

“ Catholic Schools and Transformative Education in a Changing World”

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"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way."

The opening lines of A Tale of Two Cities. Charles Dickens may just as well be describing the global scene of today, a society of extreme social contradictions.

We are in the midst of a rapidly changing, increasingly complex & competitive world, where more & more of the old structures, traditions & coherence of life seem to be giving way to the new, to the uncertain, to the great Unknown: climate change, the threat of Ebola, unending war in many parts of the world.

These last few days we discussed challenges our Catholic schools face and ways of responding to Christ's call.

Let me return to them briefly:

1. The Challenge of Mission

It is easy to get lost in the quagmire. We need clear direction. We need a clear Vision. This is provided by our Mission.

A Catholic school is different from other schools. We have a long history of providing excellent education, where trust and collaboration exist between families and school, and order, duty, responsibility are all taken very seriously.

But we need to be more than that. Our goal should be more encompassing than those of secular institutions. What is essential is the Catholic dimension of our school.

We have to constantly ask ourselves: **How can we be effective so we are not Catholic in name only, but shining examples of our Mission & our Faith?** We need to create vital faith communities within our schools. Religious instruction, values formation, faith development should all be fully integrated into the academic development of our students. We have to take on the role of “cultural catalysts,” and look for ways of enhancing our Catholic culture and demonstrating core consistency.

There are many ways of being Catholic, and each institution has to find what best expresses its own Catholic identity. A critical test to ask ourselves would be: do “Identity and Mission” drive my school’s strategic planning process?

An excellent resource for thinking through the issue would be the online initiative of Boston College, their “Church in the 21st century courses (C21)”, based on Dr. Thomas Groome's "What Makes Us Catholic?".

2. The Challenge of Relevance

We are educating the youth of the 21st century. The Millennium Generation, often seen as narcissistic, coddled, even spoiled. Easily bored, with short attention spans, shallow (Nicholas Carr) - our constantly web-surfing, tweeting generation. Notice how so many get into trouble because of their Facebook/Twitter postings. (But then again, so do many adults).

We have to teach them to analyze, to reflect & dig deeply. They need to aim for long-term goals and be aware of possible consequences of their actions. They have to discern what is most important in life.

Brought up in a world where social structures have changed considerably, they have little sense of stability and rootedness. So many families are torn apart in order to survive. They contribute positively to our GDP, but at what personal and social cost. Our schools must provide specialized counseling & support to this group.

How do we influence the youth, educate them, and become relevant to their lives? EMForster's advice to writers applies equally well to teachers/educators: **"Only connect!"**

What worked for our campus minister was simply to make the room next to hers comfortable - a "safe" place. She made sure there was a lot of food. (That always works!). They began organizing themselves & soon she had a team to help with mission work. Their ideas have been great! They took charge of Peer counseling & did a good job! First of all, they knew who were at risk, they knew who to look out for, they knew how to reach them.

There are many positives about millennials. They are far more tolerant than their parents. They are team-oriented and seek collaboration. Wired to the world, they tend to think global and are quick to see the world's problems as their own. (Fournier, 2013). It is easy to tap them for projects that inspire and need new ideas.

Our school's core values of Truth, Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation are advocacies our students have fully embraced. We have four (4) institutional Centers that help us concretize our Mission-Vision.

A project of our Center for Peace: a Lugawan fundraising activity for our sister school in the South. This is an initiative started in the 90s. Friendships were formed through the mail (now it's email). In the end these girls came to know, respect, and appreciate each other's faith & practices.

We are not only a green school; we are a dark green school: green in our philosophy, curriculum, activities, and research. Last Christmas, our campus turned red and green using recycled materials.

Even our preschoolers have taken as their mantra: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.

"Mixed waste is garbage; segregated waste is resources" reminders are abound in our campus. These messages are there to help us internalize our mantra which then becomes a way of thinking & behaving.

3. The Challenge of Inclusion

The main driving force in the Church's movement - very visible at the moment - is the move towards increased pastoral care & inclusion (Evangelii Gaudium). We are all sheep needing care - and the Church has taken steps to be more informed and in touch with the lives of common people.

