



Caring for our common home: ecology and social justice

“Taming the Obsession with Competition: From the Entrepreneurial Self to the Reconciler”

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In faith, we know that, amidst the difficulties and challenges of our time, God never ceases to labor for the salvation of all people, indeed of all creation. We believe that God continues his work of “reconciling the world to himself in Christ.” We hear the urgent summons to join the Lord in caring for the neediest and to extend God’s mercy to where injustice, suffering or despair seem to thwart the divine plan.

(GC 36, Decree 1, 37-38)

The end of 2016 was rather special. Two most recognisable global education rankings published their results almost simultaneously. TIMSS (*Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study*) every four years measures mathematics and physics achievement of students grades 4, 8 and 12. The latest results were published on November 29th, 2016. The OECD published its triennial PISA (*Programme for International Student Assessment*) rankings on December 6th, 2016, which charts how well 15-year-old pupils do in mathematics, science and reading. In both rankings, East Asian superpowers took all the top places, setting off an outburst of recriminations flying in all directions to the rest of us.

Everyone takes school rankings very seriously; they are the measure of educational success, where attitudes, hard work and policies converge. Global rankings and national league tables feature very prominently both in policy papers and in the press, in the minds of ministers and parents alike. Schools and universities advertise for new students on the basis of their respective positions in the league table. Similarly every year parents make big sacrifices to get a place for their kids in top schools. Tables and rankings convey a language that is readily understandable to today’s parents, teachers and policy makers.

Jesuit schools inhabit this same world, and thrive. Our schools dominate league

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tables in many countries and warrant the adjectives “elite,” “top,” or “best.” Within their walls future leaders and prospective captains of industry are educated. While critical of those rankings, we often find ourselves benefitting from them. Parents vie for a place in our schools and they are prepared to part with a lot of fortune, which will then pay for top-class facilities, teachers and experiences. Up is the only way to go for our schools.

For decades this aptitude for excellence has run deep in our apostolic vein, the manifestation of *magis* among the teachers and staff. Every now and then the Society reminds us of the main characteristics of Jesuit education. At best we have tried to balance the strive for the best with a concern for the poor. In the students, Jesuit schools encourage solidarity with the marginalised and nurture critical thinking. One thing remains, however, that we never seriously question the worldview which begets the competitive spirit so worshipped in educational establishments these days. This is the same worldview that drives forward the pursuit for prosperity in the past century. Competitive economies need competitive entrepreneurs that come out top of the class, the kind of graduates we would love to see leaving our schools. As it has turned out, this vision is also responsible for encouraging exploitative business practices that are destroying the environment.

Except for few odd balls, citizens of this planet have come to realise that the world as we know it cannot go on forever. The call to reconsider our way of life has come from all corners, including from the Church with the latest social encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Surely this cry has not fallen on deaf ears but more investigation is necessary to find appropriate responses in our educational institutions. While condemning wasteful and consumerist lifestyles, our schools seem to struggle when it comes to reconciling the environmental concerns with the strive for excellence. In many cases, the former is added as an afterthought to the latter. Jesuit schools need to forge new coherence in the face of this real challenge. In this paper, I would like to explore the connections between the educational competitiveness, the aspiration for prosperity and environmental degradations through the lens of Jesuit schools. I will then identify some avenues for reconstructing a path for transformation in light of recent social teachings of the Church.

A Reconfigured Alliance between Schools, Parents and the State

The educational system grows out of the tripartite alliance of schools, parents and the state. The relationship between them is governed by an ideological framework which is open to contestation. A particular paradigm has been dominant in the past three decades or so. This paradigm hinges on a concept of the state and its role which is fundamentally different from previous ones, notably the welfare state of the post-World War II. The state is now seen generally as a service delivery agent, and it seeks to do it in the most efficient way possible. To achieve this goal, the state has embarked on an overhaul of its public services, dictated by the market imperatives of value for money, competition, and choice. Many countries in the West started this process in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. In

several East Asian countries this process was triggered by the 1997 economic crisis which was blamed partly on the corrupt and inefficient state sector.

In the education sector, chief among the measures is the drive to decentralise school governance. It means handing over powers to run various aspects of the governance to local structures such as school committees, parents association, local government agencies, etc. The rationale is that locals know better, and so decentralisation will allow the school system to be more responsive to their needs and hence more efficient (Mok, 2006).

