

Civic Responsibility & Participation

Marie-Thérèse Pallut

She has been Professor of Applied Linguistics for the Course in French Civilization of La Sorbonne (Paris, France) since 1976.

As far back as I can remember, whenever I realized that something was around me was going wrong, I somehow felt responsible. It seemed to me that either I had said or done something wrong or that I had omitted doing something that I should have done. Meanwhile, in my ‘home sweet home’, I was taught not to feel responsible for my surroundings, since there was no need “to concern oneself about what is none of one’s business”. Despite this family wisdom, I did worry about family problems, quarrels at school, and what I knew about international or local conflicts, thinking naively: “But they only have to do this or that to solve their problems!”

When I was at university, I heard about emergency and First Aid courses offered by the Red Cross. On weekends, I went to the local police station to volunteer. The people working there had not gone to university but I was impressed by their goodness, by their humanity that was being developed by their generosity and availability for others. Many of the people in need were older people with more or less serious illnesses who were alone in the world, and married couples who were fighting, often because of alcohol problems. These were my ‘educational Sundays’. Two years later, I passed an examination that allowed me to take on more responsibilities in this work. I also realized that some of the people who did this work were seeking to fill a void in their lives; they were trying to give expression to their desire to live working in the service of others.

Four or five years later, I had to give up this work due to other commitments and especially due to my involvement in the student union at the Sorbonne in Paris, where I was completing my degree in humanities. This was during the late 1970s. This involvement made sense to me since I did not want to be just a ‘consumer’ of the university; I wanted to help it function properly. However, I

was surprised to see that every time the government decided something which related to the university, the student movements would immediately create a situation of conflict which not only interrupted classes, but also impeded the normal functioning of the university, the exams schedules, etc. Many students lost an entire year of university due to such actions. My spontaneous reaction to such situations was conservative, a desire to keep the balance I perceived in the existing stable social model. But my vision of the situation was not always objective. I thought it was better to preserve what we had than to run the risk of losing even that. Later I realized that the students who wanted to change everything were influenced by an ideology that was threatening to the human person, his freedom and his true dignity. And because these students refused to be ‘economic victims of capitalism’, they instead allowed themselves to become victims of political interests and an ideological pretext.

Committing myself to the ‘traditional’ trade union, I thought I was serving the best values of work, effort and intellectual truth, as Simone de Beauvoir had put it in *Mémoires d’une jeune-fille rangée*, participating in the effort of Humanity to know, understand, and express itself. I thought I could change the world. However, shortly thereafter, I came to the conclusion that these efforts were not leading anywhere. I no longer had the impression that I was serving *something* or *someone* in particular in these ‘noble tasks of the university’. My malaise became more noticeable and a certain personal moral issue put into question the ‘authenticity of my commitment’. In short, the other students decided that I no longer met the required standards.

1. COMING INTO CONTACT WITH THE MESSAGE OF JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ DE BALAGUER

During the course of these reflections, I met another student at the Sorbonne who had agreed to help me in the student elections. She introduced me to the UNIV Congress, which she was preparing to attend in Rome in the Easter of 1980. The topic, aims and spirit of the Congress — the positive impact that university students could have on the world — struck a chord in me. At the same time, they elevated my own ideals and aspirations with the perspective of eternity. I became very enthusiastic! Shortly thereafter, this friend introduced me to Josemaría Escrivá through *The Way*, wherein I read that “men — like fish — have to be caught by the head”¹.

¹ *The Way*, 978.

The teachings of Blessed Josemaría proved a real revelation to me. From *The Way*, I learned that I was a ‘grain of wheat’ that needed to bury itself and die in order for there to be a harvest². In *Furrow*, I read: “It is difficult to make one’s mark through quiet work and the proper fulfilment of our duties as citizens, so that later one can demand one’s rights and place them in the service of the Church and of society. It is difficult, but it is very effective”³. Finally in *The Forge*, I was confronted with the following consideration: “Think what would happen if we Christians chose not to behave as such... and then rectify your conduct⁴”. In short, I came to understand that in order to change the world, I needed to decide to change myself.

I realized that in order to achieve my goals in life, it was not a question of being in ‘line’ with this or that thinker, but rather of struggling to become a better person, and then as a corollary, of helping the people and the world around me. Because society is healthy if its members are healthy, the sanctification of society begins with personal sanctification. Without pretending that all social and economic systems are of equal value, I concluded that they would have less negative effects in their radical expressions, if those who want to accomplish change began by changing themselves. The value of a society does not come so much from its particular structures as it does from the quality of its citizens. I saw at the same time that this new extraordinarily ambitious landscape was both exciting and attainable thanks to the grace of God.

“A university”, wrote Blessed Josemaría, “should not form men who will egoistically consume the benefits they have achieved through their studies. Rather it should prepare students for a life of generous help of their neighbour, of Christian charity... I myself measure the sincerity of concern for others in terms of works of service”⁵.

Through my experience in student union politics, I realized that I expected coherence between the lives, ideas and ideals that people claimed to serve, and I saw that I had to begin with myself. I also noticed that many ideological groups and political parties tend to imprint upon their militant members a desire to conform to the ‘party line’ to such an extent that there is often little room for personal initiative and creativity on the part of individual members. The leaders of such groups often refuse to listen to ideas that they does emanate from their own camp or systematically suggest the opposite of whatever their opponents propose in order not to give the impression of agreeing with them.

