

Human Rights in Developing Countries: The Nigerian Experience

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“We children of God, who are citizens with the same standing as any others, have to take part fearlessly in all honest human activities and organizations, so that Christ may be present in them.

Our Lord will ask a strict account of each one of us if through neglect or love of comfort we do not freely strive to play a part in the human developments and decisions on which the present and future of society depend”¹.

1. MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH OPUS DEI

When I first came into contact with the teachings of Blessed Josemaría, I was a happy young mother, a young lawyer — barely less than three years at the Bar, with many bright ideas about a great and brilliant legal career. I had no particular interest in Human Rights issues and of course I had never heard about Opus Dei or its Founder and his teachings. Although I had a real sound Christian (Catholic) background and upbringing, and had been taught the need for sincere hard work and industry, the whole idea of finding God in the ordinary everyday life of family and work or the sanctifying value of ordinary work [...] or even apostolate through professional work never occurred to me. I never heard about it, at least not in so many words, or with such clarity as it now presents itself after

¹ *The Forge*, 715.

these many years of contact with the writings and teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá and general formation in both human and supernatural virtues.

2. THE NIGERIA IN WHICH I LIVE

As it relates to the specific topic of my personal involvement in Human Rights issues, I think it appropriate to pause at this point to put us into the picture of the cultural, social and political background in my country in which situation I have had to work.

Barely seven years after its independence from British colonial rule, Nigeria was plunged into a devastating civil war which lasted for 30 months. After this civil war, the country was under military dictatorship from 1970 until 1999 with only short-lived interventions of civil rule from 1979 to December 1983 and from 1991 to October 1993 at the State level. Civil rule has just again returned in the country in May 1999. Democracy was unknown to most Nigerians born after independence, and the rulers and most of the citizens had forgotten or never experienced the Rule of Law. With a militarised and regimented society, civil liberties and human rights were of little moment.

As a nation we are a conglomerate of many diverse religious belief systems, cultural backgrounds, languages and therefore social interests. Governance is not simple or easy. We have very strong attachment to customs, traditions, culture and superstitions which in each of the regions are deeply rooted in the people's religion. In the South Eastern region where I live, our customs and traditions are principally based on non-Christian norms and superstitious beliefs and this greatly affects social life. One quite often observes severe conflicts between the social norms of our imported civilisation and Christianity, and our traditional tenets. Even in our dual legal system, provision is made for the recognition of the native laws and customs *which are not repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience*. However, many native laws and customs do conflict with moral justice and do not make adequate allowance for fundamental Human Rights. For instance: a girl-child under ten years by customary law can be given off without her consent in marriage to a 50 year old man; a woman has no right to own or inherit landed property either from her father or from her husband; a widow is, under guise of customs and tradition, subjected to unimaginable forms of inhuman and degrading treatments. She is forced to sit on hard bare floor for several weeks without having a bath; she is not allowed to wash her hands before or after eating; she is forced to shave her hair to the scalp so as not to look pretty; and she could as a matter of course be *inherited* as a chattel by her late husband's brother or other male relation. Her consent was not necessary and was not sought or

considered! Such offensive customs are legion but I think I should pause here to mention a case which appears to form my first serious professional experience of Human Rights violation.

3. FIRST PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

This was in the early eighties. Monica, like every other client, came in to chambers to consult. She had been sued by a third party for a declaration of title to vacant possession of a developed property situated in Enugu. She had been married under Native Law and Customs and wedded in the Catholic Church, (not under the Marriage Act) for twenty three years and had ten children. At the early years of their marriage, her husband who was a truck driver, used to be away from home for weeks at a stretch because of his job. She was a 'full time house wife' and also sold items like kerosine, firewood, plantains, ground nuts etc. With the little income accruing from this, she supported her husband's resources for house keeping, children's up keep and family projects. With their joint resources, her husband bought an undeveloped property in Enugu in his sole name and commenced development thereof². They subsequently moved into the house of two floors and several rooms and while living there they had their last six children. The last boy was about six years old when her husband suddenly took a fancy to Monica's 17 year old niece who lived with them as a house help. He started an affair with her and soon purported to 'marry' her [...] under Native Law and Customs which permits polygamy. This naturally soured his relationship with his legitimate wife — Monica and he asked her to leave the home³. Monica refused. The husband then moved from their property and residence in Enugu to their village home with his second 'wife' and banished Monica from ever stepping into their compound. This was accompanied by serious threats of shooting her to death. In the meantime, without consulting or informing Monica, he sold their matrimonial home at Enugu, which was purchased in his sole name to the third party who applied all forms of unorthodox means to get Monica and her ten children out of the house, including setting fire on part of the building. The husband then sued Monica and she briefed me to conduct her defence.

