

Barokní jezuitské Klatovy 2009

A Jesuit School Yesterday; Jesuit Schools Today

There is a saying that God created human beings because God loves a good story. Certainly individual persons like you and me have stories, but schools also have stories. The Jesuit College in Klatovy has a very long story because it goes back 373 years. The school was founded and directed by a Catholic religious order called the Society of Jesus. During the symposium this weekend, you will step back in time and learn about the lives of the students who attended this school and the adults who served as teachers. You may be surprised by what you discover. You will certainly find much to be proud of and much to be thankful for.

For my part, I have come to you today to speak about the present. We might say that my personal story intersects the story of the Jesuit College in Klatovy because I am a member of the Society of Jesus who has spent his whole life in schools – as a teacher of German, Latin and theology, as school director in Philadelphia and Washington, and as Secretary for Education for the Society of Jesus, living in Rome. My purpose is to tell you something about Jesuit schools today – how many they are, where they are, what kinds of schools they are, what they try to do. This last aspect, what they try to do, is most important because it touches on the very reason for the existence of Jesuit schools: their mission. I believe that this mission has something to say to each one of you about your life – whatever your age, whatever your profession, whatever your beliefs, whatever your socio-economic status, whatever your life style.

So let's begin. There are about 4,000 Jesuit educational institutions in the world – on six continents and in 70 countries. Among these are 462 secondary schools. There are 200 universities. The largest Jesuit university is in Brazil. Its name is UNISINOS and it has 25,000 students. There are Jesuit kindergartens and primary schools, as well as technical schools where you can learn things like electrical engineering, woodworking, computer science and hotel management. Some of these 4,000 schools receive financial support from the government; others do not. In Jesuit schools you will see students who are rich, middle class and poor. In India, for example, about 40–50% of the students in Jesuit schools are tribals or outcasts. Some schools have only boys. Other schools are co-educational. In some schools the students wear uniforms, but in others the students wear what they want. Some schools are old, while others are new. The oldest Jesuit school was founded in Messina, Italy in 1548. One of the newest schools is right here in the Czech Republic, a small school in the city of Dečín called the Nativity Christian Primary School. There are many different kinds of schools. In my country, the United States, you will find a network of secondary schools for students who come from families of limited financial means. These students go to school for four days of the week, but on the fifth day they work in an office or business, and the money they earn helps to pay for the cost of their education. In Egypt the Jesuits conduct a boarding school for children who are disabled. In Sydney, Australia, you will find a secondary school in which most of the students are immigrants. Four years ago a German Jesuit founded a coeducational boarding school in Kosovo. Most of the students are Muslim. In the African country of Zambia, a Polish missionary had the idea to start a radio school. For this kind of school you do not even need a building. All you need is a radio. Lessons are transmitted from a central location. Students gather with an adult supervisor; they bring their books, their paper and pens, and they receive their education over the airwaves. Finally,

there is a vast network of Jesuit schools in Latin America which deserves special mention. The network is called *Fe y Alegria*, “Faith and Joy.” It was founded in Venezuela 54 years ago. It is now present in 18 countries and sponsors over 1000 educational centers for the poor. Altogether there are almost three million students who attend Jesuit schools – young adults, adolescents and children. Jesuit schools comprise the largest school system in the Catholic Church.

And now comes the big question: Why have the Jesuits devoted so much energy and effort to the education of the young for over four and one half centuries, and why do 3,700 Jesuits around the world continue to work today in educational institutions of all kinds?

When Saint Ignatius Loyola founded the Jesuits towards the middle of the 16th century, he did not include education among the ministries in which he wanted his brothers to be engaged. The early Jesuits did the things which other priests of their day did. They celebrated Mass. They heard confessions. They preached sermons. They gave talks. They fed the poor, nursed the sick and provided shelter for the homeless. As time went by, though, Saint Ignatius came to realize that education has tremendous potential for good because it engages young people in their open, eager and inquisitive years and helps to form them into the leaders of the future. He also witnessed the sad state of education in his day, especially among the poor. And so he gave permission for the opening of the first Jesuit school in Italy which I have already mentioned. You can see that Saint Ignatius must have had a good idea because that school has now grown into 4,000 schools!

If the mission of Jesuit schools is to help form the leaders of tomorrow, how do they do this? I would say that there are at least three characteristics of Jesuit schools which have a profound affect on their students and challenge them to be leaders.