Being inclusive means creating an environment fair to both genders. Pope Francis himself said that the role of women should be seen as one of service, not servitude. He points out that the Church is a Mother, nurturing and accepting. It's time to fully empower women and make use of women's strengths, which is that of bringing people together. This is a prime advocacy for our school.

Our Women and Gender Institute has a program that trains & gives women in Mindanao a central role in the peace process, where they sit at the peace table as full participants, not hovering at the sides like they used to.

And remember: Educating a woman is more than just educating A woman - its effects are multiplied and benefit all those around her - children, spouse, and ultimately, Society.

The same empowering philosophy applies to persons with disabilities, as well as the poor and marginalized among us. When we help others achieve their true potential, they surprise us with their abilities.

We have two (2) units that fulfill this function: our Miriam Adult Education for out-of-school youth and our Southeast Asian School for the Deaf.

We have to recognize this truth : We cannot change others without changing ourselves. The need today is for a leader/a teacher of a different kind - one whom the youth see as truly authentic.

The Sheep are different - but so are their Shepherds (us). The Shepherdess has assumed a different image, has become more diverse, more grounded in the community, more ordinary.

Thus we see the Voice of the Laity assuming a different proportion. This year celebrates the Year of the Laity. And that explains my presence onstage.

The Church as people of God is composed of 3/4 laity - ordinary men and women. We welcome ways to learn from and work with the Church. Our gifts need to be nurtured and nourished. We need effective training programs so we become committed agents of renewal who will add balance, depth, and reach to the Church.

Lay ecclesial movements such as Couples for Christ (with its origin in the Philippines) have become a major force in Christian family renewal. Vocations will come from happy and generous families belonging to this type of Christian community.

Challenges will arise in such partnerships but this will produce a strong, dynamic, and life-affirming faith to the whole community.

May I share with you a little bit of the history of our own school, a story of lay leadership and transformation.

Founded 88 years ago in this Agustinian Convent in Malabon, in the 1970s the Maryknoll nuns decided to go back to their original mission: to minister to the poor & disempowered.

They had 3 options:

Option 1 - to give us to Ateneo de Manila.

Option 2 - to give us to another order to manage

Option 3 - to allow the Laity to take over.

And they chose the 3rd way. This became the vehicle for the school's continued transformation.

We now have a Lay Board, lay administrators and a new name.

The name may have changed but our Mission remains the same.

The Maryknoll nuns - trailblazers in habit - had great faith in the Filipino Laity. Through commitment & hard work, we continue to bring fulfillment to our founders' vision.

4. The Challenge of Sustainability

Sustainability issues have become more real and urgent today. We all need to find ways of maximizing use of our limited resources. One effective way is through Collaboration & strategic Networking.

Catholic schools have to start thinking of themselves as a whole - not operating in separate silos but as part of a larger community with a common goal. We take strength and support from having each other, aware that together, our work is amplified and will have greater impact.

Our CEAP has been very active on many fronts: clamoring for ethical behavior in public service; providing training for member schools in all areas; and now, advocating for true public & private complementarity. Yes, together we are a River.

At this point, I want to announce another great opportunity for Collaboration. We have the endorsement & support of Cardinal Tagle & CEAP to launch a Family Congress (Kapamilya Kita) which will take place during the Papal visit. This will showcase the contributions and critical role of families in moving our Faith forward. Flyers are on your tables.

Service Learning

A last word: Education consists of 3 important domains: Academic, Research, & Community Work & Practice. The thoughts, concepts & ideas that originate in our classrooms should lead to Action. Precepts must lead to Praxis. The best of these practices are in Service Learning. Here are some examples of what we do.

The challenge of each institution here is to stay alive and well & keep thriving in the face of rapid change that both enriches and dilutes our identity.

Let me now circle back to Dickens, a great observer of human nature who lived in a similar era of uncertainty & chaos.

For me, this is the best of times. I end with a heart full of Hope.

For we have a Leader who is compassionate and forward thinking, who fully understands the “human condition.” Pope Francis has been calling for greater creativity and openness, and a “pastoral conversion” in papal ministry. We find great strength and comfort in his solidarity with us.

And **We** are today’s Shepherds: those few afforded the wonderful privilege of accompanying the youth. We are called upon to create an environment so they can grow in Faith & in their personal and academic lives. And that, fellow Catholic educators, is our sacred Mission. God bless us in our work.

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