

Identity and Mission: What is distinctive of Catholic, Jesuit Higher Education in Africa and Madagascar?

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Abstract

Jesuit higher education in Africa and Madagascar is committed to the work of teaching, research, and community building that requires an integration of faith and science in a context of pluralism and interdisciplinary dialogue. Thanks to this effort, it enables the Church to affirm her identity in the contemporary world and promotes favorable conditions for the determination of a meaningful social life. In an environment where higher education is generally of poor quality and irrelevant to society, our firm commitment to this apostolate is a prophetic message and a beacon of hope for Africa today. In carrying out her mission within a faith vision of the reality, the Society of Jesus contributes through her schools and colleges of higher learning, to meet the fundamental demands of an education that fashions a society responsive to the human need for growth and fulfillment.

Introduction

When we consider Jesuit higher education in the Assistancy of Africa and Madagascar, the first question that stands out is, what do we mean? Throughout the continent, Jesuits are well known for the quality and influence of their primary and secondary schools, much less for their presence and their work in higher education. Nearly every Jesuit Province or Region of the Assistancy runs educational institutions from elementary level to high school. But to this day, there is no Jesuit University to speak of on the African continent.

Therefore, higher education seems to be the right terminology to describe our topic. Indeed most Jesuit institutions of higher learning across Africa are rather colleges providing specialized professional or vocational training. A quick look at the existing establishments of tertiary education distinguishes between Jesuit houses of formation in Philosophy and Theology¹, colleges for technical or professional training², and a research center³ offering degree programs in various subjects.

My description and analysis of the identity and mission of Jesuit higher education in Africa and Madagascar will necessarily be limited, mainly because I did not carry out a general survey of the different institutions mentioned above and an assessment of their characteristics and objectives to draw an adequate picture of their Jesuit identity and their mission in the Church and society. Anyway, from my experience of Jesuit higher education in DR Congo and my contacts with other Jesuit institutions I will attempt to sketch out an understanding of what could be perceived as distinctive of our Catholic identity and Jesuit educational mission in Africa and Madagascar.

African Jesuits have been engaged in higher education on the continent for almost half a century⁴. However, the existence of our schools in a fundamentally lay society which refuses to endorse any one religious view and opts for a pluralism that is determined to respect every one's freedom of opinion sets the context for our mission. Our Jesuit education is therefore challenged to account for its relevance to the modern African society, not through apologetic discourse but through the quality of its teaching activity, its scientific research and community service.

Our assumption in this paper is that it is because of its Catholic identity and its ignatian charism that Jesuit higher education can be relevant and meaningful to our African society. In other words, the reason for Jesuit education is essentially theological. This means that its fundamental option is to carry out its mission from the perspective of faith and in full dedication to the service of the Church and the society.

Of course, scientific research as such is not and cannot be Catholic. By its special nature it is limited to its object and conducted according to its specific method. But our Jesuit colleges and faculties in Africa are Church educational institutions where an integration of knowledge

takes place through interdisciplinary dialogue in order to address issues related to human freedom and destiny.

What then does it mean to be a Catholic, Jesuit school of higher learning in Africa today? What are the qualities that define a college as Catholic? In Africa and Madagascar, the answers are all around—from training of our men for priesthood to formation of Church leaders and skilled educators who will fashion a better society.

1. Dedication to studies and research in the Jesuit tradition

a. Philosophy

Our common houses of formation represent today the main investment of the Society in Africa in terms of higher education. These establishments are not just seminary-style colleges where young Jesuits are being prepared for Church service, but they are also research-oriented and embody the Jesuit spirit and Catholic tradition.

Our philosophical centers are affiliated with the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. They provide academic training to young Africans, most of whom are religious (Jesuits and others), future priests; but also lay students who will play in their own country a role in the shaping and the spreading of a Christian culture which strives towards the integration of the essential aspects and the demands of the African cultures, as well as the issues raised by the social, economic, and political realities of the different countries where they will be working.

