

Family and Society

Cecilia Royals

President of the National Institute of Womanhood, has participated in UN conferences in Cairo and Beijing; she has testified before the US Senate Foreign Relations and Congressional Committees on the understanding and well-being of women and has spoken at numerous international conferences on the family, education and society.

I am a homemaker. My time and talents are spent making a home. This coming May I will have been married 24 years. My husband and I have four sons and four daughters. The oldest is 22 and the youngest is 7. They are wonderful people whose lives have been filled with the ordinary ups and downs of children everywhere.

We have, however, had many health challenges. These challenges began with the crisis birth of our first child. Since then we have lived through many blood transfusions, the usual broken bones, three open-heart surgeries, a malfunctioning pacemaker that required 3 replacements. Since two of our children have Downs Syndrome, this has meant speech impediments, developmental delays, physical therapy and special education. Our parenting career has a different measure of what is ordinary work.

Homemaking for my family alone could consume all the 24 hours of my day, and for a time it did. Initially the need to increase my effectiveness in my work revolved around the needs of my nuclear family. Not only did I need to make dinner well for my husband, but also stimulate the developing minds of my young children. It revolved around the need to re-direct their erroneous ways, observe and apply the instruction necessary for their growth in virtue. At times I was consumed with tracking homework and administering safely 5 different medications given to my daughter in heart failure, washing clothes, dusting, study, the meal planning which needed to take into account the allergies of the children. It was not just the first week of meals that needed good planning and professional execution, it was also the 27th meal, and the 351st and all the way

through to the 7221st and on. So many details to attend to, to improve on, and so little time, it seemed to me.

Gradually, in small steps, I came to appreciate that my 24 hours should also include homemaking for others I had not previously considered. I began to see that I needed to be more generous, that my talents needed to be placed at the service of others too, and I began to realise that I could help my friends and acquaintances more if I saw them on a more regular basis. The idea of making time for my friends more regularly, in turn gradually opened new avenues I might have neglected altogether had I permitted myself to be run by spontaneous events and with timetables constructed by circumstance. In other words, neglected for lack of having a plan.

The message of Josemaría Escrivá opened for me a new perspective of service toward all men. At first the plan was simple. I became involved with a book club. We would gather with a few friends on a monthly basis to discuss a book. During those months discussion frequently turned to current issues. In the course of those conversations we often commented on the need for women with a sound understanding of womanhood to influence in public debate. It was not long after that, that it became clear that perhaps it was not for someone else to do this work but rather an opportunity for us to add our contribution. Shortly after that, the plan became more organized, a handful of the women involved in that book group, set about to become effective instruments in promoting an understanding of womanhood.

The teaching of Josemaría Escrivá has compelled me to move from the theoretical to the actual doing. First it was clear what it was that someone had to do, and then it became unavoidably clear that I needed to give it my best effort.

The extension of my work into the community for the sake of my family must also be for the sake of the family in general. If I petition City Hall for better roads or fight in the United Nations for fundamental freedoms, I am doing the work of a homemaker. I am working for my children and my children's children, I am working for my neighbor and his family and I am working for the individual who has not yet discovered his identity with family. This work of making our civilization into a home where the human person can thrive is the work of the homemaker. It is my work.

Now let me tell you about the institute we founded. The National Institute of Womanhood (NIW) seeks to imbue all women with a deep awareness of the dignity of womanhood and to create and sustain a culture of respect for woman. NIW is a pro-active think tank that works to meet social challenges by promoting constructive dialogue on issues concerning the development of the person, the family and society, through public opinion, policy analysis and leadership development. We also provide research for non-governmental organizations and indi-

viduals attending United Nations and other global conferences on women's issues¹.

From 1990 to 1994 the Institute began its national expansion by establishing programs designed to reach women at home, in the work place and in the university. During those years NIW published a Newsletter, held annual workshops, hosted five annual conferences, and sponsored more than twenty forums. The Institute began to develop a national presence and to establish its reputation in women's issues.

