

Christian Behaviour in Business Enterprises

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The changing nature of work, and the environment and philosophy of work have made for a distinct adjustment in the nature of relationship in the workplace, in the family and even in broader society in a way that impacts significantly on the dignity of man. This impact of technology at work and the demands of corporate globalization are put to the test more severely in transition economies of the third world where the desire for leapfrogging stages of development means that man in society could be moving in a very short space of time from the so called moral economy of the peasant subsistence farmer, to the distance of the detached cyber-technocrat who can work from a smart home in the suburb and seldom see his co-workers.

It is in such an environment that we have to situate this discussion of relationships and work in the twenty first century.

It should help our discussion to set the context of the evolution of work and track trends in values associated with work so we can appropriately situate extant challenges and personal struggles of individuals with relationships in these rapidly changing circumstances of the environment of business. In providing this framework for drawing meaning, I am much influenced by the thinking of C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* that meaning is best located at the confluence of the personal struggles of individuals and the grand march of history. In that sense the testimonials from personal experience that spice this pre-

sentation are located in the nexus of trends in sociological transformations driven by great ideas about human organization, science and technology¹.

A key anchor to the testimonials are the teachings of the founder of Opus Dei, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá which are underpinned by the exhortation to place Christ at the Zenith of human activities. In the following discussion we draw on Blessed Escrivá's thoughts on humility, friendship, God's love, the universal call to holiness and the imperative of the Common Good, which flows these and other virtues and values. In the following pages I would like to share my own experiences on how the teachings of Blessed Josemaría influenced my own behavior as I tried to put them into practice.

1. THE MORAL ECONOMY OF PEASANT PEOPLE

At the time James Watt was redesigning the steam engine, thus releasing the energies that powered the industrial revolution, most African peoples lived in peasant communities in which there were limited vehicles for storing value. The subsistence farmer had very few ways of preparing for the rainy day. The most important of them was in family relationships.

The extended family system was very important because the values of society reinforced its utility in the mutual protection it provided its members. If a rain storm destroyed your barn, it was taken for granted that members of the extended family would rally round the victim, provide for him to tide over the difficult period and contribute seedlings for him to plant in the coming season². Social balance was much disrupted by non-compliance with norms that sustain being one's brother's keeper that social values were rafted or evolved to establish an atmosphere in which the typical African was his brothers' keeper. The adage, it takes a village to raise a child was true because people committed to shared values that sustained the network of social relations and there was a perception of the obligation of all to share in getting every child of the community to imbibe those values.

2. POST INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION SOCIETY

The Industrial Revolution spreading from Europe would change the way work was organized and the relationship between people in places of production

¹ C.W. MILLS, *The sociological Imagination*, London 1959.

² P. UTOMI, *To Serve is to Live*, Ibadan 1999.

of goods and services. Instead of volunteer relatives getting together when planting or harvesting requirements demanded more than the individual subsistence farmer could handle alone in some part of what is now Nigeria, division of labour, function specialization and routinization of activity to attain higher levels of efficiency created more impersonal working environments.

While these impersonal relationships produced an abused labour force that created the fertile ground for the philosophy of Karl Marx and other collectivist thinkers in Europe an African working class emerging with early industrialization in the middle of the twentieth century in Africa faced the dual challenge of the pressures to live by the norms of the moral economy of peasant community and the harsh realities of nascent urban industrial conditions of service.

The need to be a brothers keeper meant that the home was to be constantly open to family and other relations from the rural homestead even if income in the urban industrial underclass hardly allowed for dwelling space comfortable for the nuclear family and food that could be called nutritious on the table. As members of the extended family migrated in droves and drones from rural areas in search of opportunity under the push and pull of rural poverty and the bright lights of the city, many ended up crowded into rooms that taxed human patience. Sometimes there were as many as six people living in rooms of no more than 12 feet by 10 feet.

The challenge for managers that were posed by these conditions came alive to me when I recently attended a meeting of the British Africa Business Association in London. One of the members, a former CEO of the Nigerian subsidiary of the Blue Circle Group recalled during our chat that he had to require of his staff that they have no live-in guests if they are to be entitled to housing benefits offered by the company. The logic of the decision was to use the benefits as incentive to shut out the extended family and reduce the strain and stresses on the workers of having to cope with the pressures of providing for others from their limited incomes.

