

*Education and sustainable development*

*A proposition*

by

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The Roman Catholic Church is involved in global sustainable development. The Church is at the center of an international network of schools, hospitals, relief agencies, and community initiatives that contribute to education, health, and welfare worldwide.

The Holy See and most of our catholic colleges and universities in the world made some kind of commitment to sustainability and education. Yet, the academic piece is far more promising in terms of transforming our institutions into places where students and communities develop a new vision of what it means to inhabit our precious blue planet. To achieve this goal will require fundamental re-thinking of what we teach and how we teach.

This Nagoya Conference calls attention to the need to re-design our education to meet the ecological challenges we are facing and will face and we in higher education have been very slow to rise to the challenge.

While redesigning education might seem like a daunting challenge, many of the tenets that UNESCO proposes are precisely those that are part of our Catholic mission, such as teaching students who they are before they worry about how they are going to make a living; teaching values and theories, not just theories; and teaching consciousness rather than abstraction.

My overall argument is that if we, as participants in Catholic education, think and act regarding sustainability as we have solidarity and poverty, gender and diversity, that is, as ways of being and knowing that are integral to a full human experience, then our universities will be all the richer for our work and accomplishments. But, far more significantly, the integration of environmental education with the centuries-old Catholic ideals provides a depth and strength to sustainability that no other institution of higher education has access to. Such an integration allows for personal and societal transformation. Such transformation is necessary because following the same path we are on will not get us to new, sustainable relationships with Creation and each other. I know from personal and professional experience that striving to live within the carrying capacity of our ecosystems is a spiritual and intellectual exercise that is essential to my humanity. Creating an educational system along these lines will provide our graduates with a sense of hope and engagement that is not as accessible in any other approach to education.

The Catholic tradition has much to offer the sustainability movement in no small measure because we take the spiritual aspect of humanity seriously. In fact, without attention to our spirits, sustainability education will not be successful. For example, the Catholic teaching that the world is good before it is suspect is a fundamental expression of hope and wonder before the majesty of both the natural and human constructs of our planet. The ability to find God in all things or to see the eternal in the ephemeral is a related expression that has much to offer us as educators

but particularly as citizens and co-creators of a new way to inhabit the world. If we and our students do not appreciate and love what we know and have, we will not have the emotional and spiritual reservoir to carry us through the work ahead.

I know this from my personal experience at UNESCO and in the Church. Often there is a sense of helplessness and hopelessness in the face of myriad systemic challenges our society is facing. When I started working at UNESCO twelve years ago, me and a lot of people we did not know a lot about global warming, significant global inequality, or worry about long-term economic instability. Now, they are aware of and face these challenges personally and in the wider world. Our education needs to catch up to their reality. We simply cannot offer them an intellectual inquiry into global warming, we must offer them a deep sense of respect for the complexities of the natural world; how those are being changed; and what that might mean for our humanity, and our economic, social and political futures. To disentangle one of these pieces and address it singly risks failing to educate at all. Students need skills, ideas, and institutional and individual role models in order to face their future with hope and engagement.

Using the characteristics of environmental education laid out by Catholic Church, in its social doctrine and in the documents of the Congregation for the Catholic education, we can establish what many educational institutions offer now. Then we can survey what our educational systems need to be and the ways in which these desired characteristics are strengthened and more fully realized within a Catholic context. I have a number of concerns with education as it is currently constructed and delivered. I worry that we teach students to seek a career instead of a calling. Also other persons have expressed a similar concern, noting that we educate for upward mobility, which often means leaving home and improving on the lifestyle and choices of one's parents and home community. Our students come to college steeped in twin ideals of upward mobility and infinite personal flexibility in terms of residence, relationship, and resources. These ideas are based on a belief in technology and a pervasive set of global ideas and norms assumptions, not the least of which is are endless progress and infinite resources. And, as educators we promote such ideals. In English professor Jason Peters' words, we let these students major in Getting Ahead. We have strip-mined the local talent, converted it into graduates, and shipped it to Big Important Places. In as much as we try to sell to prospective students and parents the kinds of jobs and salaries our graduates will get, we are educating for a career rather than a calling rooted in values and a more sustainable future.

On my view, it is evident that there is a planetary emergency for having an education linked with sustainable development. We need to teach skills and knowledge for survival, for some level of self- and local sufficiency. Few of our institutions teach students practical skills of self-sufficiency such as car repair, gardening, or furniture making; having relegated such tasks to vocational school training. The assumption is that higher education yields a salary big enough to meet all of our needs in the marketplace; all we need to know how to use is our heads.

The second major theme, according to me, is that our educational system acts as if for hundreds of years we have been on an upward trajectory in terms of knowledge acquisition. But in fact we have been losing knowledge, as possessed by

small-scale communities, through language and skills loss, as those communities become absorbed by a global economy. Ignorance, he argues, is not a solvable problem any more than comprehending the world in its entirety is possible. Higher education has become vainglorious and has led to possibly the most problematic aspect of our current educational system and that is a lack of wonder, to be explored below. If we know more than ever before, then there is little wonder or mystery left for any of us to explore. I will say more on this in a moment..