² *The Way*, 938.

³ *Furrow*, 300.

⁴ *The Forge*, 95.

⁵ *Conversations*, 75.

In such a climate, speeches and political life in general becomes weighed down with contradictory arguments that paralyse creativity, common sense and serious thought about the issues. This appears even more curious when one sees the same people in the private sector act in a much more daring and sensible way, finding ways of resolving problems by working with others for the service of others.

Sometimes, presenting oneself as a Christian in the political sphere can mean being refused the opportunity to speak, as if this in itself were something suspicious. I realized that we need to be daring to express our opinions to as many people as possible, even to those who hold contrary opinions. As Blessed Josemaría said, “A Christian ‘lay outlook’ of this sort will enable you to flee from all intolerance, from all fanaticism. To put it in a positive way, it will help you to live in peace with all your fellow citizens, and to promote this understanding and harmony in all spheres of social life”⁶.

Negative reflections on my involvement in student unions led me to shy away from political involvement for a period. However, the teachings of Blessed Josemaría helped me to realize that a child of God has the responsibility to take his or her place in society, acting with rectitude in the accomplishment of his or her responsibilities. In effect, to renounce any political involvement with the excuse of one’s faith or the difficulties involved would mean renouncing involvement in temporal affairs, and therefore the life of an ordinary Christian to which one is called by baptism. As Blessed Josemaría says, we need to be ‘of the world’ but not ‘worldly’⁷.

2. THE CHANGES IN MY LIFE

My contact with the teachings of Blessed Josemaría helped me to realize that it was not necessary for me to belong to any particular political group or party in order to work for the common good in society. There are many ways to take one’s individual responsibility as a citizen seriously. For example, I could work with a certain responsible politician, if I agree with his or her policies or objectives, as long as he or she acts in an upright way. In such a case, I would have the responsibility to make sure that the politician followed through with his or her policies or campaign promises. This would be a matter of individual commitment in function of certain objectives, such as to guide and support upright poli-

⁶ *Ibidem*, 117.

⁷ *The Way*, 939.

cies regarding the family, education, social justice, or cultural development. As Blessed Josemaría said, “it is the task of Christians, in His name, to reconcile all things to God, placing Christ, by means of their work in the middle of the world, at the summit of all human activities”⁸.

I also concluded that we have the duty to be present in different places: being a good citizen does not mean being keeping to oneself and not causing problems, to the point of being completely useless to one’s society. Rather, we have to speak clearly, without any ambiguity, and not be afraid of revealing what we are really trying to achieve. Especially since I got married, I have begun again to speak up in different circles such as my children’s primary and secondary schools in order to help improve the educational system.

Just as I contact political candidates to explain my concerns about safety and drifting youth in my town, I think it is natural for me to volunteer on a committee to improve communication and help find solutions before tense social situations become violent. This has given me opportunities to work towards a spirit of solidarity in my local community. Sometimes I find it difficult to deal with the prejudices that other people have against people from other countries and backgrounds. Some of these people are even surprised to see a Christian welcome people of other religions into our town.

I do still stay involved in our professional trade union at the Sorbonne for teachers in Applied Linguistics, where we work to find solutions to small problems. I believe that Christian trade unionism presupposes firm commitment to social justice, which includes working in order to have the human dignity of all workers respected. The social or economic model Christians have to defend is not of this or that organization, but rather of a society where professional work allows people to carry out their civic duties and become authentic human beings.

In addition, I have seen that civil commitment begins with individual friendship. This is something that was brought home to me by a woman who worked in my home a few years ago. She was sick and depressed and had a five-year-old daughter. Sometimes her husband would come home drunk and smash up the house, and she would have to leave her apartment and sleep with her daughter in her car, in the parking lot. She was crushed with debt. She told me that she wanted to commit suicide and let me raise her daughter.

I tried to help her with her most serious problems. I understood that, above all, she needed to talk about her problems. One day, she told me “out of loyalty” that she was a Jehovah’s Witness. She expected that I would then throw her out, as others had done, but of course I did no such thing. She was a very

⁸ *Conversations*, 59.

good worker, which was why I was surprised one day when I came home to find her work only half-done. She explained that she had seen *The Forge* ('What a title', she laughed!) on my night table and she could not stop reading it. "I felt so reassured from the first words", she said. "I will never again say such stupid things as I did about wanting to commit suicide!" I thought for sure she had read the point that says: "When you find yourself worn out or fed up, go and confide in Our Lord, as that good friend of ours did, and say: Jesus, see what you can do about it. Even before I begin to struggle, I am already tired. He will give you his strength"⁹. In this experience, I saw first hand that the message of Blessed Josemaría speaks to each soul, because his tone and words are the simplicity of life and they touch all people who are searching for authentic life.

I will conclude with these enlightening and encouraging words from *Furrow*: "When I ask you always to be faithful in the service of God and souls, it is not an easy enthusiasm I am looking for. It is the enthusiasm you can acquire in the world when you see how much there is to be done everywhere"¹⁰.

⁹ *The Forge*, 244.

¹⁰ *Furrow*, 298.