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Social Development at Metro Achievement Center: A Legacy of St. Josemaría

Guided by St. Josemaría Escrivá's passion for social development and the education of youth, the Metro Achievement Center opened its doors twenty-five years ago in the heart of Chicago's inner city. Metro is one example among many social initiatives inspired by Opus Dei throughout the world where people with limited access to economic and educational opportunities receive academic support and an encouragement for their Christian life. (1)

Metro began with only a few girls (the 40 attending the first summer program in 1985), and now assists over 500 Chicago girls between the ages of eight and 18 each year. Since its founding, the center has served more than 5,000 young women.

Metro's mission is to motivate and educate these young women through after-school and summertime programs to become better students and virtuous individuals. Key to our approach is the integration of academic enrichment classes with a character education program based on the human virtues.

Why does Metro stand out among hundreds of educational enrichment programs in the city of Chicago? Without a doubt, Metro's ability to effectively serve numerous inner-city families in this great metropolis is owed in a particular way to St. Josemaría's vision of social development. While providing a well-rounded educational experience for our students, our curriculum is grounded in two social teachings of the Church: the dignity of the person and the recognition of parents as the primary educators of their children. Discovering specific ways to

reinforce and reflect these teachings forms an important part of our mission and institutional culture. (2)

Historical and environmental background

Rising immigration and population shifts in Chicago greatly impact the social and educational institutions in this third-largest city of the United States. As young professionals move into revitalized and upgraded neighborhoods, lower income residents, many of whom are African-American families, are often displaced to other areas of the city or beyond its borders. Simultaneously, growing numbers of Latin Americans migrate into the city, thereby shaping Chicago's ethnic profile. Since 2000, government and not-for-profit programs that aim to serve minority populations have grown exponentially in an attempt to provide these groups with adequate

economic, educational and social services.

Chicago public high schools have long been notorious for their high drop-out rate. An estimated 30% of high school students quit before they graduate. In response to this astounding statistic, which is twice as high as the drop-out rate for the state of Illinois as a whole, there are now over 600 after-school academic programs in the city, each aiming to keep students in school and learning. Eighty-three percent of public school students come from low-income families and are disproportionately from minority populations: African-American (44%) and Hispanic (41%). (3) Metro directly serves this student population.

Students from over 125 public, parochial, and independent schools look to Metro for academic enrichment. Sixty-three percent of

these students come from the public school system and more than 95% are from minority backgrounds (Hispanic, African-American, and Asian). Since 2000, 100% of Metro's high school students have graduated from high school and continued on to college, most of them the first in their families to attend a college or university.

More than social action

The center is located just west of the financial district of Chicago. Students must leave their neighborhoods and travel across the city to attend Metro. Meeting and socializing with students from other neighborhoods and different schools helps to break down racial prejudices and neighborhood rivalries, thus building a spirit of unity and solidarity. In a 1966 New York Times interview, St. Josemaría spoke of the value of the work that Midtown (Metro's

counterpart for boys) was doing in Chicago, **“An important part of its work consists in bringing together, in an atmosphere of friendship and collaboration, the different ethnic groups that live there.”** (4)

Similarly, by connecting inner-city students with hundreds of volunteers from the corporate community and major universities, Metro girls are introduced to new and varied social environments. The diversity of individuals is a microcosm of Chicago's urban community.

Experience has shown that the social exposure girls receive at Metro equips them to handle with greater ease and confidence the new and diverse social settings they later find at the university or at work in their profession.

Mercy goes beyond justice

Historically, Catholics and other concerned citizens have joined forces

to find just solutions to help the poor and needy. The work of Metro can be best understood as more than a “just solution.” It is, rather, a “work of mercy.” This phrase most accurately describes our efforts and captures the spirit of St. Josemaría’s social concern. Mercy goes beyond justice. Mercy encourages us to serve and to meet the needs of others out of love rather than strict duty. A work of mercy consequently includes the dimension of compassion; a concern for the poor and underprivileged which is at the same time both human and spiritual.(5) The fifth Beatitude reminds us: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy (Mt 5:7). Seeing all mankind as one race, the race of the children of God, was St. Josemaría’s vision for humanity and for charitable works. (6) This conviction shapes our education model in numerous ways. Our site is located centrally and we make a concerted effort to admit and

mix students from different ethnic neighborhoods rather than offer our services to one particular ethnic population. Most importantly, we treat each individual girl with the respect she deserves as a child of God, which provides the context for all of our educational work at Metro.

