

Developing a More Compassionate Environmental Attitude

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1. INTRODUCTION

My first introduction to the teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá was about 20 years ago when I had just started my Ph.D research work. I was most fascinated by his views on *work* and the connection he made about this with Opus Dei as the ‘work of God’. Although the idea of doing my work for God was not foreign to me, I found the depth of his consideration of this subject to be spiritually novel, and yet, simple and truthful. From this experience, I became very keen to know more about his teachings and found myself reading several books about him or those that he had written. Soon the knowledge that all work can be offered up to God for good intentions gave work and indeed hard work, which I was already used to, a whole new meaning. My efforts and struggle in living this teaching raised the standard of my work to a higher plane and I knew back then that I must find ways of passing on the teachings of Blessed Josemaría in my professional work.

The main opportunity I have had in spreading and incorporating the teachings of Blessed Josemaría in my professional work has been through my lectures and practical work with my students on environmental issues. A very relevant and useful teaching of Blessed Josemaría for me in this task is his view that “this world of ours will be saved, let me remind you, not by those who try to deaden awareness of the life of the spirit, reducing everything to a matter of economics or material well-being, but by those who have faith in God and in the eternal destiny of man, and who know how to receive the truth of Christ as a light

providing direction for action and conduct [...]”¹. In living the spirit of this teaching in my profession I have, through my examples and lectures, encouraged my students not to focus on the *pessimistic* and *materialistic* concerns that are often central to some of the current debates on environmental issues. This teaching has also made it obvious to me that if we are to solve global environmental problems we need to expand our concern to include genuine consideration for the spiritual, social and moral needs of the human person. I often use these human dimensions to emphasise to my students of the need for us to be more compassionate and be more considerate of others who are less fortunate when dealing with environmental issues. I also often challenge them to respond consciously and not passively to the debates on environmental issues of social significance. In doing this I am always mindful that a desire to work for the common good must be matched through my profession by forming competent men and women who can pass on to others the maturity which they have achieved.

In the rest of this presentation, I will share with you how the teachings of Blessed Josemaría have helped me in encouraging my environmental science and chemistry students to develop a more compassionate environmental attitude. I will also demonstrate how these teachings have encouraged me to take a stance for social responsibility, particularly in those dimensions that are specifically human, in dealing with our current environmental issues.

2. RESPONDING TO CHANGE

The acceptance of change or the need to change some of our past habits and take responsibility for our actions can be a daunting task, especially when we are very much set in our ways of doing things. Blessed Josemaría gave me a vivid and useful example in this area, of how we should not be afraid of change even in or up to our old age, by demonstrating, at over seventy years old and having said Mass for forty-seven years under the old rubrics, that he was still as determined as ever to say Mass as perfectly as possible under the new rubrics². I have found this example of Blessed Josemaría useful in emphasising the need and willingness to respond to change with a positive attitude in my lectures. This has been particularly useful in diffusing the often pessimistic messages associated with some of the global environmental issues in the media. This example of Blessed Jose-

¹ J. ESCRIVÁ, Talk of 9 May 1974, “El compromiso de la verdad”, in *Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y la Universidad*, Pamplona 1993, p. 109.

² J.M. GARCÍA LAHIGUERA, in *Testimonies to a Man of God: Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, New York 1992, vol. 1, pp. 25-28.

maría has spurred me on over the years to focus on teaching others about the true issues involved with our global environmental problems, with the expectation that people will respond more easily to change if they have a better understanding of the issues involved. My efforts in this area over the years have included academic lectures, public environmental forums, radio and television interviews, newspaper articles and seminar/conference presentations.

Blessed Josemaría's teaching on *human weakness* also reminds me constantly about my responsibility in this area because as he said: "[...] We do not love justice if we do not wish to see it fulfilled in the lives of others. In the same way it is wrong to shut oneself up in comfortable religiosity, forgetting the needs of others"³. I have been drawn by these words on many occasions to act for the needs of others, rather than focusing only on my personal professional accomplishments. One example of this was when I was drawn, on my reflection on these words, to speak out in 1991 for a concerned community about environmental pollution in a suburb called Londonderry in Western Sydney where our university is located. At that time there was growing concern that a government-owned waste treatment and processing plant located in the area was introducing nasty pollutants to the environment, but the issue, and the concern of the local community, was not being taken seriously. With the desire to see justice done in the life of the people of Londonderry I decided to carry out a voluntary independent investigation in this area. This action subsequently resulted in several interviews in the newspapers, radio and television, bringing the issue and concern of the people to the fore. Before long there was a government inquiry and other investigations in this area, in both of which I participated. On the balance of available evidence, the state government decided to close down the waste treatment plant in Londonderry. The courage for me to stick my neck out in such a controversial issue is rooted in this and other teachings of Blessed Josemaría and I always use this example to encourage my students to develop a spirit of *generosity*, particularly in caring about the needs of others. I strongly believe that this is the expectation of Blessed Josemaría of my academic profession when he said that "university people should be responsible citizens with a healthy concern for the problems of other people and a generous spirit which bring them to face these problems and to resolve them in the best possible way. It is the task of the universities to foster these activities in their students"⁴.