² By native law and custom a woman cannot negotiate for or purchase land in her own name.

³ By custom it was the rightful prerogative of a man to send away his wife if he no longer wanted her. He did not have to sue for a formal divorce.

At the trial, we led oral evidence to show that Monica had made appreciable contributions to the purchase and development of the property from the proceeds of her little trading; she had planted several fruiting economic trees on the property, all of which enhanced its value; in the circumstances of a normal husband and wife relationship existing during the time of the purchase and development, she had rendered such domestic services in the home which if quantified in terms of money amounted to reasonable financial support to her husband in the investment. I urged the court to hold that even though the husband had legal title to the property, all the above factors coupled with the fact that the property was her matrimonial home, invested Monica with such equitable interest as would defeat the third party interest and entitle her to remain in the property with her children. The judge (male) held in summary that the Church wedding without more did not amount to a marriage under the Act and was at best a Customary Law Marriage whose incidents were cognisable only under Native Laws and Customs. The fact of such marriage does not raise any presumption of any interest in favour of a wife in a property acquired during the marriage and registered in the husband's name without clear evidence of a joint ownership. He held that under Native Law and Customs, the matrimonial home is the village home where the husband was, not a house in the city even if the couple reside there and only visit the village occasionally. So we lost! Monica had not the money to pursue an appeal against the judgement and she and the children were turned out of their home into the street by the Law in such heart rending circumstances. This was a thorough humiliation and great pain. She could not go back to the village home because she had been banished from there. Under Native Law and Customs she had no enforceable interest in her husband's property in the village. She could not return to her paternal home because that, by custom, had been inherited by her male relations and it belongs exclusively to them. I was greatly grieved, not because I lost a case, but because I felt she had not been fairly treated by either our Statutory Law or the Customary Law.

4. THE PURELY TECHNICAL PERSPECTIVE

I could not quite clearly articulate it at the time but I felt strongly that there was something very vital which our legal system failed to recognise and take care of in Monica's case. The thought returned to me from time to time over the years like the discordant refrain of an unhappy tune. I took a purely technical view of the matter then and raised a number of technical questions. Why would the Law not recognise the value of a wife's contributions to a family project simply because it was undertaken in the sole name of her husband? Why should the Customary

Law deny a woman the right to inherit property from her father? Why would it not recognise her right to remain in a home she had lived in with her family as her matrimonial home? Why must a third party interest acquired during marital estrangement defeat the right of a spouse to her matrimonial home? I felt there was something grossly wrong with the Law which needed to be changed to avoid such injustice as Monica had suffered. People deserve more and better respect and protection under the Law. I did not know where or how to start.

5. NEW CONCEPTS AND NEW PERCEPTION

In the meantime I became somewhat familiar with some of the teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, which gradually and almost imperceptibly began to transform my general perceptions about life. I began to recognise in his teachings a very deep appreciation of the transcendent nature of the human being above all other creatures and the inseparable unity of his physical and spiritual aspects.

This view recognises that man is a composite of body and soul, a creature, the subject of God's incomparable and inestimable predilection, a most beloved child of God. The scripture narration of Creation established man as the only creature made in the image and likeness of God⁴, and as Vatican Council II emphasized, "the only creature that God has wanted for his own sake"⁵. This quality places him far above all other creatures and imbues him with a special dignity which comes directly from the Creator Himself. The dignity of man is further confirmed and made sacrosanct by the fact that God Himself took physical flesh in the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, to become MAN in every way except sin. In His person the dignity of that unity between the physical and the divine came to perfection. Man by that fact of his sonship⁶ enjoys a special share of this unity and dignity.

His holistic view of man had always informed the sincere charity, respect, delicacy and decorum with which Blessed Josemaría related to and dealt with every person. He always insisted on the inalienable dignity of man and the obligation of true respect for each person's rights, freedom of conscience, belief and action, his rights to a good name, honour, fair judgement and personal privacy. To him such respect was not merely a matter of complying with statutory provisions but a serious obligation in charity. As he clearly stated in *Christ is passing by*, 72:

⁴ Gen 1: 26.