A Christian spirit

For a social program to be a work of mercy, a Christian spirit is essential. Several years ago, a benefactor of educational programs that Opus Dei organized in Lithuania reminded us of this. She commented: "I'm glad to hear that your summer program includes the option for the girls to attend catechism classes. There are plenty of wonderful agencies providing social services. But Opus Dei is here to help people get closer to God." Her perspective brought to mind well-known words of St. Josemaría directed to those who

strive to help the needy: **“Until now you had not understood the message that we Christians bring to the rest of men: the hidden marvel of the interior life. What a wonderful new world you are placing in front of them!”** (7)

We now turn our attention to three areas where St. Josemaría’s vision regarding the dignity of each person as a child of God shapes the charitable work done at Metro. First, we consider educational development from both a human and spiritual perspective; second, how faith can be fostered in a secular setting; and lastly, the importance of inculcating personal responsibility for building solidarity.

Unity of the human and divine

St. Josemaría often spoke of “unity of life,” a harmony among the different facets of a person’s life founded on a single guiding principle--that we are

children of God. Unity of life leads to the conviction that the human and divine dimensions of our existence are distinct but intertwined and inseparable. The unity between the human and divine is reinforced in several ways at Metro.

Our academic curriculum reinforces basic reading, writing, mathematics and science skills as well as classes in the humanities. Students also benefit from individual tutoring and homework help. Interactive classes in the fine arts and sports offer students the opportunity to develop social skills and improve physical fitness. In addition to academic support, character-building classes for students and their parents are essential to Metro's program and focus on human virtues such as responsibility, generosity, and sincerity. Each girl also receives individual mentoring that provides practical advice on how to put the

human virtues into practice. These classes in academic and human formation are complemented by an optional religious education program that emphasizes the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

Unity of life is also fostered by encouraging students to work well, not just for themselves, but with an eye to serving others and the common good. A mother put it this way: “You teach our children that it is still good to be good.” The idea that one can turn work into prayer simply by working well and offering it to God is often a new discovery for our staff and students.

A Christian attitude toward material things is another way we foster unity of life. Finding ways to incarnate what St. Josemaría referred to as “Christian materialism” is an ongoing effort on the part of our staff. **“Authentic Christianity,**

which professes the resurrection of all flesh, has always quite logically opposed ‘dis-incarnation,’ without fear of being judged materialistic. We can, therefore, rightfully speak of a ‘Christian materialism’, which is boldly opposed to that materialism which is blind to the spirit.” (8)

In this spirit, the staff strives to keep the facility clean, orderly and home-like in appearance, knowing that this fosters interior serenity and a willingness to serve others.

Dedicating space in our center to a chapel, a parent room, and a living room is a material way of highlighting the importance that God, parents and family have in our lives. We entrust our work with families to the Holy Family; our chapel has an image of Jesus, Mary and Joseph that reflects St.

Josemaría’s great love for the “Trinity on earth.” While professional women

serve as mentors to our girls, an image of the Virgin Mary in each of the classrooms and common areas serves as a reminder of Mary's protection and love for each of us.

Our comprehensive approach to education—educating the mind, heart, body and soul—emphasizes the link between the human and divine in each person and contributes to personal growth. At Metro we prefer to speak of “self-worth” rather than “self-esteem,” because true self-esteem springs naturally from a girl's awareness of her personal dignity and value as a daughter of God. St. Josemaría's keen appreciation for the unity that should exist within each person has a great influence on the academic programs and other activities at Metro.

