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"Christianising Social Life", fourth video of the Series "The Richness of Ordinary Life"

This is the fourth of the Series of videos presented by Prof. Regina Eya in which she explains how the message of St. Josemaría of seeking holiness in ordinary life, can be lived in the many social events everyone has to be part of.

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CHAPTER 4

I HAVE TO BE AT THIS MEETING...
AND THAT FUNERAL ...AND THE
OTHER FUNCTIONS!

(Christianizing social life)

Often, as one gets older and rises in society, there rises a demand for the person's assistance and attention in many community development efforts. In addition to this it is traditional in Africa, especially in Nigeria, to rally round our friends

and relations in times of joyous celebrations and in their grief. This is a very strong source of social support on which most Nigerians count as they get on with life. Thus there are always invitations to community events, to funerals, weddings, to birthdays, title-taking, etc. Often many of these functions conflict and it becomes difficult to cope with these invitations.

St. Josemaría has taught us to try to be in places where we can influence people and thereby do apostolate. So once again we try to Christianize these civic obligations. Josemaría insists that as one strives to keep constant dialogue with God, one should 'passionately love the world'. He enjoins all Christians to freely cooperate with their fellow citizens in whatever affects or concerns them or whatever they may be called upon to do. The difference is that as they do so they must bring the light of

Christ's charity to all such activities. St. Josemaría reminds us that Christ has said that when He is lifted up He would draw all men to Himself. So in every situation if you raise Christ up behaving like Him and creating an atmosphere that smells of His presence, then He automatically draws all men to Himself and you have done apostolate!

“You must understand now more clearly that God is calling you to serve him in and from the ordinary material and secular activities of human life. Our age needs to give back to matter and to the most trivial occurrences their noble and original meaning. It needs to restore them to the service of the Kingdom of God, to spiritualize them, turning them into a means and occasion for a continuous meeting with Jesus Christ.”(1)

Popular seminars/workshops

So when there is a seminar on women empowerment, for example, of course I attend. I want to learn what is going on around the world. My place in society requires and deserves that. But when I hear about contraception and abortion, I find the opportunity to oppose whatever the Church has opposed. I speak out against efforts to recognize the so-called 'alternate families' where gays or lesbians live as families since this, in its very essence, destroys the family of man and wife which Jesus Christ promoted. I explain the ethical implication of in vitro fertilization and cloning which invariably make scientists arrogate to themselves the right to decide which embryo is allowed to live or to die. I seek the support of all those present that share my views. I try in turn to organize seminars and to encourage people to participate in the seminars but to equip themselves with Catholic doctrine as they do, so they

can bring with them the teachings of the Church, which many people are ignorant of.

Human consideration in funeral ceremonies

Then I must attend funerals. In Nigeria funerals are big ceremonies. Nigerians are pious enough to declare gratitude to God for the worthy lives their relations have lived and insist they have been called to glory. Perhaps with this in mind, a lot of preparations for funerals are put in place after the initial shock and grief. Preparations for the burial of the dead may include building a new house for the corpse to lie in state in grand style, even if the deceased had no such comfort in his lifetime. Human consideration makes the family of the deceased to prepare to please and impress the public. People, many people, are usually invited via elaborate cards.

The bereaved invite all those who had in turn invited them in their own time of bereavement. Having attended other funerals they “see how things are done”. They do likewise for they cannot afford to be different. People would laugh at them, wouldn't they? The success of a funeral is judged by the large turn out of sympathizers, the amount of food and drinks given them and also by the gifts that are exchanged. The sympathizers bring money, drinks and livestock like cows and goats. The bereaved dish out food and drinks as well as souvenirs to their visitors. These may range from buckets and plastic dishes to ceramic mugs, umbrellas, clocks etc!

The glorious Asoebi!

For the funeral ceremonies themselves, different groups of relations and friends of the bereaved purchase apparels in uniform,

popularly known as “Asoebi”. Some times these uniform dresses come in sets, one for the wake-keeping in the city where the deceased lived, one for taking the corpse to Church the next morning and then driving in a long convoy to the village, and the other for the Church service on the day of burial. Different groups are encouraged to go for different materials so as to be identifiable, and the more the number of groups the more successful the funeral.

Immediately the corpse is buried people sit in canopies prepared for them according to the “Asoebi” and there follows an eating ritual and a dancing spree to bid the deceased farewell and cheer up the bereaved.