⁵ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Past. Const. *Gaudium et spes*, 24.

⁶ *Divine filiation* is the very core and basis of the spirituality which Blessed Josemaría teaches.

“Christian charity cannot be limited to giving things or money to the needy. It seeks, above all, to respect and understand each person for what he is, in his intrinsic dignity as a man and child of God. Consequently, those who impugn the reputation and honour of others show that they are ignorant of some truths of our Christian faith and, in any case, lacking in an authentic love of God. ... Let us especially resolve not to judge others, not to doubt their good will, to drown evil in an abundance of good, sowing loyal friendship, justice and peace all around us”.

Reflecting again and again on Monica’s case against the background of the above and other teachings of Blessed Josemaría, the fundamental defects in the Native Laws and Customs which were applied to her case as well as some of the Statutory Laws in the country became more obvious to me. There was lacking in many aspects of these legal systems the recognition of that intrinsic dignity of man from which enures his fundamental rights which must be respected and protected. Such a legal system while it may produce technical justice does not ensure moral justice in many respects.

6. THE TRUE CONCEPT OF FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS

Enjoyment of Fundamental Human Rights is a matter of strict moral justice which must find adequate expression and security in any legal system. Human rights are fundamental because of their direct relationship and emmanence from the divine and natural precepts upon which the entire creation and particularly human existence is ordered. Man is entitled to these rights for the simple reason of his being human. Fundamental rights existed *ab initio*, that is to say, before they were recognized by legislators. The right to life, for example, arose from the very moment the first human being came into existence in the mind of the creator and by the very act of his creation. The recent codification of human rights in the last century sometimes tends to over-shadow a clear view of this fact and gives the erroneous impression that Fundamental Human Rights are a gift of man to himself or a gift from some sovereign political authority. It is against the above background that I began to view the abuses and violations of Fundamental Human Rights by individuals and governments, especially in military regimes like existed then in Nigeria where many constitutional provisions which secured Human Rights were repealed and replaced by military decrees.

7. HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR REDRESS

Even with this new realisation and the great desire I had to make some positive input in the struggle against Human Rights violations, the odds seemed greatly against much fruitful redress. A good number of people understood that the Human Rights violations in the entire country were massive, but very few had the courage either to speak out or to challenge same, or to create public awareness of the situation. At that time press freedom was completely strangled by Decree No. 4 of 1984, Human Rights activists and civil liberties fighters like Gani Fawehunmi SAN and Olisa Agbakoba SAN were constantly locked up and detained without due formalities or observance of law, and vocal pressmen like Dele Giwa were served letter bombs! Police arrests and detention without trial were used to settle personal scores between two quarrelling individuals. Sudden and unnatural death (SUD) became an officially acceptable explanation for the frequent mysterious deaths of suspects awaiting trial in police custody. The police had unofficial permission to shoot some types of criminals at sight. A condemned criminal could be executed before the appeal against his conviction was heard and any moves to claim damages by his estate were quelled by threats of total extermination. To crown it all, even though the peace declaration after the Nigerian civil war announced 'no victor, no vanquished', the clear disabilities of a defeated people still hung heavily over the East. My limitations were obvious but Monica's case, and a number of other cases and events which I had come across along the line tugged at me and left my conscience rather restless. I needed an outlet and some allies to row against such heavy current.

8. MY PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT

In 1985 the World Conference on Women was held in Nairobi and this provoked global interest in and attention to Women's Fundamental Human Rights and other Gender Issues. Discussions and projects on Women's and Children's Rights gathered momentum. The International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) branch, to which I belonged, as an association of professional women, naturally had a vital role to play in the global affair. This rekindled my interest and serious participation in FIDA. I found this to be an opportunity to make some useful input and contribution in a process of social reformation especially in the area of basic Human Rights. It was clearly recognised that mass ignorance of basic rights militated against the desired reform, and made it more difficult to achieve. Apart from running humanitarian projects for destitute children and inmates of Remand Homes, therefore, FIDA started a Family Law

