



**JEA & JACSA Education Conference  
St Ignatius' College Adelaide July 10-12 2019  
*Companions in a Mission of Reconciliation & Justice***

***Vulnerability as Truth and Grace***

As 2019 is being celebrated as the [United Nations International Year of Indigenous Languages](#) let me say in my faltering Kukatja:

*Maninpunginpa-tjananya puntu Kurna nyininipaya ngurra ngaatja, tjirlpi kamu parntany parntany, kurralkatjanu kamu nyininipaya kuwarri*, or in English: 'Today, I acknowledge the Kurna people of this land, the elders, men and women, of the past and those living today.'

Let me now tell you a story ...

I often wear a coat in winter that has on it the name: Red Cloud Indian School ... until last week no one has ever asked me why I wear this coat and what is my connection to that school.

Red Cloud Indian School is on the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota (USA). A Jesuit school which began in 1888 named after Chief Red Cloud who sought a home and school for his people after the Plains wars of the 1880s, the treaties that followed (some broken), and between Custer's last stand in 1876 and the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. Red Cloud asked for the 'Black Robes' to come ...

When on sabbatical at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska in 2010, I used to go with others from Creighton to Red Cloud Indian School to support those who were finishing school that year to apply for Gates Scholarships and go to College ...

Some 100 years later in 1989 ... The Pine Ridge High School women's basketball team traveled to play at Lead High School ... a school in the Black Hills of SD where gold was found and towns established, the place of Mt Rushmore/4 US Presidents ... broken treaties resulting in tension between the Sioux and residents of Lead.

It was Chief Red Cloud who was once quoted as saying: 'The white man made us many promises, more than I can remember. Only one they kept. They promised to take our land and they took it'.

Before the game ... team of girls, the youngest 14 year old SueAnne Big Crow ... facing noise, teasing and taunting ... team 'frozen' ... SueAnne takes the lead ... does a shawl dance ... the opening of the cocoon when the butterfly emerges ... then quiet ... only her singing is heard ... she returns ... takes the basketball ... they play the game ... who won? ... not clear but what is remembered is a new relationship forged that day between Sioux youth and those at Lead.



The dance that SueAnne makes that day expresses her vulnerability, dignity and spirituality. It calls out the best within her but also what is most fragile in order to face what confronts her and her team mates. It is a dance of courage that invites conversion, that others become more attentive, respectful and human.

We live in a time where clear divisions in our world are becoming more apparent.

In his book, *Age of Anger*, Pankaj Mishra examines our present world as being one of *ressentiment*. He says: ‘the modern promise of equality collides with massive disparities of power, education, status and property ownership’.

A modern desert experience of ‘indifference’, as Mishra explains, can lead to expressions of rage by those feeling dispossessed or to indifference and where detention, cruelty and heartlessness no longer elicit condemnation or shame.

Our Church and our Province cannot escape these larger world realities nor Royal Commissions into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse, the Banks, Aged Care, People with Disability and, in Victoria, police informants and the mental health system.

Whether in our Province, Church and world we face polarising divisions: choices over building bridges or erecting walls; strengthening borders or offering hospitality; living in fear or risking trust.

We live on a land where our ancestors never entered a treaty with First Nations Peoples. Our privilege is based on their dispossession. And, as if to forget that most of us came to this land either as prisoners, prison warders or seeking some form of refuge, we continue to tighten our borders and treat harshly those who remind us of the common humanity we all share as the people of God.

But, while we live with much uncertainty, we also live with the possibility that something new can be born. Vulnerability and weakness can come as gift if our spirits stop to listen, our eyes and hearts remain open to welcoming something new, the seeds of which have already been deeply placed by God within us.

Our companionship with Christ, at the very heart of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, is also about joining him in service. That key element of being ‘men and women for others’ is about generosity and sacrifice, looking beyond ourselves in the example of Christ, caring for the needs of others, often at some cost to ourselves. At such times, nothing can be more personal, fragile and full of risk when we offer what we have received, uncertain as to what we might receive in return.

Let me now briefly address three contexts of ‘vulnerability as truth and grace’ within our education ministries and what I might name as three very important ‘dances’ in that education context: **the dance of entering school, the dance of living school and the dance of leaving school**. In all cases, these dances offer key spaces where truth and grace can be found in vulnerability.



