

Living Competence, Conscience, and Compassion

The *Magis* in Schools**how much more can we take?***by Ross Jones, SJ*

- Ignatian Network introduces the tenth in a series of briefing papers entitled *Living Competence, Conscience and Compassion* that highlight different aspects of the Ignatian School Renewal. The briefing papers will appear from time to time as a stimulus to principals and teachers.

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- Ross Jones taught at St Aloysius' College for many years before joining the Society. During his ecclesial studies, he was a boarding master at Xavier College and a tutor at Newman College. After ordination, he was appointed foundation Principal to Loyola College Mount Druitt. Presently he is Socius to the Provincial and the Provincial's Assistant for Schools.

When I was undertaking teacher training, I was interested to learn that the word *curriculum* comes from the Latin, meaning a race track. The implication is that students in schools have a course to run. As in all races, there is a final goal or finish post. There is, more than likely, competition along the way among a field of contenders. There are probably hurdles to jump. There will be places and prizes. Maybe there are even bets and wagers on the side.

Australians have long been known as a nation of gamblers. Most punters follow horses or dogs in their perennial quest for backing winners. Whether equine or canine, the races share much in common. Yet there is one fundamental difference. When horses compete, they have riders or drivers. But greyhounds run free. The horses are urged to their goal by jockeys' kicks and riding crops. Greyhounds, on the other hand, bound after a mechanical rabbit manipulated by the gaming personnel so that it is always elusively just out of reach of the leading dogs — too close and the "rabbit" is destroyed, too far away and the dogs lose interest. In either case, the race ceases.

The racing analogy prompts a question about the educational process in our schools. To go back to

classical roots once again, "to educate" means "to draw something out". The best education is not imposition, or filling up, or cramming. It is discovering something within. It is eliciting. It is creating a desire to learn. Just as horses or dogs are raced, so might our students be driven or drawn. There is a valuable distinction here.

Increasingly, we ask more and more of our students. There are ever greater demands of expanding curriculum content. Kicks and crops are aplenty. Especially with external or public examinations and the expectations associated with them, students are pushed to the limit. They are driven. Extra tutoring to squeeze out those few more marks. Longer hours of work. And, as if there was no respite, outside the classroom are those professional coaches who can turn school sport into some sort of trial by ordeal.

As if to make matters worse, ignatian schools raise the matter of the *magis*. A favourite concept of Ignatius, it is on the lips of every ignatian educator. "More" is how it is translated. "More!" is the rallying cry. Another tyranny? It seems like the last thing we need when "small is beautiful" and "less is more" are the catchcries of those cultures which are counter to a burgeoning consumer society.

So it might be timely to look more closely at this term of Ignatius which to some may seem quite inspiring, yet to others rather energy-sapping.

The notion of this *magis* did not come all at once to Ignatius. There are hints in his Autobiography as to its development. When he was convalescing at Loyola and beginning to dream about his future, he was fired up with the great deeds of Dominic and Francis. He wanted to outdo them, taking on extreme penances, going to the Holy Land on foot. It was naive. It was "kicks and crops" stuff. Later, his understanding of the *magis* — though still heroic — was more refined. At the end of his life the *magis* was exercised in a small office in Rome, leading, encouraging and directing his men from a desk. Of course he would have longed to be winning the Ethiopians back to the Church, or to be with Xavier in the mysterious East. But the greater good was in Rome. He was drawn to it discerningly and confidently.

Later, in choosing a motto for his "least Society" (an uncharacteristically non-*magis* adjective here!), Ignatius goes for the comparative: all we do is for "God's *greater* glory".

Ignatius treasured so much the ability of his men to be mobile, to be free to quickly respond to the needs of the world and the Church. At first glance, then, it seems something of a puzzle as to why he would lock himself and the order into the fixity of institutions like schools. The answer lies in the *magis*. Choice of ministries is dealt with by Ignatius in the Constitutions. Among his criteria for choice we see again and again references to "the greater service of God", "the more universal good" "for the greater glory of God", "the greater need", "the greater fruit". Here he wrote "the more universal the good is, the more it is divine". Schools, in particular, he argued, could exert a multiplier effect. A student whose heart was on fire, one who would transcend mediocrity, would, in turn and by influence, set sparks of passion aglow in others.

The *magis*, "the more", is a key for making choices among competing values. The entire life of Ignatius Loyola was a search for the *magis* — that is, the more universal good, the more effective means, the more generous service of others and the ever greater glory of God. And, as Irenaeus put it so well, "the glory of God is the human person fully alive". The *magis*, properly understood, brings life. Schooling is about education for really living — not simply for making a living.

The *magis* is not just doing "more". It is doing something deeper, more widely, something beyond, adding depth and dimension. Lest we be tempted to think that the *magis* is simply adding more or

making greater demands, recall Ignatius' directive found in the annotations to his Spiritual Exercises — *non multa, sed multum*. We should not strive simply to do more things (and those superficially) but to do fewer things at greater depth.

The *magis* is also a quality of character. Ignatius wished to draw large-hearted people to join his enterprise. He wanted to influence magnanimous persons - people who would "walk the extra mile", not because it was simply commanded of them (that would be a timidity of sorts) but because they had great desires to do great things.

If we look about, we see hints of the *magis* in the mottoes of some of our schools. Stonyhurst: *Quant je puis* (As much as I am able). St Ignatius' College, Riverview: *Quantum potes, tantum aude* (Dare to do as much as you are able). St Xavier's, Calcutta: *Nil ultra* (Nothing beyond/The task is unending). How do we understand such clarion calls? Are they stick or carrot? That is a question worth reflecting upon.