If the industrial revolution produced opportunity for more than the aristocracy to have access to manufactured goods, the moving assembly line ushered in mass production in a way that ensured the triumph of competition as survival of the fittest. Just as companies worked at developing competitive strengths to deliver sustainable superior performance over rivals, individuals in these enterprises began to compete on matters of their careers in ways that sometimes escaped every concept of human solidarity. There were many who would do anything to get to their objective no matter the price for other colleagues at work or the host community of the firm.

The effect of the Industrial Revolution on relationships between men, was of enough concern that it not only stimulated political response, as in Marxist

Leninist socialism behind the rise and ultimately the fall of communism, it also generated papal response and an unfolding treasure of calls for social action. The outcome of that today is the social doctrine of the church.

As technology bridged distances, evolving patterns of relationships at work were increasingly universalized. The transplanting of interpretations of the competition spirit manifested itself in transition societies on platforms that on the one hand sought to protect old values that treasured community relationships and the intrinsic worth of the human person while imbibing the new ways of survival of the fittest even at the expense of other men.

3. COMPETITIVE COMMUNALISM AND ETHNIC PREJUDICE

For many of those struggling to live the paradox of the old and new orders that contradict each other markedly, a coping pattern was developed. With people from their ethnic stock, they tried to live the old kindred spirit, treating as out groups others in the new nation-states they were now part of. For those others were reserved the most bitter consequences of walking all over other people to achieve objectives in a competitive economic environment. Not that people from the same ethnic group were spared the brutal outcomes of unbridled competition for positions in organization. Where people from different ethnic groups worked together, the tendency was more for people who spoke the same language to gang up against out-groups.

In Nigeria, competition for the gains of development at the advent of self-government in the late 1950s was generally denominated along ethnic lines. This phenomenon was well captured in a concept developed in the research and publications of two American scholars, Robert Melson and Howard Wolpe. It is indeed from their evaluation of the evolving patterns of political economy activity in immediate post-independence Nigeria in the early 1960s that the concept of Competitive Communalism as the competition for economic welfare along ethnic lines gained widespread currency³.

Whereas, positive gains, in terms of development resulting from the competitive spirit, can clearly be identified, there was no question about the harm that came to the Common Good by the deepening of social cleavages along ethnic lines. The more horrid manifestations of these tendencies include the civil wars that have become rife in Rwanda and other parts of the Great Lakes region in which people turned on their neighbours of several generations and hacked

³ R. MELSON-H. WOLPE (eds.), *Nigeria: Modernization and the Politics of Communalism*, East Lansing, Michigan 1971.

them to death. In less horrifying but just as damaging manner, the practice of ethnic discrimination in the work place has become so pervasive that people are celebrated when they are perceived as not being ethnic chauvinists as managers.

In 1994 I resigned my position as Deputy Managing Director of Volkswagen of Nigeria after eight and a half years with the company. Nearly six of those years were spent as Chief Operating Officer managing a plant that employed as many as 3,500 people at some points, in the assembly of completely Knocked Down (CKD) parts shipped from Germany and Brazil.

Following my departure to join the faculty of the Lagos Business School, there were several articles in national newspapers and commentary on television about my tenure. What was most remarkable, for me, about the articles and commentary in the electronic media was how much play was made of my being a “completely detribalized” manager. Two other points made in the Vox Pop taken by the Daily Times newspaper from a sample of the staff which have value for our discussion of a Christian view of the business environment, was the significant references to the observations of simplicity, humility and enthusiasm for helping others solve their problems. I found the focus on these issues strange. I took such conduct as the norm. That they were seen as deserving of public attention speaks to what is sad about the norm. In many ways the influence of teachings of Blessed Josemaría accounts for much of this difference.

In a sense the values that stirred my cause through those years at Volkswagen rest with effort to internalize and struggle to live these words from one of Blessed Escrivá’s homilies: «He urges us to live a Christian life to the full — a life of self-sacrifice, work and joy»⁴. I always thought the lesson a great treasure but even more importantly, the challenge of seeking to live it with a role model to use as platform for benchmarking. Again Blessed Escrivá helps set one up down this path when he reminds of Christ that: «he came to teach us, but he taught us by doing things. In teaching us, he was the model, being our teacher and setting us an example with his conduct»⁵.

From the foregoing contextual setting, we shall try to advance the understanding of the challenges of a Christian culture in the business setting in this age of globalization along these paths: ethnicity and managing people; friendship and work; service, helpfulness and dealings with colleagues at work; balancing family needs with the business setting to advance the common good of all the society and building institutions that reduce uncertainty.

