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"Njia" the African-illustrated version of "The Way"

In the last quarter of 2023, we received news of a social media project, run by Dr. Jotham Njoroge (artist and philosopher), to illustrate the spiritual classic of St. Josemaria "The Way". We caught up with him to get some details on this intriguing project.

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Interviewer (I). The Whatsapp grapevine had some info around October last year that you were onto another artistic project. Would you like to tell us what this project is called and what it is about?

Dr. Jotham Njoroge (JN). The project is called “Njia” which means “The Way” in Swahili and it is an illustrated version of St. Josemaría’s most famous book. Around mid last year, I was toying around with AI image generation, but mostly for fun. Then one day during a very boring meeting I was attending at work, the idea hit me like a thunderbolt (and just when I was about to fall asleep!). Why not use AI art to illustrate each point of The Way, helping young people to visualise those points better, and also make them more “shareable” through social media? God speaks in mysterious ways and at mysterious times. I remained wide

awake for the rest of the meeting, with my colleagues probably thinking that I was very much engaged. But my mind was far away, already working on the project and thinking up which image would best suit each point. I know the first points almost by heart (because they impacted me that much when I was 16 years old) and so it was easy to start visualizing the process in my mind. Part of the brainwave was also to give the illustrations an African flavor, thereby making it more relatable to our Kenyan (and African) context, thus the decision to name it “Njia” and have each chapter titled by its Swahili version.

I. And where is it being published? Where can people follow or view these frames?

JN. Currently, I’m posting them on WhatsApp Channels. That was another happy coincidence.

WhatsApp started its Channels mid last year, and Kenya was one of the few countries where it was available. I didn't want people to have to go to a website or other popular image-posting apps (like Instagram) that bombard you with other content that you may not want to see. So I tried it out and it worked quite well, although with a few hiccups since people weren't familiar with WhatsApp channels at the time. Incidentally, I also tried it on Instagram, but found it hard to be consistent, especially with the extra work of publishing the same image in another platform. I soon abandoned the Instagram version after Christmas, and focused more on trying to be consistent on WhatsApp. You can access the channel via this link: tinyurl.com/njia2023.

I. And who is the target audience for this project?

JN. St. Josemaria originally wrote *The Way* for the university students and young professionals he was dealing with at the beginning of the 1930s, when Opus Dei was still only a few years old. In the same spirit, the illustrations are meant for young people. I know this may sound ‘discriminatory’ since *The Way* appeals to everyone. At any rate, I encourage older people to say with St. Josemaría: “I feel young and I know that I will never consider myself old. If I keep true to my God, Love will constantly vivify me. My youth will be renewed like that of the eagle.” (*Friends of God*, 31)

I. Why them?

JN. I think that young people today are moved more by what they see than by what they hear. We live in a culture of the ‘image’ and this culture must also be Christianised whereby people can find images that speak to

them of God, but without being too “churchy”. We use the same artistic tools and styles as the rest of the world, but for a purpose that goes beyond this world.

I. Of all the published material from St. Josemaria, "The Way" is by far his most popular. Why do you think this is?

JN. It is short and simple! Well, the book has 999 points and therefore, many pages. But it is fragmented into small stand-alone points that are full of meaning. I think if St. Josemaría started a marketing company today, it would be one of the most successful in the world. In 2007, Chip and Dan Heath wrote a book called “Made to Stick” which explores why some ideas are very memorable while others aren’t. In the book they break it down to six key ingredients that spell out the acronym SUCCES. Ideas that stick are Simple,

Unexpected, Concrete, Credible, Emotional and have a Story. The points of The Way fulfil most of these characteristics and illustrating them just adds to the Unexpected, Concrete and Emotional aspects.

What about the Story aspect? That's an interesting question. After doing the first two chapters of The Way, a friend of mine mentioned that the illustrations are becoming a bit too monotonous and boring. I also felt the same and after brainstorming about it together with my friend, we came up with the idea of giving each chapter a theme, that would tie the points together in a kind of narrative. The first chapter where I tried this was on Mortification (still ongoing) and later on Resolutions (finished). The latter has the theme of maritime life: ships and sailing. Incidentally, I made the images for the entire chapter while vacationing by the beach. In the chapter on

Mortification, I chose images from the traditional life of the Maasai tribe because they are known to be very austere and embrace pain and suffering as a normal part of life. I thought these would be fitting images for the ideas.

I. Is this also the reason you chose it for this illustration project?

JN. Not really. I was actually running away from a big problem that AI artists (if we can call ourselves that) faced at the beginning, when the technology was still new. It is the problem of “Character Consistency”. It’s hard to generate images of the exact same person doing many different things and in different contexts. The face always comes out different. Therefore, AI image generators were not good for a long project like a comic book, with the same characters appearing many times in different poses. Before *Njia*,

I had actually thought of doing a fully illustrated version of St. Josemaría's *Via Crucis*, but the AI kept drawing Jesus in a different way in each scene (some were very comical!). That's why I had to go for a project that didn't require Character Consistency, and *The Way* proved to be perfect for that. Nowadays, there are powerful AIs that have more or less managed to solve this problem. So I'm just waiting for some time to free up from my schedule and give it a try with a long project like *Holy Rosary* and of course, *Via Crucis*. Maybe for Lent next year? Who knows.

