

Working Towards Socio-Economic Integration

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The presentation at the Congress in Rome began with a video displaying the problems associated with socio-economic disintegration in Chicago and the need for a solution. Although this video was made in the 'inner city' the central section of the City of Chicago where social isolation is apparent and economically disadvantaged are concentrated as a population, it could have been made in the impoverished section of any high-density urban area in the world.

Neither the problems nor the needs in such areas are new. However, they were probably less pronounced in 1965, when a group of businessmen started Midtown Educational Foundation (MEF) and acquired three buildings on Loomis St. in the inner city of Chicago. These men gathered together to begin a lay initiative to help children who lacked the challenge and guidance necessary for them to strive to develop as individuals and overcome the circumstances and conditions in which they found themselves.

Since some of these pioneers were faithful of Opus Dei, from the very beginning, the programs were imbued with the teachings of Blessed Josemaría on the dignity of each human person, regardless of their social, economic, racial, ethnic or religious background. The early Midtown programs were limited to boys and were in the form of clubs for learning boxing, photography, woodworking, and so forth. By the early 1970's, after learning from trial and error, the programs were definitively set on supplementary education, character development and athletics.

Extraordinary success was achieved. 95% of boys participating completed high school versus less than 50% of their peers, and 60% went on to college ver-

sus less than 20% for inner city kids coming from similar circumstances. Public recognition for Midtown's excellence grew, and the need to assist inner city girls was obvious. This resulted in creating the Metro programs for girls in 1985. It was also in 1985 that the parent organization, the Midtown Education Foundation, was established to provide a focal point for general management, administration and fund raising for both Midtown and Metro.

Since 1985, the boys and girls programs have grown in size and also continued to produce excellent results. No other initiative, whether government or private charity, has duplicated the results produced by Midtown and Metro. Also, no other program up until now has embodied the idea that the dignity of each human being cannot be fragmented, in quite the way that we have. We believe that each person must be seen and dealt with in a holistic way that treats the academic, psychological, physical and spiritual dimension of the person. Full integration of the person means achieving a unity of life.

The success of both programs has continued and their excellence has been recognized and honored with awards in the United States and internationally. Why such success? How are Midtown and Metro different from other initiatives? In large part, the differences are due to the application of the teachings of Blessed Josemaría. Let us consider, using a few quotes from his many writings, how Metro and Midtown have attempted to 'materialize' Escrivá's inspiration:

"In other words: if you want to follow Christ, to serve the Church and help other men to recognize their eternal destiny, there is no need to leave the world or keep it at arm's length. You don't even need to take up an ecclesiastical activity. The only condition which is both necessary and sufficient is to fulfil the mission which God has given you, in the place and in the environment indicated by his Providence"¹. This lay initiative in 1965 did not take place outside the inner city nor seek to remove the children from their environment. It dealt with the problem in the place where they and the children were located.

"If you lose the supernatural meaning of your life, your charity will be philanthropy [...] and all your works, fruitless"². The founding and persisting motivation of guidance was and remains 'all' for the glory of God.

"Ordinary work is not only the context in which they should become holy. It is the 'raw material' of their holiness"³. Be it Board of Directors governance or staff or volunteer work, the opportunity to live 'unity of life' is a reality because

¹ *Conversations*, 60.

² *The Way*, 280.

³ *Conversations*, 70.

of MEF. In speaking here about ‘work’, Blessed Josemaría was also referring to all of the interpersonal relationships which derive from it. In other words, the whole range of ordinary life insofar as it is colored by work.

“Our life belongs to God. We are here to spend it in his service, concerning ourselves generously with souls, showing, through our words and our example, the extent of the Christian dedication that is expected of us”⁴. Serving others is not just helping their earthly welfare; it means bringing them closer to God. Corporal works of mercy without supernatural content become simply good deeds with very limited effect. The success of MEF can be found in MEF’s emphasis on the dignity and divine filiation of each person.

Apostolate refers to a whole range of activities including actually announcing Christ to people and the efforts of individuals to infuse their surrounding with a Christian spirit. The message of Blessed Josemaría (and consequently the mission of Opus Dei) is the universal call to holiness, as affirmed solemnly by the Second Vatican Council. As lay people, this call is to be answered where we are, namely, in the middle of the world. All the circumstances in which life places us bring opportunities for us to respond with love and service to others. As Blessed Josemaría taught, “in our apostolate we give primary and fundamental importance to the spontaneity of the individual, to free and responsible initiative guided by the action of the Spirit, and not to organizational structures and tactics imposed from above, from the seat of government”⁵.

The socio-economic disintegration represented in the opening video is remedied by MEF in at least three ways or types of integration:

First of all, we work towards the integration of the person by having everyone involved: board members, staff members, volunteers and those who work in program content all treat each child’s dignity in a holistic way. It is believed that character development is this holistic view’s most important dimension. Teaching, mentoring and role modeling human virtue is foundational to the development of the spiritual life. The virtue component of the programs is where MEF differentiates itself from other inner city initiatives.

Social integration occurs automatically from MEF’s program content and structure. Simply the one-on-one interpersonal interaction between volunteers and inner city kids; inner city parents with staff and volunteers, inner city kids

⁴ *Christ is passing by*, 93.

⁵ *Conversations*, 19.

with other kids from different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds and communities causes social integration to naturally occur.

Finally, economic integration occurs primarily as a consequence of the need to obtain private funding for the growing programs. The majority of this funding is from local corporations and foundations. The programs thus serve to bridge the corporate sector and the inner city poor. The solicitation of local business leaders by MEF Board members, staff and volunteers for financial support creates an awareness of the inner city social problem and needs that result not only in financial help but also direct involvement of many business leaders and employees of their companies as volunteers. Over 90% of funding for MEF has been from private non-government sources. The majority of such funding is from corporations and foundations.

These three types of integration are themselves a source of further integration since all activity occurs within the context of the MEF initiative. The integration and apostolic influence is carried on by all who become involved or simply in direct contact with MEF. Although this apostolate is carried out primarily by Catholics, it is not a Catholic initiative. It is rather an apostolate of personal initiative, as each individual involved sees his or her responsibility to address a need in society that goes beyond a particular material need. It is a personal involvement of one's Christian self in the secular environment, institutions and lives of people and it is done one person at a time.