During the next years NIW began establishing its reputation for thorough policy research and analysis and its advocacy work. NIW has participated in the preparation for and the meetings of four key United Nations global conferences:

- The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, September, 1994
- The World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) in Copenhagen, March, 1995
- The Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing) in Beijing, September, 1995
- The World Summit of Human Settlement (Habitat II) in Istanbul, May, 1996
- ICPD + 5 in New York, 1999
- Beijing + 5 in New York, March, 2000
- Special Session on Children, Prepcom 2 New York, February, 2001
- Forty-fifth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, March 2001

These activities catapulted NIW into the national and international scenes. The Institute has testified before the House and Senate sub-committees, addressed the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, addressed international conferences in North and South America and Europe and has hosted an international Conference in Beijing. Currently, NIW hosts a web site², continues to monitor the United Nations, sponsors forums and workshops, and speaks to the media on issues pertinent to its mission.

The efforts to maintain the regular activities have proved to be the most challenging. At times the needs of our children made it necessary to suspend the monthly forums and the publications of the newsletter. The pace at which the United Nations moves cannot be our measure. We contribute what we can, when we can. In the business that we are in things change at the pace of decades, even centuries. A major significance of this work has been the people we have been

¹ NIW was founded in 1990 and is a registered 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation under the laws of the State of Maryland.

² www.uniw.org

able to meet, the conversations we have shared, the bridges we have built. I never would have dreamed of meeting and reaching these persons had it not been for the transfusion of encouragement received through the teaching of Blessed Josemaría.

Both my family and NIW can fill all the waking hours in a week; and that would still not be sufficient time devoted to either of them. Here is where Blessed Josemaría comes to the rescue again. He has offered so many wonderful insights, strategies on how to persevere to the end. His suggestions of how to think about order and good use of time, for instance, are very helpful for finding ways to increase effectiveness.

Among these many ordinary demands on my time and talents, a little common sense can suggest which task can be delegated and delegate it. Josemaría reminded us that «a fundamental rule for good management is to give responsibility to others without this becoming for you a way of seeking anonymity or comfort»³. Concretely, this means the laundry gets delegated. In our home each person over the age of ten, my husband included, is responsible for their own laundry. The children are taught how to use the machines, the schedule and, what is more they are expected, as they get older, to help with the general household laundry such as the washing of the towels and to help the younger ones. My husband has been a tremendous leader on this front, particularly when the going gets tough. On the other hand, I prepare most of the dinners, the children, however, are responsible for preparing desserts such as brownies and chocolate chip cookies.

For NIW, this has meant that, once the conferences and forums were established, then the volunteers handled them. It also has meant that contacts need to be followed up on a personal basis not institutionally. Finally, it has meant changing from a volunteer force to a paid force. The time involved in doing these tasks was too great and required compensation. That has meant shrinking NIW until the funding grows to bear the size of the personnel needed.

It is also true that both my family and NIW make extra-ordinary demands on a frequent basis that are ‘schedule busting’ and require exemptions from normal commitments. These ‘schedule-busting’ phenomena occur frequently in our household and so they constitute the normal for us. Our efforts consist in struggling to moderate our workload so that we can re-group before the next crisis.

As the years have passed, and the demands on my time have changed I have learned to better manage my priorities. The effort to balance in my work consists in allotting sufficient attention on a sufficiently regular basis to the many

³ *Furrow*, 972.

important aspects of my vocation to homemaking. It means learning to redirect my efforts sooner, and learning to direct them to what is important not just what is urgent. Perhaps it is urgent that we buy the new sneakers today, and take the car to be repaired and request funding for the organization, and clear the clutter in the master bedroom. These things have to be accomplished, but time also has to be carved out to study and write and respond to the questions of our age.

Balance, for me, does not consist in finding the perfect mean between competing priorities, but rather, in knowing which one needs my best attention when and which can be put aside for a time. It consists in redirecting my efforts as often as necessary to get to the final goal and in learning to know that sooner or later I will get to it, that is, if it is important enough. It means detaching from so many manias of personal prestige. Balance is keeping your eye on the goal even though you may appear to be going in the opposite direction. It is very much like sailing against the wind. The course from point A to point B is very crooked.

The influence of Blessed Josemaría on my life has been radical. He has touched the core of my being and explained to me the purpose of my existence. He has taught me to love work as an offering to God, united to the sacrifice of the Mass, for my sanctification and the sanctification of the whole world. He has taught me to desire to do it to the best of my capacity for the glory of God and in order for it to be an offering worthy of God. He has taught me to love ordinary work, to devote the time and study necessary to increase my effectiveness. Gradually, I learned to extend and expand my work, not shrink it. To do more, sooner and better.