

Doing the more or less: Magis in our times

A couple of weeks ago I attended Loreto Normanhurst's Loreto Day – the culmination of weeks of awareness raising and then a day of fund raising and celebration. The girls were supporting Nyumbani village in Kenya – a village for grandparents and grandchildren – the middle generation having been wiped out by HIV/AIDS. The village was founded by an American Jesuit doctor and psychiatrist, Angelo D'Agostino, who died some time ago and the CEO is now one of our sisters, Mary Owens. As the girls were giving their presentation I was reminded of a visit I made to Kenya some years ago. In the evening Mary Owens came in and said they had been celebrating some of the children's birthdays but she was worried because one of the boys, who had just turned 18, stormed out of the party and she didn't know why was it adolescent angst, a worry...?. The next day I was talking with the Director of the Nyumbani Children's Home and he said that boy had walked into his office and said: *Now I am an adult what's to become of me?* Indeed what was to become of him – HIV positive and an orphan?

What's to become of me? A question most of our young people ask in one way or another but also a question we ask about our children, our students, our friends - *what's to become of them?* What is the more, the *Magis* we want for them?

My guess is that we want them all to live life to the full, to be fully human and all that being human involves. In his recent encyclical Pope Francis says that being fully human is to be graced by the virtues of generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience. Coming from the perspective of our Christian, Ignatian heritage we desire women and men for others. We want them, in Jesus words, *to serve, not to be served*; to be attuned in Ignatian-speak *to discerning the more universal good, the greater good*. Jon Sobrino, that wonderful South American, Jesuit theologian, says that *human beings only come to be fully human by facilitating the liberation of those who suffer oppression and defeat*. Pope Francis wants the Church to be a field hospital after battle - attending to wounds and hurts rather than dictating battle strategies and rules of engagement. We want our students to bind the wounds, tend the hurts and liberate the defeated rather than immerse themselves in battle plans. One of the ways to heal, advocated by Pope Francis, is mercy, He says *that mercy can heal the wounds and change history*. He wants Christians to be out there *healing the wounds of humanity*.

Being the wise and attuned educators that you are - you are only too well aware of the barriers, the distractions that hinder them, and us, from seeking the greater good - what I call, for economy's sake, the 3 Cs: excessive competitiveness which leads to an all-encompassing desire for power, where you claw your way to the top, watching your back and exercising control every inch of the way; consumption - when success in life is measured out in the symbols of consumerism - designer clothes, cars, money, trips overseas and a partying life style and in a grab-bag of what I call corruption - when cheating, undermining, bullying and denigration become acceptable and all is OK if you don't get caught.

We are also painfully aware of the disconnection of many young people from the institutional Church. They come from schools which encourage participation in the liturgy, provide a sound education in faith and scripture, give a variety of religious experiences, invite them to discuss all manner of moral issues with openness and frankness - then they leave school and, in many, many cases, enter an ecclesiastical desert.

As educators we need to work against the image of the Church as judge, jury and an institution which is into condemnation. Pope Francis warns against *remaining shut up within structures that give us a false sense of security, within rules that make us harsh judges*. He urges young people to be revolutionaries swimming against the tide. No doubt some of us shudder at the prospect of a school of revolutionaries madly swimming against the tide but are our schools recognised as places of mercy? A more trivial example, perhaps, but do strict dress codes sometimes cloud our vision of the child who battles just to get to school with half his clothes at Mum's and the other half at Dad's? Are we earnest in our search for the causes of bad behaviour rather than mete out the customary punishments? Schools as havens of mercy is a concept worth considering.

Chris Gleeson s.j, a well-known Jesuit educator who is in our midst this evening, in an online article for Magis Education writes about helping our students follow *the song line of Jesus*, while Pope Francis sees the world as *crisscrossed by roads that come closer together and move apart but the important thing is that they lead towards God*. In a later address Pope Francis speaks about *being a church that finds new roads*. The challenge for us as educators is helping our students hear the song lines and find the roads.

