

Ignatian Education Briefing Papers

A School of Compassion*by Margaret Marsh*

Ignatian Education Briefing Papers are published from time to time by the Jesuit Education Office as a stimulus to Ignatian reflection for principals, teachers and parents.

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Can you imagine a school without compassion? It's almost unthinkable, isn't it? A school where rigid, unforgiving attitudes ruled and where those in authority could exercise their role with such chilling sternness that even the most just decisions would be strangely unwelcome - such a school would surely be a place that few would choose to work in and few students would enjoy attending. What is it then, this quality of compassion that can make such a difference to an educational environment?

"*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*", the Bible tells us, and there we get our first clue. That so-called "*fear*" is the first step in faith, and it is as faith brings wisdom that other wonderful things begin to happen. One of them is the growth of compassion.

Wisdom and compassion simply cannot be separated. Wisdom might be described as the perception and living out of the spiritual laws governing all life; the Scriptures clearly link it with the work of the Holy Spirit. Compassion has been called wisdom at work, wisdom rolling up its sleeves, as it were, and plunging into life. Persons who have faith have glimpsed and are reaching out for the divine wisdom, however dimly seen, and as their faith journey continues and they grow in enthusiasm, they become more and more effective channels of wisdom and its inseparable partner, compassion.

If we want our schools to be places of compassion we can see that there is a real challenge before us. On our part a wholehearted faith is asked for. It is not enough to be content with intellectual belief; this is a matter for the whole person, heart as well as head. We are not asked to be perfect, we are not expected to have all the answers to all the theological problems; we do not even have to be very good at loving other people. Let's relax! Faith leads to wisdom which leads to compassion ... As simple as that!

How differently we respond to people if we look at them with the eyes of faith-wisdom. Psychology

speaks most helpfully about sympathy and empathy and their importance. We know how empathy takes us further into another's experience so that we feel their pain or joy in our own selves. Sympathy too is a gentle quality, a little more objective than empathy; when we feel sympathy our heart goes out to someone but we are a little less closely affected. Of a similar nature is kindness, which is generous, thoughtful and a true part of love. Pity, however, must be set aside; for pity, although well-intentioned, has a trace of a feeling of superiority and stands slightly apart. But there is one part of love which is finer than even empathy, sympathy and kindness - compassion.

Compassion rises above the other parts of love like a mountain soaring above the plains and foothills. For compassion includes all love's other facets and lifts them higher than their everyday expression; in the light of compassion they become radiant with the love of God. Perhaps mercy comes closest to it in our

understanding. Yet even mercy may be delivered by a cold heart and may lack wisdom. Compassion, though, is always wise.

Compassion sees beyond the present factors in a situation to the wider scheme of God. It judges in the light of eternity and eternal values. When we act with compassion we transcend our normal behaviour and judgments and come closest to that state which St. Paul speaks of as being in *'the mind of Christ'*.

But we must not become proud! We cannot really *'have'* compassion at all! It is not a possession, not a *'thing'* anyone can own. It is a human response which the Divine takes charge of and makes more beautiful than it could otherwise be. It is the Holy Spirit working in us, not something we initiate.

As those who teach or administer will know, the need for compassion, or more accurately, for people who are open to be channels of compassion, is great. There are so many situations that arise in the daily schedule that call for a speedy decision, a word of advice on an intimate matter that you have never really thought about, or a balancing of several points of view that all have merit ... The list is endless. Some decisions are easy: perhaps most decisions are relatively easy if you see things in very black and white terms or if you have worked out a fixed set of responses that minimise the effort of looking at the uniqueness of each person and his or her circumstances. If you are content to follow an authoritarian line and avoid the personal dimension of problems then probably things are easier. But if the hard line is not for you and you are confident enough in yourself to face and to some extent share the journey of the other person you will quickly realise that you need more than the insight which your academic qualifications and training have given you. Your humanity and your wisdom are demanded, as well as your intellect. Cold logic will not provide a satisfactory solution; heart and intuition must come into play.

Reflect on some of those moments. Paul draws you aside and you find yourself facing a victim of bullying. Joe may be questioning his sexuality. A talent for music and mathematics may be causing opposition from Sue's parents who have a certain career in mind for her. Lee's grades have not been good because his mother has terminal cancer. Another staff member may have mocked you in front of students. A teacher may have resented your action as an administrator. You have a choice: you can turn away, refuse to hear the *'question behind the question'*. But you have chosen to work in a school that is fuelled by the spirit of St. Ignatius - what would he have done? Would he turn away? Ask yourself: Why have I been approached? What am I really being asked? There is only one path now: to summon up all your resources of faith, humanity and skill and be fully present for that person who has brought you his or her need.

What a challenge! Teachers have to be absolutely superhuman. But as long as you are not relying on

your own strength, then even that need not worry you.

For as we gradually become more firmly established in our faith and see the loving presence of God affecting our lives, strengthening and guiding us, we realise we can '*let go and let God*' - we can allow God to use us in these difficult situations with an effectiveness that would not be possible if we relied on just our own talents.

Yet another thing we have to squeeze into an already packed day? we cry in horror. Society is, it is true, placing increasing demands upon teachers as values change, employment situations vary, new skills are required and amongst those things the role of the teacher itself is undergoing scrutiny. How can we cope with our lives outside school (or perhaps the lack of any meaningful life outside) in addition to the students, our colleagues, administration, deadlines that get tighter and tighter, co-curricular activities, curriculum changes, computerisation, and the odd snuffle and headache that always strike when the reports are about to be written? Where will we find the time to reflect and centre ourselves upon the Source of Wisdom without whom we haven't got a chance of getting anywhere near a compassionate stance?

Well, after all the proper responses have been made about living a healthy lifestyle, managing your time and remembering those helpful hints on stress management someone made as you rushed between one meeting and the next, it is hard to do better than go back to the principle mentioned earlier: that if we rest in our own strength we are on shaky ground indeed; but that if we open ourselves to the wisdom of God through prayer and reflection and dare to make time so that no day goes by without that, then yes! we will cope and we will be successful in what we are doing. And, more importantly, we will succeed by being able to bring compassion to bear on whatever roles we play in our school.

St. Ignatius is the inspiration of our educational enterprise. To play any part in an Ignatian work setting means that we need to take the model which the Saint provides as our foundation. There is a delightful letter written by him to his brother who had decided to send his son to Paris to study. After various personal and practical points he says this: "*For if He has given you an abundance of this world's goods, it is to help you earn those of heaven by giving a good example and sound teaching to your sons ... Converse spiritually with some, impose a proper punishment on others, without anger or harshness. Share with some the influence of your family, and help others with money and goods. Deal with an open hand with poor orphans and the needy. The man with whom our Lord has been generous should not be close. One day we shall find in heaven as much repose and delight as we have dispensed in this life ...*"

For "*sons*" we could read "*students*". The details may vary slightly for us in the 20th century, but the spirit is clearly the same. St. Ignatius knew that faith in the One who is Wisdom was essential in those to whom he was entrusting his vision and he would have known too that he could confidently call those faith-filled people to serve with compassion.

A school with compassion ... Think of it!

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