The third major theme is that we don't think in ecological or long-term patterns. We teach students through distinct disciplines but rarely get around to showing students how those disciplinary boundaries that they have studied don't really exist in the world and in the decisions that they are going to make. Nor do our students learn about the long scale of time such as the millions of years that modern humans inhabited the planet before cities and agriculture, two facets of our lives that most of us take for granted.

The fourth theme and the one that has the most obvious natural resonance with the Catholic mission, is that we educate without attention to a sense of wonder and feeling. We tend to exclude feelings of wonder and awe from our educational philosophy. This is particularly lamentable because upcoming students perhaps more than any other generation are taught what is wrong with our world and our environment. And, unlike previous generations, they have had fewer chances to fall in love with it. Rather than playing in nearby woods and streams and pickup ball games in the neighborhood, many children are not free to roam outside and do not have a neighborhood gaggle of children with whom to create fun and merriment. Instead, their play is routinized and designed by adults for their enjoyment and safety, through sports, camps, lessons, and other activities. The informality and spontaneity of play is an essential mechanism by which wonder and love are instilled. Recently Orr told a gathering of college educators that until we all feel the climate crisis nothing is going to be done about it. Statistics are not going to make us move, but feeling the changes will. Without prior connection to the world and people around them, our students have even less likelihood to feel the profound climatic changes upon us.

As we think about the way forward, the wonderful news is that we have a marvelous toolkit of theories and practices that animate the Catholic order and its institutions of higher education that lend themselves beautifully to our current educational needs. Inspiring from catholic education and social doctrine for an educational system that addresses our climate and human crises, we can appreciate the resources available to us and how they might help us create the sustainability education our country and planet need.

Rightly UNESCO calls for all education to be environmental education. At first this might seem that we all need to be teaching about biology, but that is not what he means. The Compendium of social doctrine provides a way forward calling for us to be in right relation with God, others and Creation. Only through this three-fold focus will we have a meaningful life. The relationship with Creation is new and expressly indicates the necessity of integrating our relationship to the environment with our other relationships. Catholic education, in this light, becomes education for

spirituality and solidarity with people and planet, whether in a psychology classical or management class.

Integral to environmental education (at all levels of schooling) is restoring a sense of wonder not only in terms of the natural world but also in terms of human capacities and human society, that is, seeing God in all things. Many think such wonder is essential for human development. Rachel Carson wrote in *A Sense of Wonder*, If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength. And, Thomas Berry has made a similar cry, If this fascination, this entrancement, with life is not evoked, the children will not have the psychic energies needed to sustain the sorrows inherent in the human condition. They might never discover their true place in the vast world of time and space. Children need a story that will bring personal meaning together with the grandeur and meaning of the universe.

There is both a spiritual and intellectual component to an education for wonder. The intellectual component emphasizes the long duration of our planet's and humanity's history. For example, the industrialization and consumption levels that our students take for granted have only been with us for a couple of hundred years out of the millennia that modern humans have been alive. For much of modern human history, we gathered and hunted and lived in small bands of people with few possessions. Certainly, we are not returning to that state, but it has been the dominant human experience on the planet and knowledge of that reality shifts our sense of how permanent things might be and how important our current technology and institutions might be in the long term. An ecological view of history would note that an important change took place 10,000 years ago, when humans began farming and significantly manipulating the environment around them for their own means. For the last 10,000 years, since the beginning of agriculture and urbanization, human societies have exploited virtually all possible environments to become the most powerful species on the planet. What a marvelous species!

Catholic education illuminates the spiritual component of education for wonder. We encourage our students to get involved in the wider world, to be of service to others, to think of themselves as part of God's mission, as part of something that is bigger than themselves. This same sense of transcendence can be inculcated no matter a student's religious faith through a sense of wonder, both at the natural world but also at human society and human relationships. We are, after all, who we are in relation to the world around us and Catholic higher education roots students in this broader context.

We should call for mastery of one's person rather than mastery of subject. The Catholic ideal of *cura personalis*, care and development of the whole person, not just the intellect, expresses this sentiment clearly. In *The Catholic Model of Education* Michael McMahon notes that the primary concern of Catholic education is the opportunity to form young souls or to form characters and moral habits as much as intellect. And, further, Catholics believe that we do this in relationship with others

and with God. All education is relational first and informational second. This is an essential element in cultivating wonder and awe. If relationships precede and are foundational to knowledge acquisition, then, students act out of connection and meaning rather than abstraction and isolation.

Another point is that knowledge carries with it responsibility to use it well in the world. And a corollary is that we cannot say we know something until we understand the effects of this knowledge on real people and their communities. The Catholic notion of solidarity, so clearly articulated by the Holy Father Francis in different speeches.

For instance, on Friday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2014, Pope Francis met with United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and other executives from the UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes. In addressing the representatives present, Pope Francis began strategically by mentioning his predecessors, the two recently canonized saints John XXIII and John Paul II, and the “passionate concern” that they had “for integral human development” and “for understanding between peoples”, not forgetting to mention the numerous visits made by John Paul II to the Organizations.