### **The dance of entering school**

Last year I was approached by some alumni of one of our schools concerned about the ways in which some people were applying for their children to attend one of our schools by getting a form signed by the local parish priest. They were concerned by what we might describe as the particular ‘dance’ of application. They witnessed contrasting efforts by some to ‘pretend’ to be regular Sunday worshippers with others who loved the school and its values but were not going to pretend they were regular Sunday worshippers. And, as we know, there are many similar parents and alumni in our schools today who live and practise Christian belief in a wide range of ways.

We have been entering a new space in Australia for some years where there is a growing number of people who claim to be spiritual and not religious. There are others who claim no formal religion at all. Ignatian spirituality does not resile from this complex Australian and often secular context but uses a long and trusted experience to engage with others in the human journey of life and its search for a deeper and divine meaning.

As our Fr Arturo Sosa commented at the Synod for Young People in 2018: ‘Instead of multiplying regrets for an idealized past that is gone, let us ask ourselves sincerely what the Lord is telling us through secularization, where the Holy Spirit leads us through that path that humanity is actually living’ (Synod of Young People, Oct 24, 2018).

The living of ‘synodality’ that Pope Francis encourages of us is, at its theological roots, about a shared journey, the *syn-hodos*, ‘the path made together by the People of God’. A journey seeking to be open together to finding the traces of God in all things.

Pope Francis asks if we can imagine a new ‘dance’ in the Church where we invert the hierarchical pyramid and begin from below. Can we open our hearts to a new journey of faith, a more inclusive one but, in our new and current Australian context, one we need to humbly and patiently learn? What might that mean for our Church, our Jesuit Province and our schools if we were to invert the traditional pyramid?

In the application process for a child to come to one of our schools, and from the first day of that child’s school, can we ask families to risk a faith journey with us and we with them? Can we search together for a deeper and more authentic Catholic expression of Australian spirituality? Can we allow our Ignatian spirituality to guide us in discovering a new a new Christian dance in this land?

In other words, can our Ignatian spirituality be expressed as an invitation at that very moment when someone applies to send their child to one of our schools? And, if so, how might that initial and ongoing conversation be expressed?



### **The dance of living school**

For some years now I have been interested in how students at our schools grow in awareness of life beyond school. That is, how do students encounter the ‘dance’ of others (as did the children at that basketball court at *Lead*), one that expresses a spirituality and cultural expression of life, often so different from our own; one that is beyond our usual cultural experiences, securities, privileges and largely ‘white’ and often ‘male dominated’ spaces?

School immersions are now an important element in most schools. They make a powerful footprint on our earth taking up large financial, institutional, ecological and time resources. They risk becoming the new and popular ‘dance’, one we learn to master on our own terms rather than one that involves receiving the ‘dance’ of ‘the other’. In my own life I admit to knowing some of the strengths and limitations of such cultural experiences, well before the concept of ‘immersion’ was ever coined.

At the heart of any valuable immersion is vulnerability. Whatever the preparation, the gift lies in powerlessness, able to sit and receive the cultural ‘dance’ of another, one we have not heard before and which can remain strange and foreign to us. Our independence, power and desire to control is questioned. We need to examine our motivation when wanting ‘to do good for others’ seems a good and obvious thing.

In our Christian tradition we can learn much from the sacrament of baptism, especially when it is done generously and involves full immersion, as it was for all adults in the early Church. At such a time, total immersion faces the risk of drowning but so is any healthy cultural immersion where, to be transformed by the new experience, something within us needs to be allowed to die.

The taste of death, as in any healthy immersion, is one which Ignatius understood. Not just in the conversion of his life but in the offer of companionship with Christ he then received. This companionship offers a new spiritual grace and awakening, not feeling any shame when ‘smelling like sheep’ when we find ourselves living down and dirty amongst them.

### **The dance of leaving school**

I was reminded recently that when the Jesuits sailed from Portugal to Brazil in the early life of the Society of Jesus they had emblazoned on their sail: ‘One World is Not Enough’. Our Ignatian spirituality is for the world, not constrained to one culture or another and certainly not limited to our own. It is why Ignatius asked his men to learn the language and value the culture of others, wherever they went. There is always an excitement in Ignatian spirituality when God’s traces are found in the unusual and the unexpected but not surprisingly in the life of others, for that is where we know God’s presence is always to be found and well before we ever arrived.