This efficiency is further enhanced by competition which comes in the form of parental choice. In an education marketplace students and their parents are drawn into sometimes fierce battles for a place in favourite schools. This competition on the ground translates into a league table and government funding is tied to the school performance. Consequently schools are increasingly under pressure to perform, or else they will lose funding and eventually perish. In essence this system has led the state education sector to mimic the private sector. Global school rankings paint a similar picture on a grander scale, underlining the interconnectedness of this phenomenon.

The change in governance structure is paired with a more fundamental shift in the perception toward the role of schools and education in society. The bottom line is that schools are here to prepare students to face the demands of competitive job markets, which are now in direct competition with the rest of the world thanks to liberalisation and globalisation. An important role of education, therefore, is to boost competitiveness of countries and consequently their place in regional and global markets. This message was highlighted in the World Education Forum which took place in Incheon, South Korea on 19-22 May 2015. During the forum, the OECD launched a report titled “Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain”. The report published the results of research on the link between education standards and the prospect of economic growth in 76 countries. It was written by two economists namely Eric Hanushek from Stanford University and Ludger Woessmann from Munich University. The report argues that education standards are a “powerful predictor of the wealth that countries will produce in the long run.” The link between education and markets has never been more explicit and prominent.

A Reconfigured Self

This reformed alliance has significantly changed characteristics of education in many schools, including ours. In particular, the changes concern the ideals of a student. School management, curricula and the general atmosphere in society idealise an entrepreneurial subject which revolves around discourses of competition and enterprise. A successful learner is one that works hard to harness his/her own talents to gain school and post-school qualifications. These qualifications are then brought to bear on the job market to become a successful worker (Nairn and Higgins, 2007). Self is highly individualised in this discourse,

taking responsibility for all successes and failures.

This underlying discourse of entrepreneurship redefines traditional values such as freedom and empowerment in a highly individualised sense. Increasing individualism is seen as a sign of this freedom while collective powers are viewed suspiciously. On a daily basis individual students learn freedom as a matter of expanded preferences and feel empowered when they are able to join market economy where they can exercise choice. By joining the market economy they will be able to fulfil their material aspiration for home ownership, money, cars and travel, and this enhances further their sense of freedom. Each individual practices to desire this at an early age through a reward-punishment mechanism, which is at the centre of educational establishments, and along the way students nurture emotional attributes necessary to celebrate achievement and to feel contrite for underachievement.

This pursuit for success inevitably penetrates and reconfigures familial relationship by putting enormous pressure on parents and students. In Asia this anxiety manifests in the problematic expressions “tiger mum” and “tiger daughter/son” (Chua, 2011). These are terms to describe tough parents who make their children work really hard to excel academically. Intense academic competition requires a new kind of parenting which focuses on the desire for success. Parents have to juggle between their own career and the possibility of their children’s career. A quick fix to this is to enrol their kids to private tutorial classes, effectively outsourcing some parental responsibility to the booming tutorial industry. While the parents bear the financial costs of this extra instruction, the children may have to endure the emotional stress quietly.

In many developing countries poverty remains pervasive and even for members of the growing middle class, it is still a fresh memory to be rid of at all costs. Here education promises an accelerated ascent up the social economic ladder, and the pursuit for academic excellence is heightened at all levels. For many it would be hard to think otherwise. Having a comfortable life as soon as possible through good employment is still a dream for millions.

The competition for good employment, however, has been made harder in recent times with the introduction of flexible works across all economic sectors. Economic reforms emphasise productivity and efficiency over employment security. Firms increasingly employ people on a short-term basis. Our graduates have to anticipate this rat race to land the remaining secure jobs or to face the prospect of joining the army of “precariats” (Standing, 2011), who have to survive a precarious existence without predictability or security so common in today’s labour markets. This development helps intensify the individualisation of responsibility. It is not an exaggeration, therefore, if the whole education reforms often boil down to the “reconfiguration of subjects as economic entrepreneurs and of institutions capable of producing them” (Davies and Bansel, 2007: 248).

An Alternative Paradigm

It is a big relief on our part that the Jesuit leadership has been aware of this trend right from the very beginning. In 1973 in Valencia, Spain, Fr Pedro Arrupe addressed European Jesuit alumni in a famous speech entitled “Men for Others”. He stressed that the promotion of justice was a constitutive element of Jesuit mission in which the genuine love for God is always linked to the love of neighbour. Our students, therefore, learn to become men and women for others and not to focus on their own love, desire or interest. This powerful statement of mission was further elaborated by Fr Kolvenbach (1993) when he said that “The goal of Jesuit education is the formation of men and women for others, people of competence, conscience and compassionate commitment.” Fr Adolfo Nicolas (2013) calls education for justice and social responsibility a “hallmark” of Jesuit education. Jesuit education clearly takes the work for just relationships seriously, and this fundamental position is being challenged by a different discourse of education.

