

TRANSFORMING WISDOM

Or, praying for the gift of prophetic discernment
for Sister Mary Thomas C. Prado, OSB,
the 18th President of St. Scholastica's College,
on the Feast of the Lord's Transfiguration

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Good Afternoon. First of all, please allow me a few words with Sister Mary Thomas, the main celebrant of our gathering.

Dear Sister Tammy,

If I get the drift in the choice of the first reading from the 1st Book of Kings, you are praying for Solomonic wisdom, you are asking God for the gift of prophetic discernment that is required of an educationist in the tradition of Jesus Christ the rabbi, the teacher who taught us the way to life. You have asked well, Sister, but you have also asked for much. Therefore, much will be given to you, as much will also be asked of you.

Dear Friends of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing,

Discernment has become such a big word both in the business world and within religious circles, to the extent that almost every pursuit, every endeavor to understand or uncover anything is now called 'discernment.' The term is well on the way of being gutted, disemboweled. An earlier casualty was the word *process*. And as in meat processing, you end up with processed meat. Dead meat, in other words.

Before the process could reach terminal stage in the case of discernment, let me put in my ten cents worth.

I have always preferred another word, *wisdom*. She's more maternal, more comforting and less technical, more true to life. Hereon I will employ discernment to mean wisdom, as in Solomonic wisdom (see 1Kgs 3). You would now see why I was so glad to note that, more than anything else, Sister Mary Thomas, like Solomon, and as the 18th President of St. Scholastica's College, prays to the Lord with us for **an understanding heart and a discerning mind**. She would like to embody the Lord's wisdom in the education apostolate.

Wisdom is a gift you pray for. It doesn't come automatically with the accumulation of knowledge. You ask for it not as a chunk of diamond, or a kilogram of gold to serve as a hedge for recession days. Rather, as in the gift of a sapling that is already complete but not yet full. It will continue to demand nourishment and nurture, for it to grow into a mighty tree. Wisdom is a gift you plead for in prayer, and work for, in sacrifice and pain. Wisdom is "listening to the Spirit, as it were, wetting one's finger, to feel where, whence and whereto the Spirit blows. It is exposing oneself to wind and storm, hurricane and all, rather than hiding and fleeing from the wind to protect oneself. Listening to the Spirit is to recognize her action and to surrender oneself to her life-giving force." (Juliano Vandevoorde)

Sr. Mary Thomas, discernment is detecting the mysteries trapped in the ordinary, or camouflaged by the petty. It is getting hold of the unfettered mysteries of life - usually manifested as a struggle between good and evil - and giving life a moral compass, for our own sake.

Ultimately, discernment *is finding God where she/he wants us to find her/him*. The human struggle to find the Source of Life is the continuum wherein to locate the role of Christian education in human society. Christian education is tasked to lead the student to find God in the world and discover her or his role in the plan of salvation.

education is kindling the fire

The poet William Butler Yeats would give it to us in less religious terms: “Education is not the filling of a pail, it is the lighting of a fire.” Yes, education is fire that illumines, fire that excites, *fire that is dangerous as only education can be dangerous*.

It was a great blessing that my initiation into active missionary life took place in Latin America during the early years after the 2nd Vatican Council. It was then that the Guatemalan Church was engaged in an intensive literacy program as a pastoral priority in behalf of the poor, particularly the Mayan indigenous communities. In 1972, illiteracy was at 90% among the Indian men in Guatemala; hardly any Indian woman could read or write. The program used, as primers, the social teachings of the Church, on the one hand, and the Guatemalan Constitutions, on the other. The literacy campaign among the Indians was so successful that within a decade the Guatemalan government was accusing the church of revolution. “*Nunca perdonamos la Iglesia por habernos levantado a la Indiada*” the incumbent Vice-President Sandoval Alarcón viciously blurted out: “We shall never forgive the Church for having awakened the native population.” About this time, the persecution of the Guatemalan Church began. Among those disappeared by the military police was a Filipino missionary from Baguio City, Fr. Conrado de la Cruz, CICM.

Yet, the historical fact remains that the Church was trying to fulfill its role as *mater et magistra*, i.e., as mother and teacher. The phenomenon of persecution repeats itself in Church history, if only to authenticate her attempts at fidelity to the Lord’s mandate to be light to the nations.

The experience also demonstrates that *education is a fire to vanquish both ignorance and deception, a fire that is dangerous as only education can be dangerous for the dark corners of the human brain*.

a paradigm shift is called for in the Catholic educational system

A fundamental question that must be addressed by Christian educators in the Philippines is whether the education model we are using is Christian, i.e., does it originate from the teachings and mission of Jesus Christ? Or, is it simply a watered down version of the western materialist paradigm primarily geared towards the individual’s financial gain or profitability. Don’t we need a veritable paradigmatic shift in the field of Catholic education for it to become truly *catholic* – open, and universal in perspective.

The well-regarded Australian educationist Dr. Jennifer Gidley has called the attention of 3rd World educators: “It is well known that education is the most powerful method of enculturating, even 'brainwashing' a people. Mass education which transplants an educational model from one cultural system, such as Euro-American, into another very different culture while retaining the original standards and categories of knowledge, is tantamount to cultural genocide.” Not incidentally, the film director Peter Weir, after a spate of violent school shootings by and of fellow students in the United States, described western culture as “toxic culture.”