The philosophy we teach is specially characterized by its connection with the social and cultural realities of Africa, and oriented towards a Christian vision of humankind and society. We aim to give an intellectual and pastoral formation in the Jesuit tradition. We begin with experience and reflection on experience, continuing on to philosophical analysis and synthesis. This is in order to enable the person to be a responsible educator throughout life, having acquired

the capacity for self-education. The overall objective is to form a person who lives by authentic values, is prepared for genuine dialogue and is available for the service of others. Such a person will be able to judge a situation reasonably, decide and act responsibly for the good of all, and be able to educate others to do the same.

Through the study of Philosophy our students learn to be at home in their African cultures. They try to come to an understanding of culture as such and the ways in which meaning and systems of thought are established and develop. They also learn how the Western intellectual tradition evolved and how it currently influences Africa. More importantly, they are initiated to deconstruct the Western ways of thinking so as to learn to think for themselves.

Therefore, the handing down of one philosophical doctrine like the Thomism as it once used to be, is now replaced with a concern for training students to think properly, to make rational and logical discourse, orderly and critical, and to enable them to communicate sound knowledge and wisdom about major issues on human destiny.

What appears to be most characteristic of our Jesuit education is the way in which the interaction between teaching and research takes place as well as the concern with fundamental problems related to rationality and ethical finality. In this context, courses and seminars are meant to introduce the students to the issues under investigation and to stimulate them to participate in the ongoing activity of research. Students' magazines, teachers' publications and philosophical conferences witness to the flourishing scientific work of intellectual production.

We understand our mission as a service to the Church, in the perspective of the Christian faith and from a fundamental faith commitment. That is, as Catholic, we intend to serve both the local community, the universal Church and the larger society through the work of intellectual production which is properly speaking our task and mission. The fact that this task is carried out

within a faith vision of the reality and in communion with the Church implies that our Jesuit educational institutions are a privileged forum for the expression of the Roman Catholic Church.

However, our academic activity is not merely an extension of the teaching function of the Church. Among the major trends in Catholic higher education, M. P. Walsh (1970, 50)⁵ saw four decades ago, the following to be of vital importance in the shaping of the nature and role of the Catholic university: the lessening of ecclesiastical control; the greater recognition of responsibility to the common good of society and the growing opportunities for making Catholicism relevant today. In short, the meaning of the Catholic university derives from its specific mission as a university and as Catholic.

Concretely, we attempt to address the intricate issue of the relationship between the Christian faith and the activity of reason and to ensure ultimately an organic encounter between faith and reason. Therefore, we see as our goal to promote an academic environment where the effort of the human reason reaches its fullest expression in an attempt to come to the most adequate understanding possible of the human being in the world. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (n. 15)⁶ rightly points out that in a Catholic university, research necessarily includes the search for an integration of knowledge, a dialogue between faith and reason, an ethical concern and a theological perspective.

The term “reason” is nothing but an indication of a dimension of the spirit. But the content of this dimension, its exact nature are difficult to grasp. They are precisely at the heart of the matter that reason is concerned with. In wondering about the human being, his/her nature and about their relationship, reason is actually reflecting on itself. The issues that it sets forth when exploring critically the foundations of a particular question emerge as problems regarding its

own nature, its capabilities and its limits. While trying to understand itself, reason is confronted with the problem of its own content, its own meaning.

To some extent, human reason seems capable to answer this problem on its own. Indeed Philosophy is somehow an attempt of reason to account for its own meaning. However, in their own way, many contemporary philosophers have acknowledged that reason alone cannot exhaust the question of meaning. Meaning goes beyond the control of reason and the latter remains subordinate to it. So, it needs to be enlightened by an interpretation based on a spiritual dimension which does not belong to the nature of reason itself but to the nature of belief.

From the point of view of the Christian faith, the meaning of the rational effort can only be perceived in the general context of the human vocation as proposed by Christianity. On the other hand, faith is not a totally inexpressible reality. It is fundamentally a way of life founded on an understanding. It requires an understanding of reality and calls for the help of reason to account for itself and its object.

