

ENTER TO LEARN, LEAVE TO SERVE

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I am most grateful to José Antonio Cecilia, President, for his kind invitation to reflect with you about the expectations that we have for our alumni and alumnae of our Catholic schools and universities. I welcome you to our Mother House for your XV Congress.

My reflection is, of course, based on my experience as the Brother Superior of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Together with over 90,000 Lasallian Partners, we Brothers conduct a worldwide network of Catholic educational communities. Inspired by the spirituality and pedagogical insights of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, our Founder and Patron saint of Teachers, we strive to make these educational communities beacons of hope for the one million students in 80 countries who enter our campuses to learn and leave to serve. Enter to learn, leave to serve; a global mantra found and posted in many of our schools today.

“Here comes everybody”, Irish author James Joyce’s description of the Catholic Church¹ also describes Lasallian schools and universities; and, I believe, most contemporary Catholic schools and their graduates. Today, we are mandated by the Gospel and commissioned by the Church to announce the Good News to Catholic, Orthodox, other Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews and an endless variety of other believers and non believers.

What are our expectations for the young people and adult graduates of our Catholic educational communities? Aware of the cultural complexities represented by our alumnae and alumni, I would like to highlight one

¹ Joyce, James. Finnegan’s Wake, Faber and Faber, 1939.

fundamental expectation and two action-oriented consequences of this expectation.

Given that Jesus Christ is at the heart of Catholic education, we must proclaim the good news of salvation to all.² Our fundamental expectation for our graduates is a consequence of this proclamation of the Good News.

We expect our graduates to commit to Jesus' project for the Reign of God.³ This commitment can be either explicitly related to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and the community of believers that motivate behavior in favor of the common good; or it can be implicitly manifested through concrete actions in favor of the wellbeing of all.

We should "Consider the worthiest purpose of education as that learners might become fully alive human beings who help to create a society that serves the common good".⁴ In other words, we expect our graduates, each according to her or his ability and cultural contexts, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, provide shelter for the homeless, welcome the stranger, care for the sick and imprisoned, and bring joy and hope to the world.

This means that we desire our former students to be "... God's leaven in the midst of humanity. It means proclaiming and brings God's salvation into our world..."⁵ We want our graduates to be convinced that "The dignity of the human person and the common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges."⁶

Graduates of our educational communities are expected to stand out, to be different, to get other people's attention. We want young women and men to see reality from the bottom up and to be change makers in the world. We want them to be the voice for the vulnerable, the despised and rejected. We hope they

² "Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion, III. Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014.

³ Pagola, José Antonio. Jesús Aproximación Histórica, see especially chapter 4. PPC, 2007.

⁴ Groome, Thomas. Educating for Life, Thomas More, 1998, p. 36.

⁵ Pope Francis, "The Joy of the Gospel" Pauline, 2013, no. 114.

⁶ Pope Francis, no. 218

will be agents for the Reign of God. We invite our alumni and alumnae to tilt the world towards the poor and that Reign of God.

As a consequence of their partnership with Jesus in his project for the Reign of God, our graduates, we hope, will be moved to concrete actions that will alleviate the anxieties and basic necessities of the poor and in this way contribute to the common good. We want our graduates to be risk-taking servant-leaders on the side of the vulnerable and excluded.

Servant leadership, a timeless concept but effectively articulated in 1970 by Robert K. Greenleaf, is the first action oriented consequence of partnership with Jesus that I would invite you to consider.

The servant-leader is servant first.... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first.... Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions.... The difference manifest itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served.

The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?"⁷

An effective servant-leader, I believe, must be a reflective and prayerful person; qualities learned through the experience of a Catholic education. Our graduate leaders, men and women, firmly immersed in our rapidly changing world, "... who approach their responsibility with a sense of service in a changing world need a commitment to reflection and prayer to creatively deal with change, political skills

⁷ Center for Servant Leadership, www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership.

to direct the change, and a well-rooted spirituality to be balanced among the change”.⁸

How can graduates collaborate with the mission of their Catholic schools and universities to ensure that the leaders of the 2050’s be women and men committed to peace, solidarity, compassion and mercy? How can graduates encourage today’s students to be prayerful, active participants in their faith communities, reflective, and effective promoters of social justice?⁹

In their own lives, graduates can continue to participate in the mission of their Catholic school by being servant-leaders who overturn things so that the last will be first. This is the “revolution” envisioned by Jesus. We want you to be on fire with the Reign of God. We want you burning with an apostolic zeal that contagiously impels others to join you in taking the side of the oppressed.

Graduates of Catholic schools must also be relevantly and critically engaged with contemporary cultural trends. In view of this, a Reign of God-inspired use of technology is the second action-oriented consequence of partnership with Jesus that I propose for your consideration. “It is precisely in the Gospel of Christ, taking root in the minds and hearts of the faithful, that the Catholic school finds its definition as it comes to terms with the cultural conditions of the times.”¹⁰ When this affirmation was written in 1977, the Gospel of Christ and its relationship with our contemporary experience of technology was unimaginable.

Now, however, graduates of Catholic schools are challenged to harness technology to free people from the oppression of poverty. To be a life-long partner-in-mission with your school or university, you are invited to see technology as a wonderful medium for communicating the Good News through effective strategies that provide concrete responses to the basic needs of the poor. In fact, if you do not do this, others will use social media for purposes that are an affront to human dignity. Sadly, today, as intolerance increases in various societies, social media is used in the form of fake news that feeds our prejudices.

⁸ Doohan, Leonard. *Spiritual Leadership*, Paulist, 2007, p. 21.

⁹ *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion*, cf. III.

¹⁰ *The Catholic School*, Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, no. 9.

On the other hand, through technology “the many – all of us acting together – now have the power to do good at a speed and scope we’ve never seen before: to reverse environmental degradation or to feed, house, and clothe every person on the planet, if we ever set our collective mind to do so.”¹¹

Servant-leaders, recipients of a Catholic education, are empowered to help others experience God’s loving and merciful presence through social media and all the other ever-changing, and overwhelming, technological advances – especially cyberspace. “We are responsible for making God’s presence manifest by what we do, by the choices we make. And the reason this issue is most acute in cyberspace is that no one else is in charge there. There is no place in today’s world where you encounter the freedom to choose that God gave man, more than in cyberspace. Cyberspace is where we are all connected and no one is in charge.”¹²

Just imagine how different the world would be if graduates of Catholic schools collectively infused universal connectivity with the foundational principle of Judeo-Christian anthropology: all human persons are created in the image and likeness of God. How things would be turned over and tilted toward the Reign of God if everyone’s behavior reflected that all people, without exception, are intrinsically entitled to respect.

In the Catholic educational community children and young people enter to learn and leave to serve. In my remarks I have offered a fundamental expectation of our graduates and suggested two action-oriented consequences of this expectation. I reiterate them by way of conclusion. Commitment to Jesus’ project for the Reign of God is the expectation. This commitment has many manifestations. The two I have suggested are: joyful and effective servant-leadership that engages others in tilting the world toward that Reign of God and its preference for the poor, rejected and vulnerable; and a Gospel inspired use of technology and connectivity that benefits the common good.

May our graduates go forth with this admonition:

¹¹ Friedman, Thomas, Thank You for Being Late, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016, p. 87-88.

¹² Ibid. 339.

You have already been told what is right
and what God wants of you.
only this, to act justly,
to love tenderly
and to walk humbly with your God.

(Micah 6:8)