

Unity of Life in University Life

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1. INTRODUCTION

I was fortunate to meet the message of Blessed Josemaría more than thirty years ago, initially through the writings of Blessed Josemaría in *The Way* and *Conversations*. Two things struck me forcefully and immediately and they have remained with me. One was Blessed Josemaría's inspiring clarity of vision about the nature and scope of university research and teaching and the influence of intellectuals on the life of a nation. «An hour of study, for a modern apostle, is an hour of prayer»¹. "Study. Study in earnest. If you are to be salt and light, you need knowledge, ability. Or do you imagine that an idle and lazy life will entitle you to receive infused knowledge?"².

In itself this is not novel, but it has to be seen in the context of the second point which struck me then, namely his explanation in theory and practice of how we really can pray always, in and through our work, with our bodies as well as our minds, with our deeds as well as with our thoughts and words.

Though these were the starting points for Blessed Josemaría's influence on my academic life which was then beginning, naturally I was not content just to read about the ideas of the Founder of Opus Dei, but I was able to deepen in the message at Warrane College, which is affiliated to the University of New South

¹ *The Way*, 335.

² *Ibidem*, 340.

Wales. It was at a university, the University of Navarre in Pamplona in 1967, that Blessed Josemaría succinctly summarized the spirit with which we should all try to cooperate with God by sanctifying one's work, sanctifying oneself through one's work, and sanctifying others through one's work.

My main area of research has been in applying statistical and mathematical models to medicine, especially diabetes 'mellitus'. This was inspired by Blessed Josemaría's approach to unity of life, referred to again later. My wife has suffered severely from Type 1 diabetes since infancy. As we lived in different countries we found that approaches to her therapy varied. In order to harmonize my domestic and professional lives, and to understand my wife's illness, I began to read the primary medical literature in endocrinology and found that there were gaps that could be filled by an epidemiologist.

This linking of home and work through my research was further encouraged through personal meetings that my wife and I had in Rome with Blessed Josemaría (17 December 1973) and his successor, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo (6 October 1981), who told us much about the former's diabetes as he enquired knowledgeably about my wife's illness.

2. QUALITY OF ACADEMIC WORK

I have found many non-Catholic and non-Christian colleagues who are readily attracted by, and put into practice, the concept of offering work well done to one's Creator. Sanctification, and hence sinning, are less easily appreciated, though the ear that is tuned to nuances can resonate to the idea that "saints are sinners who struggle". They do appreciate the notion that academics should look beyond the 'ivory tower', that they should serve society. Indeed, 'community service' is increasingly being used as a necessary criterion for promotion in Australian universities. "This means it must be a job which contributes effectively towards both the building up of the earthly city — and therefore it must be done competently and in a spirit of service; and to the consecration of the world — and in this regard it must both sanctify and be sanctified"³.

The research students I have supervised have come from many different religious backgrounds — and none — but they could accept, even if they did not understand, that one could offer work well done for the glory of God. In fact, one cannot earn the respect of one's peers in academe unless one strives for excellence and depth in teaching or research. "There is no excuse for those

³ *Conversations*, 70.

who could be scholars and are not”⁴. “Study. Obedience: ‘non multa, sed multum’ — not many things, but well”⁵.

Two of my doctoral students were Jews, orthodox and loyal to their own spiritual heritage, and they were particularly attracted to the notion of self-discipline as it comes through in *The Way*, particularly in relation to striving for excellence, mortification and purity, which are themselves inter-related. “The world admires only spectacular sacrifice, because it does not realize the value of sacrifice that is hidden and silent”⁶.

The fruit of our research and teaching is service. We admire the spectacular service or sacrifice, but the value of service that is hidden and silent can easily be overlooked. This hidden and silent service starts with the quality of our work and our preparation for that work. “And so as the motto of your 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”⁷. This is how academics can contribute to the solution of the problems of society — not by leaving things to others, or complaining about the government — but by serving society with those skills which society has helped them to acquire through the provision of universities and scholarships.