Thus, there is a double flow; from reason to faith which reveals to reason its meaning, and from faith to reason which helps faith to become understandable. It seems appropriate then to recall here the famous saying of Saint Thomas Aquinas: *fides quaerens intellectum, intellectus quaerens fidem*. This formula could provide as well an accurate description of the real mission of our Jesuit schools of Philosophy.

b. Theology

Our schools of theology have a key role to play in the life and mission of the Church and the Society of Jesus in Africa. The mission statement from Hekima college makes it clear: “We are a centre of excellent formation, research and intellectual scholarship that cherishes offering high quality integral and contextualized education and spiritual formation founded on the

Ignatian pedagogy and the finest tradition of Jesuit humanistic heritage, to the Jesuits and non-Jesuits (lay, clerical and religious) enabling them to respond to the plights of the neediest and the most vulnerable of the society.”

As theological colleges and centers preparing Jesuits and others for pastoral, priestly service and ministry, the challenge upon them is enormous. Challenges arising from the socio-cultural context of poverty, injustice, violence, lack of democracy, etc. Challenges arising from the church community –how to evangelize on the African soil in relation to the recent Synod of Bishops for Africa (October 2009), how to inculturate and live the gospel, how to respond to the spread of new religious movements and the rapid growth of Islam, etc. Challenges from the theological community –what do we believe, what can and must we believe as Christians, as African Christians? Do we believe the Word we proclaim and teach what we believe?

Students in theology and faculty are exposed to these challenges through teaching, research, and pastoral ministry. It is worth mentioning that the apostolic involvement of our students is essential to their growth and their preparation for priestly ministry. This is a permanent feature of the theological studies at Hekima College as well as at ITCJ in Abidjan. Apostolic opportunities are available for Jesuit scholastics without compromising on academic standards or demands.

By all accounts, this provides for a significant involvement in the lives and concerns of people and for a serious individual or group reflection on these involvements. Experience from the students’ own lives enables them to reach a reasonable position on academic issues in the light of what they are studying. Over the years, our theologates have thus developed links with schools, parishes, Christian movements, and other ministries to facilitate the students’ exposure to meaningful pastoral activities during the course of their studies.

The more students commit themselves, their time and energy to this selfless, challenging effort, the more they affirm their Catholic faith and test their potential for leadership and ministry in the community. At the same time, a number of tensions persist as part of their spiritual struggle and pastoral experience:

- a spirit of universality yet a demand for greater inculturation;
- a call for theological reflection together with a desire for apostolic involvement;
- a connection with the local Church, Province and family traditions, yet a desire to represent the catholicity and universality of the gospel and religious life.

The journey through theological formation helps them to discover their real freedom, their growth, and their vocation.

What being Catholic means for our theological centers has also to do with their link with local Catholic universities, i.e. CUEA⁷ in Nairobi and UCAO⁸ in Abidjan. The integration of our Jesuit schools of theology in this academic environment is a challenge and an opportunity.

In addition, besides the extensive help that the teaching staff gives to neighboring institutions and religious/lay groups, consideration is given to periodical seminars organized around topics of concern. Students are involved in preparation and presentations. This activity of reflection and research has led to the creation at Hekima college of *Hekima Review*, as a vehicle for students and teachers' publications and a contribution to the ongoing theological thinking and discussion.

2. Enhancing diversity through dialogue and search for the truth

The quality of any educational institution depends to a large extent upon its core values as well as the quality of its student body, its staff and the strength of the programs offered. Appreciation of diversity is typical of our Jesuit higher education where students from many

cultures, many educational and professional backgrounds, and many language groups come together. How can Jesuit education be relevant to their life experience and their goals?

Although Jesuit values are distinctive features in our schools, non-Jesuits do not seem intimidated by who we are as long as fair treatment, honesty, integrity, and respect are part of our way of proceeding. In dealing with others, we remain sensitive to dialogue, to a commitment to a sense of community, to excellence, to responsible leadership and teamwork.

Our effort to enhance diversity on campus, in school programs, in student enrolment and staffing is our response to the challenge of a modern pluralistic society which Africa has become today. When the Church in Africa speaks of the need for reconciliation, for justice and peace, for inter-religious and intercultural dialogue, for managing globalization, etc. it sets apostolic priorities which shape our mission and objectives as we carry out our task of formation and scholarship.