³ *Christ is Passing By*, 52.

⁴ *Conversations*, 74.

3. RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Central to the need for us to be generous and more caring about others is what I often describe to my student: as the *Greed Factor* — the desire to want more than we require. The more we want the quicker we deplete our resources and the more waste we generate. I have found the teaching of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá on *poverty*: “[...] don’t create needs for yourself”⁵ to be very useful in teaching about the dangers of *materialism*. I often demonstrate the need to struggle against this temptation by avoiding, and encouraging my students and staff to avoid, the often mad rush about purchasing the latest gadgets. Even in my professional work I often emphasize the need to buy only what is absolutely necessary for whatever we do.

The need to control our greed is even more pressing at a global level. Let us consider two of the well-known global environmental issues, such as global warming and the hole in the ozone layer. The main contributors to the cause of these problems are the high-income nations. Among them they contribute 22% of the global population, but they use 80% of the global resources and generate 80% of all wastes and pollutants. There is, without doubt, a serious imbalance here with respect to resource utilisation and waste generation which I often highlight to my students, and in particular a need for those of us in high income nations where all the resources are available, to be more compassionate and generous to others in low income nations and to work against wastage of resources. This also helps me to emphasize that the need to overcome *greed* and *selfishness*, driven by the on-going push for *materialism* and *self-centredness* in high-income nations, should be uppermost in our thoughts. The cause and danger of selfishness is well explained by Blessed Josemaría who stated that “it is pride that constantly makes people think: ‘mine, mine, mine’. It is a vice that makes men sterile and fruitless. It destroys their keenness to work for God and leads them to waste their time. As for you, don’t lose your effectiveness; instead, trample on your selfishness. You think your life is for yourself? Your life is for God, for the good of all men, through your love of our Lord”⁶. I find this teaching useful in highlighting that the root-cause of the problem with greed and selfishness is *pride* which can be wasteful, but can be overcome if we trample on it. I also demonstrate this to my students by being more considerate and patient in my dealings with them and giving more of myself to my staff and students.

⁵ *The Way*, 630.

⁶ *Friends of God*, 47.

4. NEED FOR A CHANGE OF ATTITUDE

One area where the teaching of Blessed Josemaría has most influenced my view on global environmental issues is in responding to the on-going myths about population growth and environment. If we consider that most of our global resources are used up in the less populated high-income nations where most of the global wastes and pollutants are generated it becomes clearer that some of the views expressed in this area do not stand up to scrutiny. The real twist in this debate lies in the fact that most low-income nations do not produce enough food for their populations and they cannot afford to import food to meet the shortfall. To clarify the nature of this problem I often highlight to my students that the world food production has generally increased faster than population growth since 1950. In fact the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization has recently estimated that the world could feed 30-35 billion people if we fully employed present technologies. This is 5-6 times more than our current global population. I find this useful in stressing to my students that what is needed is a better strategy for a fair and even distribution of our global food resources, as well as a great expression of *compassion* to those in low-income nations. The teaching of Blessed Josemaría on *generosity* has been useful here in providing a simple basis for explaining why we need a fair and even distribution of global resources, such as food, and how it can be accomplished. Undoubtedly, a reappraisal of global food production will be required to make this work. One of the points I highlight to my students is that it is of no immediate benefit to the low-income nations if all we want to do is to argue against deforestation in countries and regions, such as Brazil and Africa, while the majority of people in these parts of the world can still not be fed. I often find this example useful in emphasising to my students that we cannot just shrug our shoulders and go about our own business without a fair concern that God gave us the earth to use, not only for our own good, but for that of our neighbours as well.

In conclusion, the teachings of Blessed Josemaría have provided me, over the years, with the necessary tools for developing a more compassionate environmental attitude in my students. More specifically, his teachings on *work*, *generosity*, *human weakness* and *poverty* have helped me to highlight the wastefulness and dangers of *selfishness*, *materialism* and *pessimism* to my students. This has consequently enabled me to train them to become mature and competent men and women who are willing to share and use their knowledge for the good of society.