORK AND FAMILY

Since we have learnt from Blessed Josemaría that work can be turned into prayer and we need to pray for our families, I find that work and family can be quite compatible. Just like an author dedicates a book to a loved one, I offer up daily, a piece of work to God for my family.

I have also found it useful to take each one of my children to my office so that they see where I work and I take the opportunity to explain to them what I do. I also point out to the children the fact that I have to go to work whether I like it or not. In a similar way, they too should do their professional work — which for them is being a good student — whether they feel like it or not.

My work affords me a good opportunity to talk to others about their families. It has now become quite natural for me to ask people I am dealing with professionally to tell me a little about their family. When I establish that a person I am dealing with is living in an irregular union, I assist them to identify the bottleneck, i.e. what is holding them back from getting married properly. We then go on to identify possible solutions and I have been encouraged to see some of them get married properly in Church. It is a great joy for me to attend such weddings. Before I came into contact with the teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá on marriage as a sacrament and a way of sanctification, I would not have done this.

The other issue that comes up fairly often in my work with people is the number of children in a family. Very often the people are professionally qualified with equally qualified spouses, and both spouses work. As they describe their family, one gets to know how many and how old the children are. Increasingly, the majority of these professionals have only one or two children, and the reason advanced for this number is that children are expensive to raise. At this stage, I recall the teaching of Blessed Josemaría: «I shall never tire of repeating that marriage is a great and marvellous divine path. Like everything divine in us, it calls for response to grace, generosity, dedication and service. Selfishness, in whatever shape or form, is opposed to the love of God which ought to govern our lives»<sup>1</sup>.

In order to drive the point home, I often ask about the family the person grew up in — how many brothers and sisters the person has and the profession of the parents. Quite often, the answer I get is that the person grew up in a family with six or eight children and that the parents were small scale farmers or junior civil servants, earning very, very low incomes. The contrast is quite striking even for the person and at that stage I tell them about my five children. In the end we end up agreeing that it is a question of one's generosity or selfishness!

This reminds me of a talk we gave at a university campus where in introducing the speakers we told the audience that one of the ladies in our group was the mother of eight children. They were dumbfounded and full of amazement, so much so that they requested an opportunity to meet her at the end of the talk and

<sup>1</sup> *Conversations*, 93.

touch her to make sure that she was real. The fact that one of her children was their fellow student helped them believe!

I have seen a number of families where parents, who have retired from regular employment have to find additional work to supplement the income of their young employed sons and daughters whose life style cannot be sustained on their incomes.

### 3. EMPLOYER ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES TOWARDS THE FAMILY

In the course of my work, I interact with many employers in our country — the majority of whom are Christians — and have found that they have very different ideas on how they should treat their employees in relation to their families.

Employers can be divided into three groups depending on how they treat their employees as follows:

- a) those who are interested only in the employee during working hours
- b) those who take an interest in the employee beyond working hours
- c) those who recognize the employee's family as playing an important role

While many employers fall into the first two categories, it is possible that more employers can be moved to the third category.

Employers in the first category take no account of their employees' other needs or concerns and therefore do not help the employees in maintaining a balance between work and family. In this category would fall many of the security companies which employ a large number of men as security guards. Most of these employees work as night watchmen from 6.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. every night of the week and therefore have no time to be with their families. What's more they get paid such low wages that it is virtually impossible to live with their families. Many of these employees end up having to live away from their families and only meet them when they take their annual leave and travel to their rural homes.

In the second category one finds employers who invest in their employees' welfare and provide many schemes through which the employees' needs are catered for. For example the employer will operate a medical scheme covering the employees and provide for self-improvement schemes.

#### *What Employers Can Do*

«If your selfishness leads you away from the ordinary desire for the holy and healthy well-being of mankind, if you count the cost or if you are not moved

by the wretched material or moral condition of your neighbour, you force me to reproach you strongly, so that you can do something about it. If you do not feel a holy fraternity with your fellow men, and you live on the margin of the great Christian family, you are just a poor foundling»<sup>131</sup>.

