Jesuit Education: The Art of Building Cathedrals¹ Álvaro Lobo SJ

"All the well-being of Christianity and of the whole world depends on the proper education of youth".

February 14th, 1556. Letter from Pedro de Ribadeneira, SJ to Philip II of Spain, written on behalf of St. Ignatius of Loyola, SJ.

In 1546², St. Ignatius of Loyola granted a request from the then Duke of Gandia, St Francis Borgia, SJ, to allow young men to study alongside the Jesuits at their college in eastern Spain. In similar mode, in 1549, he approved a plan from the senators of Palermo to open the first Jesuit school in the city of Messina. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, a similar phenomenon was also occurring due to the tireless apostolic zeal of St Francis Xavier, SJ. And so, news of the schools gradually began to spread like wildfire, leading the already elderly Ignatius to be deluged by requests by the dozen for new schools in his Roman "headquarters". By the time the founder of the Society had passed away, Jesuit schools were well established and in 1599, they began to implement the famous Ratio Studiorum championed by the Mallorcan, Jerónimo Nadal, SJ. A century after the foundation of the Society of Jesus, the number of Jesuit schools across the world had risen to 444. By the time of the Society's Suppression in 1773³, which led to the closure of nearly all the schools, there were approximately 845 Jesuit educational establishments.

¹ The origin and structure of this article and some of the ideas it contains were taken from the II Colloquium JESEDU-Global 2021 held in May 2021.

²John W. O'Malley, SJ. *The First Jesuits*. Chapter 6.

³ Pope Clement XIV authorised the Suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773. It was restored by Pius VII in 1814.

Before and after that time, and indeed up until today, the schools of the Society of Jesus have served the Church and their host cities ⁴, for the benefit of their pupils, their families and the Jesuits themselves. Kings, saints and distinguished leaders have all passed through their halls; so too have singers including Freddie Mercury, philosophers such as Ortega v Gasset and sportsmen like Andres Iniesta. Jesuit schools developed the theatre with pupils such as Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca and Molière and introduced the study of the liberal arts including mathematics, physics and astronomy, while at the same time offering in-depth tuition in Latin, Greek, and classical culture. Jesuit schooling was available to everyone⁵ from the scions of noble families in the large capital cities to students so poor they lacked a roof above their heads. Alongside their original style of teaching, the modus Parisiensis⁶, the schools aimed to propagate the faith and also to counter the rift in the Church induced by the Reformation. Wherever they were, they also built bridges with local culture. And furthermore, as occurred in Latin America, they disseminated science through their pharmacies and pioneering laboratories. From the start, and despite their geographical distance, the schools functioned as a single body with a shared mission, an aspiration which still exists today through education networks such as Educate Magis or Fe y Alegria.

Nearly 500 years after St. Ignatius first trusted his pedagogical instincts, there are nearly 2,000 Jesuit educational establishments worldwide, educating nearly two million students. Just as was true all those years ago, Jesuit schools become engines for social cohesion which have huge impact, wherever they are, on local society, culture and the

⁴ MI Epp.ian. 4: 7-9

⁵ *MI Epp*. 4: 9-11. Polanco said: "Prior to any other considerations, let us accept the poor and the rich in our schools for free and out of charity, without asking for any kind of recompense."

⁶ This was the method of teaching that the first Jesuits learned while they were students at the University of the Sorbonne in Paris.

economy. It is no coincidence that Jesuit schools exist in developed countries, refugee camps and even in places where Christianity is banned. Likewise, as well as their distinguished former pupils, they are still calling young people receiving a Jesuit education today to build a better future through their personal efforts, commitment and professionalism. Yet we should not forget that every single one of these educational establishments arose from a shared aspiration and initiative. They are thus the fruit of the love for God and humanity shown by their benefactors, Jesuits, staff and other employees, students and families. All the above have put their talents and resources to practical use to serve God's kingdom.

