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Opus Dei's Gesture for Industrial Technology

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The on-going technological revolution in Nigeria cannot mask the wide disparity between the rich and the poor, who often live side by

side. This rich and the poor become so by circumstance, one having more opportunities than the other. The Chinese adage is familiar which says that if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day, but if you teach him to fish, you feed him for life. In this vein, there are many ways to help the poor amongst us: feed them at intervals through alms giving and pittances, which provide them with sporadic relief, or give them skills which increases their labour value, guaranteeing a more dignified and sustained means of livelihood.

Last October, an event that was widely reported in the Nigeria (and International) press was the public presentation of the IIT, Institute for Industrial Technology, at Ogba, Ikeja. The technical school is a project of the African Development Foundation (ADF), a non-profit making trust. IIT has been set up to provide quality technical training, solidly imbued

with work ethics, to young out-of-school Nigerians.

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Blessed Josemaría Escrivá had clear visions of social initiatives that would permeate all sectors of society. He encouraged people who had more opportunities and greater resources to live justice and charity by helping those less fortunate around them.

By now, the names of both Blessed Josemaría Escrivá and of Opus Dei are well known in Nigeria. It was in 1965 that this Catholic priest, who has spent his life teaching people how to seek holiness in ordinary life, sent two young professionals to begin Opus Dei in Nigeria. One of the duo, Dr. Jeremy White now lies in Ikoyi Cemetery.

He believed that all men are equal. Hear him say to a journalist: “No one is better than anyone else, no one! We are equal! Each one of us is worth the same, each person is worth Christ’s blood!” Understanding Opus Dei, which he founded, holds the key to appreciating these social welfare projects all over the world. Providing amenities of food, clothing and shelter, necessary for a conscientious struggle to attain the other higher life at the end of this one. He also taught that there are no unimportant jobs, and that the value of any job depended on the love of God put into it by the one carrying it out. Thus a street sweeper can have a greater dignity in his or her job than a university profession, if the former put more love of God into that job.

The Institute for Industrial Technology (IIT) has come on time to solve an urgent social problem in Nigeria. Many youths drop out of

school and often drop into helplessness. This downward plunge could end in a life of crime or in abject poverty, as there are few means to improve the situation of those who do not pursue an academic career. Those who chose to learn a trade turn out not being well trained, often under the apprenticeship system. The problem is either a hoarding of knowledge by their masters (tutors) or the sheer lack of both knowledge and facilities to train them. The end result: poorly trained, poorly motivated menial workers, scrapping out a living in worsening poverty.

We are all daily witnesses of the rising wave of unemployment. A developing economy like ours raises the competitive stake of skills acquisition, hence the mad rush to climb higher and higher. The few opportunities available lie at the peak of the pyramid. IIT wants to

widen the possibilities at the base of the pyramid. The students admitted for the pilot 3-year electro-mechanics course are secondary school graduates with minimum qualifications. They are then trained to be multi-skilled in both fields, a practice which is proving to reduce industry down time, as a multi-skilled technician is better equipped to run and maintain industrial equipment.

One major impact of the teaching of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá and Opus Dei in the IIT curriculum is the training given in work ethics. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá taught that if work is for us a means to sanctity, that work must therefore be done with an upright intention. Uprightness of intention means doing it as best as possible, with as much purity of means and end as possible, that is, ethically.

Understandably therefore, work ethics in IIT is already making the difference. “Work ethics is a new dimension as far as I am concerned, which appeals to the inner person: your relationship with your workers, your subordinates, your colleagues, your bosses and your customers. So this is the key difference between IIT and other technical schools, and I think it has rubbed off well with participants. You’re asked to look at your work, not just in terms of money. Work has a value, a positive value that you can impart. The way you work influences others...Work ethics enables you to share the concern of other workers for improving working conditions. In as much as you work, you should put in basic human values...the work ethics (classes) gives me a wider view, a larger resource to draw from and apply to the job”. So says Uzor Ifejika, a 31-year-old Line Engineer, a student at IIT.

For Keshir Afegbua, another student, “Ethics has to do with man himself and the way he behaves. IIT wants to produce an engineer with competence and moral integrity”.

What is interesting is that these students are not the so-called ‘intellectuals’. They are all manual workers who have grasped, in their own ways, the deepest essence of work, both intellectual and manual: its sanctifying value.

The method of training at IIT is the Dual-training system, a method of teaching where the student alternately spends time in the school and in the industry. Rex Trugo, a Philippine technical consultant at IIT describes it as “a beautiful synergy between the school and the factory floor. It is a system of educational training that uses two venues of learning: the school and the factory floor. The school provides general

education (including aspects of culture, social, moral formation, etc) and more disciplined academic training, using state-of-the-art equipment. It also provides basic skills and laboratory training, under a controlled environment. However, the ‘real’ life experience can be given only on the factory floor – hands-on experience with machines. On the factory floor, you have to learn to work with people and in teams, to cooperate with people.” Within the school itself, ratio of theory to practice is 30:70.

Industry collaboration with the IIT has been on from the beginning and is increasing, thanks to both the high competence of the training and the emphasis on work ethics.

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