The Church is the community of people sharing a common vision about human destiny. What makes the unity of the Church and gives her her specific identity is precisely a certain faith vision or conception of the human being in both his/her individual and social aspects as well as an attempt to provide an answer to the question of meaning which is the most fundamental question for a human being, since it concerns his/her ultimate destiny.

But diversity also implies a coexistence of different views on human destiny. Our modern pluralistic society is precisely characterized by an open confrontation between different convictions regarding the question of meaning or simply, about the problem of human destiny. Surely most people would agree that the finality of social life is to realize the common good, or else, to create the appropriate conditions that would allow individuals to achieve their end

according to their personal and communal dimension. In short, to ensure proper conditions for a meaningful existence.

But there is no ready-made formula defining what a meaningful life is. The expression stands for something that is the object of a practical and theoretical permanent investigation. In other words, the fundamental issue in a pluralistic society is the divergence of approaches to the meaning of human existence due to different conceptions of the human destiny. But pluralism must permit each “belief” to realize itself authentically and freely and to bring its views into play in the organization of collective life. It must establish a sufficient “consensus” so that differences do not become disruptive and that discussion may continue along peaceful lines. In a few words, a pluralistic society is one in which various visions of the world, various religious or philosophical beliefs can coexist in peace without hindering one another, without any one of them wishing to eliminate or destroy another. (Luyten, 1970)⁹

The distinctive character of our education, “founded on the Ignatian pedagogy and the finest traditions of Jesuit humanistic heritage”, is set to contribute to the life of our modern pluralistic society and to the gradual achievement of its noble aspirations according to its specific mission. But because Catholic faith is in fact but a religious faith in the midst of religious plurality and in a world whose vision is becoming every day more secular, we need, as Catholic and Jesuit institution, to develop permanent structures of dialogue with other universities with different orientations.

Our research work would enable us to build up a network of collaboration to share concrete and technical solutions to problems arising from our context and our collective life; and to explore our findings from the perspective of our mission and identity. Above all, the most

substantial and decisive contribution of the Catholic university to the life of the society is its very constant effort in the academic work, carried out in the light of the Christian faith.

The faculty's research, which must be rationally rigorous, firmly rooted in faith and open to dialogue with all people of good will, notes Father Kolvenbach (2000, 7)¹⁰, not only obeys the canons of each discipline, but ultimately embraces human reality in order to help make the world a more fitting place for six billion of us to inhabit. (...) University knowledge is valuable for its own sake and at the same time is knowledge that must ask itself, "For whom? For what?"

I think the following words from the former president of Tanzania, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, make the point:

"I have been appealing to African universities and African university students –as well as to others receiving higher education—to be committed members of their society, and to design all their work for its service. I do not believe that this is at all inconsistent with the traditional function of a university, which is often defined as the search for truth. For I believe that society is served by truth. I believe that we need the universities, and their products, to stand up for truth as they see it, regardless of the personal consequences to themselves. Neither leaders nor masses are infallible: it may be that we are wrong –either through ignorance, or through malice. It is part of the task of those who are not burdened with day-to-day responsibilities to help us, and the people, to the best of their ability. And this may sometimes involve saying unpopular things if you believe them to be true.

But you will have noticed that I said the truth as it is seen should be spoken regardless of personal consequences. It would be sheer arrogance to speak the truth as you see it regardless of the consequences for society. The man who shouts 'fire' in a crowded school-room may be responsible for more deaths through panic than if he had said nothing –and certainly more than if

he had quietly organized an evacuation. For the whole truth is known to none of us; we may have found out a new part of it, but we must not assume more (...)

