

Living Competence, Conscience, and Compassion

How Could a Group of Jesuits Make a Difference to a School?*by Peter Collins, S.J.*

Ignatian Network introduces the fourth 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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When I was a small boy growing up in Sydney in the early 1960's, every so often my Dad would get a phone call. "Collins. Meagher here. I'm at the archway."

No matter what was happening, Dad would immediately rush out and we'd jump in the car and drive over to Riverview. There, Father John Meagher would be, usually clutching some dusty old Agatha Christie's for Mum.

Johnny Meagher had taught my father back in the 1940's and from then on both had kept in touch with each other. Their's was a life-long friendship and I vividly recall the look of love and sadness in my father's eyes when we went to visit Johnny Meagher when he was dying at St. John of God Hospital in Richmond.

When I think of the difference a group of Jesuits could make to a school, I think of Johnny Meagher's visits. For I think the most important role a group of Jesuits can contribute to a school is to develop a culture of hospitality. By that I mean that Jesuits become welcomers: of people, of initiatives, of ideas, and that Jesuits become visitors. To use one of Johnny Meagher's favourite phrases, "*we put our walking shoes on*", and set about reaching out to the many people who are part of the school community.

In saying this, I am very mindful that hospitality - being welcomers and visitors - is a very rich Jesuit tradition already, one not only lived out by John Meagher. Most of our lives in schools is hospitality already: the hours whether wandering around playgrounds asking various students how their teams did on a Saturday; I think, too, of John Malone and the thousands of boys he has walked across Studley Park Road; of Geoff Schneider - if he doesn't know the bus route to every sports ground on the north side of

Sydney, then no-one does; I think, too, of Tony Smith's customary visits to those families who suffer bereavement. When I taught with him at St. Aloysius, Tony used to head out on Easter Saturday and Sunday to leave Easter eggs with those families whose children or Mums and Dads had died.

Yet for all these - and I'm sure you could name many more - gracious acts of hospitality, I think that our practice of hospitality needs attending to as it seems to me to hold one of the most important keys to our ministry in schools. Although this is a brief paper, I wish to sketch quickly what some of those areas are and, in so doing, outline the "*how*" of making a difference.

The first area that I think needs attending to is the hospitality we offer to each other as Jesuits within a school. To the best of my knowledge, very few Jesuit Communities sit down and talk about the Community's mission to the schools we work in, nor do we talk much about how we could develop a greater team approach to our apostolate within the school. I think that a Community needs to discuss these areas of work, and in particular, develop a forum whereby each and every Jesuit can

discuss and put forward their ideas and reflection on the school. These forums are needed so that a Community can thrash out its mission and develop greater co-ordination in what the Community is doing. This conversation could be held over a number of days before schools began Term, and could be followed up by regular meetings throughout the Term.

I remember this type of conversation back in 1990 when the St. Aloysius Community were discerning whether or not to relocate the Community quarters. I found it excellent and very helpful as the question of where we put our heads at night necessarily involved asking questions about what our presence in a school meant during the day and how we could find more apostolically effective ways to live.

Hospitality to Jesuits also means hospitality to those Jesuits who work formally outside the schools' apostolate. My recent experience of organising the collection of 80,000 books for Africa began with the five headmasters all saying 'yes', and committing their respective schools to the Appeal. It was a wonderful moment of the welcoming of an idea from someone who, although not working in the apostolate, is interested in what happens in the schools.

The second area of hospitality that I see needs addressing is our hospitality to our co-workers. In many ways, our co-workers have often made commitments to our schools that in many ways we have not. Some have made long-term commitments to particular schools. Some see them as their life's work. If the future is to "*Ignatianise*" them, so, too, it also lies in developing ways to make them feel more than welcome. This is not simply a matter of friendships, but also of ideas. Many of our lay staff have expertise in education that we may or may not have. And I'm not sure we tap into that rich resource well enough.

One of the weaknesses of our Jesuit life is our vow of obedience. While within the Order it is an excellent and sacred way to develop mission, it presupposes a kind of efficiency in decision-making that can sometimes be authoritarian and tending to be concerned more with outcome than process. In a more democratic age, and at a time when participation is the key to good management, I think sometimes we, Jesuits, make the false jump by treating non-Jesuits as we would our own. We need to find ways to be more consultative and listening in our approach to running our schools, more hospitable to ideas from staff, more receptive and active in seeking ideas from the parents and students.

In many ways, the school has moved in that direction with School Councils and the wider involvement of the laity in the Jesuit Schools' Board. But I think there is still a long way to go.

Perhaps a way of focusing this issue is to ask the question: How many of our staff actually eat with the Jesuit Community? And if they do, who are they? Sometimes, Jesuit Communities often tend to invite the more respectable in for dinner - people, who belong to the hierarchies within a school such as Council or Board members. In my experience at St. Aloysius, when we started to invite all the staff in for dinner on parent-teacher nights, they felt very grateful to be invited in to the family circle. Many would keep saying how glad they were to have dined with us, and how it made them feel part of the place. I think hospitality of this kind, which is usually pretty easy for us, is an area we could do more to make our co-workers feel more and more part of the Jesuit schools they teach in, and more and more the school becomes theirs as well.

What about hospitality to students? Don't worry, I'm not suggesting we feed them as well - though the various BBQs I've been to with students have been excellent. I think the students are an enormous and all too often under-utilised resource. They have many excellent ideas, and we need to keep finding ways to develop their confidence and create ways within a school for their ideas to come to life and take shape.

One of the best moments I had teaching as a Regent was when a Year 8 boy at the newly formed SRC spoke up and told the School Captain to sit down, shut up and listen. "You haven't taken us seriously", he said to a hushed meeting. And proceeded to lecture him with the ideas he had. I sat back delighted, thinking this is what the SRC is all about. It was the Years 7 and 8 (12-14 year olds) who often had the best ideas.

And I think the students have the potential for even more. It was highly significant to me that during the recent Appeal, it was a Year 11 girl from another school, who upon hearing an Aloysian speak at Mass, went around her school and collected 10,000 books in a matter of days. 10,000 is a lot of books, but she did it by sheer enthusiasm, as did all the students who collected 80,000 books in just four weeks. Student Representative Councils, more participatory Prefect systems, are just a start to welcome the ideas and initiative of our students. More can and needs to be done.

There is one final and very important area of hospitality that needs to be addressed, and that is the way Jesuits in schools can provide hospitality to the poor. My school days were filled with stories of Xavier Whiteley's stories of snakes sliding through his bedroom in India, and of Hans Hendriks describing his life walking with the Santals in India. They were a powerful reminder that there was another world, different to the White First World affluence we lived in each day. There was a poor and needy world, one calling for our compassion, respect and understanding. This world was one in which Jesuits worked with as much commitment and passion as the Jesuits who taught us did. It opened up my eyes of

my imagination, and of my heart. I've seen the same when Brian Stoney's work with the homeless came to be connected to Aloysius. More and more, we need to find ways to open up the "*rich young men and women*" to this other world. An apt way to start is with the work of our brothers in these areas.

There's much more that could be said, and if I have appeared to be directive, it is not only because of my enthusiasm but also because I believe that this call to develop hospitality is one that we, Jesuits, can do, and so make a critical difference to our schools.

I also believe it because I believe that at the heart of this call to hospitality is the God of Johnny Meagher, the one who welcomes us as we are, and calls us to full human flourishing, and the God who visits us again and again and calls us to freedom and to a life given for the least.

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