And we should remember that there is no worse way to betray tradition than to replicate it yet omit its essence: that is how tradition ends up as merely an empty gesture, a long-gone history or a peculiar nostalgia for a supposedly golden age. If tradition is to be faithfully replicated in every time and place, we need to discover its true, inner meaning. That is why what follows below is an attempt to explore some enduring features of Ignatian pedagogy that remain to this day the heartbeat of every one of our schools.

AN EDUCATION FOR DEPTH

Imagine that, just like we build schools, we are going to build a cathedral since cathedrals and schools share, at least up to a point, similar characteristics. Both are community enterprises, with all the positives and negatives that entails, and both require a great deal of generosity from all parties. Their history is entwined with the passing of various generations, and albeit in different ways, they transform the cities that watch over them. Ultimately, both become a symbol of many different cultures, conserving in their very stones the soul and religiosity of a people.

In this context the need for depth is obvious. As with any building project, the first requirement is to lay deep foundations. This very depth of knowledge is in turn what allows the building to go up. After all, without the use of accurate and detailed plans, Gothic architecture would simply never been possible. And had this been the case, to cite an example from the more recent past, it would have been impossible to build the Cathedral of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. At the same time, knowing the story behind every work of art in a cathedral provides an insight into the heart of the artist which allows the spectator to be more readily moved while contemplating their work. It should come as no surprise that the sense of depth in a cathedral alters our perception of reality, grounds us in our surroundings, and makes us feel we are part of something far greater than ourselves.

In a world where everything changes far too quickly, it is essential to develop deep roots. Failure to do so means that individuals and groups may be easily crushed by any storm, as though they were as fragile as trees, which in a drought would struggle to locate the nutrients necessary for survival. Any tree that desires to bear fruit needs to lay down proper roots beforehand. This applies to us too on a personal and occasionally community level, whenever the contempt of our age for history leads us as individuals and as peoples to forget who we are and where we come from, thus condemning us to repeat the regrettable errors of the past.

However, educating for depth is by no means limited to increasing our knowledge so we are equipped so to speak to build larger cathedrals. It should also prove adept at seeking out the truth that sets us free, transforms and improves us, thus becoming that pearl of great price that we desire to pass on to the next generation. At the present time,

when thanks to the internet, sources of information are multiplying and a tweet has more impact than a PhD thesis, it is a matter of some urgency that we know how to distinguish opinion from fact, truth from lies, the main issue from what is incidental, good from evil, the superficial from what is authentic and rationality from pure emotionalism. Furthermore, the quality of depth ensures that science does not forget its ultimate purpose. Depth acts as a reminder that the role of science is none other than to serve mankind. History, alas, is littered with examples of science running amok, leaving millions of victims by the wayside.

And finally, depth is the gateway through which we access the beauty that makes us better people and steers us towards something greater than ourselves, thus enriching our life and the world. This is the very depth that St. Ignatius of Loyola, SJ, invites us to accept when he suggests that we should discover the real meaning of our lives, or when he encourages us to dream or insists we study the humanities, or just that we base our lives on contemplation and a desire to see beyond the limits of our senses.

Educating in depth does not just mean constant self-questioning until we reach the point where we can let go of self-absorption. It involves the whole person and relationship with others, and making the space for respect, trust and sincere friendship. Educating in depth is not limited either to merely distinguishing good from evil. What it means above all, is distinguishing between the apparent good and the truly good, and choosing what is truly best in every situation from the good options available. Consequently, this involves an appreciation of silence, knowing how to distinguish between emotions and feelings, and discerning which are helpful and which lead us down a one-way street, in accordance with the *Spiritual Exercises*. Educating for depth

involves drilling down into the truth of our lives, to the place where we find true love, the purpose and reason for our entire existence.

Perhaps this was the idea of solidity and depth Jesus was alluding to when he called us to build our house upon the rock⁷ or when he said his life was the truth⁸, the way and the life. And who knows? Perhaps this sense of depth inspired former Jesuit pupils such as René Descartes when he revolutionised philosophy, Miguel de Cervantes when he created Don Quixote or even Alfred Hitchcock whenever he was directing a film.

