

# **My Experience in Public Administration. Trying to be just and charitable**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás liked to introduce himself in this manner. He played on the Spanish word for 'write' ('escribir') and the abundant writings through which he had transmitted his message. It is precisely because he wrote a lot that we have a rich heritage of spiritual guidance to mould our character in every endeavour of our lives. The writings of Blessed Josemaría profoundly influence many spheres of human activity because the human spirit is addressed plainly and forthrightly. These writings constitute an important part of the means available many to people to help them to sanctify all of their noble human activities.

## **2. RESPONSIBILITIES**

To appreciate the milieu of public administrators' work in Kenya it would be worthwhile to give some background information about the public sector. Administrators face daily challenges in the pursuit for sanctity at work in particular and life in general. It is true that all human endeavours face varying degrees of challenges, however, a Christian working in the public sector in my country faces special challenges. A Christian with a calling to sanctify their work faces ridicule everywhere they turn. Blessed Josemaría provides solace when he says,

“Convince yourself that there is no such thing as ridicule for whoever is doing what is best”<sup>1</sup>.

As an administrator, one is called to make decisions that affect the lives of many people all the time. The public always expects and pushes for favorable decisions with little regard to justice. As far as they are concerned, justice is only served when they are favorably treated. No matter how well one was trained and experienced, there are always painful decisions to be made. In these instances, one needs to call on one’s Christian faith to act justly. However, with faith one needs the charity to understand the complex nature of human behavior. A personal code of ethics is required to discharge one’s daily duties according to the call to holiness. One of the guiding lights Blessed Josemaría provides is when he says “when a man (woman) gives way in matters of ideals, of honour, or of Faith that man is without ideals, without honour and without Faith”<sup>2</sup>, because “(anyone) ready to compromise would condemn Jesus to death again”<sup>3</sup>. Following the teachings of Blessed Josemaría, administrators have the spiritual strength and nourishment to aspire to holiness.

### 3. SERVICE

Sanctity is a way of life. Service in the public sector calls for one to Serve with a capital ‘S’. This service should have ‘Duc in Altum’<sup>4</sup> as its rallying call. Blessed Josemaría said the value of a task depends on the personal conditions of the one who exercises it, on the love of God that is put into it: “Besides, all work can have the same supernatural quality. There are no great or mean tasks. All are great if they are done with love. Those which are considered great become small when the Christian meaning of life is lost sight of. On the other hand, there are apparently small things that can in fact be very great because of their real effects”<sup>5</sup>. In this way tasks should not be performed robotically but with zeal.

Public servants should exercise a detachment from material goods in all their endeavours. One of the most sickening aspects of public life is its infamous reputation that all public servants, especially administrators in decision-making positions are corrupt. This insidious menace has penetrated every fiber of public life to the point of being the rule rather than the exception. The teachings of

<sup>1</sup> *The Way*, 392.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 394.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 393.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. *Lk* 5:4; *Friends of God*, 21; *The Way*, 792.

<sup>5</sup> *Conversations*, 109.

Blessed Josemaría are very clear about detachment from worldly goods. He counsels that “if you want to be your own masters at all times, I advise you to make a very real effort to be detached from everything, and to do so without fear or hesitation. [...] make honest use of upright human means with a view to serving God, his Church, your family, your profession, your country and the whole of mankind”<sup>6</sup>.

A public administrator serves both the public at large and those under their charge. In essence, they are agents of change. This calls for daily apostolate in all their contacts. Pope John Paul II struck the same vein of thought as Blessed Josemaría when he stated his position on apostolate in the homily which he gave on the occasion of his beatification on May 17, 1992:

“With supernatural intuition, Blessed Josemaría untiringly preached the universal call to holiness and apostolate. Christ calls everyone to become holy in the realities of everyday life. Hence, work too is a means of personal holiness and apostolate when it is lived in union with Jesus Christ”.

