

## **Education Beyond the Comfort Zone**

*Stepping out of one's "comfort zone" to experience firsthand the glaring inequities and rampant injustices of our world has the power to change our perspectives and priorities*

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It is a truism that Jesuit Schools do not educate in a vacuum. We educate in a world where approximately 40,000 people die each day from easily preventable diseases; where \$2.4 billion a day is spent on weapons of destruction; where three billion people live on less than \$2 a day; where the total assets of the wealthiest 358 individuals exceed the combined annual income of the poorest 45 percent of the entire world's population. Consider if the world were reduced to a village of 100 people, 80 of them would live in poverty; six people would control 59 percent of the village's wealth and all six of them would be U.S. citizens; only one would have a college degree. As for the United States, Hurricane Katrina showed us how many Americans are left behind in poverty and revealed the connection between race, age, and poverty, as well as the destructive power of a political ideology with no sense of the common good.

Do Jesuit universities and colleges devote enough attention to the 75 percent of the world whose life circumstances deny them the possibility of ever attending a university? Where do those poor Black seniors who were abandoned in the Gulf Coast rest homes fit into Jesuit education? Would a poll about the role and responsibility of Jesuit higher education conducted among our trustees, faculty, staff, students and alumni yield dramatically different answers from those obtained by a sampling of the three billion people in the world who live on less than \$2 a day? How would that 75 percent of the world who do not own a fridge, keep their clothes in a closet, or sleep in a bed feel about what we are doing with Jesuit higher education in the United States? Should they have anything to say to us about education? Is it appropriate for Jesuit universities to measure their excellence simply by the standards of *U.S. News and World Report* or *Princeton Review*?

Such questions evoke the memory of Thomas Meagher and his assessment of the education he received at Clongowes, the very best Jesuit school in 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland: “They talked to us about Mount Olympus and the Vale of Tempe; they birched us into a flippant acquaintance with the disreputable Gods and Goddesses of the golden and heroic ages; they entangled us in Euclid...gave us a look...at what was doing in the New World; but, as far as Ireland was concerned, they left us blind and crippled children in the dark.”—from *The Great Shame*

Thus did Meagher lament an excellent academic education that left him completely in the dark about deliberate, widespread starvation in the Irish countryside and the brutal repression of poor Catholics by British troops throughout the country.

It is axiomatic that where we stand determines what we see. The squalid *favelas* of Rio De Janerio look very different to the sun-worshippers of Ipanema than they do to the desperate slum-dwellers who populate them. A University of San Francisco student referred to her experience in Central America as pushing away from her comfort zone and daring to understand the world from the perspective of a poor peasant woman. Another USF nursing student wrote of his time in rural Guatemala: “I lived for two weeks with people who had nothing, but offered us everything they had. They always welcomed me, a complete stranger, like a long lost relative from California. I have completely changed my priorities.” Our perspectives and priorities change when we stand in the people who cannot keep their food in a fridge or clothes in a closet.

From a global perspective, Jesuit higher education embraces a very privileged elite. The ethical question for higher education generally—even more so for Jesuit education—is as much about 99 percent people in the village who are not there, as it is about the one person who is. Can we educate people to be humanly in the world without attending to the two-thirds of the world whose lives are marked by grinding poverty and quiet despair—those three billion people who live on less than \$2 that some of us pay for a bottle of designer water? It is said that on the eve of India’s independence and in the face of insurmountable challenges, when Gandhi was asked what he feared the most,

he replied, “hardness of heart in the educated.” Gandhi’s fear was well placed and should haunt all of us involved with Jesuit education in this country.

When John Donne wrote: “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main...Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in Mankind” he was underscoring the truth that we are inextricably joined to one another and that we cannot achieve the fullness of our graced humanity in isolation from one another, much less at the expense of others. The Superior General of the Jesuits, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, expressed this same truth in an address at Santa Clara University when he challenged the Jesuit schools to “educate the whole person of solidarity for the real world.” He emphasized that such solidarity is the product of contact, not concepts, and that “personal involvement with innocent suffering, with the injustice others suffer, is the catalyst for solidarity, which then gives rise to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection.” It is important to note that the intended outcome of global solidarity is rigorous inquiry and serious moral reflection. Solidarity is an enhancement, not a diminishment, of academic rigor and intellectual integrity. Fr. Kolvenbach, like Donne before him, believes that to be humanly in today’s world one must be fully cognizant that *our* world is not the real world for the majority of people in the global village and that the suffering of others touches and even diminishes us.

Stepping out of one’s “comfort zone” to experience firsthand the glaring inequities and rampant injustices of our world has the power to change perspectives and priorities. A former student told me that his experience in Guatemala taught him that if all the people in the world were stretched out in a single file line, he would be up toward the very front of the line. He has decided that rather than spend the rest of his life pushing to be the very first line, he would try to look back at the billions of people behind him. That decision, he said, has made all the difference. Such is the perspective that should characterize “persons solidarity for the real world” that Jesuit universities aim to educate. Only with the perspective will the Jesuit-educated graduate make a difference for the other 99 people in our global village and realize the fullness of their humanity.