Compassionate Person

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Good morning. I don´t know what I am doing here, as I am probably the only person at this seminar who is not involved in the formal educational structure. My only involvement in the formal Jesuit educational apostolate was almost fifty years ago, when, as a scholastic, I taught science and mathematics in a Jesuit school in Dublin. Much to the relief of my students, I then moved on to study theology and never returned to education. During my short time studying theology, I came across a child sleeping on the streets of Dublin, 9 years of age, and my life changed forever. Forty years later, we now run 13 hostels for homeless young people, three for children under 18 years of age, about 130 apartments, four drug treatment centres and a drop-in centre for homeless people. When people ask me how do I keep working with homeless people all these years, I tell them that, because if I ever stopped they might send me back teaching.

I found this talk very difficult to write, as Jesuit schools are so diverse, from schools in very poor areas for very poor kids to schools in affluent areas for very rich kids. And because the educational structures within which those schools operate are so diverse, from schools that are totally funded – and controlled – by government to schools that receive no funding at all from government. Hence my reflections arise from the reality of the Jesuit schools in Ireland. There we have five second-level schools, three of which are fee-paying schools for mostly rich kids, although they have varying degrees of scholarship schemes for children who could never afford the fees, and two of the schools are free, funded by Government, but with a predominantly middle-class ethos which makes it difficult for poorer children to feel comfortable there, even though it is theoretically open to them.

I would like to begin by sharing some of that experience with you, as it provides the context for what I wish to say. This morning we talked about how feelings are so important in Ignatian Spirituality and we were asked to reflect on our feelings yesterday as we walked the way of St. Ignatius.

I went to the Inner City of Dublin to live in 1974 along with two other Jesuits. Why did we go there? We had no idea. This was the era of General Congregation 32 which defined the mission of the Society as the service of faith of which the promotion of justice was in integral part. We Jesuits in Ireland were not exactly prominent in the justice field – indeed we would have been associated rather with educating rich kids in our fee paying schools. I was shocked by what I experienced in the Inner City. The housing conditions were absolutely appalling, eight families to a house, no sound-proofing between apartments, one toilet in the yard at the back of the house and a high concentration of families with problems, often related to alcohol. But what shocked me even more was the fact that I had been living in Dublin for the previous 15 years, and I had no idea that people lived in such conditions, within a 5 minute walk of the main street of our capital city. As Paul said on Monday, I was conscious of the conditions, as I passed that neighbourhood on a daily basis, but I had no consciousness of them until I went to live there.

Working with homeless people over the past forty years has totally and radically changed me. It has turned me inside out and upside down. It has challenged my values, it has made me very critical of the policies of our Government, it has challenged my understanding of God and it has changed my relationship to God. Listening to the stories of homeless children, stories of horrific abuse, violence, extreme neglect, I came to a deep sense of gratitude to God for what I have received from God. I grew up being told that God was a judge, looking down on us and noticing everything we did and said and even thought, and one day we would have to account for it all before God. Now I reject that understanding of God. For me, God is now the giver of the gifts, and has poured out, and continues to pour out, so many gifts on me, my prayer now to God is simply ´thanks´, there is nothing else to say to God.

People ask me do I ever get depressed working with homeless people against the odds. I say, ´no´, never depressed but always angry. I used to be an angry young man, now I am just an angry old man. I do about one funeral a month, it is always a young person who has died from drugs or suicide. We have 20,000 heroin users in Ireland, how many detox beds do we have for 20,000 heroin users? 35. Some Christmases ago, I buried two young people, I knew them both very well, they both died of a drug overdose, one was found dead on Christmas morning – and they were both on the waiting list for one of those 35 beds. We destroyed their lives because we did not have the services they needed when they deeded them. Could we eliminate homelessness in Ireland? Of course we could but the political will is not there. I try to express my anger constructively, by writing, by talking to groups, by talking to the media.