Doing work well, with the greatest human perfection, appeals to genuine scholars, and genuine scholarship is the foundation for inspiring teaching and creative research. However, this is not a sufficient condition for motivation at those times when ideas desert one, when one encounters ‘writer’s block’, or the solution to that equation eludes one. That is when the notion of really offering one’s work to God starts to become heroic, and a real act of mortification which can be offered to God. Anyone can be enthusiastic when the ideas are flowing.

The most common question from my research students after visiting our home for the first time where they experienced my wife’s warmth and hospitality, especially her radiant smile, was “how can you believe in a God who allows such suffering?” This is a question that begs many answers, but the most fruitful has been the example of my wife’s peace and serenity which she has acquired — in no easy battle — from God’s grace and daily reflection on some points from Blessed

⁴ *The Way*, 332.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 333.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 185.

⁷ *Christ Is passing by*, 50.

Josemaría's spiritual classic, *The Way*. In chatting with my students I found that they responded well to that book and *Conversations*, irrespective of their religious background.

3. THE USE OF TIME

This is the beginning of the evangelization of one's environment that Blessed Josemaría spoke about. The academic whose work is well done and who is productive with scholarly research carried out for the glory of God and not just for promotion or honors, will be serene and calm and well-ordered. He or she knows from prayerful reflection and study that the truths one seeks to transmit in teaching or to find in research already exist in the mind of God, that God is letting the research co-operate in unraveling it —at God's pace. There is no point then in continuing to do one's research beyond the appointed time when other duties beckon, with the notion that given another twenty minutes that elusive idea will fall into place. One needs a plan of life, a plan which caters for all facets of our temporal and eternal needs. This plan of life generates time; it does not consume time. Time is like the 'holy grail' of the modern professional person, particularly the academic in search of 'fame'. The person who appears to be able to make time is envied as having the key to a successful life. "Those who are engaged in business say that time is money. That seems little to me: for us who are engaged in affairs of souls, time is [...] glory!"⁸.

Time is a treasure, but it is a treasure because it is a gift from God, to whom we shall have to give an account for its use or abuse. There is no room for idle moments. Being idle is not merely being lazy or doing nothing, but not trying to do what God wants when he wants it. "Idleness is inconceivable in a man who has the soul of an apostle"⁹.

In this respect, further inspiration for those involved in academic life can be gleaned from the pages of the biography of Blessed Josemaría by Vázquez de Prada, where one can find the details of the teaching and advanced study of the 'Beatus'. These were pursued under the most adverse circumstances with many barriers to his progress coming from the misfortunes or the ill-will of others. His dedication and thoroughness — and his grades — attest to his genuine scholarly instincts. Of particular significance is that his academic achievements were accomplished as just one part of a very full life, with no excuses, no neglect of his

⁸ *The Way*, 355.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 358.

duties of state, no neglect of his family, plus a heroic round of visits to the poor, to the sick (whose prayers he implored), and with countless hours at the service of the faithful in the confessional. For instance, during the academic year 1929-30, while Blessed Josemaría was enrolled in his doctoral studies in Madrid, he was also teaching, he was looking after his mother and brother and sister, he had duties as a Chaplain, and he was carrying out an extensive apostolate among the poor and the needy and the sick of the city¹⁰. This is a vibrant example for the academic who might be tempted to put off that book, that piece of research, that lecture preparation, until there is more time: “if only I had fewer students, more time, less noisy children, more secretarial assistance [...] if only!”¹¹.

So too the academic who is offering each moment to God for some spiritual intention is not going to become a victim of ‘professionalitis’, of neglecting family and friends in a jealous quest for fame. One learns the value of time better than any time-management course can teach. There is time for God, time for one’s family, time for the apostolate of friendship. “Through your work, through the whole network of human relations, you ought to show the charity of Christ and its concrete expression in friendship, understanding, human affection and peace. Just as Christ ‘went about doing good’ (Acts 10: 38) through Palestine, so must you also spread peace in your family circle, in civil society, at work, and in your cultural and leisure activities”¹².

In practical terms, this harmony in our personal and professional lives is achieved when we serve others with work well done, work that is finished well, whether work is paid or unpaid. Blessed Josemaría would not have agreed with Plato who said that “the beginning is the most important part of the work”. Anyone can start a job with enthusiasm, but it takes some special qualities to finish with enthusiasm. “A clear sign of lukewarmness is a lack of supernatural ‘stubbornness’, of fortitude to keep on working and not stop until you have laid ‘the last stone’”¹³.