⁴ *Christ is passing by*, 18.

⁵ *Christ is passing by*, 21.

4. ETHNICITY AND MANAGING PEOPLE

So rampant are complaints of abuse by superiors from a different ethnic group in work place settings in places such as Nigeria that many people would not step away from their cup of tea for thirty seconds lest they be poisoned by a rival or an aggrieved subordinate. The effects of such high levels of distrust on work culture cover a scope that ranges from limitations to organizational effectiveness because teamwork is jeopardized to what organizational learning experts like Bob Garratt describe as malicious obedience to patently stupid instructions from superiors⁶. In the midst of these organizational and historical trends lurk personal troubles of individuals who are forced into early retirement because their superiors at work distrust them for no fault but the language of their ethnic stock.

Those who struggle against ethnicity and the harm it does to the dignity of their colleagues at work get pilloried by people from their ethnic group as insensitive to reality. Yet I have had the privilege of the benefits of values that are Christian in the interface with colleagues during my years in industry. My direct reports through my years at Volkswagen of Nigeria all came from different ethnic groups and we worked in such an atmosphere of friendship that seven years after I still am in close touch and enjoy their kind report. One of them, a Moslem from a well known political family, since converted to Christianity and speaks to date of the sense of fraternity we enjoyed when he reported to me as Corporate Affairs Manager for VN, Nigeria.

Another rewarding testimonial came at a customer forum of a bank whose board I serve as Chairman. At the event, one of the customers, in speaking on why he ensured that his company become a customer of the bank, said his late father worked for Volkswagen of Nigeria at the time I was deputy Managing Director and that his father never tired of talking about “their boss” and his simplicity, friendship with all and his detribalized disposition. Such perceptions must have been, in the main, an outward manifestation of struggle to live interior life as Blessed Josemaría Escrivá repeatedly urged because I never made specific effort to be so seen.

If effortless friendship at work is this rewarding, I have thought to myself often, with these testimonials how come it is so out of fashion to be newsworthy. I suspect that it may have to do with the packaging and marketing of Christian values and principles. The more people take on enlightened self-interest or long term view, the more it seemed to me the value of the Christian way emerges, whether or not they subscribe to the faith per se. The other dimension of course

⁶ B. GARRATT, *Learning to Lead*, London 1991.

is how oriented people are to living a unity of life, a subject at the heart of the teachings of Blessed Josemaría: to live every moment and circumstance with the desire to turn them into a chance to deal with God and to do apostolate⁷.

5. FRIENDSHIP AND WORK

There are indeed studies that show higher levels of organizational effectiveness where friendship abounds than where people are very formal and distant from colleagues at work. The increasing tendency in globalized world with physical distance between collaborating individuals, and costs being cut by using the convergence of computing and telecommunications to offer the same services from long distance has had its effects on friendship between colleagues at work.

The diminishing of friendship at work has a big cost for society because the trust of friendship is a veritable tool for transmitting values and affecting people who ordinarily may not see a great message when it comes from someone they do not know and trust.

It seems more and more obvious that the trouble with work is the waning of love. Ambition translated as a zero-sum in which some must lose if others win leads to a loss of friendship. There are many who miss the ultimate management challenge which in my experience sustains corporate culture that make for an enabling environment for success: colleagues who are able to be happy for the success of their counterparts. The logic is simple to me. Collins and Porras indeed establish the value of corporate culture and shared values for sustained corporate success⁸. Stephen R. Covey on his part helps us see how a win-win mentality, an abundance disposition enhances personal effectiveness⁹. But it was Blessed Josemaría who set the frame of ambition that proved to have redeeming value for the very ambitious fast track I had pursued. He writes in *The Way*: «You are ambitious: for knowledge, for leadership, for great ventures. Good. Very Good. But let it be for Christ, for love»¹⁰.

Contact with Opus Dei and the teachings of Blessed Josemaría helped me find more meaning for building personal prestige as a path to drawing people to Christian values and use of the opportunities of my station for the apostolate of public opinion.

⁷ Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 10, 126, *Conversations*, 114, etc.

⁸ J.C. COLLINS-J.I. PORRAS, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, New York 1994.

⁹ S. COVEY, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York 1989; see also ID., *Principle Centred Leadership*, New York 1990.

¹⁰ *The Way*, 24.