Centre which runs a Legal Education project and gives free legal services for the benefit of women and children principally, as well as other poor persons in society. With these projects which were funded by foreign agencies, I took more active part in organising numerous seminars, workshops, outreaches in both rural and urban communities. We produced many simplified and illustrated publications both in English and Igbo languages on various Human Rights topics. These efforts were directed primarily towards educating the masses, both literate and illiterate, on their basic and fundamental rights, helping them to be able to recognise and to enforce such rights through dialogue, lobbying, pressure groups and litigation where necessary. At the same time we encouraged the women generally to enrol in various literacy and skills acquisition programmes, in order to empower themselves intellectually and economically. We moved from one rural community to another, creating awareness amongst the vastly illiterate rural women on current global rights and gender issues. Amongst many other interest areas of action we gave special attention in our projects to the prevention of various forms of violence against women and children either by individuals, through machinery of State agencies or by the various harmful traditional practices prevalent in our region. I had the opportunity of giving numerous talks, delivering seminars and workshop papers, and participating in conciliatory negotiations with traditional rulers, who are the custodians of customs and tradition. This at last seemed to provide me with the much desired outlet to ventilate my hitherto smouldering experiences of Monica's case. During those years also, that is, late 80's and early 90's, I had the opportunity of even more intensive formation and closer spiritual direction which I found ever so necessary and useful for the continuously increasing responsibility posed by my professional career and social engagements.

Between January 1984 and October 1991 Nigeria had another spate of military governance which apart from stifling possibilities of exercising fundamental rights, extensively distorted and destroyed our value systems. Even though the country appeared to record successes in some areas of social development, it was obvious that the nation was tending steadily towards political, moral and economic collapse. There was generally, for instance, a beclouded consciousness of the value of human life and therefore a regrettably diminished respect for the fundamental right to life. Even though contraception, abortion and euthanasia still stood as punishable offences in our statute books, in real life the practice was liberalised or at least condoned. Violent crimes like murder, and armed robberies became rife. Capital punishment was re-affirmed as a deterrent punishment for these crimes, but this had little corrective impact on a society that was obviously losing direction in moral principles. The system had no programme for a collective moral and human formation.

It was very easy and indeed common in such circumstances for people (and for me in particular) to blame ‘government’ or the ‘church’ for failing to give adequate moral guidance and direction, or to fling up their arms in total discouragement and pass on the buck. But as Blessed Josemaría had taught:

“The immediate task of directly ordering temporal realities in the light of doctrinal principles enunciated by the Magisterium corresponds specifically to the laity, who work immersed in all the circumstances and structures of secular life. But at the same time they must act with the necessary personal autonomy in making concrete decisions in their social, family, political and cultural life”⁷.

This means that no one can plead alibi or be excused from a personal commitment to bring about positive changes in his immediate society. It would not matter how little such individual input may be in the context of the magnitude of the social problem, as long as each person feels committed to the cause of the common good. This teaching for me was both a strong stimulus as well as a daring challenge. It remains consistent with the gospel teaching to which he has also energetically given practical expression, to the effect that a Christian should see himself daily as yeast within the dough of human society, and as salt in the food, with the personal responsibility and mission of giving texture and flavour to his society. In this way the coherent Christian, consistently and often imperceptibly, by his professional, family and social activities, lives out the obligation of transforming his immediate environment, effectively impacting on the tone and direction of social development in true solidarity with his professional colleagues and neighbours, and always for the common good.

I felt thus further confirmed in my resolve and enthusiasm in the different Human Rights programmes we ran in FIDA. With time, my commitment in these programmes increased and took different dimensions. By the early 90’s projections about the World Conference on Women scheduled for Beijing, China became topical. Various organisations working on Human Rights projects, particularly women’s rights and gender issues, increased their awareness campaigns on the Platform of Action proposed for the Conference. Our FIDA branch, in addition to its Family Law Centre legal services, further intensified its activities in the areas of eradication of poverty, violence, harmful traditional practices and other forms of discriminatory practices against women which infringed on their Fundamental Human Rights. We were also interested in Women’s Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights. Series of enlightenment workshops and seminars were organised in urban cities and rural areas both in English and in the ver-

⁷ *Conversations*, 11.

nacular for the illiterate communities, to bring home the right education and awareness benefits to them.