Africa needs objectivity from its universities. We are dealing with new problems; we need all the light thrown on them that can be obtained. But the universities must be committed institutions too; committed to the growth and the development of our societies. They must promote committed service –and therefore honest, truthful and selfless service.”¹¹

3. A vision of education as instrument of evangelization

In Africa today, we are specially challenged to carry on and to promote structures of higher learning where teaching, community building, and scientific research are integrated in a Catholic vision of the world based on divine revelation. More specifically, we need to explore the practicality of setting up a network for Jesuit higher education institutions of Africa and Madagascar through a website where projects can be shared to enhance our common vision in terms of Ignatian pedagogy, community service, students award standards, etc. Other possible areas of interest may include: teaching resources, research facilities, funding prospects, students fellowship link, scholarship opportunities, sabbatical options, students exchange programs, etc.

In addition, “the complexity of the problems we face and the richness of the opportunities offered”, argues the 35th General Congregation, “demand that we build bridges between rich and poor, establishing advocacy links of mutual support between those who hold political power and those who find it difficult to voice their interests. Our intellectual apostolate provides an inestimable help in constructing these bridges, offering us new ways of understanding in depth the mechanisms and links among our present problems.”¹²

There is an ethical and religious dimension to each of our school programs, whether the curriculum emphasizes more theoretical subjects or professional training. Our technical colleges

are not just places where students come to acquire the skills needed for a specific job (mechanics, agriculture, teaching, social work, communication, advocacy, etc.) They are also communities of learning, discernment, and growth. Faculty and staff are challenged to fulfill their roles not only as teachers and administrators, but as mentors and educators as well. Students learn to take responsibility for themselves while they are also confronted with problems that tend to inhibit their academic work, their social skills, their ethical concern, their critical thinking or their spiritual progress. On campus, not only do we celebrate liturgy together, but we make room for students' initiatives for collaboration, entertainment, community service, internship assignment, etc

Without claiming any monopoly or exclusivity, we are confident that our schools and colleges are fulfilling an essential role in the Church for the betterment of the whole of the African society. They articulate their identity and mission at least in two ways:

On the one hand, they are at the service of the Church, providing her with a solid intellectual foundation in view of the issues at stake in the context of a pluralistic society where rationality has become the common ground. For *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (n. 49)¹³, because of its Catholic identity, all the basic academic activities of the university are connected with and in harmony with the evangelizing mission of the Church:

- research carried out in the light of the Christian message which puts new human discoveries at the service of individuals and society;
- education offered in a faith-context that forms men and women capable of rational and critical judgment and conscious of the transcendent dignity of the human person;
- professional training that incorporates ethical values and a sense of service to individuals and to society;

- the dialogue with culture that makes the faith better understood, and the theological research that translates the faith into contemporary language.

In the name and at the service of the Church and society, the Jesuit and Catholic higher education in Africa and Madagascar is emerging as an instrument of integral and effective evangelization. While facilitating the encounter between faith and reason, it contributes to help the Church community to define her identity, to strengthen her credibility and determination, and to participate efficiently in the democratic discussion.

On the other hand, given the nature of its activities and its interest in the fundamental problems related to rationality and to ethical finality, Jesuit education plays a role in the determination of meaning and thereby, in the emergence of a social life as a response to the demands of human aspiration to fulfillment. People look to this type of education to shed light on their own search for truth and the meaning of life in the face of death, poverty, violence, and injustice. The specificity of its contribution is that Jesuit higher education is actively committed to a critical approach and a global perspective throughout the learning process, in order to avoid arbitrariness, bias or intolerance. And this requires as much intellectual integrity as interdisciplinary dialogue.

Conclusion

As Catholic, Jesuit higher education in Africa and Madagascar is committed to the work of teaching and research that requires an integration of faith and science in a context of pluralism and interdisciplinary dialogue. Thanks to this effort, it enables the Church to affirm her identity in the contemporary world and promotes favorable conditions for the determination of a meaningful social life. In carrying out her mission within a faith vision of the reality, the Society of Jesus contributes through her schools and colleges of higher learning, to meet the fundamental

demands of an education that fashions a society responsive to the human need for growth and fulfillment.

ADDENDUM

I. Some key questions for discussion:

1. Engaging society: As a Jesuit college or university, how do we evaluate our contribution to society in terms of bringing about the transformation we want to see in society?
2. Developing critical thinking and pedagogy: How do we know our Jesuit education is changing the hearts and minds of its recipients to fashion leaders who will make a difference and not replicate the same misconduct they used to blame?