AN EDUCATION FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

Quite a few cathedrals retain in their porticos figures of kings and shepherds⁹ which give a clear message to visitors: *everyone is at home in the cathedral* and as far as faith and dignity are concerned, people's background is of little importance. And actually, these kinds of building do not belong to anybody in particular, but become a home to anyone who wishes to pray and celebrate the faith alongside the rest of God's people. Global citizenship has always been part of the Church's nature even though it is often threatened by the reality of geographical frontiers and national agendas.

Several resources can help us grasp the need for formation in global citizenship. One of the clearest is article 26 of the Universal Rights of Man¹⁰, as well as more recently, the Sustainable Development Goals.

⁷ Matthew 7:24-29.

⁸John 14:6.

⁹ It may be a help at this point to recall the main entrance to Salamanca Cathedral sculpted by Juan Rodríguez of Valladolid. This depicts kings and shepherds as the rich and the poor, to indicate there is a place for everyone within, whatever their background.

¹⁰ Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Regrettably, in all too many places the dignity of a great many individuals is still in dispute, while in others, a sizeable credibility gap separates the theory from the facts. As far as Christians are concerned, the dignity of the human person has always been taken as a given¹¹ and we apprehend our universal brotherhood as soon as we address God as Father.¹²

The current global scenario reveals a world where different identities, political brands of nationalism and ideologies are becoming increasingly influential. Survey the press and you will notice that every kind of issue is presented from a biased perspective that obliges the reader to take a stance on the left or to the right, as a goodie or a baddie, as one of us or one of them, completely ignoring the fact that individual lives and dignity are at stake behind each of these labels. Indeed, ideologies themselves insist on every problem being analysed from a single point of view and always present themselves as the ultimate solution. And so, in their presumptuous efforts to divide people, they digress into a world of lofty ideas, forgetting the harsh reality of a broken world.

Yet we find a counterpoint to this gaze that divides and segregates in the first week of St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, and subsequently in *The Contemplation on the Incarnation*¹³. Faced with a gaze that only focuses on what is evil, God sees what is good in the world¹⁴. Faced with a gaze that divides and judges people, God looks down upon everyone with mercy. Faced with a gaze fixated purely on failure and pessimism, God offers the incarnation, the hope and salvation of humanity. And faced with a world that regards anything different with

¹¹ Genesis 1:27.

¹² Luke 15:11-32; Matthew 20:1-16 and Matthew 6:9-13.

¹³ The Spiritual Exercises [102-109].

¹⁴ Genesis 1:31.

suspicion, God contemplates the diversity of the world as being as good as it is necessary.

There is no denying that we live a hyper-connected world. This century has already offered many examples of how what happens in a remote location has consequences tens of thousands of miles away: the pandemic is only the most recent example of this. Neither can we dodge the fact that global problems require global solutions. Anything less is just a sticking plaster and a recipe for frustration in the future. However, this hyper-connected world also has some advantages, enabling fast travel and the speedy transfer of resources and ideas. And our pupils should not only receive an education that prepares them to travel, appreciate different cultures, speak foreign languages or discover the opportunities available to them in the 21st century. Should they not also be educated to broaden their horizons, be aware of the outside world and take responsibility for it and perhaps through this, increase their love for humanity as a whole?

A saying attributed to Leonardo da Vinci proclaims that, "One has no right to love or hate anything if one has not acquired a thorough knowledge of its nature." It is only when we come from a place of knowing the world, and having hearts open to others that see their dignity, that we can draw close to and empathise with their suffering and together seek solutions. More recently, in *Querida Amazonia*¹⁵, Pope Francis has insisted that diversity, far from being a threat is the source of great richness for humanity. Perhaps at this point we should note that *Fratelli Tutti* invites us to help the whole human race embrace a new age of fraternity and understanding.¹⁶

¹⁵ FRANCIS, Querida Amazonía, 37.

¹⁶ FRANCIS, Fratelli Tutti, 77.

