

Looking After People: the Work of the Administration

Brigitte Irwin initially trained as a biologist, and now helps to run Thornycroft Hall Conference Centre, in the heart of the beautiful Cheshire countryside. The activities that take place there are organised by Opus Dei and take their inspiration from the spirit and teachings of St Josemaria Escriva, its founder. Here Brigitte explains what goes on behind the scenes in Thornycroft Hall, and reflects

on the deeper repercussions she sees in her work.

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I'm a biologist, and have always loved ecology. Well, the first ecology we must have is *human ecology*! When you think it through, unless you are cherishing and caring for life, for the individuals you have around you, for the family, you can't really be a good environmentalist – it's not going to be a thorough, true environmentalism.

Thornycroft Hall is a Conference Centre which is full of activities all year round: courses, study days, workshops and seminars on all sorts of topics – business ethics, current issues, philosophy, theology, study of the Catechism of the Catholic Church..., right now there are

workshops studying the legacy of the Holy Father's visit to the UK last September. We also have retreats, lasting either for one day or a few days.

My role here, in *Thornycroft Hall*, is to facilitate and support the job of the wonderful people I work with, making sure that the conditions are right for everyone that wants to participate in these activities.

What I'm doing here is creating a welcoming place which gives people a chance to step out of the ordinary hustle and bustle of everyday life for a while, study and reflect on things, get a new focus on their existence, one that's more in tune with humanity, with the truth about life and the world..., and I think that helping to make an atmosphere which gives them the space, time and peace they need for that is really valuable.

I'm not involved in the organisation of the actual courses, Instead, I focused on the running of the house so it's attractive and welcoming, peaceful and clean, with good meals so that people are well looked after and feel at home.

And if spending a few days here inspires them to build up their relationship with God and with others, regaining their vitality and energy, working out solutions to the problems of today, then maybe they'll take a little of this new vision, a bit of the peace and wholesomeness back home with them.

In fact, as I see it, the activities here enrich the lives of the people who come to them, and that also reaches all the people they are in contact with: first, their own families, then friends, acquaintances, colleagues, the workplace: in the end, it reaches

the whole of society, because even if just one person is inspired to care for and help others in any way, the whole world benefits.

There's a lot involved!

In the **kitchen** the meals must be healthy and nutritious, as well as being delicious, and that takes a good dose of culinary art as well as domestic science.

There's a lot of artistry involved in **food service** too, between decorating the tables beautifully complete with flowers, noticing anything special someone may need and sorting out any diets: so that each meal is a wonderful experience for them. We try to take particular care of special occasions, birthdays, feast days, so that they are real *celebrations*.

Then there's the **housekeeping** – we really try to give the house a fresh and homely feel, with everything in

its place so that it's really harmonious and lovely.

Saying spiritual things through the material things

I love the way human beings are both material and spiritual and so you can “say” spiritual things through the material things. For example, we’ve just prepared a meal for someone who is sick. We used a pleasant embroidered napkin and tray cloth and some little flowers and nicely prepared food, to entice that person to eat something and feel better. The message of all that is “You are important!” What we want to do is to bring a little bit of Heaven to Earth!

The backbone of society

This is quite like what the family is in society: it’s like the backbone of society, which supports everything

that goes on: if the family doesn't work, everyone suffers.

A really important part of Opus Dei is the real Christian family warmth, and we have a big part to play in that! My work here in *Thornycroft* is quite like the canvas backing that supports a tapestry: it might be hidden, and its importance can be overlooked, but if it isn't there the tapestry falls apart.

A happy home makes people happy, and who wants to be unhappy? To be happy, we need to live in truth and it helps us to have beauty around us, to live in a place that is elegant, where people are thoughtful, and attentive. Home is the place where we regain strength, both materially and spiritually, through loving contact with others, the place where we can plan our life projects with the support and help of those closest to us.

More than four walls

Every person needs a home, it's like an expression of the essence of ourselves: that little bit of the earth, of creation, that we draw around us. Those four walls and roof show, in 'bricks and mortar', the essence of the family, like an incarnation of our beliefs about life, about ourselves and about the world: about the value we attach to each person, about the dignity and importance of our lives.

If you think of the material things that make you feel really glad and comfortable at home: space, light, cleanliness, tidiness, cheerfulness, peace, serenity, and restfulness, you get the ingredients that raise people's spirits and make them want to get back to replenish their store of energy for living. There isn't a single person who wouldn't wish for all this at home!

But it doesn't happen just all automatically! It's something that has to be worked for, and lots of qualities are needed to create such a wonderful place: talent, resourcefulness, ingenuity, generosity, magnanimity, order, good organisation, common sense, kindness, a good sense of humour, love for others... The domestic care includes so much, all the elements of culture: art, science, beauty, poetry, communication. And on top of that, to run a home well, you need a knowledge of engineering, science, nutrition, health and safety, economics, and logistics... It's no small ideal!

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