Between 1991 and 1994, three apparently unrelated events of interest occurred whose seemingly isolated impacts on me appeared to dictate the direction and degree of my involvement in Human Rights struggles for a good number of years thereafter. The events were a training workshop on Family Planning organised by one lady in my village church, another *coup d'etat* which enthroned another military administration in the country, and my appointment as the Honourable Attorney General and Commissioner for Justice of my State.

It is usual in August of every year for women living in various places to return to their home town for annual conferences at which they would discuss issues of town/community development, run lectures on assorted topics (social, moral, cultural, etc); organise variety shows and fund-raising for community development projects. The Conference usually begins and ends with a liturgical act.

At the August Conference of 1991 in my town, one particular woman attracted special attention with her announcement of a three-day train-the-trainers workshop on Family Planning after the conference. For some unexplained reason I was highly suspicious of this programme. She turned out to be an agent of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Her three-day workshop which had thirty women, mainly teachers and nurses, was a session for distribution of pamphlets on assorted contraceptives and abortifacients. These materials were doled out to the participants with lunch and transport fare. My sister-in-law, a teacher, participated in it and rushed to my house in utter horror and disgust with the 'workshop materials'. To add insult to injury the woman had conducted the workshop right inside our village church building!!! To say that I was annoyed would be an understatement. I felt a truly righteous and 'holy intransigence' (to borrow Blessed. Josemaría's phrase: cfr. *The Way*, 387, 396-398) for such impertinence. My husband and I advised my sister-in-law to sit through to the end of the workshop and collect as much of the 'materials' as she could and also to retrieve the ones given to other ladies who would be willing to surrender theirs. We later took these to our Parish priest who immediately summoned and reprimanded the ladies. He declared a period for prayers and penances for the people of the town to make atonement for defiling the Church before any Mass would be celebrated therein. He persuaded the ladies to surrender their 'workshop materials' and advised those who had used theirs to avail themselves of sacramental confession. These were all effectively implemented.

I should ordinarily have been satisfied with these steps, but somehow, that event was an important eye opener for me on the great harm being done to society by anti-life and pro-abortion campaigns which deliberately fail to provide sufficient and complete information on the subject of so-called 'reproductive rights',

so that target groups could make informed choices on the matter. A clearer picture of the extension of their reach and the magnitude of the damage already done and continuing to be done to society and nations was to unfold before me in the course of time. For that moment, I felt the serious need to engage in a programme of public education and awareness campaign to propagate the undiminished truth, so that people could exercise their rights in true freedom and consciousness of the consequences of their decisions. My particular interest in 'Women's Reproductive Rights' was kindled.

After the above event, there was yet another *coup d'état* in Nigeria. This happened in October 1993 and the administration was to last until 1999. Within this period, Human Rights violations and corruption became virtually institutionalised. The country's economy continued to decline. While a few people lived in disgraceful opulence from ill-gotten wealth, the majority of the people lived in want and suffering from lack of basic material necessities, stress, depression, and fear from a reign of terror. The cries and complaints from the lowest social stratum never rose beyond their upper lips. The middle class was stifled by the force of arms. Trade unionists were silenced either by incarceration or by money. The upper class minority was apparently comfortable and corrupt and found no need to complain! A few people who dared to raise their voices against the system paid dearly for it and others learnt to keep quiet and wait. In the face of such an inversion of values and human suffering, only a firm moral formation which gives a deep appreciation of the dignity of the human person from the multi-faceted dimension of his being, can enable one to overcome the generally pervading spell of fear, helplessness, disillusion or indifference. Blessed Josemaría seems to have anticipated or even experienced such a situation and was inspired to write that:

"A man or society which does not react to suffering and injustice and makes no effort to alleviate them is still distant from the love of Christ's heart. While Christians enjoy the fullest freedom in finding and applying various solutions to these problems, they should be united in having one and the same desire to serve mankind, otherwise their Christianity will not be the word and life of Jesus. It will be a fraud, a deception of God and man"⁸.