One of the many things they have taught me is what is the hardest part of being homeless. I always thought that the hardest part of being homeless was having to find someone on the street to sleep. But it´s not, you can get used to that. What is the hardest part of being homeless? We had a young lad living with us; when he was 18, he left us to go and live with his girlfriend. After about a year, they split up and he went on to the streets because he had nowhere else to go. After a couple of months on the streets, he threw himself into the Liffey river. To his dismay, he was rescued and brought to hospital. And I went up to visit him in hospital and he said, "Peter, I can´t go on living like this." "What do you mean?" I asked him, "living like what?" And he said, "I can´t go on living knowing that nobody cares." The hardest part of being homeless is to know that if you disappeared off the face of the earth, nobody would even notice. Your life has no meaning, no value to anyone else. You have totally lost any sense of your own value, you have totally lost your dignity. When people ask me what are we doing with homeless people, I say, yes, we can give some of them accommodation, we can give some of them drug treatment, we can give some of them counselling, but what we are really trying to do is to give them the message that they are just as important and just as valuable as anyone else, to give them back a sense of their own dignity.

So forgive me for going on about homelessness when I am supposed to be talking about Jesuit education, but I think it's relevance to our educational efforts will become clearer as I go on.

On Tuesday, we heard that before seeking to change the educational method in the network of schools in Barcelona, it was necessary to have a dream which would drive that process. I think Jesuit education is fundamentally the transmission of a dream, the dream that Jesus had. His dream was God's dream. He dreamt of a world where no-one would be hungry and not be given food, where no-one would be thirsty and not be given drink, where no-one would be naked and not be given clothes, where no-one would be in hospital and not be visited, where no-one would be in prison and be rejected (Matt 25). He dreamt of a world where human beings would live together like God's family. In a family of four children, the parents do not give three of their children a lovely steak for dinner and give the fourth child bread and jam. Yet that is what we, God's family, do to one billion people on our planet. In a family, the parents do not give three of the children a lovely bed to sleep in and tell the fourth child to sleep outside the door on the front porch. Yet that is what we, God's family, do to homeless people in every city of our world. This is not what God wants for God´s children. I want our students to dream God´s dream and seek to make it a reality in our world.

I see dignity as the link between faith and justice: if I tell the students in our school that every human being has the dignity of being a child of God, but if I am not struggling to make that dignity a reality in the lives of those whose dignity is denied or undermined by poverty, homelessness or marginalisation, then the words I am speaking to our students are empty words, or even worse, hypocrisy. I think in the diversity of faiths and cultures with which those of you who are educators engage, dignity is a concept that most of our students, of any faith or none, or whatever culture they come from, can identify with. We may not be

able to demand that all our teachers and collaborators believe in God, still less in Jesus, but we can surely expect that they believe in the dignity of every human being. Many people of no faith are very committed to social justice and making our world a better place for all people; perhaps they are what Karl Rahner calls "anonymous Christians." Indeed, my experience is that most young people have a strong commitment to fairness and justice and will respond enthusiastically when asked to commit themselves to working for, and with, people on the margins, even if they have rejected the notion of God. I have a difficulty sometimes with the word ´God´- people often ask me if I talk to homeless people about God. I say ´no´ and they look surprised: But you should be talking to them about God," they say, "You´re a priest, aren´t you." I say, "I can´t talk to them about God, because when I use the word ´God¨, I mean a being who loves them with an infinite and unconditional love. But when they hear the word ´God´, what do they hear? They hear ´judgement, condemnation´. So we are using the same word, ´God´ but with two totally different and contradictory meanings. So I say, "I cannot talk to them about God, but I hope we are communicating God to them." How do you communicate to someone a God who loves them? Why you do it by loving them, not by talking about it!

We want to produce students who dream God's dream, committed to building a world of justice and peace, in which everyone's dignity is affirmed and realised. We do not want to produce students who will "fit in" to society, we want to produce students who will challenge and change society. Nor do we do not want to produce students who, as Pope Francis said, "bind the wounds without first curing them and treating them; who treat the symptoms and not the causes and roots. "That," says Pope Francis, "is the temptation of the 'do-gooders', of the fearful, and also of the so-called 'progressives and liberals." We want to produce students who will go beyond 'raising money for good causes.'

