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The Teachings of Josemaría Escrivá in an African Context

An article by noted Kenyan author Margaret Ogola on the relevance of St. Josemaría's teachings to Africa.

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Love is perennial and youthful. So is this continent, 60% of whose population are under the age of twenty-five. The momentum of the youthfulness of the peoples of Africa will necessarily carry this continent

beyond its current woes and upheavals to the realization of a truly African dream where people will take responsibility for their homeland and cease to expect help from where none is forthcoming.

There are many things which move me deeply in the teachings of Saint Josemaría Escrivá, but perhaps the one that has had the greatest impact on my life, my outlook, my hopes, is the concept that every baptized person is expected to take full responsibility for the attainment of full Christian and social maturity. There are no second-class citizens in the world-view of the founder of Opus Dei. All are called to struggle for sanctity right where they are — sanctity being walking in friendship with God in the highways and alleyways of this world wherever his children are to be found — working, suffering, living.

"Heroism, sanctity, daring, require a constant spiritual preparation. You can only give to others what you already have. And in order to give God to them, you yourself need to get to know him, to live his Life, to serve him." (The Forge, no. 78). This ringing call is not for a few specially gifted or set apart people, but amazingly enough it is for all. I truly found it amazing that anyone could take the lay faithful so seriously. This attitude does cut dependency at the knees. One has no choice but to stand up and be counted.

Africans too, and in particular, are not second-class citizens of the world doomed to be dependent on others for all manner of handouts. Help yes, as one brother gives to another who happens to have fallen into difficulties — culpable or otherwise — looking him straight in the eye, as a brother who stands on an equal but firmer footing, should. In this regard,

I have great doubts regarding the form of aid now being doled out to Africa by the monetary institutions and governments of the west and in particular through the state. There is something disturbingly pernicious about a type of aid that leaves an entire continent not only inescapably indebted, but also totally dependent. But help yes — as one brother gives to another.

One tends to forget, perhaps because of the rapid adaptability of Africans, that only barely one hundred years ago, this continent was in the early iron-age. Within this short period of time we have had to adopt systems of thought and governance that others have had hundreds or even thousands of years to experiment with. What's more, we have had to do it in their languages. Thereby we have gained and lost at the same time. In having no choice but to learn and be facile in other languages we

have had the great benefit of looking into the minds of others and into the minds of their great thinkers and have greatly benefited. But often these others have felt no great need to learn our languages and thus be in a position to look into our souls to truly understand why we laugh when we laugh and why we weep when we weep. This is diminishing, for in every language is coded generation upon generation of human aspiration and endeavour. No wonder some great attempts to assist have foundered.

In any case the African loves to learn and this longing finds powerful echo in the words of St. Josemaría. "Study. Study in earnest. If you are to be salt and light, you need knowledge and capability. Or do you imagine that an idle and lazy life will entitle you to receive infused knowledge?" (The Way, no. 340). Indeed Josemaría Escrivá urges all his children to

strive to have "the doctrine of theologians and the piety of little children." In short, he does not encourage the kind of easy formulae for rapid salvation that some look for — a formalistic or pietistic religion where attendance without commitment or emotions without thought is the order of the day. Rather he urges a deep interior transformation with a sportsmanlike approach to the interior life — never remaining down after a fall.

"Another fall... and what a fall! Despair? No! Humble yourself and through Mary, your Mother, have recourse to the merciful love of Jesus. A miserere — 'have mercy on me' — and lift up your heart! And now, begin again." (The Way, no. 711). Also "Tackling serious matters with a sporting spirit gives very good results. Perhaps I have lost several games? Very well, but — if I persevere — in the end I shall win." (Furrow, no. 169). And Africans

are nothing if not sportsmen and women.

The family is central to the being of the peoples of Africa. It is not only a social safety net for almost everyone, it is also a source of deep identity — a revelation of who one really is. The loss of family values harms every group of people, but it has been catastrophic for Africans. Indeed it is this loss that has opened doors to the AIDS pandemic, which in Africa seems to acquire an increase in virulence and ferocity not seen elsewhere. Josemaría Escrivá stands out because of his single-minded defense of the family, of the sanctity of marriage and of the dignity of fruitful love. "Do you laugh because I tell you that you have a 'vocation to marriage'? Well, you have just that — a vocation. Commend yourself to St. Raphael that he may keep you pure, as he did Tobias, until the end of the way." (The Way, no. 27). Also: "In

national life there are two things which are really essential: the laws concerning marriage and the laws to do with education. In these areas God's sons have to stand firm and fight with toughness and fairness, for the sake of all mankind." (The Forge, no. 104).

Finally, the African woman carries heavy burdens both figuratively and actually, but her dependability is phenomenal. In the midst the swirling chaos of day-to-day living she holds the family together with nothing more substantial than the strength of her love. And to her the new saint has this to say: "Woman is stronger than man and more faithful in the hour of trial: Mary Magdalene and Mary Cleophas and Salome. With a group of valiant women like these, closely united to our sorrowful Mother, what work for souls could be done in the world!" (The Way, no. 982).

The teachings of Josemaría Escrivá resonate with the perennial youthfulness of love, to which Africa, amidst the crises and problems besetting her, responds. "These world crises," the founder of Opus Dei states quite calmly, "are crises of saints" (The Way, no. 301).

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