In several passages in the Gospels, Jesus comes across foreigners ¹⁷ and those considered the enemies of his people¹⁸, but is able to see their faith and acknowledge their dignity. Likewise, he sends the disciples to evangelise the whole world, and not just to Galilee. This was the example those first Jesuits, gathering in a room in Paris, followed when they managed to rise above their differing social backgrounds, and even put aside family rivalries for the sake of the Gospel. It is also exemplified by the life of St Francis Xavier, SJ, and those of many other missionaries. And this may well be the experience today of many Jesuit pupils in refugee camps, far from their homeland. In spite of this, thanks to the commitment of their teachers, they understand that foreigners can also treat them as brothers. This is perhaps a good place to remember that if you gaze down on the world from the heavens, you cannot discern national borders.

AN EDUCATION FOR RECONCILIATION

As we continue with our image of cathedrals, we are all but obliged to turn to one of the most beautiful and important in all Spain: The Cathedral of Santiago of Compostela. For centuries, thousands of pilgrims from all over Europe travelled to this Galician city to fall to their knees before the tomb of the apostle James. One of the many reasons inspiring these pilgrimages was that many who walked the 'Camino' desired to become reconciled to their past and thus freed up to live out the rest of their days in peace. And now, centuries later, there are countless reasons why thousands of anonymous people decide to strap up their walking boots and set out on the 'Camino'. There is absolutely no doubt that for most, their motivation for doing so is all about their most heartfelt yearnings.

¹⁷ Mark 7:24-30.

¹⁸ Luke 7:1-10.

It is worthy of note that one of the goals that St. Ignatius established for the Society of Jesus was reconciling the estranged¹⁹, something he had already done in his second time in Azpeitia, around the year 1535²⁰. The 36th General Congregation²¹ emphasised this goal anew. And indeed, it is what a priest aims to do every time someone enters the confessional. In reference to the schools, we cannot ignore this particular aspiration, which involves the whole person, and therefore the various aspects of our pedagogical reality.

Perhaps the most exemplary paradigm is St. Ignatius's own experience, firstly in Loyola and particularly at Manresa. Over the course of those critical months, he was able to look back over his past, accept himself just as he was, accept God's forgiveness and mercy and recognise that not everything was only down to him. Only someone who has accepted themselves can then reach out to others. And only someone truly at peace with their past can build up their own sense of identity, and find their place in the world. It is no exaggeration to say that formation cannot be reduced to the purely external. It is just as much about looking back over our past and understanding how God has been working through it.

The next step is about reconciliation with others. Obviously, this involves reconciling with our neighbour and recognising their dignity, especially that of those who suffer the most. It is also about knowing how to live as a family and in community, putting aside our differences and disagreements. This also applies to society as a whole, especially in

¹⁹ "Moreover, he should show himself ready to reconcile the estranged, compassionately assist and serve those in prisons or hospitals, and indeed to perform any other works of charity, according to what will seem expedient for the glory of God and the common good." (Formula of the Institute, 1550). ²⁰ *Autobiography*, pp.88-89

²¹ As is pointed in Decree 1 of GC36: Companions in a Mission of Justice and Reconciliation.

a world of growing social inequality, where the number of isolated communities is on the rise. This type of reconciliation translates into social justice, or at least that is how Pedro Arrupe, SJ, expressed this in his well-known paper, *Men and Women for Others*²². Reconciliation with others implies working sensitively in favour of the common good, establishing equitable relationships and institutions, and the gradual transformation of structures which generate poverty and exclusion, whether these arise out of simple ignorance or a deliberate, loaded silence. After all, as St. John Paul II pointed out, "There is no peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness."²³

Reconciliation with Creation should not be overlooked either, as became apparent some years ago. It is now becoming a worldwide crisis. Maybe the first challenge here is to get rid of the erroneous idea that this is either a passing trend, or else an ideology which appeals to some and is disquieting to others. The real issue at stake with regard to safeguarding our common home is our understanding of how we receive and steward what we have been given. Yet as part of this, we should also include our commitment to future generations²⁴ and to the poorest of the poor who are paying the price for damage to Creation. And also, as Pope Francis points out, we should commit to changing our lifestyles.²⁵ Caring for and consequently being reconciled to Creation, leads us to apprehend reality with a different gaze and base our lives round a sense of gratitude for everything we have been given.