Gidley also pointed out that in a critique of the model of education put forward by the World Bank at the 'Education for All' (EFA) meeting in Thailand, a number of educationists and

social activists, cite this model as being a further attempt to assert the values and culture of the western materialist paradigm.

are catholic schools educating the young to serve or to exploit others?

Education is not a technique or a strategy for success. It is an all-encompassing meditation on life that requires expansive minds and hearts, a fired up imagination. **It is the art of critical thinking attuned to the workings of the Spirit in the world.** Jesus turned the hierarchical system on its head by word and personal example. In plain language he declared that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20.28). The leader must be the servant of his brothers and sisters. Did not Jesus ‘educate’ his disciples to serve? Did he not demand that they place themselves at the service of the victims of violence and injustice? (cf Mt 25.31-46) Do our Catholic schools provide this kind of formation?

Were statistics available, it would be extremely interesting and instructive to know how many alumnae and alumni of Catholic schools have become servant leaders in their respective communities, and how many have placed themselves at the service of Mammon for the sake of personal aggrandizement? How many have become the skilled and sophisticated exploiters of the poor and powerless of Philippine society?

Catholic education in the country ought to review its biblical lessons and try to discern their implications to modern Philippine society. The biblical metaphors (e.g., light of the world, salt of the earth, a two-edged sword, et al) and the Lord’s parables (the leaven in the dough, the mustard seed, a lighted lamp in a darkened room) must be allowed to speak once again to Christian educators, enabling them to confront the challenge of personal and societal transformation, which, by the way, is the key message of today’s feast of the Lord’s Transfiguration.

the ora et labora of transforming wisdom

For the Christian educator, teaching and formation do not constitute a career, not even a profession. It is a manner of discipleship, a calling to be possessed by transforming wisdom, akin to what happened to Peter, James and John at the Lord’s transfiguration. They had a glimpse of what was to be, and they were never the same again. “They were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying: ‘Get up and do not be afraid’” (Mt 17.7). And the Lord led them down the mountain because there was still a lot to be done on the plain. Likewise, the education apostolate takes place in this world and nowhere else. It is on the plains of this world that the Benedictine *ora et labora* perspective on education will have its day.

According to a study conducted by the University of Delaware, “people remember: **20%** of what they see, **30%** of what they hear, **50%** of what they see and hear, **80%** of what they see, hear and do, simultaneously.”¹

These figures, in some ways, are able to quantify the need for prophetic and inspiring leaders who are able to witness with what they show and say and do. We need educators who by the totality of their lives are able to elicit hope in the young even as both are confronted with the stark realities of Philippine society. Consider: the toxic sludge of the Payatas dumpsite where the poor eke out a living collecting the refuse of the even more toxic opulence of the uncaring rich, bruited about by media as the epitome of success, and the recent finding that the Philippines is now number one in the rate of growing inequality in Southeast Asia (cf Inquirer, 23 July). Not-

¹ Prof. Fred T. Hofstetter, Director, Instructional Technology Center, University of Delaware, USA.

withstanding the official manipulation of the statistical methodology employed in the President's last SONA, there are more hungry Filipinos today than last year.

When Sister Mary Thomas chose today's feast and readings to be the setting for her installation as the 18th president of St. Scholastica's College, she was aware of the double-edged quality of prophetic wisdom. On the one hand, the modern religious educator is called upon to detect and denounce the corruption upon which the prevailing culture of death and violence feeds. On the other, she remains, first and foremost, a prophet of hope. She is commissioned to see, understand, and interpret the signs of hope that our Provident God keeps sending our way, in the context of confused, and often cruel surroundings. The people, especially the disenchanting young, the downtrodden, the desperate, the marginalized must be lifted up by a vision of a better tomorrow. Indeed, *without vision, we shall scatter* (cf Prov 29.18). For our future's sake, Christian education must provide a vision of hope for the young people of today.

Let me end with a quote and a prayer. The quote is from the historian Henry B. Adams. He tells us: "A teacher affects eternity; she can never tell where her influence stops."

And the prayer of blessing is for the celebrant, Sr. Mary Thomas, OSB:

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May Our God, the Source of Life, and All Holy,
bless you with the intelligence of Thomas of Aquinas
and the simplicity of Mary, the Maiden of Nazareth.

May God bless you, as well and as much,
with the practical wisdom of your Father, Benedict of Nursia,
who, like the Lord, grew in age, in wisdom and in grace
through prayer and the cross of human toil.

By the witness of your life, teaching and preaching and living God's Word,
may you serve as a prophet of transforming wisdom to our people, and
a blessing to the community of the Missionaries Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing.

We pray through the same Christ, our Lord.

AMEN.

- w. t. dulay, mj
6 august 2011
st. scholastica's college
leon quinto, manila

Readings:

1. 1 Kg 3.5, 7-12
2. 2 Peter 1.16-19
3. Matthew 17.1-9