

Dream and Your Dreams Will Fall Short of Reality

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When people ask me how many children I have, I often say that I have twelve plus two non-profits. They always laugh, but the ones who laugh loudest are the ones who are involved in the work of non-profits, or NGOs (non-governmental organizations) as they are known at the United Nations. This is because working for one of these is like having another child.

Looking back on the last twenty five years — the time in which I gave birth to the twelve kids and two non-profits — it is clear that the influence of Blessed Josemaría has been a constant source of inspiration and guidance.

First, the twelve children. I met my husband Peter and fell in love at the young age of fifteen. At that time I had just come into contact with Opus Dei and I was becoming aware of the writings of Blessed Josemaría — mostly through books — *The Way* and then *Furrow* and *The Forge*.

All the points that I read therein recalled what my parents had taught me about that which Blessed Josemaría called unity of life¹. That is, that we cannot live a schizophrenic existence where we do whatever we want Monday through Saturday and then piously go to Church on Sunday only to forget it all until next Sunday. His writings reinforced the notion that our sacramental and prayer life has to inform our everyday life. The teaching that most stands out in my mind was that the Mass is the center and root of our interior life: “Keep struggling, so that the

¹ Cfr. *Friends of God*, 165.

Holy Sacrifice of the Altar really becomes the center and the root of your interior life, and so your whole day will turn into an act of worship — an extension of the Mass you have attended and a preparation for the next. Your whole day will then be an act of worship that overflows in aspirations, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the offering up of your professional work and your family life”².

My parents were daily communicants and they also had a large family and several non-profits. I had seen them fast from midnight on and I had seen the devotion with which they gathered us to say the family Rosary. They lost everything they had materially when they left Cuba but they gave us the most important thing — their faith in God, the Church, Our Lady and the Pope. It is therefore clear how the writings of Blessed Josemaría fit right in with the formation I was given at home: “Offer your prayer, your atonement, and your action for this end: *ut sint unum!* — that all of us Christians may share one will, one heart, one spirit. This is so that *omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam* — that we may all go to Jesus, closely united to the Pope, through Mary”³.

I also learned from Blessed Josemaría to offer up all my daily work at the Offertory of the Mass and to unite it to the five wounds of Christ. As the mother of a large family — especially when I had eleven children under the age of fifteen — I found myself spending most of my time providing for their physical needs. Sometimes it seemed that as I finished cleaning up after one meal, it was time for the next one. At night I would throw some laundry in to wash, run the vacuum, and the next day the cycle of providing “food, shelter, and clothing” would start all over again. The laundry has always been my biggest challenge. But one day I was sitting in Mass, offering my laundry to Our Lord during the Offertory when I looked up at the big crucifix and saw a laundry basket in each of the five wounds. I think it was a very graphic reminder of what Blessed Josemaría taught about the unity of life.

In short, I spent the first eighteen years of my married life building a culture of life at home, trying to create a “bright and cheerful home” as Blessed Josemaría had taught: “If you live marriage as God wishes you to, in a holy way, your house will be a bright and cheerful home, full of peace and joy”⁴.

It was then that I began to expand my sphere of influence and become more involved in a visible way with building the culture of life. Since I had seven daughters, the issues surrounding the education of women were central to our lives. As a graduate of Harvard University people would often comment: “You went to Harvard and you have eleven kids!” To which I would quickly reply:

² *The Forge*, 69.

³ *Ibidem*, 647.

⁴ *Christ is Passing By*, 78.

“They taught me that if you are going to do something, do it *big*”. But the underlying assumptions of such comments were always the same — that a woman with an education is wasting her time if she has a family.

Once again, Blessed Josemaría’s words came to mind. “These world crises are crises of saints”⁵ and “launch out into the deep”⁶. I realized that I had to get involved in the “apostolate of public opinion” because it was clear that if we could influence the decision-makers at the top, then we could affect the culture at large.

It was around this time in 1992 that Cecilia Royals invited me to be on the founding Board of Directors of the National Institute of Womanhood. At NIW (my first non-profit) we were attempting to articulate the meaning of “authentic womanhood”. We wanted to defend the roles of woman as companion to man and mother to her children. It was becoming more and more apparent that the fight for woman’s advancement was being fought at the expense of woman’s basic roles as wife and mother.

When people would ask how I could find time for NIW with eleven children, I would respond: “It is precisely because I have eleven children and seven of them are girls, that I have to find time to fight for the rights of wives and mothers”. I knew my girls would go on to higher places of learning such as Harvard and the words of Blessed Josemaría kept ringing in my ears: “Paradox: sanctity is more attainable than learning, but it is easier to be learned than to be a saint”⁷.

Another article by Blessed Josemaría that influenced me a lot was an interview he did with Tad Szulc, a journalist of the New York Times, which was published in *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá*. There he expressed his belief that while women could and should work at all professions, they had special talents for the ‘service’ professions, such as nursing and teaching. At first this struck me as sexist. I was after all a ‘child of the sixties’ — raised to believe that men and women are not only equal but basically the same. But knowing that Blessed Josemaría was not only a saint but a scholar as well, I saw that I had to study the issue further and try to understand what he meant. I realized that his response, even though it might at first glance appear somewhat discriminatory towards women, was really signaling not so much the range of professions open to women, as the real contribution that women could make to human life with what is specifically feminine: her way of living and working, teaching, helping, and protecting.

⁵ *The Way*, 301.

⁶ *Friends of God*, 21.

⁷ *The Way*, 282.