And when you have finished your work? “When you have finished your work, do your brother’s, helping him, for Christ’s sake, so tactfully and so naturally that no one — not even he — will realize that you are doing more in justice than you ought. This indeed is virtue befitting a son of God!”¹⁴. Academics have

¹⁰ A. VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei: The Life of Josemaría Escrivá*, vol. 1, Princeton 2001, pp. 326-329.

¹¹ K. BUERSMEYER - A.G. SHANNON, *Means and Ends and Tinplate Morality*, in «Unicorn: Journal of the Australian College of Education», Vol. 5, No. 2 (1979), pp. 122-128.

¹² *Christ Is passing by*, 166.

¹³ *The Forge*, 489.

¹⁴ *The Way*, 440.

the opportunity for apostolate through collaboration with their peers all over the world and to err on the side of generosity in sharing their ideas.

4. CHILDREN OF GOD

The force which binds all this together is the realization that we are children of God. Earthly parenthood, that most beautiful cooperation in God's creation, is a mere imitation of God's fatherhood. When we become aware of this we become really happy and we try to act as though we are all brothers and sisters of one another "which is not reduced to a topic of discussion or an illusory ideal"¹⁵.

Living with someone with severe diabetic problems at home and researching diabetes at work has not always been easy — in human terms probably not a wise thing to try to do — but here again Blessed Josemaría's words sustain one's hope: "But, have you forgotten that God is your Father? All-powerful, infinitely wise, full of mercy. He would never send you anything that is evil. The thing that is worrying you, it's good for you, even though those earthbound eyes of yours may not be able to see it now. 'Omnia in bonum!' Lord, once again, and always, may your most wise Will be done!"¹⁶.

"Being children of God, how can we be sad? Sadness is the end product of selfishness. If we truly want to live for God, we will never lack joy, even when we discover our errors and wretchedness. Cheerfulness finds its way out into our life of prayer, so much so that we cannot help singing for joy. For we are in love, and singing is a thing that lovers do"¹⁷.

The social dimension to being children of God is that we are brothers and sisters of each other. The need is ever more urgent for university professors to use their special talents to help to create societies which will welcome all their members, to go beyond the systems of societal stresses, to look for long-term sustainable solutions.

In our civilization today, the conviction reigns supreme that the true nature and dignity of people reside in what they produce. The scientist appears to be worth more than the street-cleaner, because scientific theory is considered to be more valuable than garbage. A person's worth is related to the value of what the person produces. This is actually dehumanizing. We are more than tokens in global economics.

¹⁵ *Friends of God*, 236.

¹⁶ *The Way of the Cross*, 9:4.

¹⁷ *Friends of God*, 92.

Blessed Josemaría's teaching linked work with love: love of God, love of our brothers and sisters, love of the work itself. For him, hard work and diligence formed a single virtue. "‘Diligent’ comes from the verb ‘diligo’, which means to love, to appreciate, to choose something after careful consideration and attention. The diligent man does not rush things. He does his work thoughtfully and lovingly"¹⁸.

In Australia we see the solution to this problem in trying to make our education systems more vocational when their major weakness is that they are not liberal enough! We forget both *educere* (to lead out) and *educare* (to nourish). A truly liberal education can give students a sense of purpose which can relate work to personal talents and the demands of society. With structural unemployment as a feature of some developed economies, we need graduates with more liberal education, not increased vocational education for jobs which do not exist now. Furthermore, who can predict the specific, as distinct from the generic, skills of the future? The fundamentals of this liberal education are truth, goodness and beauty. They form a tripod, which, if one is missing, the whole collapses.

University students have to prepare themselves to build a world which is more human and more just. "We have to uphold the right of all men to live, to own what is necessary, to lead a more dignified existence, to work and to rest, to form a home, to bring children into the world within marriage and to be allowed to educate them, to pass peacefully through times of sickness and old age, to have access to culture, to join with other citizens to achieve legitimate ends, and, above all, to enjoy the right to know and love God in perfect liberty"¹⁹.