When Ignatius described the ministry of education as "joining virtue with letters", the *magis* underlies the link. We move beyond mere competencies and utilitarian skills (valuable as they are) to consider ethical dimensions, to reflect on what it is that makes a person fully human, to explore and appropriate those values which are ultimately liberating. It broadens the horizon of experience. It deepens the degree of our reflection.

The *magis* pushes back the barriers which limit our understanding. If we look at the word *magis* and *magister* (master), we find a link in the comparison. Ignatius wanted the student to have mastery of the matter, to have a substantial grasp, to reach the point where he or she could say of the subject matter, "Yes, I have a hold on it!" Mastery is always *more* than simple recall or rote learning.

Ignatian spirituality, which is to pervade our schools, means moving into the realm of human experience of our students. This movement of the *magis* takes them from the level of seeing to perceiving, or from hearing to really listening, so that the whole world becomes the arena of God's presence and action. The drama of life is taken to a dimension of divine manifestation.

The *magis* energises us for action. It is that impulse or drive which transforms mere words into deeds, lip service into action. Plutarch records that when Demosthenes was asked what were the three most important aspects of oratory he answered. "Action, Action, Action!" In a similar vein, Ignatius wrote that love finds expression in deeds more than words.

It is a sense of the *magis* that recasts community service. A chore with the poor or a walk through a theme park of deprivation will deepen to become a consideration of 'where is God here?' or 'how am I being called to respond?' or 'am I being prodded to recognise some of my own poverty?'. Pursuing the *magis* clothes experience with meaning. For important choices in the life of the student or teacher, the *magis* moves superficial decision to prayerful discernment.

In terms of the students' world-view, the *magis* takes them beyond parochialism to a sense of the universal church; from monoculture to an appreciation of the richness within the human family; from narrow nationalism to a sense of the global village. It evokes an expansive response to the question, 'Who is my neighbour?'.

So how might one promote or measure this *magis* in a school? How would it be seen in operation? I believe the *magis* is displayed when some or all of the following are observed:

In **students**, when they

- are encouraged to discover and follow the great dreams and desires they have for themselves and for others;
- do not exchange "near enough is good enough" for a personal best;
- move from the narrow realm of self-centredness and self-concern to the capacity for other-centredness;
- can perceive and evaluate someone's stance, a political position, an historical issue, from several points of view;
- reflect on the choices before them, always seeking the greater good;
- choose that which is of lasting value, rather than the short-term or transient;
- responsibly question the *status quo*, rejecting mediocrity, risking the extraordinary.

In **staff**, when they

- have less concern for covering the syllabus and more concern for un-covering the syllabus, a movement from breadth to depth;
- are, in the words of Manning Clark (recalling his teachers at Geelong Grammar) "life-enlargers" rather than those who were "life-straighteners", people who nurture life in others, expand their minds and hearts, abhor any form of pettiness, who live the banquet of life with passion and want to share it with others;
- by appreciating *cura personalis*, know their pupils more deeply, understanding their concerns and fears, their hopes and desires.

When **staff and students** both

- see boundaries not as obstacles or ends, but as new challenges to be faced, new opportunities for growth;
- habitually ask themselves, "where can I do the most good and give the best service?"
- seriously face the question, "what challenges me?"

When a **school administration** seizes upon the *magis* as the great agent of change in our schools.

When a **school community** does not see its sphere of influence or concern beginning and ending at the front gates.

When **families** (as well as their sons and daughters) are ministered to as a whole.

But the *magis* is **not**

- perfectionism;

- "building bigger barns";
- losing sight of the human in competitiveness;
- being driven rather than drawn;
- synonymous with what is harder (because the harder is not necessarily the better or the more loving);
- hawking "excellence" in schools as a virtue of the education market.

At the end of it all, then, how would a truly ignatian educator be remembered by a pupil? Perhaps the pupil, in reminiscing, might say, "He or she did more for me than any other teacher." It would be a *more* not measured merely in extra tuition hours or supplementary exercises or incessant pushing. It would be the recalled experience of the student being more drawn than driven.

Perhaps it would be the sort of quality hinted at in this story retold from Anthony de Mello:

A writer arrived at the monastery to write a book about the Master.

"People say you are a great teacher. Are you?" he asked.

"You might say so," said the Master, none too modestly.

"And what makes you a great teacher?"

"The ability to recognise."

"Recognise what?"

"The butterfly in a caterpillar; the eagle in an egg; the saint in a selfish human being."

Ever Searching for the *Magis*

- Those who wish to give greater proof of their love, and to distinguish themselves in whatever concerns the service of the the Eternal King and the Lord of all, will not only offer themselves entirely for the work . . . but make offerings of greater value and more importance. [*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 97]

The *magis* is not simply one among others in a list of Jesuit characteristics. It permeates them all. The entire life of Ignatius was a search for the *magis*, the ever greater glory of God, the ever fuller service of our neighbour, the more universal good, the more effective apostolic means. Mediocrity has no place in Ignatius' world view.

Jesuits are never content with the *status quo*, the known, the tried, the

already existing. We are constantly driven to discover, re-define, and reach out for the *magis*. For us, frontiers and boundaries are not obstacles or ends, but new challenges to be faced, new opportunities to be welcomed. Indeed, ours is a holy boldness, a certain apostolic aggressivity, typical of our way of proceeding.

— *Decrees of the 34th General Congregation* (1995), nos.559-561

"More" does not imply comparison with others or measurement of progress against an absolute standard; rather it is the fullest possible development of each person's individual capacities at each stage of life, joined to the willingness to continue this development throughout life and the motivation to use those developed gifts for others.

- 7.1 "Excellence in Formation", n. 109

The Characteristics of Jesuit Education (1986)

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