Fostering faith in a secular setting

In the United States we find great respect for religion and openness to faith. In the spring of 2008, Benedict XVI spoke of this reality during his Apostolic trip to the United States: **“This country has a long history of cooperation between different religions in many spheres of public life...members of different religions come together to enhance mutual understanding and promote the common good.”** (9)

Metro's work is directed and carried out by lay Catholics working alongside people of many different faiths. It is not an ecclesial work but rather a collaborative effort of individuals who share a concern for improving education, and, in turn, the economic and social condition of those in need. In 1967, St. Josemaría spoke with Time Magazine and underscored the importance of Christians and non-Christians working together to promote

activities that benefit society and that **“are open to everyone, without any kind of racial, religious or ideological discrimination.”**(10) St. Josemaría challenged lay people to feel personally responsible for discovering solutions to society’s problems; for example, raising the standards of low-income families and immigrants is not a task meant to be left to clerics and religious.

Fortunately, Metro can count on the assistance of almost 200 professional women and university volunteers who engage their hands, heads, and hearts by serving inner-city children. Seventy-six percent of the funds Metro needs to operate and support the academic and personal growth of our students come from corporations, foundations, special events, and individuals. The families we serve contribute five percent of Metro’s operating budget, and

investments make up most of the difference. (11)

While Metro's academic and character-building classes are the core of our curriculum and are offered weekly to all students, monthly religious education classes are available to those students interested in learning more about the Catholic faith. Students must freely choose to attend the classes and must "opt-in" with parental permission to lively instructional sessions. Metro does not ask families about their religious affiliation, yet approximately 85% of students choose to take part in these discussions. A chaplain offers spiritual guidance to all interested Metro students, staff, and volunteers. Because of St. Josemaría's appreciation and respect for people of all religious backgrounds, one finds at Metro a natural and positive approach to faith, and to religious

formation. When a professional woman or university student tutors and helps a child academically, she often discovers in the process something deeper: friendship and the love of God. There is always a great respect for persons of all religious views and beliefs. It is precisely within the “faith friendly” environment at Metro that students, their parents and our volunteers often discover--or rediscover-- the Christian faith. In recent years, through the example and help of Metro staff, some volunteers and students were baptized or received into the Church, and parents who had never received the sacrament of Matrimony experienced the joy of receiving this grace.

Part of Metro’s effort to facilitate the connection between faith and life is manifested by our placement of a chapel in the middle of our academic space. Students, parents and

volunteers are invited to stop in and pray at any time. For the staff, our chapel is a magnet drawing us to pray for the many individuals who walk through our doors each day. We can say that, for those promoting this institution, the Tabernacle is the center, without Metro thereby losing its secular character, since it is not an ecclesiastical initiative, but one of citizens—some faithful of the Prelature, others not—who in the use of their freedom and independently of their religious beliefs, carry out this social activity.

The chapel, situated in the heart of our facility serves as a constant reminder of how natural our relationship with God should be in the midst of the simple and ordinary things in life, especially study, work, friendship, and volunteer service. Some time ago a Jewish businessman visited Metro and remarked that, being a spiritual man, he was pleased

to see how we had included faith in our vision of the person; he also held faith to be an essential aspect of human dignity and happiness.

Priority of the individual over the institution: personal responsibility for building solidarity

Every society is a labyrinth of elaborate structures and institutions. Financial and commercial institutions influence and regulate our monetary well-being. Global networks of communication and technology institutionalize and revolutionize the way we work and communicate. Already in the 20th century, Church institutions developed global structures to provide aid for the needy. Yet it is worth reflecting on the fact that Jesus always reached out to individual souls, healing and comforting them one by one. The parables of Christ highlight the value of each person,

who is loved directly and sought out individually by their merciful Father God.

