

The Teachings of Blessed Josemaría Concerning the Sanctification of Work: a Personal Experience as a Politician and a Statesman

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I will try in these few pages to express to some extent how the teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá have influenced me in my political life, particularly in my way of treating others and in my way of working as a politician and a governor.

It was Christmas Eve one year at the end of the seventies. I was making phone calls to some relatives and friends, wishing them Happy Christmas before leaving for midnight Mass. Suddenly I remembered the recommendation given by Blessed Josemaría Escrivá about the way to treat one's adversaries... Without wasting any time, I looked in the phonebook for the phone numbers of all of the political leaders of the minority parties in the legislature and surprised them, in the middle of their family celebrations, in order to share with them the joy of the commemoration of the birth of the Child Jesus. In the following years I kept the Christmas phone call as a tradition of good fellowship, as a way of overcoming the natural differences and contradictions of political activity in a parliamentary democracy.

As is well known, Blessed Josemaría did not speak or write at all about specific political problems or issues. He limited himself to making general reference to the social doctrine of the Catholic Church and emphasizing the fundamental freedom and personal responsibility of each citizen. From the general principles of the social doctrine of the Church, I tried to give priority in my career to the role and protection of the family (housing, public morality, etc.), academic freedom, the requirements of social justice in economics, solidarity within the community,

dialogue, and mutual tolerance and openness to all. These concerns led me to work to overcome the negative effects of the revolutionary period (1974-1976) as quickly as possible, by promoting the acceptance of all political parties, the normalization of their activity and the rightful place of their leaders in the official protocol. By granting amnesty to the members of other parties, I endeavoured to move beyond the excesses of the past and help construct a healthy, peaceful future of mutual understanding and cooperation.

According to Blessed Escrivá, if professional work is to be worthy to be offered God, thus becoming an instrument of sanctity and sanctification, it has to be done well. This meant that I had to correct my tendency to quickly improvise speeches, for example during my annual visits to each of the islands of the archipelago of the Azores. In place of spontaneous addresses, I began preparing detailed documents about the problems of these islands in order to improve public awareness about them and encourage local authorities to get involved in the struggle for democratic freedom and economic and social development. In other areas, I did my utmost so that official documents were correct in presentation, even re-doing them when necessary, as evidence of respect for the person, entity or community to whom they were addressed.

Blessed Josemaría also gave a number of examples about how to practice the virtue of order in performing professional duties. I tried to follow them in several aspects, and to teach them to the other members of my team. These included punctuality, before anything else in starting and in finishing, and avoiding delays which are usually unnecessary when time is well used. Another practice I learned was to divide my day into different periods, devoting each period to a specific task, while at the same time being flexible and open to more urgent things that could arise. I realized that such an attitude is necessary to work with efficiency, and above all that it allows one to give more glory to God. I also learned from Blessed Josemaría that reserving a certain place for each of my work instruments, and always trying to keep my desk drawers neat and attractive are also ways of working well, of sanctifying my work.

Blessed Josemaría also taught that we need to continually struggle to overcome selfishness in order to make all of our work a service to others. On January 1st, 1980, a violent earthquake caused serious damage on three islands of the archipelago, killing dozens of people and leaving thousands of families homeless. During the following months (which were in winter), I felt that I could help support these people by spending Sundays with them, travelling to an island that had been more seriously affected, attending the Holy Mass there in provisional facilities (after most of the churches had fallen down) and eating with them in an emergency shelter.

Josemaría Escrivá also advised specific applications of the Christian spirit of poverty, which are especially appropriate for ordinary Christians living in the middle of the world. I tried to practice poverty in this spirit by spending only what was necessary in the exercise of my duties and keeping clear distinctions between my personal and my professional expenses as elementary signs of respect for the taxpayers. Acting in this way did not prevent me from performing my duties with the required dignity, and even with magnanimity when it was necessary. Following the same principles, I did not consider gifts which I received during my time in office to be my own, knowing well that they were given in virtue of my office and not my person. I furthermore had the opportunity to direct a number of quality books that had been offered to me to public libraries so that they would be available to all people. Other gifts received from the Azorean Communities around the world (the United States, Canada, Brazil, Bermuda) went on to form the basis of an Emigration Museum.

The teachings of Blessed Josemaría about ways of practicing Christian charity with professional colleagues led me to promote a trusting climate of friendship, especially with my assistants and the members of my political party. While business meetings were always intense and sometimes dealt with difficult or controversial problems, a serene and even good-humoured mood usually prevailed. In place of sterile oral discussions, I encouraged the calm study of problems in written form, as this often allows for more thoughtful and more dispassionate consideration of issues. This method also saves time, which can then be spent on other tasks. I also would not tolerate lying or gossiping. Friendship, solidarity and a healthy climate of loyalty made my team stronger and enabled us to deal more effectively with the problems at hand and with the politicians in opposition.

As is well known, it is all too easy for politicians in a competitive multi-party system to bypass ethical requirements, respect for the truth and respect for the dignity of the human person in the pursuit of political ends. In such circumstances, the words and example of Blessed Josemaría have helped me to remember that charity is always our first norm, to be practised both in speaking to and about others, and in understanding and forgiving the faults of others. His words have helped me to try extend an attitude of openness and truthfulness, and even of cordiality to politicians in opposition. As evidence of my respect for democratic rules, I tried never to treat my adversaries as enemies, and I looked forward to maintaining open and sincere relationships with them, even though politics by its very nature always implies some measure of conflict. On one particularly difficult occasion, this attitude led me to meet personally with the leaders of other parties, even though they had very different ideological perspectives. I explained our position, heard theirs, and worked from there towards a common understanding and a common resolution of the crisis. With some modifications to our

initial plan, and more importantly, with the support of these other groups, we were able to go ahead with our project.

I was also inspired by Blessed Josemaría, in that he always forgave others and asked to be forgiven, when he thought he might have hurt or otherwise wronged someone. At the end of my political career, in my farewell address on radio and television, I publicly offered my apologies to anyone who considered himself or herself hurt by me and I forgave anyone who wronged me in anyway.

In summary, the example and teachings of Blessed Josemaría have helped me to try to sanctify my life and work as a politician and statesman for almost twenty years. And I have seen that, contrary to what many say, it is possible to be a coherent Christian politician in the modern world.