Love of neighbour expressed by Christ and the infinite civilizing value of that gospel of love colours the paradox of the late twentieth century. The progress and prosperity of the era flows from knowledge that was the product of this civilization of love, the idea of a university etc, yet it was in this century that ambition trampled human solidarity so strongly that friendship at work has been on a decline. the meaning of this is not clear. My effort to come to terms with these changing values and my own experience is captured in tmy autobiography. *To serve is to live* written in 1998 and updated in 2001.

There are companies who for reasons of aligning their functional strategy at the Human Resource level with their basic strategy create what translate to opportunities for friendship. I find illustrations from companies like 3M useful in my teaching when I identify how workplace environment facilitate organizational effectiveness.

6. A SENSE OF SERVICE AND HELPFULNESS

It is probably in a sense of service that the teachings of Blessed Josemaría on interior life as overflowing into conduct become the most manifest as the following testimonial attests.

Service as sacrificial giving of oneself for the good of others remains the stuff that heroes are made of. Ironically, many hero “wannabes” are not enthusiastic about giving service. This is worse when the effects of a rent economy are considered. The reward system, in economies such as that in Nigeria that has favoured people with access pursuing economic rent over those who have ideas that create value for the customer, has diminished the capacity of institutions of the society to encourage a sense of service in the citizenry.

Small ideas that flow from a simple sense of courtesy towards colleagues at work or from response to trauma incidents affecting colleagues can become a vehicle for greater good than it was conceived to address. A good example was my response to adversity in 1991. I was in an automobile mishap in which my chauffeur died on the steering wheel. I was in a near death experience in which I was in and out of shock as a result of severe internal hemorrhaging. I had to be evacuated to a hospital in Germany. On my return a few months after, the experience of my driver’s widow opened my eyes further into the inhumane ways of widowhood rites and welfare. In response to my observation, I started a small charity to support widows from the lowest socio-economic segment of society. In the nine years of its existence, the widow support center has increased awareness of the problem, encouraged a sprouting of non-governmental organisations to

deal with the challenge and attracted continent wide television attention which is now exciting discussion of legislation to protect widows.

7. OF FAMILY AND WORK

A most likely victim of the pressures of global marketplace of the 21st century is the very cornerstone of society's stability: the family. Work means much travel for the upwardly mobile and travel can reach a level where it becomes an interference in parenting. With more professional women working schedules as busy as those of their husbands and trading activities of women who would ordinarily be housewives, keeping them away from home for long periods, we now have situations in which both parents are away for weeks. A whole generation of African middle class children is now being raised not by parents but by domestic staff like house helps, nannies and stewards. The consequence for transmission of culture and values is predictable. Not only does this trend go against the grain of parents as the first teachers of their children, as Pope John Paul II has reminded frequently¹¹, but it also weakens the fabric of bonding between parents and children and affects discipline in society.

The effect of travel in causing separation of couples pursuing careers that require them to be on the go at the intercontinental level has also been strenuous on marital bonds. The incidence of divorce among professional couples in Nigeria, though nowhere near the American rate, has been going up. The globalization of divorce could translate to universalizing teenage deviance. While many parents in Nigeria will shudder at what they see on US News and World Report, Nigerians could learn a few lessons from the American experience. Whereas teachers considered chewing gum and talking out of turn to be the ultimate deviant conduct in the United States in the 1940s, in the 1990s, bringing fire arms to school and teenage pregnancy were more the norm. A clearly identifiable dependent variable — the break down of the American family and the rise of single parent homes. Is there an explanation? Bernardo Villegas is no doubt correct when he shows how the family serves as a school of values¹².

Blessed Josemaría again provides a perspective on the challenge of family life even in this age, the challenge of creating bright and cheerful homes by recognizing that:

«Being a father or a mother is not simply a matter of bringing children into the world. The capacity for generation, which is a share in the creative power of

¹¹ Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to the families*, 16; Ex. ap. *Familiaris consortio*, 36.

¹² B. VILLEGAS, *The Book of Values*, Manila 1996.

God, is meant to have a continuation. Parents are called to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the development of their children into men and women who will be authentic Christians.

The parents are the first persons responsible for the education of their children, in human as well as in spiritual matters. They should be conscious of the extent of their responsibility. To fulfill it, they need prudence, understanding a capacity to love and a concern for giving good example»¹³.