In Ireland, there is a huge demand for Jesuit education. Parents know that their children will receive a very good education and they will almost certainly go to college, get their degree and fit very successfully into society as it exists. However, I would love if our Jesuit schools were places where most parents would NOT want to send their children, because they know that, if they sent their child there, they would be exposed to the dream and would receive a very strong grounding in social justice, both in theory and in practice, and in later life would be socially and politically very active. They would be pupils who would challenge and change society and instead of fitting comfortably into society will probably be crucified by the society they try to change. Just as there were those who did not want Jesus´ dream to become reality, and so crucified him, today also there are many who do not want to share their wealth or power and will resist every attempt to make the world a more just place for those who are poor and marginalised.

In my original article, I used the "see, judge, act," paradigm. I would like to expand that in the light of the virtual discussion that has taken place since then.

Some insertion experiences consist of doing something for the poor or homeless or giving something to the poor or homeless, what Dan from the Philippines called poverty tourism, which most parents are delighted for their children to experience. The 15-16 year old students, many from Jesuit schools, who spend a week in our drop-in centre for homeless people, which I talked about in my original paper, come in on a Monday morning wanting to know what they can do for these homeless people. As the week progresses, they come to realise that they have nothing to give these homeless people, but the homeless people have so much to give them. They come, in some small way, to befriend them and not to see them as the recipients of their generosity. I think that is one of the desired outcomes from a good insertion experience, namely the realisation that is we, who are not poor, who have so much to learn, so much to receive, from those who are poor. They challenge our prejudices and break down the mental barriers that divide us. They come to realise that there is no 'them' and 'us', but only 'us'. They make us angry that life has been so unfair and unjust to people who are no different from us, who have the same hopes, fears, joys and sorrows as ourselves. As Gaudium et Spes says:

"The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." (No. 1)

That anger can be the driving force for change, if expressed constructively. Love and anger are two sides of the one coin: you cannot love someone who is suffering unnecessarily without being angry at what is causing that suffering. We want to produce students who are angry in a constructive way at the way things are, which requires teachers who are angry with the way things are, which requires a headmaster/headmistress who is angry at the way things are.

Dan also talked about the need for insertion experiences to be sufficiently deep and sustained that our pupils can discover and experience that change is possible. Arturo from Bolivia talked about insertion experiences where pupils can live what they are experiencing and live it to the limit. Most parents would demand that their children do NOT have such insertion experiences and would not send their children to a school that insists on such experiences. A child spends about 15 – 20% of their year in the school environment and the other 80 – 85% at home. Unless the parents are supportive of a strong social justice dimension to the education of their child, then we are working against the parents and the parents will inevitably win! Where schools have the freedom to select the students they will accept, is this commitment by parents to a demanding social justice experience for their children a primary criterion for the selection process?

<u>'Compassion' or 'solidarity'</u>. In the virtual discussion, the question was asked, "was there such a thing as Christian compassion? I'm not sure that there is any such thing as "Christian compassion." I believe that compassion is a fundamental and spontaneous feeling that belongs to us as human beings. When we see a small child who is starving in her mother's arms, or a nine year old child living on the street, or a child bereaved through violence, our heart spontaneously reaches out to that child – whether we are Christians or Hindus or Moslems or Jews or atheists. But compassion must lead to action. If we care, that caring must make a difference, otherwise what is the point of caring? My problem with the term compassion is that compassion means different things to different people. For some, it can mean giving money to a charity at Christmas; for others, it can mean spending your life with Ebola patients in Africa. It may or may not involve commitment. I prefer the word 'solidarity'.

Compassion is a spontaneous response of the heart. But the plight of those to whom our hearts reach out spontaneously in compassion must be reflected upon. The actions which result from that reflection are the expression of true compassion. An analogy I sometimes use is: imagine a person sitting beside a river on a beautiful summer day. He is enjoying the sun and the peace and the quiet. Then a body comes floating down the river. He jumps in, pulls the person out of the river, gives them the kiss of life and sends them on their way. That is surely an act of compassion. He just settles down to enjoy the rest of the day, when another body comes floating down the river; he jumps in pulls them out, gives them the kiss of life and sends them on their way. And then a third body and a fourth, all these bodies keep floating down the river. At some point he must ask himself where all these bodies are coming from! So he goes up river, finds a bridge and an oil tanker has crashed on the bridge, spilt all the oil on the bridge, and destroyed the wall at the side of the bridge. Everyone crossing the bridge slips on the oil, falls through the broken wall and into the river. So he cleans up the bridge, puts a rope at the side of the bridge and there are no more bodies floating down the river. Pulling the bodies out of the river is what Mother Teresa did so wonderful – a magnificent witness to the compassion of God. But fixing the bridge is what Oscar Romero tried to do. He challenged the structures of his society which kept people poor and marginalised – and like Jesus he was murdered.

