

***When I first went to school there was no school:  
A Reflection on Education as Accompaniment, Compassion, and Solidarity***

**Boston, MA  
Prayer Service (Wednesday, 1 August 2012)**

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**Invocation (sung)**

Abba, God!  
You are honored  
Slender arm full of generosity  
Abba, God!  
Reveal your grandeur  
That all may believe  
That you have pitched tent in our midst  
You dwell in our world

**When I first went to school... (1)**

When I first went to school, there was no school. There were no books. And my teacher was more of a shepherd than a teacher. The kind of school that I went to was called “Garri School”. I am exaggerating a bit calling it a school, because it wasn’t really a school – certainly not as we would understand it today. I was almost five years old. From the very beginning, going to school felt like being led through a door into an experience from which I would never return; an adventure that would shape my life for good.

Every morning, the teacher would make the round of the entire neighborhood on foot, stopping at each house to collect any child that had already attained the age of 5 years. By the time the teacher got to the school, she would have in tow up to 50 kids of between 4 and 5 years old. The teacher would march ahead of the kids, and all the kids would follow behind. It was the teacher’s responsibility to guide the group of children through traffic, across open drains, in between houses, until finally we all arrived safely at her house. Her house was the school. But

there was no classroom. All we had was a long corridor outside the one-room apartment of the teacher. That was where we had our classes; from early in the morning until mid-afternoon. At the close of school, the teacher would lead us out, the same way we came, dropping off each kid in his or her house until the last kid had been delivered safely to his or her house. The following morning, we would repeat the same journey with our itinerant teacher, from home to school and school to home.

At that tender age of 5 years, I developed a close bond with my teacher. For me, my teacher was someone who knew the way to school, to the place of learning; not only did she know the way to school, she also led the way, and I followed. Every day without fail, like a shepherd, she would lead us out to school, and lead us back. Whether going or coming, not one child was left behind. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, my teacher was careful that not one of the children entrusted to her care got lost (John 18:9).

This shepherd-teacher was everything for us and she took care of us in every way possible. I was always fascinated by how she seemed to find time for every child in her school. Although there were many of us, at all times, I felt I was at the centre of everything that the teacher did – from being shepherded to school to being cared for and nurtured maternally, I was at the centre of it all. I could always count on “the personal attention, encouragement, and dedication” of my teacher. She cared about and nourished my “body, mind, and spirit”; she was interested in my “whole person” and in who I was becoming!

**Let’s reflect for a moment: What if the art of education was like shepherding and accompanying those entrusted to us along the path of knowledge, truth, and discovery? We would not be the inventors of this art; instead, we would be imitators of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.**

**Reflection: John 10:1-15 (Spanish)**

“Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever does not enter a sheepfold through the gate but climbs over elsewhere is a thief and a robber. But whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice, as he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has driven out all his own, he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers....” “Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate for the

sheep. All who came [before me] are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them. This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep.

### **When I first went to school... (2)**

I said the school that I went to as a 5-year old was called “Garri School”. Garri is staple food in West Africa; it is made from cassava, a tropical tuber that grows in many West African countries. Garri is a dry, gritty, granular flour that can be made into a stiff and heavy dough and eaten with sauce. The closest family resemblance to garri would be couscous. Every morning, as we were herded off to ‘school’ my mother would measure a handful of garri into my pocket. If I was lucky, I also got a few roasted peanuts to chew on when I ate the garri. Garri was particularly suited for this kind of school. At school, snacks were not provided – no chocolate, no candies, no cookies! After eating – or, rather, swallowing – some dry garri, I would drink some water, and as the garri absorbed the water in my stomach, it would expand. The end result was that I felt very full, full enough to last the entire day of school!

There was something else about my Garri School. We did not have books, we did not have pencils, and we did not have pens. I know this may sound surprising, even shocking, but it is true. We had no books, no pencils, and no pens! So, what did we write on or with? We had wooden slates. Every morning, I carried a wooden slate to school. The slate was a flat piece of wood measuring about 8 inches wide by 10 inches long, and a quarter of an inch thick. To give you a picture of what I am talking about, think of a slate as your modern tablet or iPad – except that the one I used at school was made of wood! To write on a slate, I used a small piece of chalk, but, oftentimes, all we had was charcoal. Charcoal, as you may know is black. That was my stylus. As you can imagine, we did not have chairs or desks either. Everybody sat on the bare floor, with our slates on our laps. There wasn’t much you could write on a small slate.

Amazingly, it was on this small wooden tablet that I learnt to write English and I learnt the basic Arithmetic of addition, subtraction, division, and multiplication.

Recently, I received an application from a young man who expressed his desire to join the Society of Jesus and become a Jesuit priest. As I read his account of his early education, I could not but think how similar his experience was to mine. This is what he wrote:

About my education, I began schooling in 1991 at a local village school. I was still (too) tiny to take myself to school and, therefore, I would be carried by my sister on her back to and from school. We used to write on the soil (that is, on the ground, with a piece of stick) and on banana leaves, after which the teacher would come to inspect our work. Writing on the soil was fun since we could easily modify our work.... Writing on banana leaves was not easy, for one needed extra much care of the delicate books (that is, banana leaves). Any carelessness could tear the books (read: banana leaves). The books were not expensive, but it meant they would not last long enough for us to see how we used to fare in our early stages of education.