In the light of the above, there could be no question of giving up the zeal on human rights struggles even though the environment was intimidatingly hostile especially for persons of our class who do not have important social connections. I however realised that God in his infinite wisdom has placed me specifically in these very circumstances with those disabilities as well as the abilities with

⁸ *Christ is passing by*, 167

which He has blessed me, precisely to love Him, serve Him, to do His will and thereby bring Him glory. It is precisely in such prevailing circumstances of my country at this time in history, the circumstances of my social status, profession and social background that God expects me to work for my personal sanctity and the sanctity of others through my effort to contribute to the solution of our social problems. I could not wish for another Nigeria, or for a more conducive environment, or a better social or professional standing before I would feel obliged to respond to the visible needs of my time. Such wishful thinking would be both idle, escapist and self-deceptive. It was necessary at least to keep constantly in people's view, the fact that the system was wrong and that there was need for a restructuring of our value systems. It was also of utmost importance to preserve my own personal resolve never to yield even in small instances or to come to any compromise with the general corruption, even if the atmosphere was not conducive to much open protest or campaign. I felt continuously strengthened and the right path was always clearly kept in my view by the many teachings from the life of Blessed Josemaría which by now I had come into more frequent contact with. Apart from the opportunities I had of giving talks to various groups of women, youths, traditional rulers, etc. on moral, social and cultural topics, I saw that my profession still remained a major milieu as well as instrument for whatever personal input I could make with regards to Human Rights enforcement.

On February 2nd 1994, I was sworn in as the Honourable Attorney General and Commissioner for Justice of my State. This event suddenly catapulted me from my common place position in the thick of the deprived 'masses' to a position of Governance. In a truly democratic system, such position would ordinarily be one of great importance, but the circumstances of a military regime placed a lot of limitations to the exercise of the constitutional powers and functions of an Attorney General. I was however convinced that this was more than just a little opportunity to bring some good into people's lives in my immediate social environment. It was not an easy job trying to direct the decisions and actions of a military administration strictly along the path of the Rule of Law. More often than not, legal advice was either rejected or completely avoided if it was inconvenient or if it would introduce much protocol to the preferred military short-cut solutions which, as one can imagine, would not always accord with constitutionality and often ran afoul of Human Rights observance. On two occasions I have had to insist on the trial of an apprehended thief caught in the very act, and who would otherwise have been shot without trial. Unfortunately one of them escaped from custody and I was seriously reprimanded for it. Summary dismissal of civil servants under Decree No. 17 of 1984 was very common and any legal advice insisting on the unconstitutionality of such a decree was unpopular with a military regime. It required the use of prudence, tact, and diplomacy to blend constitu-

tionality and the Rule of Law with military strategies and approach. But most importantly I used a lot of prayer cards of Blessed Josemaría as a weapon in difficult moments.

The full power of control over criminal prosecution in the State rests with the Attorney General by the Constitution of the country. In exercise of this power, it was possible for me to rake up case files of some suspects who had been incarcerated and virtually forgotten in prison custody for years without trial. After thorough vetting of their cases, some were recommended to the Chief Judge of the State for release during his prison visits; others were directed to be discharged where no *prima facie* case was disclosed against them to ground a charge; and still others were given the opportunity of a fair trial with or without bail depending on the nature of their alleged offences. I reconstituted the State Advisory Council on the Prerogative of Mercy, which looked into the cases of condemned prisoners and made recommendations to the Governor (Military Administrator) for pardon, and total or partial remission of sentences of deserving convicts, especially those who under the existing decrees had no right of appeal against their convictions. In some of these cases we found obvious errors in the trial and judgement which could not be redressed because there was no right of appeal. Some of the cases turned out to be the vindictive use of the Police by influential persons in society to oppress their enemies or opponents. Also making use of the powers of the Attorney General under the Law, I appointed some Justices of the Peace. These are responsible men and women in various walks of life who are of good character and repute and who can help to keep peace and order in their immediate communities. They had some quasi-legal powers to intervene in criminal processes and being closer to the people in their communities they were in a position to dispense some degree of common justice to people around them. Because of the highly militarised mentality of the para-legal institutions like the Police and Prisons Authority the general handling of suspects and convicts fell far short of any respect or even bare recognition of their fundamental rights, especially rights to personal dignity, freedom from torture, and liberty of the person.