I have to admit that it is in struggling to live family life better that some of the teachings of the founder of Opus Dei are most profound. His views on the family as a place we live out our vocation sowing peace and joy that Christ has brought us¹⁴ has brought more fullness to family life in our home even with both my wife and I being active professionals.

These teachings have been particularly helpful in times of adversity when we have found much to draw from in his exhortation on the power of affection in adverse circumstances¹⁵.

Given this trend an “off balance sheet” part of executive programmes in the Lagos Business School is a family day to which participants bring their spouses to participate; in sessions with case studies on the challenge of family life followed by a dinner for the participating couples. As a regular speaker at these dinners, I have found most useful a story written by a famous Nigerian journalist about the ‘12 o’clock man’. It is the story of a man so anxious for his children to escape the poverty he experienced, that he spent so much time on professional activity such that the children remembered him only as «that man who has lunch with us at 12 o’clock on Sunday afternoon when we return from church».

The struggle to walk my own talk has meant a very conscious effort to spend time with the family. That effort has yielded a variety of ‘dividends’. One of the more amusing outcomes from a deliberate effort to budget the hours between 7 pm and 8.30 pm exclusively for the family has become a regular part of the dinner talks. On one occasion a well-known newspaper publisher once called my home at about 6 p.m. before I arrived from the office. On my arrival I returned his call. He then just got in his car and drove over to my home. The guards who were under strict instructions to declare that I was not available between 7 and 8.30 p.m. told him same. He returned home and called my home. When I responded to the call he got very upset, saying the guards had made a fool of him. For many months he would not talk with me. The irony is that he would later, as

¹³ *Christ is passing by*, 27.

¹⁴ Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 30.

¹⁵ Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 24.

an executive on Lagos Business School programmes be part of the group to listen to the talks. We have become very good friends again.

8. GIVE A MEANING TO WORK TECHNOLOGY AND GLOBALIZATION

What the experience of watching relationships at work adjust to changes in technology and the shrinking of the globe has done is show that glue to keep it all together has often been missing. The absence of that glue has produced material progress that has failed to bring meaning and happiness for man in society. That glue is discernable in the virtues and values of Christian life. A sense of service, respect for the dignity of human person and favour for merit over cronyism leads to both greater fulfillment for the individual at work and organizational effectiveness. This recommends a Christian view of business in the workplace just as a moral imperative but as recognition of the point made back in 1994 by Collins and Porass in their book — “Built to Last”. Organizational culture matters in sustaining performance. Christian culture has shown organization culture that has strengthened competitors.

Establishing Christian value at work may yet prove to be the challenge of the age. To do that we have to locate in the grand march of history in which technology is driving dramatic productivity gains and large scale production of goods and services, the personal pain of many individuals in their personal struggles to find meaning in a world increasingly rushing away from his own difficulty with finding fulfillment. To find the capacity to connect to the troubles of those being swept aside would be to ennoble our civilization. The treasure of that ennoblement rests in Christian values affecting how people relate at work, at home and at play. The prospects of finding this treasure for society increased when those who build up social prestige make it available for such use and for making the truth more widely accessible to many more people.

Just as the media has come to have a more ‘visible effect on culture and its transmission’ as the Pope notes, and therefore should be captured to transmit the truth, the workplace as a traditional place for nurturing the family through the in care of work, and a place of friendship that gives meaning to man in society.

This way of working —with human and supernatural perfection and by rendering service to the Church, society and one’s own family, and, at the same time, perfecting oneself, I learned from Blessed Josemaría. I should like to conclude these thoughts with some words Blessed Josemaría spoke on the Feast of Saint Joseph.

«And so, as the motto of our work, I can give you this one: If you want to be useful, serve. For, in the first place, in order to do things properly, you must

know how to do them. I cannot see the integrity of a person who does not strive to attain professional skills and to carry out properly the task entrusted to his care. It's not enough to want to do good; we must know how to do it. And, if our desire is real, it will show itself in the effort we make to use the right methods, finishing things well, achieving human perfection. But human service and technique, our knowledge of our job, should have a feature which was basic to St Joseph's work and should be so for every Christian: the spirit of service, the desire to contribute to the well-being of other people. Joseph's work was not self-centered, even though his active life made him a strong and forceful personality. When he worked, he was aware that he was carrying out God's will; he was thinking of his people, of Jesus and Mary, and of everyone in Nazareth»¹⁶.

¹⁶ *Christ is passing by*, 50-51.