This young man's story of his early education – being carried to school by an older sibling, writing on the bare floor or using banana leaves as exercise books – would be similar to that of many Africans my age and older.

As I recall it, when I first went to school, there were many challenges to overcome, but education helped me to realize that those obstacles were not insurmountable. When we did not have books, we used slates or banana leaves; when pencils, pens, or chalk were lacking, we used pieces of charcoal; where there were no chairs or desks, we carried them on our heads from our house to school and back to the house.

**What if the art of education was about making the impossible possible – creating new opportunities, enabling latent capabilities, discovering wider horizons, crossing new frontiers, stimulating limitless creativity....** In the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “Education is the engine through which development can be powered, both for the individual in opening up new opportunities as well as for countries seeking to move out of the fierce grip of poverty” (May 26, 2010).

**Reflection: General Congregation 34, Decree 26, no. 27 (French)**

We are never content with the status quo, the known, the tried, the already existing. We are constantly driven to discover, redefine, and reach out for the *magis*. For us, frontiers and boundaries are not obstacles or ends, but new challenges to be faced, new opportunities to be welcomed. Indeed, ours is a holy boldness, a certain apostolic aggressivity, typical of our way of proceeding (GC34, d. 26, no. 27).

**When I first went to school... (3)**

After completing one year of Garri School, I was enrolled in what we call primary school or grade school. To qualify for primary school, we did not have to write an entrance exam. Instead, each kid had to take a physical test. It was a very simple test: I had to place my right arm above my head and touch my left ear. If I could touch my left ear, I was qualified to begin primary school. I failed that test, but the headmaster made an exception – so, I was not left behind!

Speaking of not being left behind, something else that I remember most about going to school as a 5-year old: it seemed to take forever to get to school and back. To get to school, we must have crisscrossed the entire neighborhood. So, if you were the first kid to be picked up or the last kid to be dropped off, it meant you literally had to visit the homes of all the other kids, before you got to school or to your home! The good thing was that none of us had to do that daily round trip alone – we always walked as a group; several kids from the same neighborhood joined together for the long march to school and the long march back home from school. As I look back, it dawns on me: in our journey is our education.

As I remember it, from the very first day I went to school, I was always part of a community. The journey to Garri School and back – I did not travel that road alone. Besides the teacher, there was always a community of students with whom I made the journey – we supported one another; cared for one another; shared our little portion of garri with kids who were not fortunate enough to get their daily ration. Dropping by in one another's home every day was part of going to school; the whole neighborhood had become my school – we looked out for one another, so that nobody was left behind. Going to school meant none of us would ever have to walk alone.

**What if the art of education was a journey of creating community – a community of solidarity, compassion, friendship, and mutual support?**

**Reflection: Pope John Paul II, On Solidarity (English)**

Solidarity... is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far.... (Pope John Paul II, *On Social Concern*, #38).

Solidarity helps us to see the 'other' ... as our 'neighbor,' a 'helper' (cf. Gn 2:18-20), to be made a sharer on a par with ourselves in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God. (Pope John Paul II, *On Social Concern*, #39).

Solidarity is action on behalf of the one human family, calling us to help overcome the divisions in our world. Solidarity binds the rich to the poor. It makes the free zealous for the cause of the oppressed. It drives the comfortable and secure to take risks for the victims of tyranny and war. It calls those who are strong to care for those who are weak and vulnerable across the spectrum of human life. It opens homes and hearts to those in flight from terror and to migrants whose daily toil supports affluent lifestyles. Peacemaking, as Pope John Paul II has told us, is the work of solidarity. *Called to Global Solidarity: International Challenges for U.S. Parishes*.

**When I first went to school... (4)**

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference. (Robert Frost “The Road Not Taken”).

It’s a long time ago now since I first went to Garri School; forty years, to be precise. As I look back on my experience, from Garri School through all the subsequent stages of education, many things have stood out for me – many things about what education is really about. As a Jesuit, I have come to value the importance of good education. Education was worth all the sacrifice that we made to get it. We can never put a price on the value of education. I am grateful for all the years of schooling and all the challenges that came with it. They have made me who I am today: a learner for life.

The Society of Jesus and its army of partners and collaborators has been involved in providing good, quality, and affordable education to people for close to four hundred and sixty-four years on all the continents of the world. As a universal community, we have recorded tremendous success in our network of schools in many parts of the world. You know more than I do, how influential Jesuit education has been since 1548. In the U.S. alone, countless number of Jesuit schools, like Boston College High, work in the tradition of Ignatian pedagogy to form women and men for and with others, rooted and grounded in faith that does justice.

I come from the Province of Eastern Africa. There are six countries in this province: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sudan, and South Sudan. We have 4 high schools and two primary schools in the province. In a population of close to two hundred and fifty million people, this represents a small drop in a vast ocean of need.