What are the skills of discernment and decision making we offer alumni as they leave our schools? What are the resources we offer to help accompany their future journeys?



Pankaj Mishra, whom I have already quoted, says that the most convincing and influential public intellectual today is Pope Francis. He argues that Pope Francis' moral voice has risen 'largely because the ostensibly autonomous and self-interested individual, unleashed by the advance of commercial society, confronts an impasse'. Our human descent is either 'into angry tribalism or equally bellicose forms of antinomian individualism'.

One of the weaknesses of our western culture is that it suffers from not having clear rites of passage for young men and women entering adulthood after the long, extended period of childhood and adolescence. There are no simple pathways for young adults where the potential for personal transformation is presented and where the guidance and wisdom of elders is available.

Leaving school can be a critically important moment in a person's life or, later as they grow older, when one's first tertiary degree or work experience is completed. They can offer occasions for personal transformation because, as we have learned from the best of immersion experiences, there are these moments of openness and vulnerability. These moments can radically change the values, direction and commitment of people's lives. They work best if they come with the support and accompaniment of those who are a little older along with those much wiser.

What might we offer our alumni? Where is the promise of accompaniment but also the availability of Ignatian spirituality that calls and challenges one to life and human transformation? Who are those voices that speak to a spiritual and justice hunger in our world? What does it mean to be an Ignatian leader today?

### **Conclusion**

We are, in some ways, like those gathered in the school basketball court of *Lead* those thirty years ago. We can become used to voices that define and limit our relationship with our First Nations Peoples as well as those seeking refuge or asylum in our country. The last thing we want are 'crowd behavioural officers' to remind us of the ignorance and violence we have come to accept in executing past and present policies affecting both groups.

The Province *Bookends Project* seeks ways in which we can accompany First Nations Peoples, allowing ourselves to enter the mystery of God who has been present in this ancient land over many thousands of years and whose traces of presence remain. We seek to accompany those seeking asylum and refuge in this land because in truth most of our ancestors sought such hope and freedom. These bookends are our own particular Australian peripheries, 'those margins of society' which Pope Francis asks us reach out to 'under the gaze of Jesus' (GC36).

We have built our privilege on the dispossession of First Nations Peoples and on the courage, faith and efforts of past seekers of asylum and refuge in this land. We belong to a wounded, often a narrowly tribal-seeking and independent-seeking post-



colonial nation, too often disconnected from neighbours in our region of Asia Pacific, hesitant and uncertain as to our true identity in this ancient land and region.

There is grace to be received in such vulnerability when we listen to the voices of those on our peripheries such as at the table talks organised by JRS or acknowledging their Youth Awards. Or we listen to those at Redfern Jarjum College or others on our urban edges such as at Mt Druitt in western Sydney. The Action Statement of Rio2017 calls us 'to make sure that our mission for reconciliation and justice is reflected in our schools'. As Ignatius would say, love is expressed more in deeds than in words.

While only 14 years of age, SueAnne Big Crow took the initiative when faced with a confronting and vocal audience. She faced opposition with vulnerability, grace and humility, expressing what was most sacred and culturally important to her. That day she called everyone to conversion, including her own team mates, to lives more courageous, tolerant and human.

In these days together, and across this wide network of Jesuit and Companion schools, may we find ways, such as in **entering school, living school** and **leaving school**, to express in our conversations, programs and decisions what is deeply life giving to us in Ignatian education accepting they can be, and will appear at times, to be strange, alien and even confronting to others. Our Ignatian spirituality calls us to become more courageous, tolerant and human. It is our journey and our companionship with Christ but a path, as Pope Francis reminds us, shared together by the People of God..

### **Prayer of Chief Red Cloud: 1882- 1909**

O Great Spirit, I pray you to look upon us. We are your children and you placed us first in this land. We pray you to look down upon us, so that nothing but truth may be spoken.

Brian F McCoy SJ  
10<sup>th</sup> July 2019