

Reflection offered at Spirit of Life fellowship
30th June, 2024
Daniel Jantos

News release, June 18th: Sydney Morning Herald:

Archbishop Rev. Anthony Fisher, head of the *Bishop's Commission on Catholic Education*, has provided this statement:

As a result of a lengthy period of consultation and thoughtful self-reflection the commission, with the blessing of the Archbishop of Australia, wishes to make an important and historical adjustment to the vision and function of catholic education in Australia.

The Catholic "private" school system began on this continent as a service of charity and devotion. Dedicated individuals left familiar places committed to a mission: educating children in far flung and underserved communities who may not otherwise discover their God given potential.

Over the years the devotion of our teachers and principals and staff, with the support of the church, has produced remarkable results. Catholic education has grown in reputation as being a source of excellence in educating Australian children. We are proud of this heritage and this accomplishment.

Today, however, that excellence has become a basis of growing inequity in Australian society. It functions too closely in symbiotic relationship to other systems that reinforce and perpetuate inequality. Portions of our society are being left behind and increasingly caught in a spiral of poverty and hopelessness. This effect is especially troubling as it impacts children at the very foundational stages of their lives and the formative years of their identity.

Such a function is contrary to the central purpose of the church and it's mission. As the keeper of the promise of the gospel, the church holds sacred a solidarity which binds all people together

as members of a common family. It is impossible for us to look with indifference upon the plight of those who are increasingly being left behind.

A correction is needed that will bring our institutions into harmony with our calling and make them responsive to the needs of the broader society. We are called not only to serve the wealthy and talented whose contributions and capacities we celebrate. We are also called to serve the vulnerable and underserved.

Our school system is rising to the contemporary challenge of providing a path to success and happiness for all children. Starting from 2026, 20 percent of all enrolments will be drawn from applicants who qualify either by standards of low socioeconomic standing or have special education needs. Our share of federal government funding will particularly be dedicated to this work. We believe that our schools and our talented and devoted staff will make a significant contribution to the lives of these children, their families and communities. This percentage will continue to grow on a needs basis within the communities and regions we serve. The school's transportation resources will be utilized on behalf of those for whom access is made difficult by historical disadvantage such as the cost of housing.

This will be a bold experiment for our school system. We make this commitment in full awareness that it will be challenging and require sacrifice and adjustment. We make this change in the belief that it may renew a sense of vitality about the church's place within the communities we serve and in society more broadly. Our intention is to make a significant impact on one of the fundamental questions of our time. We wholeheartedly rise to this challenge.

The statement I just read is fictional. But can you imagine....can you imagine.... for a few moments what it would be like to have this be a reality?

I was reading about federal government funding allocations to education for 2024: (recurrent funding, supports day to day operations = \$29.1 billion: \$11.2 billion to government schools, \$9.8 billion to Catholic schools and \$8.0 billion to independent schools.) It is fair to say, I think, that there is a broad consensus that this funding formula is very problematic and an indicator of a gross injustice. And yet it goes on. The inclination to tolerate such a system, on the part of good people, surely is an exercise in blatant privilege: “as long as I and my children are benefitting, than nothing needs to be done....” But the effect this injustice has on children reinforces and perpetuates a world view that is deeply at odds with the ethical purpose of education which is always about possibility and potential and aspiration. To be so at odds is not a good place for an explicitly religious institution – especially if it purports to have any authority whatsoever on questions of moral and ethical integrity.

And, of course, institutions have choices. They have options. It doesn't have to be this way.

I found myself playing with a statement like this as a way of experiencing the effect such a statement might have on an interested observer. And writing it gave me, and I hope you too, some idea of how much direct and indirect impact such a change could actually have. The first response I was feeling was just how much goodwill would be generated were the catholic, or the Anglican, diocese to undertake such an initiative. I suspect it would invite many a serious reconsideration of the place of institutional religion in society. For someone daily associated with the religious space, that goodwill matters a lot. I suspect such a change would make many a catholic proud. It would get the attention of many a young person. It might even effect the number of people sitting in pews on Sunday morning.

Otherwise, the church's role in education is a hypocrisy that accentuates the importance of wealth and personal gain. This is currently the primary characteristic of Catholic and Anglican education and many of the other religiously affiliated

independent schools. It is mostly inaccessible to poor families. Which breeds cynicism and distrust. It represents a theology of liberation that is borne of generational privilege and not of inherent worth and dignity.

That's the theological choice here: earning potential rather than human right. Another version of that neoliberal rationalization - the prosperity gospel which is all about prosperity and not at all about gospel.