A vehicle for connecting individuals

Although Metro is indeed an institution, it is most importantly a vehicle for connecting individuals. St. Josemaría would warn members of Opus Dei against developing an institutional or collective mentality which would lead one to lose sight of the primacy of persons and their families when operating social or educational initiatives, including those that help the less fortunate. There are abundant examples in the Gospels where Jesus Christ cures and reaches out to souls personally, and we too are only effective when we realize we are personally responsible for fostering development and when we strive to pray and work at serving individual persons. While it is true

that Metro is dependent on the generosity of corporations and foundations for its financial sustainability, behind every business entity Metro recognizes individuals. In *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI expresses the priority of the individual in this way, “In development programs, the principle of the centrality of the human person, as the subject primarily responsible for development, must be preserved.” (12)

St. Josemaría said that the answer to injustice lies with individuals who act justly. If individuals are just, then over time the structures and institutions that employ them will be just.(13) He affirmed that one must serve not only with justice but above all with charity: **“Justice alone is never enough to solve the great problems of mankind... The dignity of man, who is a son of God, requires much more. Charity must**

penetrate and accompany justice, because it sweetens and deifies everything: ‘God is love.’”(14) When reflecting upon the racial problems in the United States, St. Josemaría explained the connection between justice and charity in this way: **“A Christian cannot be satisfied with merely respecting the rights of others. He has to see in every man a brother to whom he owes sincere love and disinterested service.”** (15)

The concern for each person

Ultimately, friendship is the context and medium for social integration at Metro. This personal approach, with its focus on the concern for each person’s academic, personal, social, economic and spiritual well-being, helps the children we work with blossom into the strong and caring adults they were created to be. Precisely because of our conviction

that people, not structures, are what really count, each girl in our program receives a great deal of individual attention from staff, teachers, tutors and mentors. We aim to make our own what Benedict XVI highlighted as one of the essential elements of Christian and ecclesial charity: “Yet, while professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient. We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity.” (16)

Every year, thanks to the dedication of approximately 200 volunteers working with 500 families, personal attention continues to be the mainstay of the Metro Achievement Center. The Gospel reminds us that patience, kindness, and hope are among the manifestations of a love that endures. (17)

In short, we can say that St. Josemaría's unconditional love for each person as a child of God is the vision that shapes the work of Metro in the inner-city of Chicago. His perspective encourages Christians to discover and present positive solutions: **"A son of God cannot entertain class prejudice, for he is interested in the problems of all men. And he tries to help solve them with the justice and charity of our Redeemer."**(18) His conviction that true human development can only take place when there is an appreciation for the human person in his or her totality, body and soul, gives our work of mercy the impetus and strength to build up our communities from within. Our indispensable work of education is always effective when we treat persons with the full awareness that they are children of God.

M. Sharon Hefferan, Director of Metro Achievement Center

Midtown Educational Foundation in
Chicago

Footnotes

(1) The Midtown Educational Foundation in Chicago financially supports the Midtown Center for boys, founded in 1965 and the Metro Achievement Center for girls, launched in 1985.

(2) Metro strives to put into effect the words of the Pope: “social concern must never be an abstract attitude.” See Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate, (June 29, 2009), no. 47.

(3) Catalyst Chicago provides an in-depth analysis of education trends in Chicago public schools. Statistics reported are for 2009.

(4) Interview with Tad Szulc of the New York Times, October 7, 1966, published in *Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 56.

(5) See Gerald Vann, *The Divine Pity: A Study in the Social Implications of the Beatitudes*,

Fount Paperbacks, 1985, p. 120.

(6) “. . . brothers we are, children of the same Father, God. So there is only one race, the race of the children of God. There is only one color, the color of the children of God. And there is only one language, the language which speaks to the heart and to the mind, without the noise of words, making us know God and love one another.” St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 106.

(7) St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 654.

(8) St. Josemaría, “Passionately Loving the World,” in *Conversations*, no. 115.

(9) Benedict XVI, Meeting with Representatives of Other Religions, April 17, 2008.

(10) Interview with Peter Forbath in *Time Magazine*, April 15, 1967, published in *Conversations*, no. 27.

(11) See Midtown Educational Foundation, Annual Report, 2007-2008.

(12) Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, (June 29, 2009), no. 47.

(13) See José Luis Illanes, “Work, Justice, Charity,” in *Holiness and the World*, Scepter Publishers, 1997, pp. 226-227.

(14) See St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, no. 172.

(15) Conversations, no. 29.

(16) Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas est (December 25, 2005), no. 31.

(17) See I Cor 13.

(18) Furrow, no. 303.

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