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The Dignity of the Human Person: a Human and Christian Education

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Good morning.

The Word of God, saints and scholars tell us that

*The glory of God is a human being fully alive,
and the life of a human being is the vision of God.*

Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV, 20, 7

Following this quote from St. Irenaeus, I would like to begin by situating this reflection in the context of Christian anthropology and the inherent dignity of all human persons. Our grandeur springs from the essence of our human nature - we are the image of God:

*God created humankind in his image;
In the image of God he created them;
Male and female he created them.*

Genesis 1:27

Inspired by Christian anthropology, I hope to share with you my convictions that:

- Human dignity and education are intimately related; and,
- Effective partnerships and networks can promote the enjoyment of fullness of life by all human beings.

Then, I would like to illustrate how the rapidly increasing pace of change is impelling us to strengthen and develop our cooperation to promote and defend the rights of children and to tilt the world in their favor.

In conclusion, I would like to share with you my conviction, best expressed by Leonard Doohan, that “Leaders who approach their responsibility with a sense of service in a changing world need a commitment to reflection and prayer to creatively deal with change, political skills to direct the change, and a well-rooted spirituality to be balanced amidst change.” ¹

Henri Nouwen, a life-long student of the spiritual life, often said that if people lived the spiritual life radically, it would affect everything they touched. Not only would it have an impact on personal growth and relationships, it would also influence economics, politics and social structures. ²

In the children and young people entrusted to our care we experience an encounter with Jesus Christ, and so we see the vision of God: “In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these sisters and brothers of mine, you did it to me”.³

I suggest to you that in the Christian teaching/learning dynamic the students are best called disciples because, as Lasallian educator George Van Grieken says, “Disciples are not taught in the ordinary sense. The concern is not simply for the passing on of knowledge. Rather, the students are an extension of the teacher, taking on the teacher’s convictions, commitments, and practices – in a word, taking on the teacher’s spirituality.” ⁴

For us, education indeed is a work of salvation; we strive to procure the wellbeing of our students. Our students are well when they are fully alive – when they are brightly shining images of God. For those of us who are Christian educators, educational service with the poor is an expression of our profession of faith. Saint John Baptist de La Salle, founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and Patron Saint of Teachers, tells us that we should make no distinction between our professional duties and our Christian beliefs. ⁵

BICE's reason for being is to promote the dignity and rights of children because they are inherent to their God-like nature. BICE-sponsored programs are intended to be beacons of hope because we believe, with Bengali wise man Tagore, that "every child who is born is a sign that God has not yet given up on humankind." ⁶

I realize that not everyone in this room is an educational specialist. However, we are all members of the one human family. Together we are responsible for insuring that all of our children have the opportunity for full human development. Together we must build a world of peace, compassion and justice. We must create a world-wide community in which every child is appreciated and nurtured.

The organizations that comprise BICE collaborate by sharing their talents and resources with initiatives that contribute to life-giving opportunities for children. I am honored and pleased that the Brothers of the Christian Schools, of whom I am the Superior General, are fully committed to partner with BICE.

John Baptist de La Salle, our founder, has gifted us with a spirituality and pedagogy firmly rooted in Christian anthropology. And our network of Lasallian schools, with over 1 million students and almost 100,000 Partners, is a veritable global experience of helping children to have life and live it to the fullest.

Now, rooted in Christian anthropology, I would like to share with you some insights that illustrate how we are being pushed by the constantly accelerating pace of change to increase collaboration and cooperation in favor of children.

All of us are aware of the speed of technological innovation. That expensive cell phone I bought a year ago is practically obsolete and can now be purchased for a very low price. Google has developed a driverless car. Thanks to Whatsapp, the young indigenous Nigerian fellow who somehow found his way to construction work in Paris talks to his mother, and sees her, in a faraway village in a remote corner of Nigeria.

And whatever the “cloud” is, it has the whole world connected. In his book, Thank you for Being Late: an Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of Acceleration, Thomas Friedman writes: “Amplified by this supernova, the many – all of us acting together – now have the power to do good at a speed and scope we’ve never seen before: to reverse environmental degradation or to feed, house, and clothe every person on the planet, if we ever set our collective minds to doing so.” ⁷

Just imagine what more all of us could do to promote and defend the rights of children through more effective networking and partnering. Working with BICE and by combining our talents and resources, if we ever set our collective minds to doing so, we could greatly improve the chances of all children to live life to the fullest.

Driven by the principle of Christian anthropology, inspired by God’s image beautifully reflected in each child’s face and motivated by compassion we must increase our collaboration and cooperation. Referring once again to Friedman, I believe it important to recognize that “The largest forces on the planet – technology, globalization, and climate change – are all accelerating at once. As a result, many aspects of our societies, workplaces, and geopolitics are being reshaped and need to be reimagined”. ⁸

On behalf of the world’s children, we have an obligation to influence this reshaping and reimagining of our societies. We have to develop creative and effective strategies to insure that the inherent dignity of all persons – and for us, especially children – becomes a permanent societal value. Facebook, Whatsapp, Airbnb, Uber, and so many others, clearly show us that connecting with others means progress, profits and, especially important for us, the ability to influence values and behaviors. Today, what is tweeted and retweeted becomes – uncritically – accepted as fact.

What more can we do to facilitate the wellbeing of children in the globally connected world? Globalization, as described in the book [A Future Perfect](#), is “the freer movement of goods, services, ideas, and people around the world” and it “is more about than just business: it is about culture and people”.⁹ Culture and people are what education is all about. How can we, through global connectedness, influence contemporary cultures and peoples with advocacy initiatives and reflections on childhood? How can we, by increasing partnership and collaboration with BICE, be a loud, clear and attractive global reference on issues related to the rights of children?