Our school in Wau, South Sudan, is located in a region where there was a civil war that lasted for more than 20 years. Even now some say the war has not ended. During the twenty years of war the school was closed, because the classrooms were used by the military of North Sudan as a base camp for conducting raids on the rebels territories in the south of the country. Fortunately, four years ago, the army left the school and we were able to renovate and reopen it. Today, some of the 200 students of Loyola Secondary School in Wau, South Sudan, are ex-soldiers who fought in the civil war as child soldiers.

To come to this conference, I travelled from our high school, Ocer Campion Jesuit College, in Gulu, northern Uganda. It is located at the heart of a region where a notorious and vicious rebel group killed and mutilated thousands of children, women and men; abducted young boys as child soldiers and young girls as sex slaves; and sent millions of people fleeing from their homes as refugees and internally displaced people. Perhaps some of you have heard about the Lord's Resistance Army in the YouTube posting called KONY 2012.

Whether in Wau or Gulu, Boston, Lima, Lagos, Sydney, Paris, Kinshasa, Cordoba, Barcelona, or Mexico City, no matter the context or challenges, Jesuit education is about making a difference in the lives of these children – leading them along a path that would change their lives and the world around them for good.

I began this reflection by sharing with you my experience of education as a child. As I look back on that experience I am grateful for the opportunities I had – dedicated teachers; limited but appropriate school materials; a community of fellow students with whom I journeyed daily to and from school. Above all, I am grateful that I was not left behind.

### **A Parting Thought: Elmina vs. Messina**

On the western coast of the modern African state of Ghana stands a 15<sup>th</sup>-century castle known as Elmina Castle. Elmina is a slave castle. As any European castle of its times, the imposing edifice boasts an intricate architecture of chambers, suites, watchtowers, banquet halls, balconies, and ... a chapel. There are several such slave castles, forts and fortresses along the entire coastline of Africa. They share one thing in common: each castle, fort, or fortress has what is commonly called the door of no return.

In the belly of Elmina Castle lies an expansive courtyard; but, something about this courtyard has come to define what the castle stands for in the history of man's inhumanity to man. This courtyard doubles as a dungeon, a holding cell for hundreds, thousands of women, men and children, en route for the so-called "New World" to face a harrowing future of brutality, captivity, and slavery. The courtyard opens up to a loading bay on the Atlantic Ocean. From the dungeon where they were held, abused, tortured, and molested in all manner of ways, these slaves were shoved through the door of no return to endure their treacherous journey across the Atlantic Ocean. Once they walked through that door, their fate was sealed; there was no returning from misery, captivity, and slavery on the other side of the Atlantic. They were commodities to be traded, branded, and held in captive labor for the rest of their lives.

**What if the art of educating a child was like leading him or her through a door of no return?** Unlike the door of no return in Elmina Castle, leading a child through the door of education represents liberation for the human spirit; it is empowering a child to deploy and to savor the finest manifestations of the human spirit. In the words of Julius Nyerere, former President of Tanzania, "we say [we] are created in the image of God. I refuse to imagine a God who is poor, ignorant, superstitious, fearful, oppressed, wretched – which is the lot of the



majority of those ... created in [God's] image.” Education is the art of imagining and achieving the opposite of everything that the Castle of Elmina stands for. Elmina Castle was built in 1482; as the Ignatian family of schools, since 1548 in Messina, Sicily, we have been leading countless people through the door of no return, liberating the human mind from the captivity of poverty, ignorance, superstition, fear, oppression, injustice... re-creating women and men in the image of God.

**Reflection: Luke 4:16-21 (Spanish)**

Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”

Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him....

My friends: “Today [through your ministry of education] this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

**Let us pray (Spanish):**

That as women and men committed to the ministry of Jesuit education, we may be architects of a new world where faith and justice partner with intellectual excellence; a world where service is expressed through love, compassion, and solidarity; a world where no child is ever left behind.

*We pray to the Lord. Lord, hear our prayer!*

**Let us pray (French):**

That in our Jesuit educational ministries, especially among youth, we may learn to walk with young people, learning from their generosity and compassion so as to help each other grow through fragility and fragmentation to joyful integration of our lives with God and with others (General Congregation 35, Decree 3, no. 23).

*Let us pray to the Lord. Lord, hear our prayer.*

**Let us Pray (English):**

That in our Jesuit educational ministries, our deep love of God and our passion for God's world will set us on fire – a fire that starts other fires. That we may see the world as God sees it; and learn to communicate this way of looking and a pedagogy inspired by the *Spiritual Exercises*, to other people – especially the young (GC35, d. 2, no. 10).

*Let us pray to the Lord. Lord, hear our prayer.*

**Let us pray (English):**

That as women and men committed to Jesuit education we may never be content with the status quo, the known, the tried, the already existing; that we may constantly strive to discover, redefine, and reach out for the *magis*, and, through our pedagogy, turn frontiers and boundaries into new challenges to be faced, new opportunities to be welcomed, with a holy boldness and apostolic aggressivity (GC34, d. 26, no. 27).

*Let us pray to the Lord. Lord, hear our prayer.*

**Conclusion:**

The Lord's Prayer ... in our respective languages....