I prefer the word "solidarity" to the word "compassion" – we are striving to produce students who are in solidarity with the poor and marginalised. We seek to produce men and women, not so much *for* others, as men and women *with* others. Ireland is a very compassionate country: people will give very generously to services working with homeless people, (our work depends on the generosity of Irish people!), but if we try to open a hostel for homeless people in their neighbourhood, those same people may be out on the picket line trying to prevent it. In my original paper, I tried to describe how I see the difference between compassion and solidarity. Compassion suggests giving "charity" to the poor, either in the form of money or time; solidarity, on the other hand, suggests working for justice for the poor, as defined by Pope John Paul II.

"(solidarity) is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (Social Concern No.38)

Ethos of the school: Reflection, then, is an integral part of the insertion experience. Reflection moves us from compassion (a spontaneous feeling of distress) to solidarity. A good insertion experience will produce in the student a feeling that "it is good for us to be here." But unless adequately reflected upon, insertion experiences can be transitory and forgettable as the "it is good for us to be here" feeling fades or is pushed aside by other more pressing demands such as the pressure of exams. Without reflection, an insertion experience can sometimes even reinforce a student's prejudices. In life, we often internalise unjust structures so that we are totally unaware of the injustice. In US in the eighteen century, good, God-fearing, church-going people owned slaves. No doubt, in compassion, they treated their slaves kindly. But the institution of slavery had become embedded in their consciousness in such a way that many of them never questioned the injustice of it. A deep insertion experience can leave students confused and challenged, as they come face to face with the unjust structures which affect the persons whom they befriend. They may have internalised those structures, and so justified them, without ever realising the injustice in them. To reflect adequately on those experiences requires teachers who also dream the dream. I gave a real example in my original paper of a student from a Jesuit school who had a deep insertion experience, but his attempt to reflect on it with his teachers not only failed, but was ridiculed by teachers who had not dreamed the dream he had begun to experience.

The key, then, to producing students who dream the dream is to have teachers who dream the dream. Teachers who will inspire, provoke and accompany students who are beginning to dream the dream. They too, then, must be prepared to engage in such insertion experiences, perhaps even with their students, if they have not already had that experience. This is a huge challenge for any school whose primary requirement is for teachers who are competent to teach.

The key to having teachers who dream the dream, is to have a Principal who dreams the dream and can build an ethos around a corporate commitment to justice. Unless the Principal is actively promoting and supporting a process of insertion and reflection, then the process is probably going to fail.

And principals are usually appointed by a Board, who are mostly lay people. When appointing principals, there are other qualifications required, such as being a good administrator, which may come to dominate the selection process. To ensure that a school has a continuity of principals who are committed to a social justice dimension in education, the vision, values and mission statements of the school must clearly state this social justice dimension as one of its primary priorities. We heard on Monday of a school where these are discussed with the Board and teachers every year.

To produce students who are in solidarity with the poor also requires our schools to work with parents. As you know better than I, unless the parents are supportive of the aims and objectives of the school, then a school which is creating students with a strong social

justice commitment may be setting up conflict between the student and his/her parents, which may leave the student very confused and is unfair to the student.

Reflection on the insertion experience will focus students on challenging the economic, social and political structures of our societies which create and maintain gross – and often growing – inequalities, poverty and homelessness. It may challenge the values and mindsets of their parents, so we cannot leave the parents out of the process. It may also challenge the very nature of the school itself which, despite scholarship schemes and social justice programmes, may itself be maintaining and contributing to the continuing social and economic inequalities and injustices in society. I believe that in Ireland our fee-paying Jesuit schools, as they currently exist, maintain and even reinforce the inequalities and injustice in our country. . The ultimate insertion experience for students is to be educated in a school in which all social classes are accepted and welcomed, where students from all social backgrounds sit together in the same classroom and can befriend and learn from each other, a friendship which can lead to action for and with those who are most disadvantaged.