For me a crucial song line is that of service – women and men for others. The magis of service is much, much more than a few hours compulsory community service, it requires, as Chris Lowney points out in his book on Ignatian Leadership, *going further than wholehearted service*. Don Watson, the Australian author and former speech writer for Paul Keating urges young people *to intelligent free thought and glorious deeds*. What can we do in our schools to lead our students to glorious deeds – where is the inspiration and the motivation? Pope Francis sees *service, (as) the joy of the Church, when it goes a step further, always to go further and give life*. We have the ultimate example of service in Jesus' action at the Last Supper – washing the feet of his disciples – the gnarled, cracked and dirty feet of the habitual sandal wearers. [I always find it a pity we only do this once a year in our liturgies]. Note all the attention paid to Pope Francis washing the feet of a young woman prisoner, a Muslim.... This is a very important symbol of service and much deserving of our attention. Imagine schools of foot washers! How then do we make service the baseline of our curriculum and embed it in the culture of our schools?

Perhaps the more, the magis, lies in the less?

Jesus' song line inevitably ends at the periphery, among the people at the edges of our world – the drug addict, the asylum seeker, the homeless, the alien, the leper, the blind and the

ostracised. Tony Herbert, an Australian Jesuit with more than 50 years of service in India, particularly among the Dalits, the untouchables, writes of his reason for working with them: *and there (among the Dalits) in finding God present among those on the edges, lies the reason for doing it. And with the conviction that beyond our human horizon of "no hope" there is a hope and a certainty. Against all human logic.* A poem by Christopher Logue highlights the challenge of the periphery:

*Come to the edge
We might fall
Come to the edge
It's too high
Come to the edge
And they came
And he pushed
And they flew*

How can we help our young people fly from the periphery into the transformation of people's lives? Many of the young people we teach are extremely privileged with more than enough of this world's goods and access to an enviable education. I don't, and I am sure you don't, want to inflict guilt upon them nor make gratitude compulsory but, within the context of Magis, we hope to lead them to appreciate what they have and to have them follow pathways that lead to the liberation of people who live in poverty and oppression. We might well remember that very important statement from Pedro Arrupe *All should act on behalf of the poor, many should be near the poor and few should be as the poor.* And Pope Francis says *we have to state without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them.*

I can imagine that some of you are running a class list through your minds and wondering how on earth do you entice them away from their phones let alone to the periphery? But I want to tell you about two girls. Those of you who read the Financial Review know that each year the paper invites readers to nominate the 100 women of influence. I want to tell you about two young nominees Stephanie Lorenzo, 30, and Katerina, Kate, Kimmorley, 27.

Steph Lorenzo studied marketing at Macquarie University and began work in the corporate world aiming, in her words, to be head of an agency like Saatchi & Saatchi by the time she was 30. She read a biography of a Cambodian woman, a survivor of sex trafficking, and it captured her imagination. Steph researched everything she could about trafficking and she said *instead of being sad I wanted to do something about it.* She organised a group of young people to go on a sponsored bike ride across Cambodia, they raised \$80,000 and Project Futures was born. The aim of Project Futures was *to empower and engage our generation in raising awareness and funding to combat human trafficking and sexual exploitation.*

Steph gave up her job, started the organization and used her flat as office, storeroom and meeting place. *I wanted to prove, she said, that young people want to give back in various ways and what we needed was an outlet – Project Futures became that outlet. Project Futures now organizes bike rides in Cambodia, Nepal and elsewhere and engages corporations in the support of victims of trafficking when they come to Australia on speaking and fund raising tours. Money is raised for a foundation supporting the rescue and rehabilitation of victims of trafficking. Steph now has an office and she never refuses an opportunity to talk about trafficking and the impact it has on people – she wants to raise awareness in Australia*

Katerina (Kate) Kimmorley 27 studied economics at University of Sydney. (My apologies for this Sydney-centric approach – it is my centre at the moment.) While she was studying she had a letter from a friend working in an orphanage in India telling her how 700 million Indians were plunged into darkness as the result of a massive power failure. Again the imagination was caught – the moral imagination - and Kate decided to do something about this. She went to the London School of Economics to do a Masters with a focus on sustainable energy. With two friends Kate started a company, **Pollinate Energy**, aimed at bringing low cost solar power to India. Supported by hoards of young volunteers they began micro-financing local entrepreneurs to set up small energy companies with the aim of replicating this model across India's 53 largest cities. *It's interesting for women today, Kate says, we now have social media, peer-to-peer lending – there's a new type of career for young people but no one has a road map and it can lead to new things. That's how we influence.* These two young women, from privileged schools and strong families, were headed for very successful careers in the corporate world but they were caught and held by the stories of those captured on the periphery by poverty and exploitation.