And finally, we come to reconciliation with God which enables us to understand and make sense of our own lives. This means creating

²² Published as a talk in Valencia in 1973 for the X Congress of Jesuit Alumni in Europe. The original title was "*Permanent Formation and Education for Justice*."

²³ JOHN PAUL II, XXXV World Day of Peace, 2002.

²⁴ FRANCIS. Laudato si', 67.

²⁵ FRANCIS. Laudato si'. 231.

learning environments where people deepen as far as possible their personal relationship with Christianity. In a world where religions are so important, what is needed is the kind of profound knowledge that does not regard the various religious creeds as irrational phenomena with no place in our world; or what is even worse, one where people opt for a false image of God rooted in prejudice or follow false doctrine or else where certain groups take exclusive ownership of God. Of course, what is also needed is knowledge of the real, experiential, healthy Church, something light worlds away from those all-too-common stereotypes in society at large. Far from bringing people close to a God who is love, they only create rejection, resentment and a lack of understanding across society as a whole.

To reconcile means to open the door to mercy. It entails righting relationships broken by sin, even though the importance and effect of this tends to evoke contempt in contemporary society. It means accepting wounds and moving towards swift healing. There is no doubt that reconciliation can be an opportunity to draw close to others and discover how these wounds can be a cause for growth, one which leads us to connect more effectively and closely with each other ²⁶ with God, the Church, Creation and ourselves. This was the example set by Jesus when he vanquished death on the Cross and was able to forgive those responsible ²⁷, thus preventing sin from having the last word. It is also, at least in part, the example of by St. Peter Claver SJ, once a pupil at the Jesuit school in Mallorca, who went against almost the entire city of Cartegena by going daily to the city's port to tend to the slaves who had just arrived off the boat from Africa. Even today, centuries later, he is upheld as a role model in the fight for justice and an example of forgiveness amid peoples and individuals.

²⁶ FRANCIS. Laudato si', 210.

²⁷ Luke 23:24.

AN EDUCATION FOR FAITH

It is worth highlighting in fourth place two indispensable features of any cathedral. The first is luminosity. The presence of light transformed by stained glass windows, lanterns and rose windows does not only make cathedrals more user-friendly, but also allows people to discover their beauty, and draw them closer to the God they reveal. And light can enable us to perceive the full breadth of reality with greater clarity and in sharper definition. Oddly enough, this also happens when we acknowledge the spiritual dimension of human beings and draw out the best in them. The second fundamental feature of any cathedral is the keystone. This is the part that bears the weight of the whole building. Although it might look nothing much, without the keystone in place the whole building would collapse, leaving us with only a lovely memory. For the purpose of our exercise of comparison, only the faith can be equivalent to the keystone, because as we can readily imagine, a cathedral without faith could eventually end up becoming a shopping centre, luxury hotel, or a tall, luminous building akin to an old-fashioned skyscraper. In the case of schools, devoid of faith, they could end up being just one more place of education, no different from any other.

A quick stroll through an Anthropological museum or two is all it takes to reveal that man is essentially religious by nature. This was proved by the Altamira cave paintings²⁸, and can be seen too in archaeological sites all over the world. Throughout history, art in all its many expressions, has provided ample demonstration of this human longing, because it has succeeded in conveying through our five senses the

²⁸ Cave complex renowned for its prehistoric art on the coast of Cantabria, Spain and declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1985.

human need for transcendence. It has also proved that, in the absence of a religion to quench his spiritual thirst and offer him support, man will invariably seek to worship other worldly realties including to cite but a few, money, power or pleasure.

However, other types of museums can help us in a similar way to understand the need for faith so that we can understand ourselves as a culture and as a society. Without a basic knowledge of the Bible and the Church's tradition and history, our pupils will struggle to understand the Western worldview, and struggle even more to get a handle on our history, art, customs and therefore our roots. It is perhaps worth adding in regard to this, that the vast majority of our achievements pertaining to the democracy, liberty, equality and human rights we enjoy in Europe are deeply rooted in Christian tradition. And indeed, it is only through a deep knowledge of the faith and of what truly motivates a culture that one can really understand the essential character of a people.