These are action-driving questions that require immediate responses. Remember: while we sit and ponder, social media is shaping world opinion, instantaneous communication is providing input to policy makers and others are influencing values.

We are the voice of the children. In today’s world, the more we are connected, the more our voice-for-the-children will be heard. The more we speak with one voice in favor of the rights of children, the more we will influence public opinion and policy makers. Speaking and connecting through social media and the cloud is today’s best way to teach minds and touch hearts with the message that all children want to live life and live it to the fullest. This is their God-given right.

Due to the rapid pace of improved communications systems and other technological advances, we will literally be left behind if we do not partner and synchronize to influence the contemporary world. Others, some good and some bad, will create the new dynamics for the treatment of children. BICE provides a space for reflection and action with the shared goal of having children fully alive. Through BICE, I believe, we can connect, influence and achieve a more dignified life for children everywhere.

As technological advances rush on ahead of our ability to keep up with everything, we can easily become overwhelmed. Just stop for a moment to consider that, as Freidman says, “...one person can now help so many more people – one person can educate millions with an Internet learning platform; one person can entertain or inspire millions; one person can now communicate a new idea, a new vaccine or a new application to the whole world at once.”¹⁰

A consideration of the pressing need to:

- alert public opinion and governments about violations against children;
- support local life-giving initiatives that benefit children;
- disseminate the foundations of child protection policies;
- develop research on children, and,
- keep up with social media

in the rapidly changing contemporary context, brings me to the final point of this reflection.

The inherent dignity of children – the children of God himself – motivates us to act on their behalf. Technology and social media provide us with the tools to network and partner for the purpose of insuring that all children have the opportunity to live life to the fullest. We have a lot of work to do: advocacy, fund raising, program development and strategic planning are labor intensive activities that make constant demands on our time and energy.

How can we remain focused when confronted with children who are exploited, violated, disregarded and forced into armed conflicts? How can we effectively network when the means to do so are changing at a bewildering rate? How can we creatively respond to the needs of children when we have so many deadlines to meet? How can we energetically and enthusiastically lead initiatives that promote the rights of children when we have so much work to do?

Borrowing thoughts from Leonard Doohan, a noted expert in leadership training, I remind you that to be focused and effective leaders in the areas of the rights and protection of children we must be men and women who can think, reflect and integrate. We must engage in critical reflection and imagination. ¹¹

Thinking, reflecting, integrating and imagining can only occur when we are calm and quiet. Constant connectivity can distance us from personal communication with individual persons – from particular children suffering in concrete situations.

Without times and places for personal reflection and informed conversations with like minded advocates, we can easily become caught up in impersonal and time consuming bureaucratic processes that sap our energy and diminish our creativity. Unless we settle down on a regular basis and quietly bring to our conscious awareness that children are the image and likeness of God, we can easily, and comfortably, reduce them to statistical analysis.

We are called to respond joyfully, creatively and courageously to the educational desires of poor, vulnerable and excluded children. Through inspired conversation and reflection, we are better able to listen attentively to the cry of children aspiring to live life to the fullest. A prayerful and reflective life will enable us to respond boldly, creatively and effectively to help children fulfill their desires for a life in accord with their inherent dignity.

Wise educators, I believe, should pay close attention to where they are. Reflectively observing all that surrounds them, they will find mediators of God's call. Families, friends, students, colleagues and events will be experienced as channels of God's loving presence.¹²

Referring once again to Nouwen, I suggest to you that the commitment to develop one's spiritual life unleashes the creativity necessary to meet the education aspirations of the children and young people whom God entrusts to our care. ¹³

We have a wonderful, exciting and grace-filled opportunity to work on behalf of children – God’s children. Thank you for permitting me to engage in this brief reflection with you. I am delighted to be with you and to have the opportunity to share my convictions that:

- In children we encounter the image of God.
- Contemporary means of social networking and partnering with BICE can help us to insure that children have the opportunity to live life to the fullest.
- Prayer and reflection will keep us focused and remind us that

*The glory of God is a human being fully alive,
and the life of a human being is the vision of God.*

Irenaeus, Against Heresies, IV, 20, 7

I hope that this reflection has provided you with some food for thought for our time together.

Thank you!

Notes:

1. Doohan, Leonard. *Spiritual Leadership: The Quest for Integrity*, p. 21. Paulist Press, 2007.
2. Ford, Michael, ed. *Cf. Eternal Seasons: A Liturgical Journey with Henry Nouwen*, Sorin Books, 2004.
3. St. Matthew, Gospel, 25:40.
4. Van Grieken, FSC, George. *Touching the Hearts of Students; Characteristics of Lasallian Schools*, p.81. Christian Brothers Publications, 1999.
5. Brothers of the Christian Schools. *The Rule*, 63. Rome, 2016.
6. Tagore, Rabindranath, as quoted in: BICE. *Strategic Plan: 2014-2018*, p.2.
7. Friedman, Thomas L. *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of a Acceleration*, p. 87-88. Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2016.
8. Friedman, p. 3-4.
9. Micklethwait, John and Wooldridge, Adrian. *A Future Perfect: The Challenge and Promise of Globalization*, p. xix. Random House, 2003.
10. Friedman, p. 87.
11. Doohan, cf. p. 74.
12. Gittins, CSSp, Anthony. *Reading the Clouds: Mission Spirituality for New Times*, cf. p. 13. Liguori, 1999.
13. Ford, Michael, ed.

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