

GOING TO THE FRONTIERS

The following is an excerpt from Father General, Alfonso Nicolas', speech on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of Jesuit Education in the Philippines – 13 July 2009

During the 35th General Congregation of the Jesuits in 2008, Pope Benedict challenged the Society of Jesus to go to the frontiers - to travel to those **"geographical and spiritual places where others do not reach or find it difficult to reach."** For Father Nicolas, two of those places, those frontiers, are what he has called 'the frontier of depth' and 'the frontier of universality.'

THE FRONTIER OF DEPTH

(12) The first frontier I would like to propose is the frontier of depth. Depth, for me, is perhaps a better translation of Ignatian Magis. The trouble with translating Magis simply as "More" is that it can too easily be understood as the "More" of a competitive, consumerist culture. If we have more awards, higher rankings, more computers and sports facilities, more faculty members with advanced degrees, then we can too easily fool ourselves into thinking that we are living the Magis. I am not saying that these are not important; they are vital for a good school. But to be a good Jesuit school, they are not enough.

(13) Ignatius was always concerned with depth. You have heard many times, I am sure, his principle of *Non multa sed multum*, literally, "Not many, but much," originally one of the annotations in the Spiritual Exercises, but applied often to Ignatian pedagogy as well. One could paraphrase this as "not quantity, but depth": "what satisfies the soul," Ignatius says—in other words, what really matters in the business of becoming human and Christian—is not many superficial bits of knowledge and information, but a deep understanding and appreciation of what is most important.

(14) When one looks at the Gospels, we see that Jesus always responded in depth. Look at any healing story: the way Jesus heals the paralyzed man brought in by his friends through the roof; the leper; the woman with the issue of blood. Jesus first responds to a concrete, immediate need: the healing of a sickness. But then he goes on to respond to a deeper need: the burden of guilt or the sense of hopelessness or rejection and isolation. Finally, he goes deeper still and offers what they long for most, often without knowing it: the gift of the Kingdom of God, of friendship with a God of unconditional love, in a way that transforms them at the core of their persons.

(15) What is the depth of the education we provide, and how might we be called to go deeper? Let me offer a few questions that might help explain what I mean.

(16) **How deeply do we respond to our students' needs?** If our instruction is good and up-to-date, then we respond to their need for forming and developing their talents. But beyond that are deeper needs. Even the brightest and most talented of our students are struggling. Beyond the normal struggles of youth, many of them struggle with families that are broken, wrestle with problems of isolation and misunderstanding and insecurity deeper than their minds. And how do we respond to their deepest hungers for meaning and purpose, for strength and hope that is the Kingdom of God experienced in their lives?

(17) These days, in the liturgy, we have been reading from the story of Jacob and his struggle with God. His first vision is consoling, promising, full of light: he sees angels ascending and descending on a ladder to heaven. But his last vision is much darker and more mysterious because it is deeper. He wrestles with a stranger, who turns out to be God, and Jacob wins the struggle, but comes out limping, walking a little like Ignatius did. Perhaps this should be the image of what our students turn out to be: not just walking out of our schools straight, tall, completely confident and sure of themselves, but rather, limping, even a little, because they have struggled deeply.

(18) **How deeply do we help them see?** When you live in Rome, you enter many beautiful churches adorned with glorious images, frescoes, statues, paintings, stained glass windows, and you realize that in an earlier age, these were the images that filled people's imaginations. They were images that taught people to aspire to a certain model of humanity. But our young people are growing up in a world where the media floods them with other glittering images, on billboards, on websites, on magazine covers and MTV's. They are images that are filled with promises. They sell dreams that tell them that they become more human when they have the right gadgets and wear the right clothes. What these images do is hide the face of the poor and the suffering, and make them invisible. How can we help them see more deeply, to truly see the real beyond the virtual, to see beyond these images that make false promises so that they can see the face of the hidden humanity of the poor in a way that moves them to want to serve in compassion?

(19) **How deeply do we invite them to think?** Our students today, as you know, are flooded with an incredible amount of information that keeps entering our houses, our computers, our lives. The sheer amount of information and the ease with which one can "surf" from one page to another can promote superficiality. How deeply do we help them screen, digest, connect, decide about this flood of data and the accompanying (albeit camouflaged) values that accompany them? There is evidence that the capacity of people for sober understanding and a critical sense have weakened. When I look around and see so much fundamentalism and fanaticism around the world, and the suffering that these escapes from sober thinking have produced, I wonder whether we have to think more creatively of how we can ensure that our students learn how to think deeply?

(20) **How deeply do we form their inner persons, their commitments and convictions, their faith and their strength?** You are aware of how quickly even a religious culture like that of the Philippines is becoming secularized and pluralistic. All around, our young people are being given more and more choices-not just choices of websites on the Internet, or choices of TV stations on cable TV, or choices of stores in malls, but choices of values and beliefs. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does mean that one cannot expect that external structures and traditions alone will support them in the Christian faith, beliefs or values. I have worked with Filipino migrant workers, and I have seen how easily, in a different environment, they have gone over to other groups. As the external supports become weaker, then the inside must become stronger. Depth of knowledge and, even more important, depth of experience, must mature into a depth of conviction that is able to remain peaceful and steadfast even in a confusing and hostile world.