If more employers could follow Blessed Josemaría's teaching then their attitude towards employees and their families would change for the better. Employers who consider that an employee's family plays a great role in his/her life would have to take the employee's family much more seriously and take into account at least some of the following items:-

a) Transfers and Postings

Wherever possible, employers should take care that they do not post their employees to locations which will not allow them to live with their families for long periods of time. This would require that when staff are being considered for postings, their family circumstances be taken into account. If the employee has school-going children, the timing of such postings would have to be taken into account. In a country like ours where both spouses work outside the home, it becomes very important to also take into account the spouse's circumstances.

b) Work Load and Schedules

In *Christ is passing by*, 27, Blessed Josemaría says: «Parents should find time to spend with their children, to talk with them. They are the most important thing — more important than business or work or rest». Employers who care about the family should therefore give special attention to the workload and schedules of their employees so that they have an opportunity to spend some reasonable time with their families on a regular basis.

Recently at a Family Enrichment seminar we were told of two contrasting examples:-

- A father of a family whose schedule is so tight that he has never seen his daughter in school uniform!
- Another one who works in the hotel industry has arranged with his employer that he will get time off to collect his children from school, drive them home and have dinner with them before returning to the hotel to complete the day's work schedule.

<sup>2</sup> *Furrow*, 16.

Sometimes the working hours and load are such that the employer needs to hire more people if the employees are to have family friendly schedules and work load.

#### c) Remuneration

An employer who is concerned about the welfare of the family of his employees will have to pay some attention to the remuneration policy. Some of the wages being paid in this country are so low that an employee cannot meet the basic needs of a family. The resultant financial strain leads to continuous anxiety and tension within the family. Housing, children's education and medical care are essential elements that need to be taken care of in remuneration policy.

#### d) Family Medical Cover

While many employers provide medical cover for their employees, very often such cover does not include the family. What's more, when the family is covered, the maximum amount is calculated per individual as opposed to a family unit. In our company, we provide a family based medical cover where the limits are set on a per family basis. It is the experience in many families that children fall sick more often than their working parents do and hence an individual based medical scheme does not take into account family circumstances.

#### e) Children's Education

In a country where wages are very low, an employer should seriously consider putting aside a percentage of annual profits into an education fund to help the children of the employees to obtain a decent education.

#### f) Family Day

In many small ways, an employer can show the family of the employee that it is important. For example, once every year, the employer could organize a Family Day, when the families of the employees would visit the work place and see what their family member does at work. They could then be treated to a meal or some refreshments followed by a word of thanks from the senior-most executive of the company thanking the families for their support and understanding. «At times, Josemaría would go to his father's shop on General Ricardo Street in Barbastro, where he would amuse himself by counting the coins in the cash register and his father would take the opportunity to explain the basics of addition and subtraction»<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> A. VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei: The Life of Josemaría Escrivá*. Vol. 1, Princeton 2001, p. 21.

What's more, since Christmas is a family feast, it would be a suitable time too for such a company to show a sign of recognition to the family. Since many companies send a card and a gift to business associates at this time, a company which values the families of their employees could extend this practice to include the families of the employees as well.

g) Invitation of Family to Annual Review Meetings

Several companies extend an invitation to the spouses of their key management staff to join the managers when they go for their annual business planning and review meetings, which are often held at a holiday center or hotel away from the work place. In our own company, we extend the invitation to the whole family and it has become something that the families really look forward to. Such a practice could be adopted by more employers.

With such practices and others, I am confident that a better harmony can be achieved between work and the family for the benefit of the employer, employee and society at large.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

a) In relation to the people employed in our company, I find that it helps a great deal to think of them as children of God whom God loves dearly, as Blessed Josemaría has taught us. If one thinks of them like this, it is easier to treat them well.

b) I am fully convinced that if our children can learn at home the proper balance between work and family they will have a better chance of maintaining such a balance when they begin to work.

c) There is a great and urgent need, in this part of the world, for a "School for Parenting" so that parents can be prepared to do a better job in passing on their values to their children.

d) Probably equally important is training of managers on the importance of the family and the need to support it.