The call to do personal apostolate at places of work is therefore one area an administrator can fruitfully and positively engage in as a change agent.

#### 4. GENDER

Working as a woman administrator poses its own peculiar challenges. Traditional societies do not always recognize the fact that women can perform duties formally reserved for men competently. This has led many women to compromise their values in order to climb up the ladder of success. Blessed Josemaría was very specific in his teachings about steadfastness. He advises that one should “Be uncompromising in doctrine and conduct. But be yielding in manner. A mace of tempered steel, wrapped in a quilted covering. Be uncompromising, but don’t be obstinate”<sup>7</sup>. A woman who carries herself with dignity, self-assurance and is steadfast would never have the need to compromise her values. Sooner or later people would respect her for who she is. Sometimes this does happen and one would have no alternative other than to resign. Painful, yes but the alternative as Bl. Josemaría teaches would be even more disastrous. ‘Duc in Altum’! Aiming high in the service of our Lord through our fellow brothers and sisters could have secular setbacks, but nothing less would not be sanctifying.

<sup>6</sup> *Friends of God*, 118.

<sup>7</sup> *The Way*, 397.

## 5. POWER

Administration ultimately involves power that is exercised in the discharge of duty. Public administration also involves working with politicians of every shade. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of serving the public.

Politicians by their nature always demand expedience in handling their affairs. This expedience may invariably be against the values one holds dear or at times immoral and unpalatable to justice. It is apt that St. Thomas More has just been declared the patron saint of politicians and statesmen. His views on how to handle power and politicians are in unison with what Blessed Josemaría teaches. An apostolic letter published by Pope John Paul II, which explained his elevation, states that “given his inflexible firmness in rejecting any compromise with his conscience”<sup>8</sup>. St Thomas More chooses to go to prison and ultimately death. This in essence sums up what Bl. Josemaría teaches about life in public service. I think the way that St. Thomas More acted manifests what Blessed Josemaría taught: that the Christian is — using St. Augustine’s image — a citizen of two cities, one temporal and one eternal, and that this belonging (his faithfulness to his divine vocation) is united to the way he acts as a citizen and how he seeks the common good. He hopes to reach heaven and he has no illusions with regards to the transitory nature of earthly life, but he by no means distances himself from this world. On the contrary, he sees in this the way to “put Christ at the summit of all human activities”<sup>9</sup>, to recapitulate all things in Christ. You might also mention that Blessed Josemaría drew attention above all to the loyalty of St. Thomas More to both God and his country, and that he acted with rectitude of intention in consequence.

St. Thomas would never have achieved holiness in political life without constant prayer. Because of his example it is possible to serve God first in politics. It may mean going against the grain and popular views but one should not give up doing apostolate among the politicians.

Blessed Josemaría teaches us to temper our activities with charity. Christian charity should “Force yourself, if necessary, always to forgive those who offend you, from the very first moment. For the greatest injury or offence that you can suffer from them is as nothing compared with what God has pardoned you”<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Motu proprio proclaiming Saint Thomas More Patron of Statesmen and Politicians*, 31 October 2000, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *The Forge*, 685; *Conversations*, 59; *Friends of God*, 58; *Christ is Passing By*, 156; *ibidem*, 183.

The saying that power corrupts absolutely should remind us that the position one holds is to serve others. It is not for self-glorification or advancement but to serve those entrusted to one's care. Blessed Josemaría's teachings are a guiding lighting on these matters.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion Blessed Josemaría counsels that there are two ways of reaching the top: one — the Christian way — by noble and gallant effort of serving others: the other — the pagan way — by the mean and ignoble effort of dragging down your neighbor. Through the teachings of Blessed Josemaría, we know that a life dedicated to the service of others is a life dedicated to serving our Lord. His teachings are a guiding light in a world full of hazards, which prey on our souls. The teachings and example of Blessed Josemaría sustain souls in the daily struggle to sanctify every aspect of human activity.