The first characteristic is personal care for the individual, sometimes expressed by the Latin expression *cura personalis*. All those who work in Jesuit schools – teachers, administrators, coaches, librarians, counselors, nurses – firmly believe that each student they encounter is a unique individual, created in the image and likeness of God, reflecting God in a way which can never be repeated, and endowed with an inestimable dignity. Therefore, students experience a community in which the adults know them well, know something about their talents and limitations, and know something about their families. They experience teachers who are approachable and available, open and flexible, ready to adapt their teaching methods to the needs of a particular class or to the needs of individuals within that class. They experience teachers who will remain imprinted on their memories for their entire lives. If this is the kind of atmosphere which pervades a school, the students will carry a great treasure with them when their formal education is completed and they move into the professional world. Whether they go into industry, agriculture, law, business, medicine, public service, whatever, they know that they will be expected to treat their colleagues and every person they encounter with the same respect which they experienced when they were in school. Leaders can only lead if they respect the people whom they are leading.

The second characteristic of a Jesuit school is excellence. Saint Ignatius constantly challenged his brother Jesuits to go beyond what was required or simply satisfactory. He urged them repeatedly to seek the greater glory of God and the greater service of their fellow human beings. Notice the word “greater.” Teachers in a Jesuit school, therefore, are always striving to be better teachers. I remember having lunch several years ago with an older Jesuit who was an outstanding teacher of mathematics. He was obviously in a good mood, feeling very positive.

I asked him why. He replied that he had just discovered a new way to present a certain algebraic concept to his students and he could not wait to get into the classroom to see if it would help them learn. Teachers like this are not content with the status quo. They are always on the lookout for new challenges and new frontiers. What is more important, these are the kinds of teachers who by their example encourage the students to develop every aspect of themselves – the intellectual, the physical, the social, the esthetic, the religious and the moral. They also encourage the students to develop to their full extent whatever special talents have been given to them. Yes, in the area of academics, some students will have more ability in science and mathematics, while others will have more ability in language, literature and history. If we go beyond academics, we will see students who are athletes, musicians, actors, orators and artists. We want these students to accept what God has given them and to make the most of it. We want no unhealthy comparisons or competition. When our students leave us, we want them to be competent, well integrated and self confident. They will then be well on the way to being leaders.

This brings me to the third characteristic which should be present in a Jesuit school and which should help form students into leaders. That characteristic is service.

In 1973, the Father General of the Jesuits, Father Pedro Arrupe, told a large gathering of former students of Jesuit schools that the goal of Jesuit education is to form “men and women for others.” This means that the school must help the students come to the conviction that the natural talents which they have been given and the education which they have received are to be shared with others, especially the poor and the excluded. And so Jesuits have begun new schools which are exclusively for poor children. They provide scholarships for students who come from families of limited income. They have programs which aim at sensitizing the students and the entire school community to the needs of the poor. In recent years there has been a proliferation of community service programs. Students visit the elderly, provide companionship for disabled children or offer special lessons to younger students outside of school hours. In Chile a group of students, teachers and former students of the Jesuit school constructed 30 homes for the poor. The Jesuit boarding school in Ireland sent a group of students and former students to live with families in South Africa for several weeks and to join the local community in planting trees and constructing a playground. Fifteen students and several teachers from the Jesuit school in Adelaide, Australia, immersed themselves for ten days in the lives of the indigenous people of the northern part of their country. An essential component of all these service programs is reflection. Students keep a journal and talk about the impact which their experiences have had on their lives. They think about the particular service which they have offered: Was it difficult? Did they have any fears as they began their service? Did they build a relationship with the people whom they served? What did they learn from the people whom they served? Why does a Jesuit school consider service so important? They are also encouraged to commit themselves to some kind of service in the future, no matter what their ordinary work will be. They realize that service is not just for school; it is for life.

In my brief presentation, I have tried to give you an overview of Jesuit schools around the world. I have also tried to share some aspects of the fundamental purpose and mission of these schools. At the beginning I stated that three aspects of the mission of Jesuit schools, namely personal care for the individual, excellence and service, might have something to say to all of you who have come together for this symposium. I made that statement because these are values which every one of us can identify with. Yes, they are rooted in Christianity. They were key elements

in the vision of Saint Ignatius Loyola. They receive intentional emphasis in Jesuit schools. But they are also solid human values. They were part of the history of the Jesuit College in Klatovy. Let us hope that the young men and women, who are the students of Klatovy today, will live these values as they lead this country and our world to the future. Let us hope that the adults among us will show them the way by our example, by living these same values.

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