Enter the Cairo conference of the United Nations. It was during the preparations for this conference that NIW first became involved in the international arena. As vice-president of NIW, we fought long and hard to ensure that the nations of the world respected the woman's place in the family. In 1995 at the Beijing Women's Conference, the rhetoric on women's rights became even more heated. At that time, there was an international campaign to redefine the role of woman more as a tool and instrument of production than as the primary caregiver of her children, and companion to her spouse.

Blessed Josemaría's admonition that "your boat, your talents, your hopes, your achievement, is worth nothing whatsoever unless you leave it in Christ's hands, allowing him the freedom to come aboard"⁸, reminded me constantly that we had to weave our time of prayer into our daily work to make it effective. Finding time for daily Mass and other practices of piety, while roaming the halls of the United Nations was a constant struggle but one that was rewarded with serenity and peace amongst great adversity and confusion. Quick ejaculatory prayers were sent flying every time a delegate with an opposing viewpoint took the microphone. For me it was the clearest example of spiritual warfare that I have ever experienced. "These world crises are crises of saints".

In 1995 I had to resign from NIW to find paid work to help pay for the college tuition of my older children. Centro Tepeyac was already a part of my life as I was already serving on the founding Board of Directors. This crisis pregnancy center which focuses on helping Latino immigrant women was a natural fit after working as a volunteer for NIW. There I saw all of the issues about 'reproductive rights' that we had argued about at the international level, being played out daily at the pregnancy center.

Blessed Josemaría's appeal to fight the rising tide of sensuality was always on my mind. The women that come to our center are usually victims of sensuality run amok. They are usually not married to the man whose child they are carrying, and often they come to us looking for what they think is a quick and easy solution — abortion. Blessed Josemaría's teaching that "every soul is a wonderful treasure; every man is unique and irreplaceable. Every single person is worth all the blood of Christ"⁹ reassured me that "there are no souls for the trash can". This is especially applicable to the unborn children of these poor women.

I was struck by the answer Blessed Josemaría once gave to a question posed to him by a South American woman. "Father", she asked, "what do you say to a poor woman who goes to one of those foreign funded clinics because she

⁸ *Friends of God*, 21.

⁹ *Christ is Passing By*, 80.

is pregnant and they tell her to have an abortion?” I can still see the look of horror on his face at hearing the word abortion. But what was even more astonishing was his response. He gave her an argument which clearly manifests how irrational a ‘solution’ abortion is: “Tell her what that son of mine who is a doctor told a poor woman who already had many children who came into his clinic wanting to abort — he told her, ‘Bring me your oldest one and I will kill that one since he eats a lot more than this new little one will eat’”. Blessed Josemaría had a way with words and this was one more example of how he used graphic images to teach. This example stuck with me and it has helped me to encourage the women who come to Tepeyac not to kill their smallest and most innocent child.

In looking back over the past six years at Centro Tepeyac, I can see only motives to give thanks for what God in His Goodness has been able to accomplish. I can honestly say that our phenomenal growth is most certainly due to the graces that have come from our effort to live at all times in the presence of God, since “God does not let Himself be outdone in generosity”¹⁰. We are very lucky that St. Michael’s Church is right next door, as this facilitates turning our desires to live in His presence into reality — into moments of prayer — as we have learned from Blessed Josemaría. Every morning on my way to work I make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament — from my car if the door is locked. And I think of the story that Blessed Josemaría told of the milkman that he would see coming into the Church on his daily rounds delivering milk. That man told Blessed Josemaría very simply that everyday he would enter the church only to say: “Here I am Lord, John the Milkman” — we too go to Him and to Our Lady and pray to have the strength to go about our daily work with simplicity and cheerfulness.

I am lucky in that my brother, who first introduced me to Blessed Josemaría, has made audiotapes of *The Way*, *Furrow*, and *The Forge*. For years now, I have been able to listen to them in the car as I drive to work. This repetition has allowed me to ‘experience’ the points at different times in my life when my own needs and spiritual perceptions were different. For instance I remember when I first heard about the ‘letter-apostolate’¹¹. I became aware that in writing thank you notes and direct mail appeals, I needed to look beyond my immediate work to the spiritual needs of those I write to. Also Blessed Josemaría’s words about the apostolate of public opinion have taught me the importance of preparing myself professionally so that I can influence those who write about the pro-life issues that I work with everyday. Letters to the editor and articles about pro-life issues have been a way to live out his advice to strive to positively influence my environment.

¹⁰ *The Forge*, 623.

¹¹ *The Way*, 976-977.

Blessed Josemaría's desire to reach all men, and to live out the communion of saints was brought home to me when I heard the anecdote about how when he saw the astronauts landing on the moon on television, he immediately started praying for them by name. At Tepeyac, we have the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe hanging in our kitchen area and we put post-it notes on it with prayer intentions for the women who are in serious trouble.

I am lucky to be working in a Center devoted to Our Lady because we can freely bring her into all our counseling. It is amazing how much Blessed Josemaría's practice of putting oneself into the Gospels and meditating on the scenes of Our Lady and Christ's life can be helpful. The fact that Mary was pregnant before she lived with Joseph, is something that our women can relate to. On her trip to Bethlehem on a donkey, in difficult circumstances without a roof over her head, and on her journey into Egypt, we can imagine her thinking that she did not know anyone in those places. These are all images that are relevant for our immigrant clients and allow us to help explain how she understands their situations. We keep plenty of prayer cards to Our Lady of Guadalupe at hand for all our clients.

In closing I would like to reiterate the often-repeated teaching of Blessed Josemaría that we should always aim high in everything we do. If we dream, never underestimating the good that we can do when we unite ourselves to Christ and His Mother, reality will surpass our dreams.