Action: Reflection on the immersion experience, if done in some depth, will lead inevitably to a desire to do something to bring about change. We tend to consider action as something which can be postponed to the future, after the students graduate and get settled into a career. Understandably, as students, their primary focus is on their educational attainments, so their opportunity to get involved in action outside the school is necessarily limited.

The test as to whether a school has an ethos which considers the promotion of justice to be an integral part of its educational responsibility is whether the school is committed to the promotion of justice *within* the school. My dream is for a school which would encourage and promote “student committees”, composed of students of all ages, who have the responsibility to identify and address issues of injustice and unfairness *within* the school. Perhaps that injustice is bullying of some students by others, or alleged unfair treatment of a student by a teacher. My dream is for a school which encourages students to take action – perhaps radical action – to redress the unfairness which they expose. I hear a gasp of horror from those school principals who are present! I was delighted to hear of a school in Australia with a student union who were upset that they were not consulted about having to start the school day five minutes earlier so that the Examen could be got in.

Our desire is not just to produce students who are radical social activists. The difference between radical social activists and the students we produce is that they are motivated not by ideology but by their experience of being loved by God with an infinite and unconditional love and feel called to follow the risen Jesus in the building of the family or Kingdom of God. They wish to give their lives, not for a left-wing ideology, but for a person. The Spiritual Exercises can have an important role to play in producing teachers or students of solidarity, provided the Exercises are given a social context, which today would be very different from the time of Ignatius. The first week could help us to reflect on our prejudices, our complacencies, our inaction and failure to respond to the social injustices around us, what today we call social, or structural, sin. In the Kingdom meditation, we commit to following Jesus in bringing the Kingdom of God to reality, a Kingdom in which all human beings live together as a family, under God’s rule. The Two Standards challenge the justifications and rationalisations which we invent to avoid leaving our comfort zones. The Three Classes of People challenge us to reflect on where we stand in the struggle to bring dignity to all. The Third Week brings home to us the likely outcome of our commitment to justice, we will be outsiders in the world in which we have grown up, a world which will oppose us to the end. The Fourth Week, along with the Contemplation for Obtaining Love, root us in the firm foundation stone from which we can go forth to build a world filled with justice, namely the belief that we are loved, infinitely and unconditionally, by God, a love which nothing and nobody can take away or diminish by one iota. We want to produce students who, from a deep experience of the love of God (an experience which is mediated by the love of others for them) are willing to commit their lives to building a more just world.

On Monday, George defined the formation of conscience as a process “which leads and helps the learner to find meaning in their own life and enables them to find an answer to the quest for transcendence.” How do we do that? I am often asked by young people, “How do you know if God exists? I say to them, “I will tell you. Imagine a person sitting on a river bank on a beautiful sunny day, enjoying the peace and quiet and listening to the flow of the river. Beside that person there is a child playing and the child suddenly falls into the river and is being carried away by the water. And the person beside the river jumps in, rescues the child and saves the child´s life. What will the parents of that child do? Well, of course, they will first go the hospital and reassure themselves that their child is alright. But what will they do next? They will want to find that person to thank them personally for saving their child´s life. If you want to know if God exists, I tell them, do not stand looking up into the heavens, for you will not find God there. Look around you, there are so many people suffering in so many ways. Reach out to them, try to take some of that suffering off their shoulders. If you do that, then God will come and find you, to thank you personally for what you have done for God´s children. When God finds you, then you will meet God and then you will know that God exists.” Our students will not find God in our chapels, and will not hear God in their praying and singing, unless they first find God and hear God in the suffering of those around them. It is in reaching out to those who are poor and unwanted that our students will discover the meaning of life, and will come to find the answer to the quest for transcendence.

The banks in Europe have recently undergone stress tests to see if they meet the criteria for being a bank. I often wonder should we do some such test on Jesuit schools and colleges. We need to continually ask the question: given all the money, manpower and effort which we expend on our educational apostolate, are we happy that this investment is producing people of faith, who are committed to the following of Jesus in his solidarity with the poor and with his passion for justice?