Prosperity, achievement, hard work and reward are important and valued but they are not the primary purpose and mission of the church.

Liberation theology emerged in countries in south and central America in the wake of the 2nd Vatican council in 1962 to 1965. The similarities between that movement and this issue are provocative.

Spanish conquest and conversion began in central and south America at the end of the 15th century. Spanish monarchs viewed the maintenance of Catholic worship as a central aspect of the imperial impulse. It was explicitly a strategy of submission and control. Columbus's sea voyage in 1492 was sponsored with the Papal directive to pursue "with eager zeal for the true faith" the conversion of the native population.

Those elites evolved into coffee growing industrialists through the 18th and 19th centuries. Local peasants living a subsistence lifestyle, were not only stripped of the land that enabled their subsistence ways of living but became enslaved for significant portions of the year to those coffee growers on the basis that it was a service to the nation. Government paramilitary bands and police brigades forcibly rounded up the employees that the industrialists needed. Peasants living under the yoke of blatant exploitation began uprisings that became protracted and ongoing civil wars. The church in those countries, protecting their own land holdings and influence, continued to take the side of the powerful elites with pronouncements against secular socialist causes and Godless communist doctrine as evil.

But over the course of the early 20th century and especially after the second war, the notion of human rights began to include language about economic security. In 1945, The United Nation Charter, began with a preamble that defines some of the organization's aims as, "reaffirming faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and nations large and small, and...the promotion of social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom."

It's in that context that the Second Vatican Council examined the role of the church. Clergy, nuns and sisters religious returned to places like El Salvador with a willingness to support demands for fair wages and land reform and hold government accountable for the violence with which villages and workers were intimidated and subjugated. The career of someone like Cardinal Oscar Romero stand out as a barometer of whether the church would have the integrity and courage to truly adopt the public pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council. In his transition from a loyal ally of the oligarchs to being a defender of the most needy and marginalized, Oscar Romero represented a complicated choice on the part of the church: a commitment to principles of fairness and equity, defending human rights and inherent dignity. Standing with the powerless. It was an ideology that cost him, as it had so many others, his life. In 1980 death squads organized by the government, and supported by the CIA and other vested interests in industrial agriculture and supposedly anti-communist ideology, shot him as he offered Mass.

"The people" wrote Father Ignacio Ellacuria, "begin to rise out of their magical consciousness: 'What can the poor actually do' they used to say..'but be conformed to the will of God,' And now they have begun to realize that it is not the will of God that things have been the way that they are"; "They begin to have confidence in themselves, they lose the widespread complexes, the shame, the disability, the generational helplessness of their plight and they discover that they can express themselves";

“They begin to realize that many social ills come from not being united and allowing themselves to be polarized and set to compete with one another for the crumbs of what is on offer. They have begun to acquire a sense of community”; and “They begin to meet, to find their voices, to see what they can do to help themselves and address the injustices they face.”

That is what a theology of liberation looks like.

The church has a choice.

Ignacio Ellacuria

Santa Clara University, commencement address, June, 1982

Education must respond according to the principles of political ethics, to the needs of a people, especially those who suffer misery and oppression, not because of their own fault or indolence, but because of a chain of historical events for which they cannot be held responsible

... There are two aspects to the process of educating young people. The first and most evident is that education deals with culture, with knowledge, the use of the intellect. The second, and not so evident, is that education must be concerned with the social reality--precisely because a (school) university is inescapably a social force: it must transform and enlighten the society in which it lives. But how does it do that? How does education transform the social reality of which it is so much a part?

... It has to do with a general commitment to understand causes; use imagination and creativity together to discover the remedies to our problems; communicate to our constituencies a consciousness that inspires the freedom of self-determination; educate professionals with a conscience, who will be the immediate instruments of transformation; and constantly hone our educational institutions so that they are both academically excellent and ethically oriented.

Reason and faith merge, therefore, in confronting the reality of the poor. Reason must open its eyes to their suffering; faith-- which is sometimes scandalous to those without it--sees in the weak of this world the triumph of God, for we see in the poor what salvation must mean and the conversion to which we are called.

A Christian university must take into account the gospel preference for the poor. This does not mean that only the poor will study at the university; it does not mean that the university should abdicate its mission of academic excellence--excellence which is needed in order to solve complex social issues of our time. What it does mean is that the university should be present intellectually where it is needed: to provide science for those without science; to provide skills for those without skills; to be a voice for those without voices; to give intellectual support for those who do not possess the academic qualifications to make their rights legitimate.