In “The Characteristics of Jesuit Education” (1986) Jesuit schools are expected to help students nurture a faith that does justice, become men and women for others, and foster special love and concern for the poor. These three characteristics obviously stand in direct contrast to the ideal entrepreneurial-self discussed earlier. The concern for justice and the poor unsettles the self-centric worldview by introducing critical questioning and altruistic service. Students are encouraged to explore and employ critical thinking in perceiving the reality of the world as part of their faith education. There is no place for a faith that keeps things merely personal and divorced from the world “out there”. Similarly, Jesuit education helps them realise that their talents are nurtured not for their self-gain but for the good of human community. It helps develop the attitude of mind that sees service of others as more fulfilling than material success or achievement.

Those characteristics, in so far as they manifest in the main ideas and practices in our schools, have helped mitigate the influence of mainstream education discourses so obsessed with competition. A particular element, however, has been largely ignored until recently when the awareness of environmental degradation started to make headlines. The competitive pursuit for excellence and its associated objective of economic growth have turned out to be responsible for much of the environmental damage that we are witnessing at the moment. This awareness coincides with, or perhaps is amplified by, the global economic crisis from 2008 onwards. Once again, people were woken up to the reality that the economic system that had brought about prosperity also produced social inequality, financial instability and now ecological destruction. The way our societies and economies are organised is deeply flawed.

The timing prompted investigations that led to the knowledge that both crises emerged from the same paradigm or way of thinking about ourselves and our relationship with nature. *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (2009), *The End of*

Growth: Adapting to Our New Economic Reality (2011), *How Much is Enough? Money and the Good Life* (2013), *Enough is Enough: Building a Sustainable Economy in a World of Finite Resources* (2013) are a few examples of the resurgent interest in linking the economy with the ecological concern. Scholars, journalists and policy makers alike have proposed alternatives from the unpalatable idea of degrowth, sustainable economy, to the cheekily termed “green” everything.

Interestingly, the environmental concern is still largely absent in education for a worldwide. It is at best treated to a courtesy talk about planting trees and recycling in the campus. Several Jesuit schools have taken the issue more seriously and began to draw up environmental policies on energy and waste management, sponsorship and procurement, and investment. In many cases, however, the environmental concern is still treated as an afterthought to the strive for excellence. Some others quickly jump to the technology and market bandwagon, which propagates the belief that appropriate technologies and the market for carbon credits alone will solve the problem. It is true that there are structural conditions that need to be tackled as a context for our more local and institutional efforts, but the hype for these new techs and markets may deflect our attention away from what we can actually do within our realm. In fact, they have been put forward as excuses to continue business as usual and even to increase consumption. What we can and should do, instead, is to look at our own ideas and practices, individually and institutionally, and change the habitual routines that are not compatible with the call for environmental care. We can always start by building on the existing Ignatian values already embedded in our schools’ DNA and the social teachings of the Church.

An obvious start to do so is *Laudato Si’*, an encyclical written by a Jesuit Pope who shares the same spirituality that has guided Jesuit schools. At this stage, many of us are already familiar with the document. It is a substantial document, beautifully written and touches on a lot of issues relevant to the Church and society in general today, with an emphasis on ecology. The main argument of the encyclical can probably be summarised in the following three main propositions:

- 1) The world is a gift from God to be appreciated with joy and gratitude. This is the fundamental position of the Church in relation to creation. Human beings have the duty to care for the environment and for the poor.
- 2) The globalisation of technocratic and anthropocentric paradigm has damaged the lives of individuals, the workings of society, and the beauty of nature. This diagnostic points out where the source of destruction originates.
- 3) Reconciliation with self, others and creation is fundamental to ecological conversion. This is the key to healing and repairing the damage caused by our pursuit of progress and prosperity.