N.B.: In addition, I would like to call special attention to the document published in 2002 by the US Jesuit Conference, titled: “Communal Reflection on the Jesuit Mission in Higher Education: A Way of Proceeding”⁴. An insightful guideline with relevant questions for reflection and discussion which paves the way for on-going research and dialogue beyond the conference.

II. Towards a global network

Global social, economic, technological, and ideological changes are challenging traditional educational practices in homes, schools, universities, and in industry around the planet. The new internationalization is having particular impact on higher and adult education. In many developing countries of Africa, the cost of higher education today is unaffordable for many low-income students. Jesuit education is also expensive. Are there ways in which JHE secretariat can encourage solidarity within the Society and beyond

- to help address the issue of scholarship grant for our underprivileged but talented college candidates, especially lay women students?
- to facilitate our educational institutions’ access to new technologies of communication and library resources?
- to develop university collaboration by identifying and coordinating opportunities for sabbatical programs in various academic disciplines?

RESUME

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III. QUALIFICATIONS:

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V. PUBLICATIONS :

“Alternatives to Bread and Wine at Eucharist in Africa”, in *Hekima Review* 10 (1994) 4-15.

Integration of English learning strategies and social justice education in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Content analysis of a textbook series. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 2006.

ENDNOTES

¹ Faculté de Philosophie Saint-Pierre Cainsius in Kimwenza (Kinshasa), RD Congo ; Arrupe College Jesuit School of Philosophy and Humanities in Harare, Zimbabwe ; Philosophat Saint-Paul in Antananarivo, Madagascar ; Hekima College Jesuit School of Theology in Nairobi, Kenya ; and Institut de Théologie de la Compagnie de Jésus (ITCJ) in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

² Institut Supérieur Technique de Fianarantsoa in Madagascar; École Professionnelle Supérieure d'Agriculture de Bevalala in Madagascar ; SAMIS-ESIC (communication) & ETS (fabrication mécanique) in Antananarivo, Madagascar ; Institut Supérieur Agro-Vétérinaire (ISAV) in Kimwenza (Kinshasa), RD Congo ; Saint Charles Lwanga Teachers' Training College in Chisekesi, Zambia ; School of Social Work in Harare, Zimbabwe; Hekima Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations in Nairobi, Kenya.

³ Centre de Recherche et d'Action pour la Paix (CERAP) in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

⁴ École Professionnelle Supérieure d'Agriculture de Bevalala (Madagascar), founded in 1953; Faculté de Philosophie Saint-Pierre Canisius, Kimwenza (DR Congo), founded in 1954 ; Saint Charles Lwanga Teachers' Training College, Chisekesi (Zambia), founded in 1959.

⁵ Cf. McCluskey, N. G. (Ed.) (1970). *The Catholic University: A Modern Appraisal*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

⁶ John Paul II. (1990). *Apostolic Constitution Ex Corde Ecclesiae: On Catholic Universities*. Washington, D. C.: Office for Publishing and Promotion Services.

⁷ Hekima college is a constituent college of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA).

⁸ For the past few years ITCJ has been in the process of seeking accreditation from the 'Université Catholique de l'Afrique de l'Ouest' (UCAO).

⁹ Cf. McCluskey, N. G. (Ed.) (1970). *Op. Cit.* p. 40.

¹⁰ Kolvenbach, P.-H. (2000). "The service of faith and the promotion of justice in American Jesuit higher education." *Justice Conferences*. Santa Clara University, October 6.

¹¹ Nyerere, J. (1974). *Man and Development*, Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, pp. 5-13.

¹² *Decrees of General Congregation 35*. (2008). Gujarat Sahitya Prakash: South Asian edition, pp. 77-78.

¹³ John Paul II. (1990). *Op. Cit.*

¹⁴ Traub, G. W. (Ed.) (2008). *A Jesuit Education Reader*, Chicago: Loyola Press, pp. 177-188.