The easy thing to do is to complain with sterile lamentations, as one of my students observed. It is far harder to remedy injustices, starting with those that are closest to us, in our everyday lives: the parent in the home, the business people at the stock exchange, the professor in the university, the student at school. Blessed Josemaría's writings provide realistic guidelines for those who wish to accept the challenges now, not some vague far-off tomorrow, now where God has placed me, not if only my circumstances were different.

The promotion of justice and peace can be readily encouraged among students by professors who themselves try to exemplify these virtues. Youth are generous. They are not all as hedonistic and self-destructive as sections of the media try to portray them. The highest rates of volunteer activities ever are now being registered by students on some Australian university campuses. In the Jubilee

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 81.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 171.

Year of 2000, about 2 million young people traveled to Rome to hear an 80-year-old Pope urge them to lead lives of moral rectitude and self-sacrifice.

What we, and our young charges, have to realize is that the restoration of justice and peace comes from the heart of each of us. We cannot be just if we hate. It is in the heart that every type of injustice has its birth. It is in the heart that the possibility of straightening out every human relationship is conceived, with the help of God's grace. With God's grace, liberalizing education can lead to an attractive humanism, a humanism based more on charity than justice, of respect for the integrity of human beings as persons who are children of God and our brothers and sisters.

The term 'education' might come from *educere* or *educare*, but in either case it should lead to a unity of life which is fundamentally the spirit and desire to serve God, to be in union with him. When this motivation is there, the other parts of life fit into place and Christ animates our activity. The time we dedicate to our work and our colleagues, the time we devote to our family and our friends, is time given to God and his apostolate.

5. CONCLUSION

There is thus a need for ordinary academics, who through their work and ambitions, their family and friendships, form part of the very texture of the university, to understand that their lives, just as they are, are opportunities for meeting Christ, because Christ is present in every honest human activity. For the academic, research and teaching and community service are the matter of their pursuit of sanctity.

It may seem strange to link work and industriousness, for normally they are identified with making a big effort, with being serious and tough. While there is this dimension of disciplined effort, hard work also leads people to consider the fulfillment of their daily duties as a fertile field for achieving full personal maturity where we are instruments for helping others.

It has been my experience that university teachers and researchers of goodwill, irrespective of their religious background, value the pioneering insight of Blessed Josemaría that work is an integral, not a peripheral part of being a complete human. They value it as a scholarly insight into one of the significant unsolved issues of our day, and as a means of fulfilling their own academic careers.

This apostolic work in academe is God's work which we are doing by virtue of that call to sanctity which we received at Baptism: "what a pity if in the

end you had carried out ‘your’ apostolate and not ‘his’ apostolate”²⁰. “Obviously God could have decided on any plan to have his message spread. In deciding to use us as his messengers it is almost as if God has chosen the worst possible instruments. Yet as Msgr Escrivá used to remind us, the very inefficiency of the tools makes the glory of God shine through even more clearly. The worse the tools the better the craftsman must be to use them. It is the work of God”²¹.

As a postscript, Llano’s excellent paper²², with a similar title to mine and an analogous theme, recently appeared. The reader’s attention is directed to it because it supplements, in a more academic manner, what has been written here. We conclude with some key sentences from that paper: “Josemaría Escrivá was not only an original thinker and a great academic. He was a holy priest, a man of God. But what is of most interest to our topic is that in him both dimensions, the intellectual and the spiritual, were not separated nor in the least opposed to each other. His own life was an heroic example of what he never ceased to proclaim: an existential unity imbued with refinement and consistency, in which the different anthropological parameters acquired unsuspected depth by being referred to our Father God. This is the source of the intellectual daring that characterized all of his proposals as a university radical who urged forward the search for truth beyond the frontiers of acquired knowledge”.

²⁰ *The Way*, 967.

²¹ MARIE & TONY SHANNON, *Christianity in Everyday Life: Opus Dei and Its Founder*, Melbourne 1978, p. 4.

²² A. LLANO, *The University and Unity of Life: Blessed Josemaría’s Vision*, «Romana» 30 (2000), 112-124.