The Church ministers are not left out. The more priests that are invited to the funeral the more prestigious the event. The bed on which the corpse is to be laid out is expensively decorated. By the end of the funeral

ceremonies the bereaved are reduced to penury, having sometimes even borrowed money for the event. So, to put Christ on top of funeral ceremonies, I organize prayers for the soul of the deceased stressing to those who join me for such prayers that that is often neglected but is the paramount need of the deceased. I try as much as possible to live temperance at the ceremonies without attracting undue attention to myself. And should I be bereaved myself, then a wonderful opportunity arises to play down the expensive fanfare so that an alternative and Christian style of funerals may be perceived. I might begin by dispensing people from making new uniform apparels for the funeral ceremony, because in the first place this is not necessary. In the second place, many people borrow money to buy it just to please the bereaved — another problem of human consideration. Sometimes

what we really need may be a coat of paint at ten percent of the cost of the “asoebi” to freshen up our house and make it more pleasant. I persuade my family to reduce the degree of entertainment and the number of days of such celebrations as some communities are beginning to do now. Temperance is thus practised and attention is turned more to the need to pray for the dead. Money is saved for the living and the bereaved may not need to borrow money for burials and suffer a double loss—man and material.

Of weddings, christenings and the like

But then it is not all funerals. There are happy occasions. There are weddings, christenings and title-taking ceremonies that call for big feasts. I attend of course. I love parties! Then I remember that there, too, God is meeting each and every one of the participants. Christ

attended parties too. At one of them He changed water into wine! But at all the social functions Christ attended, He was looking out for souls to save. So I remember that I am another Christ attending these functions. So I begin with offering the function to God. I wear dress commensurate with my status but without dressing to compete with other people, or to put somebody down. And I dress with modesty yet in keeping with modern fashion and I don't offend God by my appearance, because I have to be another Christ even there at these parties. I eat in moderation even when there is surplus food. I use the opportunity to make many friends and hope to make it my business to keep in touch with them later. This is with the intention of communicating interior life to them by introducing them to means of Christian formation from which I have personally benefited and which I want to share. And I look

out for opportunities to talk to my friends about God, about presence of God, about confession and communion and to invite them to retreats and recollection as well as other cultural activities that are conducive to Christian living. I pay attention to my friends' conversations. One friend may talk about a domestic problem in the family just in response to a casual 'How are you?'. Another may mention that her children are at the same school with your children and calls your attention to some problems in the school. Another may mention the latest divorce or scandal in town. Each friend has a need and wants to talk about it. Wouldn't it be marvellous if I had enough presence of God myself to recognize these opportunities for apostolate! Perhaps the other young woman with a young family was just looking for support in a decision she has to make to quit a job in order to take care of her three

young children! And the other may be toying with the idea of separation from her husband. I perhaps encourage the woman to put her family interests before her own selfish and economic considerations. It is in vogue to take a job in Nigeria even when the financial remuneration is small and does not warrant abandoning young children. Priorities are often mixed up and many people are not clear on what should be their priorities. In each of these cases I find that only genuine interest and friendship will enable me help such people and that charity demands that I offer such friendship so as to spread the kingdom of God. So while I am eating and drinking with my friends, I am also busy drawing them to God by what I do or say or what I refrain from doing or saying—all this without doing anything unusual. I am just like anybody else enjoying myself with my friends.

“Time is a Treasure!”

But then of course ‘Time is a Treasure’, as Josemaría warns us. So if the party becomes unduly long, I remember that there is a time for everything. The family duties left behind, professional duties of the next day to be prepared, my times for personal prayers according to my own plan of life. So I cannot indulge my whims. I stay only for as long as is decent and as long as my other appointments allow. St. Josemaría teaches that this attention to duties and details may seem trifling, “but they are the oil, the fuel we need to keep our flame alive and our light shining.”(2)

For reasons like the above I realize that I do not have to accept all the invitations I receive. I may, out of pride and feelings that I am indispensable, take on so many activities that I become like Martha

in the Bible, with no time for contemplative life and teach others to do so. Imagine staying at a wedding from morning till evening just so my friend will see that I came to the Mass, waited for photographs, waited at the reception venue till the crowd gathered, ate and drank at the wedding and stayed on till most of the guests were gone and then accompanied the couple to their home for the after-wedding party before returning at night to ask if my sick child was given her cough mixture by my maid! My friend I was trying to please could well do with a few hours of my presence and no more! And everybody would be shocked at my absence if anything happened to my child. Only then, perhaps, would I realize that ten hours to one friend was superfluous. A moment of recollection during my long stay would have resulted in a conversation with God which would have reminded me to rectify my

intention. Other things requiring my attention must be attended to if I am to live like a child of God. I therefore practise temperance by declining some invitations when they are not necessary, and curtailing the time I spend at functions; and this might require fortitude as some of our friends may not take “no” for an answer. We remember that we are bound in justice to perform some other duties that have priority over these social functions, and prudence dictates that we give good excuses but remain firm in declining so as to reduce our activism. Sometimes we need to go aside from the crowd so as to grow in interior life:

“withdraw into yourself. Seek God within you and listen to him.”(3)

1. Id., “Passionately Loving the World,” 114.

2. Id., “Time is a Treasure,” in Friends of God, 41.

3. Id., The Way, 319, Criterion Publishers, Lagos.

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