The Pope Francis then called upon the representatives to be attentive in striving always to do better for the “world’s peoples”, since a fundamental basis of management “is the refusal to be satisfied with current results and to press forward.”

With regards to global political and economic organization, “much more needs to be achieved” he stressed, “since an important part of humanity does not share in the benefits of progress and is in fact relegated to the status of second-class citizens.”

Consequently the Pope asserted that Future Sustainable Development Goals must “be formulated and carried out with generosity and courage, so that they can have a real impact on the structural causes of poverty and hunger, attain more substantial results in protecting the environment, ensure dignified and productive labor for all, and provide appropriate protection for the family, which is an essential element in sustainable human and social development.”

Thus in concrete terms he stressed the need for these representatives of the chief agencies of global corporations to challenge “all forms of injustice” and to resist “the ‘economy of exclusion’, the ‘throwaway culture’ and the ‘culture of death’ which nowadays sadly risk becoming passively accepted.”

On this note he took the opportunity to remind the executives about the encounter between Jesus and the rich tax collector Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10) that took place little over 2000 years ago. In this meeting Zacchaeus “made a radical decision of sharing and justice, because his conscience had been awakened by the gaze of Jesus” the pontiff explained.

Likewise, “this same spirit should be at the beginning and end of all political and economic activity” he affirmed. “Jesus does not ask Zacchaeus to change jobs nor does he condemn his financial activity; he simply inspires him to put everything, freely yet immediately and indisputably, at the service of others.”

In other words, Francis invited the representatives to be guided by a “spirit of solidarity,” which entails an “awareness of the dignity of each of our brothers and sisters whose life is sacred and inviolable from conception to natural death.”

This will then lead us to “share with complete freedom the goods which God’s providence has placed in our hands; material goods but also intellectual and spiritual ones, and to give back generously and lavishly whatever we may have earlier unjustly refused to others.”

He therefore concluded that “equitable economic and social progress can only be attained by joining scientific and technical abilities with an unfailing commitment to solidarity accompanied by a generous and disinterested spirit of gratuitousness at every level.”

However Pope Francis also noted that in steering towards a rightful development of such a kind there is the need for cooperation between private sector and civil society, as well as contributions at both the international level “aimed at the integral human development of all the world’s peoples” as well as at the local level of the State, in its “legitimate redistribution of economic benefits.”

The Holy Father finished by urging the representatives present to work together to promote a “true, worldwide ethical mobilization” which - notwithstanding religious or political convictions - looks to “put into practice a shared ideal of fraternity and solidarity, especially with regard to the poorest and those most excluded.”

The Pope support also a well integrated into Catholic higher education through social justice work and service learning, among other activities, is not only resonant with Orr's call but suggests an added dimension that is essential to sustainability education. That dimension is to, as much as humanly possible, be mindful of the myriad ways in which our actions have deep, often unintended consequences, far from where we live and play. *Healing A Broken World* is mindful of consequences and connections in their call for long-term partnerships with institutions. Long-term relationships mean that students and parents involved can know how university-community partnerships impact organizations and communities over the long-term.

A final point I would like to propose is that examples and actions are more important than words; students need faculty and administrators with integrity and institutions capable of embodying ideals completely in their operations.

Quite appropriately, often the students response to such a proclamation is to wonder why their teachers are abdicating responsibility after contributing to the problems for years. So, now I think that, both personally and institutionally, it is our collective responsibility to share our journeys with our students. Our actions and choices will never be comprehensive, never likely be enough from our perspective or someone else's, but they are a manifestation of both our concern and willingness to act on that concern as well as a reflection of our personal attributes and choices and the institutional challenges we face in acting on our values. So, in addition to the above activities, I let my students know that I drive my kids across town so that they can attend a school I believe in rather than take the bus to the public school. The contradictions are as important as the seemingly more virtuous actions. And, in the individual paths that we take are lessons for our students about how to carve out an individual path from collective institutions and concerns. With *cura personalis* behind us, this is a natural component of sustainability education for us.

Finally, the way in which learning occurs as important as the content. Here the Catholics would emphasize educating heart and mind, at least. And, I would add from my own teaching experience that we must educate for development of heart, mind and hand. Experiential and physical education, or education for survival, to use Orr's terms, are missing in much of higher education today. I have joked with a colleague that Catholic education would be perfect, as rigorous and comprehensive as it is, if it were matched with the Benedictine commitment to self-sufficiency. After two years of requiring students to do farm or garden work in my history classes, and based on my own personal experience balancing farm and garden work with my study of African history, I know that the two feed each other in meaningful ways. We are embodied students and teachers whether we admit it or not. But we need more than experiential education we need a commitment to skills and activities that cultivate personal and communal resilience as instability in the economy and environment prevails.

We are beautifully situated, as heirs to a robust, engaged educational tradition to re-create our colleges and universities as institutions that teach about sustainability in the most comprehensive way possible. Sustainability, as Catholics have recognized over the last few decades, is an integral part of our mission. If we can successfully align our tradition for truly environmental education in a deep collaboration with UNESCO and with all academic Institutions to give an intellectual and spiritual foundation for engaging in a troubled world with purpose and hope.