I. When he wrote the first version of this book, St. Josemaria suggested it should be read slowly, pausing to meditate on the meaning of the counsels he had collated. In your edition, we also have the illustrations. How would you advise readers to best make use of this new-edition material?

JN. The illustrations are meant to make the points for reflection more concrete and memorable. It's all about engaging the imagination, which relies heavily on images (thus, image-ination). I therefore encourage them to follow St. Josemaría's own advice on how to use our imagination in prayer: "at any time, without any book, we can close our eyes and contemplate Jesus' life, watching it like a movie. In this way the words and actions of our Lord will come to mind in all the different circumstances of our life. (Christ Is Passing By, 107)

I. Is there some kind of plan to collate all the pieces and commentaries into a published volume?

JN. I thought of doing that at first. But as the AI technology began improving, I felt the need to go back and redo some of the first points. It's

therefore a very dynamic project, with a lot of back and forth. Also, some images were not very politically correct, and some people felt I could have done a better illustration of a particular point. With all these factors, I abandoned the idea of a printed book. Nevertheless, in the same spirit of keeping the content as fragmented as St. Josemaría intended it to be, a group of young professionals approached me with the idea of merchandising the illustrated points through items like wall hangings, fridge magnets, bookmarks etc. I think that's a good idea and I'm currently working on that with them. So that's how a physical version of the project may take shape.

I. I imagine creating and compiling the artwork and the commentaries takes quite an investment of effort and time... What is some of the feedback you've received that

makes the project that much more worth following through to the end?

JN. On the contrary, it takes only 10 to 15 minutes to produce an illustrated point of The Way. I'm even surprised at why I sometimes don't manage to post daily. I guess it's the consistency that is difficult. 10 minutes a day, every day for 999 points comes to a total of 166.5 hours! That's a level of heroic 'virtue' that I'm yet to attain.

As for feedback and following the project through to the end, I have some mixed feelings and ideas.

Firstly, I have never imagined myself as a 'content creator' and this project has somehow put me in that space. I tell you, it is a lonely world. You may appear to be 'out there' doing things, but there are many hours spent thinking about what to produce next, and of course, the tendency to push

that 10 minutes to some elusive ‘gap’ in the day, amidst one’s professional job and family duties. Then, WhatsApp Channels’ interactive functions are limited to emojis, so I can’t get a narrated feedback like on Twitter or other platforms. This is a plus to me, since I neither have the time nor the patience to respond to each comment on a post. So I guess what keeps me going is just the fun of producing art, which is what I’ve always done as an artist.

However, I cannot overlook the impact I’ve heard rumours or actual stories about, including conversions that were sparked off by a point that someone shared to a friend of a friend. Then there are those times when I stumble upon one of my illustrations in someone else’s WhatsApp status, or even as their profile picture! A friend of mine once told me, “You can’t imagine what impact those images are making in

the lives of people. So get over your laziness and make sure you post every day!”

I. Do you have a favourite piece you've created in terms of the illustration and the point from The Way it depicts?

JN. Every artist has their favourite piece. So far, mine is the illustration for point 513 that reads: “Before, by yourself, you couldn't. Now, you have turned to our Lady, and, with her, how easy it is!” That chapter on Our Lady, which I only illustrated some points for the Rosary month of October, gave me a deeper love for African renditions of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I think I unwittingly discovered for myself, and experienced, the evangelizing concept of “inculturation.” This is when Christianity enters into the bloodstream of an already existing culture, and enriches its indigenous

words and images to communicate the divine message of salvation. One friend mentioned how they can no longer imagine Our Lady as a European, which is funny because after all, she wasn't! It's just that after centuries of widespread European Art depicting Mary as one of their own, (which is completely valid), we have imprinted in our imagination a kind of 'standard' idea of how the Blessed Virgin appears. Being a Jewess you could say that she was definitely not "black". However, philosophy tells us that whenever the transcendent touches the material world, it manifests itself as multiplicity. Thus, just as God's infinite wisdom manifests itself through an infinite number of earthly creatures, stars and galaxies, Mary's motherhood and femininity can be depicted in an infinite number of ways and cultures. But that's me putting on my

philosophical hat, and you don't want to get me started!

I. Amazing! Thank you so much for your time and your work!

JN. Thank you too and please pray for the apostolic fruits of the project, especially among young people. I hope it inspires others to start their own illustrated versions of St. Josemaría's works.

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