The periphery, the place of less is, in a sense the launch pad for doing the more. In *Laudato Si* Pope Francis says *if we want to bring about deep change, we need to realise that certain mindsets really do influence our behaviour* (what mindsets brought about Brexit, Trump and the Australian elections?). *Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature.* (LS47) Andy Hamilton in a recent article in *Eureka Street* writes of the challenges facing Australia – the most important challenges, he says, are about relationships and *first of all the way we act to vulnerable and disadvantaged people. This is the thermometer by which we measure the nation's health.* If we are looking for measures what were the key issues in the elections – did the vulnerable and disadvantaged rate much of a mention, let alone our suffering planet?

Standing at the edge enables one to look in and look out. Looking towards the centre we see a prosperous Australia – a stable democracy, more or less, with a well-established rule of law and a welfare safety net but at the edges are generations of Indigenous people who, in Stan Grant's words, when describing the booing of Adam Goodes, *heard a howl. We heard a howl of humiliation that echoes across two centuries of dispossession, injustice, suffering and survival. We heard the howl of the Australian Dream and it said to us again, you're not welcome.* Indeed at the very outer edges, dumped on off-shore islands, are people imprisoned in a limbo of despair and hopelessness, their howls encased in a cone of bureaucratic silence, cut off from all that is humane – their crime – seeking safety from persecution and violence. At the edge are scores of women beaten, humiliated and hurt by men our social and education systems have failed – the only solution to disagreement is the fist. This is an issue those involved in the education of boys must urgently confront. Struggling on the margins are One Nation voters gripped by fear of the unknown, alienated or ignored by the ordinary pathways of democracy, grasping for someone to blame. At the edge are young people without education or jobs or prospects – the unwitting victims of dysfunctional families, increasingly unequal social structures and a society that seems unable, or unwilling, to give them *a fair go*. And of course the periphery is the resort of the mentally ill, the addicted and the poor. But you can't be a bystander, a voyeur looking from afar, if you are truly on the edge, rubbing shoulders with the outcasts of our society.

This is a real challenge for our social justice and immersion projects which can so easily slip into poverty porn. Nice middle class children doing good things for the poor and feeling good about it! How do we help them understand that they are there to learn, to come to some insights as to what it is to be poor or exploited or discriminated against so that they can engage in the liberation and transformation of themselves and the world?

Looking out we see a world that is bright with possibilities, great scientific and technological discoveries have done much to relieve poverty and suffering. The easy criss-crossing of nations, the exposure to diversity, languages and cultures make for broader minds and better understanding. And yet for all that, 60 million people are fleeing war and violence, the planet groans from exploitation and misuse and there is an increasing distrust of the established political systems, while nationalist movements emerge and disenchantment with democracy grows.

If the more, the Magis, is less, then our role, above all roles is to help young people know that the song line of Jesus leads to the edges where they become sensitized to the needs of others, to those on the outer. It is possible to teach a great deal from the perspective of the other, to shape curriculum so that the views of the dispossessed are given a voice, but most

of all to provide opportunities for young people to really engage with those in danger of falling off the edge. Exposure may be a useful educational tool but engagement provides opportunities to develop confidence, compassion and form a relationship with the Jesus of the song line.

Alongside engagement we must work with young people to develop a spirituality for our times – deeply connected to the care of the planet and its citizens. A spirituality which encourages them to dig deep below the surface, to reflect (examen) on their lives and on the society around them. At the end of their education in our schools we want them to ask the big questions: *Why are poor people still living in poverty? Why are young Indigenous people committing suicide at a rate far exceeding that of their white counterparts? How can it possibly be that Australia and the developed world are becoming more unequal?* Schools are, I know, pushed to handle so many aspects of life and the days are crammed so I am not so much asking for more in the curriculum but for a deeper awareness of the edge, the periphery from which we teach and interact with our students. The song line of Jesus is ultimately a song about blessedness – blessed are the poor, the gentle, the mourners, those who work for justice, the peacemakers, the merciful and the persecuted. It is about having the humility to listen and learn from others; it is about living in that uneasy space where we, and our students, don't have all the answers. It is a song about hope – it is saying to the young, indeed to all of us, that things can change, transformation is possible.

It is from the edge that the least, teetering on the brink, can teach us what it is to be more and how we might work for the greater good.