**Leadership and Social Justice**

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About forty years ago, a gathering of bishops in Rome issued the following statement:

“Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”

“Constitutive” means that which you cannnot do without. As an engine is a constitutive element of a car. As teaching and learning are constitutive dimensions of a school. You cannot authentically preach the Gospel unless you act for justice.

Soon after this, when Jesuits world-wide gathered in Rome for their Thirty-second General Congregation, they outlined their mission today in these words:

“The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of Justice is an absolute requirement. For reconciliation with God demands the reconciliation of people with one another.”

This is the twin mission of the Church and of the Society of Jesus. Sometimes expressed as “a faith that does justice”. This has always been the mission of the Society. Today, not only does it continue to be the mission of the Jesuits and their various works and ministries, it is the shared mission of all those who work closely with Jesuits and share their spirituality.

As future leaders in a Jesuit school, we expect that you will be known as young men of justice. Leaders with integrity. Office holders whose words and actions will be characterized by the highest of moral principles.

Theological libraries are full of books on social justice. Whole courses are offered on this topic. But in recent times, the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops issued what they referred to as *Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching*. This condensed summary is a useful yardstick for us by which to reference any leadership in a school community – from the President or Head of School, right down to the captain of the most junior class or sporting team.

Remember what Pedro Arrupe said in his famous “Men for Others” speech:

“Today our prime educational objective must be to form men-for-others; men who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors; men completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for others is a farce.”

“A farce”! Strong words. It means we take justice seriously in any Jesuit school.

The following seven themes are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition. In treating each theme, we will consider how they might apply in a school community.

**1 Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and euthanasia. The value of human life is being threatened by cloning, embryonic stem cell research, and the use of the death penalty. The intentional targeting of civilians in war or terrorist attacks is always wrong. Catholic teaching also calls on us to work to avoid war. Nations must protect the right to life by finding increasingly effective ways to prevent conflicts and resolve them by peaceful means. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

**Question**

Consider that last line: “The measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.” Where might the life, or the quality of life, or the dignity of a person in the school community (student, teacher, non-teaching staff) ever be threatened or diminished? And beyond the school? What could you, as a school leader, do to protect or enhance that life or that dignity?

**2 Call to Family, Community, and Participation**

The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society -- in economics and politics, in law and policy -- directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. Marriage and the family are the central social institutions that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

**Question**

Are there people in your community who feel excluded? Who might choose to be excluded? Who are deliberately excluded? Who are “the poor and vulnerable” in your school community? What can you do for their well-being and the common good?

**3 Rights and Responsibilities**

The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities – to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

**Question**

Can you list some rights of students? And what are some of their responsibilities? If you observe some students asserting rights but ignoring responsibilities, what might be your role as a leader in your sphere of influence?

**4 Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**

A basic moral test of a community or a nation is how the most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

You would be very familiar with both the concept and the reality of God’s *unconditional* love. But in addition to that, today we speak today of another reality of God’s love, not so easily comprehended. That is, although God loves everyone equally, God has a special place for the poor in his heart.

The Pope and the Bishops have in recent years been speaking a great deal about “God’s preferential option, or love, for the poor”. At one gathering in South America, John Paul II even said, “The poor are God’s favourites.” Challenging stuff.

It presents something of a paradox. God loves everyone equally. True. But he has a preferential love for the poor. How can that be? What does it mean? To get some understanding, look at Jesus in the Gospels. He loves all. He spends time with all. We hear that he is as much at home dining with the rich as he is sharing bread with the poor. He excludes no one. But he is *more* likely to be found with the poor and the outcastes. Those who are rejected and despised. Why? Because they are starved of love. They are in need of love. They need to be “saved”. Saved for heaven in the next life, certainly. But also saved from everything that would make them less than human in this life.

The closest analogy I can think of to explain it to the boys is within a family. Good parents love all of their children equally. But if one of them is sick or ill, if one is disabled, if one struggles with a deep problem (maybe rejection) at school or with peers, then the parent’s heart goes out to them more. They have a greater claim on their parents’ care and time and love. And whilst not rejecting or loving the other children less, the parents have a preferential love for them.

What do you think of that?

**Question**

Earlier we considered the poor and vulnerable within your school community. What about those beyond the school walls? The motto of the earliest Jesuit schools was taken from Cicero: “We do not exist for ourselves alone”. We were outward looking from our earliest days. Now we speak of forming “men and women for others”. Exactly the same orientation. What could we do in a school? As a leader, how could you encourage it in a school? Share with other school groups.

**5 The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers**

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in Gods creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected--the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to the organization and joining of unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

This moral principle focuses more on issues in the workplace. Absolutely important issues, but we will not discuss them in the school context.

**6 Solidarity**

We are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers and sisters keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbour has global dimensions in a shrinking world. At the core of the virtue of solidarity is the pursuit of justice and peace. Pope Paul VI taught that if you want peace, work for justice. The Gospel calls us to be peacemakers. Our love for all our sisters and brothers demands that we promote peace in a world surrounded by violence and conflict.

**Question**

When is peace threatened in your school community? What have you done or what might you do to preserve peace? Are there any sub-groups or sub-communities existing within your broader school community? Who are they? Do they need welcoming or bringing in from the edges? How might you do this? Do you have any strategies?

**7 Care for God's Creation**

We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of Gods creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.

**Question**

Is God’s creation considered and cared for in your school community? How so? If not, how might you as a student leader demonstrate that this responsibility is serious and central?

**Conclusion**

When Fr Joseph McShane SJ became President of Fordham Jesuit University in New York a decade ago, this is what he said about the nature Jesuit education he was offering to his students:

“We want them to be bothered. We want you to leave here with a sense of responsibility to society, we want you always to be bothered always by the thought that there is injustice in the world. For us at Fordham, we want our students to be bothered, haunted by the suspicion that somewhere, someone is suffering. We want them to be bothered.”

We feel the same way. When you go back to your schools after this Leadership Programme, we want you to have “fire in your bellies”. We want you to have a passion for justice. We want you to be bothered.