(21) In the end, the test of whether our education is one of depth, is whether we are able to produce people who can "decide from inside"-which is another way of saying, the test of our education as Jesuit education is if we are able to produce people of discernment. More and more, people are making choices, not from the inner realm of faith, conscience, values,

truth, but from the seductive voices coming from the outside, of gain, profit, public opinion, convenience and fashion. People are becoming weaker in the habit of finding in the depths of the heart the answers to difficult emerging questions. On the other hand, if one looks at the alumni we are proudest of as products of the Jesuit educational system, I think we will find in them a certain depth of perception, thinking, commitment, and character, and the habit of deciding from inside.

THE FRONTIER OF UNIVERSALITY

(22) The second frontier I would like to propose is the frontier of universality. You may be aware of a letter I wrote recently on the subject of the universality of our Jesuit vocation, inspired by the spirit of GC 35. Today, I think a challenging frontier for Jesuit education is to be a more universal education in the Ignatian sense of breadth of belonging and wideness of concern and responsibility.

(23) Again, universality translates *Magis* but in a way that challenges the competitive way we sometimes translate *Magis* simply as “Excellence.” Of course, we strive for excellence, but sometimes we fall into the trap of measuring excellence only if we see ourselves as better than some other schools run by other religious groups, or even worse, better than other Jesuit schools!

(24) When I travel around the world, I see the violence and suffering caused by a terrible narrowing of the sense of belonging and competitiveness. It is a paradox of globalization that as technologies allow us to grow in knowledge of those very distant from us, at the same time, there is greater fear of the Other, the one who is different, who does not belong to my tribe or my race or my caste. Because of their fears, people end up with very small, suffocating worlds, and regard those who do not belong to those tiny kingdoms as insignificant sub-humans, at best, or as threats to be eliminated, at worst. And, I am afraid that if we are not careful, the prestige that attaches to our schools, the fame of the “Jesuit brand” of education may tempt us to make our schools a new but still narrow base for belonging, which we use to distinguish and separate ourselves from others.

(25) But there is nothing of this narrowness of belonging in Ignatius’ vision of life. He was always a man of large vistas: he loved to look at the stars, at the vastness of the sky that reflected the universal, all-embracing love of God. Ignatius’ concern was always the more “universal good”: he always wanted Jesuits to be ready to serve anywhere where there is hope for God’s glory. And he gathered around himself such a diverse group of men, of different languages, cultures, nationalities and personalities, to form a single group of friends in the Lord, who transcended their little differences, in their common dedication to the same universal mission.

(26) GC 35 further heightened this Ignatian universality by pointing out how urgently a more universal perspective, which allows us to see beyond our narrow concerns and to work with others, is needed in our world. The great challenges of the world cannot be responded to by one province, one region alone, or by Jesuits alone. The enormous challenges of the Philippines and Asia, to come nearer to home, cannot be responded to by one school or by one university alone. They require the breadth of vision and spirit that overcomes little sectarianisms so we can work with each other, Jesuits and other co-workers and companions all together in mission.

(27) What might this frontier of universality mean more concretely for Jesuit education in the Philippines?

(28) First, do our students, as a result of their time with us, end up with a broader sense of belonging and responsibility than their own families, classes, clans? My predecessors, Frs. Arrupe and Kolvenbach, spoke famously of the goal of Jesuit education as forming men and women for others and with others—men and women whose hearts have been universalized and broadened, so they feel this compassion for the poor and the suffering who are not members of their blood family, but who are now part of their larger human family?

(29) Second, with regard to the schools themselves, can we break out of our narrow sense of belonging to this particular school? I am very happy, for example, to see that the nine Jesuit schools in the Philippines are gathered here together for this congress. I am aware of the ways the Jesuit Basic Education Commission, and more recently, the Jesuit Higher Education Commission, have tried to promote this wider sense of belonging and cooperation—but not without resistance, too, I know! It would be more consoling to find out that this kind of gathering is not something that happens only once in one hundred and fifty years, but that more and more, the schools do not live in indifference to and competition against one another, but rather address their many common concerns together.

(30) Third, can we break out of our particular school system and serve those outside the Jesuit system in the Philippines? Our schools have been so blessed with human, material, academic and spiritual resources beyond many others, in a country where poverty remains crushing for so many, and where good education can serve as the most effective way out of this dehumanizing situation. What more can we do, for example, to serve, support, improve the many other schools in the Philippines, which have such scarce resources? Are the benefits of Jesuit education only to be limited to these nine schools, or can we think more creatively of more permanent, ongoing ways in which, even with our limited personnel, we can share the heritage and resources of Jesuit education with a wider group of people, especially the poor, in the ways, for example, the network of Cristo Rey and Nativity schools in the United States, or the Fe y Alegria network in Latin America are doing?

(31) Fourth, can we break out of our concern for the Philippines and start thinking of how more we can serve the wider world of Asia around us? I am happy to hear that there is much interest in and exchange with China in some of your schools: this is a very positive development. But what of the other poorer nations and less established Jesuit missions in East Asia? Can the Jesuit educational system in the Philippines reach out to serve and share with East Timor, Myanmar, Cambodia, to name just a few possible places where the needs for what you can share are great?