If we are to proceed any further with this exercise of comparison, we cannot just draw to a halt at the need to cultivate interiority, prayer, silence and spiritual devotion, or to understand culture and impart the fundamental keys to Ignatian spirituality. Our attempt to understand faith as the keystone needs a little further explanation. Giving up on the use of rational methods to pass on the faith and to facilitate experience of God leaves people in an intellectual abyss. It is hard to imagine a world where there nothing exists besides sensory, emotional, physical or practical experience and where in consequence, the truth, justice, goodness and freedom are rejected in favour of a cheap relativism and a meaningless existence. History is littered with tragic instances where various forms of atheism have become the perfect breeding ground for totalitarian regimes that do not admit the

full dignity of the human person, where forms of populism capitalise on the devaluation of the truth or where terrorism destroys innocent lives for the sake of a blood-stained utopia.

It may be helpful to remember that according to the context and educational system of a country, this faith is called upon, wherever possible, to be explicit and made available to our neighbour²⁹. Should this fail to be the case, what is passed on is an ailing faith. A tension will always exist between sectarian proselytism and watering down the proclamation of the Gospel for fear of causing offence. Yet making faith explicit and available is not really about having intense classroom discussions about the outward signs of religion, or modernising chapels so much as finding the right vocabulary to pass on the Christian faith in the 21st century. In some instances, the faith has been imposed on people while in others it has been distorted by stereotypes. Both have proved enormously damaging. At the same time, there are have been all to many cases where faith that is only implicit, and lacking in external role models ending up being watered down into other, more superficial messages that bring about as much muddle and additional problems as a clock without numbers, a motorway devoid of signs, or a compass missing the cardinal points. As the Society of Jesus, we are called to pass on the things that move our hearts: a passion for Christ and for the Kingdom of God. We should never be satisfied with sugar-coated messages and far less should we renounce our commitment to educating every baptised believer – as is their birth right – in the faith. After all, no one lights a lamp to hide it under a bushel.³⁰

Lastly, we should not forget that thousands of students, teachers, families and Jesuits pass through our schools every day. We cannot

²⁹ Matthew 22: 34-40.

³⁰ Luke 11: 33-35.

squander the opportunity to make every single one of our educational communities a Christian community, a place where Jesus is at the heart of everything, and where we convey faith in the living God who seeks to encounter us, thus enabling us to live a spirit of fraternity. Such places are an invitation to joy which in later years may evoke affectionate memories in former pupils. And who knows? They may say that school was where they spent the best years of their lives. Yet only if we succeed in passing on faith in Jesus and the Kingdom of God, will we be able to expose our pupils to the joy of the Resurrection, and therefore the prospect of building an abundant future, since faith alone is capable of sustaining hope and true love.

A STORY STILL TO BE WRITTEN

It is hard to say for sure whether James Joyce, Gabriel García Márquez, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry or so many others who spent part of their infancy and youth in Jesuit schools would fully agree with this. And it would be rather unrealistic to assume that each of the distinguished names who adorn the rollcall of our old boys, developed as far as they could each of the four dimensions outlined here. Equally, it would be just as inaccurate to assume that every Jesuit school is identical as each one is shaped by its size, location, country, context and personal history. Even so, all become a sacred space. And, of course, it would be naive to regard these four dimensions of education as functioning like discrete, separate units that never influence one another. Or, to put this another way, it is likely that the presence — in harmony and proportion — of each of these distinct aspects of education will impel many individuals and communities to build the kingdom of God, by dedicating their daily work to faith and justice.

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Now, more than ever before, it is almost impossible to foresee what the world will be like in a few years time. We only know that each of our pupils will have to find their place in the world in freedom, and above all, consider how they want to make it a better place. Let us hope that each one of us will have had sufficient reserves of boldness, healthy ambition and commitment to have figured out how we might best support them. And who knows if some day we shall know them by their fruit? May their mark on the world remain with us, like that of so many cathedrals, beyond the relentless march of time.

Paris, September 17th, 2021, Feast of St Robert Bellarmine SJ,