Still utilising my office as the Attorney General I organised workshops at which the various operators of criminal justice system had opportunities to interact, learn and improve on the quality of their functions and services. The workshops served as informal training for the Police, the Prisons officials, some members of the public and private Bar, Justices of the Peace and the judiciary on Human Right observance in the criminal justice system. Each of these legal and para-legal institutions was able to point out areas where there was need for improvement in the system. I was able also from the workshop experiences to articulate problems encountered in the criminal processes for discussion at the

Criminal Justice Committee of the State which comprised principally the Chief Judge as Chairman, the Hon. Attorney General, the Commissioner of Police, the Director of Prisons Services, and the Chairman of the Bar Association. Some measure of improvements were achieved in quicker dispensation of criminal justice as a result of these concerted efforts. The problems, by the mere fact of the prevailing military regime, however far out-weighted the successes recorded in these areas but the joy lay more in the effort to touch peoples lives for good even in these small measures.

My involvement in government understandably brought on a much greater professional responsibility but I still managed to keep up my participation in our FIDA project with the limitations as well as advantages introduced by my office. I was in office as Attorney General from February 1994 to March 1997 and this covered the pre and post Beijing periods. I had a good number of invitations to participate, both in official and personal capacities, in some of the seminars and workshops related to the Conference. I often had to give a talk, deliver a paper or give a keynote address. More often than not, my contributions were on 'Women's Reproductive Rights', an area I had taken keen interest in after the train-the-trainers workshop of August 1991 in my village church. I recall in particular the post-Beijing Workshop organised by our FIDA branch on 24th — 25th January 1996 at which I delivered a paper under the caption of '*Women And Reproductive Rights*'. Being conscious of the general trend at the Beijing conference which had introduced and promoted distorted views and definitions on the subject of reproductive rights and reproductive health, I took a moral yet practical perspective of the subject. This provoked a lot of heated arguments and dissensions at the workshop. I was riddled with a barrage of question missiles and oppositions to my views concerning sex education, contraception, and abortions. They were variously described as 'unrealistic', 'too religious and moralistic', 'very conservative and archaic', 'not suitable for the woman of the 20th Century', etc, etc. These were obviously pro-abortion voices which in spite of their volume still remained in the minority. The attacks only served to strengthen my determination to meet the anti-life proponents on as many fronts as there was need to. The desire to give correct and good moral information and formation on these and other dimensions of the subject of 'Reproductive Rights' has been a primary motive for my participation in a good number of national and international conferences and workshops

In addition to working under the auspices of my branch FIDA, we also formed coalition with other government and non-governmental organisations to work as a team for the improvement of Human Rights observance in the country and in my State in particular. In 1997, I was appointed Chairperson of a Joint Committee formed by our branch FIDA and my State Government to work out other possible ways of eradicating some of the prevalent harmful traditional prac-

tices like female genital mutilation, women's right of inheritance and succession and right to property; and the obnoxious widowhood practices. Working with members of other professional organisations like the Nigeria Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), Women Aid Collective (WACOL) and others, we articulated a proposed Bill on the rights of widows which was passed by the State House of Assembly on 8th March 2001. The same has now been signed into Law by the Government of the State. We are currently working on another Bill on Women's Inheritance Rights to be presented to the legislature. This will help women in similar circumstances as Monica. We also propose to form a coalition for the implementation and possible review of the National Policy on women which was recently launched in July 2001. Both within the arena of my professional organisation, and in the sphere of my private professional practice, I continue to have clients with cases of Human Rights violations for whom I try to seek redress through the courts.

9. CONCLUSION

Society is made up of individual human beings — you and I. The whole of life and living in any society is made up of a collation of the personal actions of the various individuals therein — yours and mine. It is necessary therefore to ensure the basic goodness of our individual acts in order to assure the corresponding rectitude of social life. Consistent good conduct of individuals is the fruit of a well formed mind in accordance with sound moral principles. Uninterrupted flow of good conduct makes for the smooth progress and development of the society. There is respect for the dignity and basic rights of all persons, which in turn makes for peace, happiness and stability. There is need therefore to give both human and moral formation to individual members of society in order to cultivate, develop and sustain their ability to generate good acts which determine the tone and direction of social development.

In recognition of the above I did not venture to launch out alone in the struggle for human rights. In the course of all these group activities in FIDA and other organisations I continuously take the opportunity to introduce my colleagues and friends to the life and teachings of Blessed Josemaría through our ordinary interactions as friends both by encouraging them to read his books and by introducing them to the various means of formation from which I personally have benefited immensely. I have found in these colleagues, who by their contact and exposure to the same teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá have developed the same attitudes, the much needed allies and co-operators for a better effectiveness in my efforts.