As far as we are concerned, the encyclical points out the need for educational

institutions to take part in the effort to ecological conversion. For us, Jesuits, the attention to reconciliation is closely related to the reflection of recent general congregations. GC 32 Decree 4 introduced the theme of reconciliation as a constitutive part of the promotion of justice, and this message was confirmed by GC 34 as a fundamental mission of the Society. GC 35 elaborates the mission of reconciliation as participating in Christ’s mission, “as he sets right our relationships with God, with other human beings, and with creation.” (Decree 3, 18). The most recent GC 36 looks to Christ as the Reconciler and it is unequivocal in its message. “Our educational apostolates at all levels, and our centers for communication and social research, should help form men and women committed to reconciliation and able to confront obstacles to reconciliation and propose solutions. The intellectual apostolate should be strengthened to help in the transformation of our cultures and societies.” (GC 36, Decree 1, no. 34)

Laudato Si’ offers an outline of how to facilitate that transformation, which can be used as a pedagogical framework in our schools.

A Pedagogy of Ecological Education



Ecological education initiates students, in the language of *Laudato Si’*, in “a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature.” (LS, no. 215). The new thinking require students to be open to truth, to study scripture and tradition, and to nurture compassion. The Ecojesuit initiative has for some time promoted the integration of sustainability science and values. Information alone will not move people. Rather, it is how people attach values or meaning to the information that often works in motivating them. Jesuit schools are in a good position to provide a suitable environment where science, ethical questions and spirituality combine in the long Ignatian tradition of experience, reflection and action.

“An awareness of the gravity of today’s cultural and ecological crisis must be translated into new habits.” (LS, no. 209) As a true reflection of its author, this encyclical challenges us into action. Ecological conversion would mean little if it does not find practical

expressions, but we all know too well that learning and accepting a bitter truth is one thing, changing habits and lifestyles accordingly is quite another. Pope Francis offers two saintly figures as spiritual models i.e. St Francis Assisi and St Therese Lisieux. The former reminds us of the long forgotten value of voluntary asceticism in today's consumerist culture, while the latter teaches us to be faithful in "simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness." (LS, no. 230). Students often find it really hard to break away from the grip of the consumerist culture which fills the airwave and their imagination constantly. Asceticism helps them learn to create a space where they can regain control over their imagination and actions. This exercise has to be practiced daily in small yet meaningful gestures.

A really important attitude to be nurtured is expressed as "less is more". *Laudato Si'* beautifully captures its essence.

A constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment. To be serenely present to each reality, however small it may be, opens us to much greater horizons of understanding and personal fulfilment. Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. This implies avoiding the dynamic of dominion and the mere accumulation of pleasures. Such sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating. It is not a lesser life or one lived with less intensity. On the contrary, it is a way of living life to the full. (LS, no. 222-223)

Indeed, many secular economists often turn to Catholic social teaching for a vision of good life that takes into account the need to prosper within limits. This is the ability to say enough in the face of seemingly endless possibilities to consume, to enjoy life's conveniences in moderation, and not to be obsessed with wealth accumulation or conquest. Human beings need to work to live in reasonable comfort, but they should spend time also in cultivating their intellects and wills, enjoying the company of friends and family, in the pursuit of higher life (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2013, 186). The philosopher Kate Soper shows the growing popularity of "alternative hedonism" which locates sources of satisfaction outside the conventional market. It is a way of life that is outwardly simple and yet rich inwardly (Jackson 2011, 148-149).

Individual conversion eventually necessitates the transformation of society to help bring about a lasting change. *Laudato Si'* makes it clear that the real foundation of social life is a love for others (and other beings) that can only be gratuitous. In the word of Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* this unselfish act follows the principle of "fraternal reciprocity," in which individual members of society are encouraged to give without any

expectation of receiving something in return, and yet the person who receives the gift still faces a cultural expectation to reciprocate one day, whether to the giver or to someone else. This principle forms a solid base for cultivating a “culture of care” which promotes respect for others and stewardship of the world at the centre of our daily lives. This culture can be nurtured through engaging in community actions in which relationships are developed and recovered. In light of the call to combat consumerism, this familiar tradition in Jesuit schools receives a new significance as an antidote to indifference quietly promoted by today’s material pursuit.

Conclusion

The concern for justice and environment significantly challenges the obsession with competition in our educational systems. Instead of glorifying material successes, it promotes an ideal self that thrives in an environment where collaboration, fraternal reciprocity, moderation and care are important values. Surely this promotion of values alone will not change the structural arrangements that shape the tripartite alliance of schools, parents and the state. Nonetheless it offers a “critique of the ‘myths’ of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market)” (LS, no. 210).

Jesuit schools can and should develop an alternative vision of a better world. It is a new world that requires a change of heart, habits and lifestyles here and now. There is no better place than schools to instil this vision early in the hearts and minds of our generation.

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