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Finding One's Own Passion: Social Justice and Self-Discovery through a Jesuit High School Experience

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Abstract

The essence of Jesuit spirituality can be found in many places, one such place is the Jesuit high school. Jesuit secondary education plays a crucial role in the lives of Jesuit brothers and priests, lay teachers, staff, and most importantly, the students themselves. Inherent in these schools is the core tenet of Ignatian spirituality - "Seeing God in All Things." This theology promotes an atmosphere of self-discovery, prompting students (and oftentimes teachers) to truly discover their own passions in life.

In our paper, we explore this phenomenon, by interviewing young alumni, faculty and staff of St. Peter's Preparatory School in Jersey City, NJ. We will examine their experiences through the lenses of three crucial interactions, all of which characterize Jesuit secondary education. The first, the interaction of a student with his teachers, transforms through time into a strong friendship that goes beyond the typical student-teacher relationship, marked by teachers who aspire to see God in all students. But the student naturally begins to interact with his fellow classmates as well, both in and out of class, forming a remarkably diverse but deeply united community.

This community in turn is thrust into the outside world, where, to quote Frederick Buechner, the students' "deep passion and the world's deep hunger meet." Here, students absorb and practice the fundamental Jesuit tenet of social justice throughout their high school years and oftentimes their careers and adult lives. These three relations sum up the Jesuit high school experience and enable students to grow personally while simultaneously developing in the context of a larger community.

The Heuristics Approach

One might not immediately discern the value of academically studying something that one took part in. Initially someone could misinterpret this type of study as nothing more than one reminiscing and ranting about his own experience. Not only does this fall completely out of the realm of academia, but it also does not accurately describe the scope of this study. While objectivity is certainly desirable in many disciplines of research, this study places a premium on our personal experience as an impetus to study others' experiences at St. Peter's Preparatory School and also as a lens through which we see and understand these experiences. Thus, implicit in our study is the idea that our experience is not necessarily unique, and that by studying the experience of other students at St. Peter's Prep, we can gain a better understanding of the phenomenon which impels students to contribute to a form of social justice specific to his own passion.

The method of our study is deeply rooted in the concept of heuristics, a type of academic study which "brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher" ¹. Because we have such an experience that is deeply personal, we can better examine how others have undergone similar experiences. Using this model, it is important to note that heuristics places a premium on meanings, essence, quality, and experiences rather than measurements, appearance, quantity, and behavior. ² Thus the juxtaposition of our personal experiences with the examination of how others respond to having gone through St. Peter's Prep is the crux of our paper and provides a sound notion of the essence of our common experience. Put in general terms, heuristic inquiry develops "a sense of connectedness develops between research and research participants in their mutual efforts to elucidate the nature, meaning, and essence of a significant human experiences." ³

This study began by reflecting on our experiences, and then moved forward by interviewing other recent alumni from St. Peter's Prep. Eight students were interviewed for this study. They graduated from Prep between 2000 and 2005, and comprised various ethnic, geographic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. We chose these participants because they represented students who had been greatly immersed in the school's culture by involvement in co-curriculars, sports, retreats, and other activities which allowed them to get a fuller experience of Prep more than just the traditional 8:00AM-2:30PM school day experience. While one might wonder what caused some other students to decline any involvement in the school outside of going to class every day, such a phenomenon is beyond the scope of this study. Further, we selected the participants to interview not based on experience with social justice, but rather those with a strong level of involvement in the school who would be able to articulate a more complete experience. Three members of the Prep faculty also were interviewed, as well the President of the school, Fr. James Keenan, SJ.

Social Justice in a Catholic, Jesuit School

¹ Patton. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. 1990. p.71

² *Ibid*, 71.

³ *Ibid*, 72.

One of the expectations of a Jesuit high school centers around the idea that the school “prepares its graduates to analyze their own contemporary culture with insight and intelligence, thereby achieving the freedom to work for justice.”⁴ Subsequently it follows that the International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education stresses that, “in preparation for life commitment, there are opportunities in Jesuit education for actual contact with the world of injustice.”⁵ Without question, the design of the Jesuit secondary high school experience by definition necessitates not only a knowledge and understanding of justice and injustice, but also actual, tangible experience confronting issues of injustice as well. In a larger context, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops recognizes Catholic education as an important forum for “demonstrating our Church's commitment to human dignity and social justice.”⁶

Examining social justice conceptually, Pope Pius XI perceived an individual virtue. He suggested a definition of social justice that allowed individuals to contribute according to their experience and ability.⁷ This concept of social justice lends itself nicely to a secondary education setting, where one is bound to find a population of young adults with diverse interests, talents, and passions, particularly in examples of schools that have assembled student bodies ethnically, economically, geographically, and religiously diverse. Juxtaposing this notion of social justice as a personal endeavor with the sound, overt framework within Catholic Jesuit secondary education allows one to envisage what a Jesuit high school might resemble in terms of its response to call for social justice. The question then arises as to how St. Peter's Prep embodies this theoretical conception of a Jesuit high school's call to social justice.

Brotherhood: The Student-Student Relationship

The relationship that students have with each other appears to be fundamental to their experience at St. Peter's Prep. The bonds formed between students teem with fraternal love and mutual respect, which creates a powerful foundation for personal growth and community transformation. One student characterized this close-knit atmosphere by saying “Sharing in the personal experience of my fellow students at Prep helped me to examine my own life.” The diverse makeup of the student body allowed for an informal type of learning—one that takes place outside of the classroom and allows the student population to further nourish its camaraderie. A young alum who is a Freshman at a Jesuit university commented that “I learned different things from different people, and that is what made the time at Prep so enriching.” He further spoke about the impact that his friendship with a Hindu student had, insofar as he was able to learn about a religion and family lifestyle previously foreign to him. St. Peter's Prep President Fr. James

⁴ Jesuit Secondary Education Association. “What Makes a Jesuit High School Jesuit?” Chapter 5.

⁵ Sharing International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education. *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*. 1986

⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*. 1998.

⁷ Pope Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno*. 1931.

Keenan, S.J., echoed this sentiment, saying, “I like going to the cafeteria and seeing students of various religious and ethnic backgrounds sitting together.”

From a student’s perspective, this brotherhood, as it is often described, becomes cemented through the series of junior year Emmaus retreats. As per St. Peter’s Prep’s own website, the Emmaus retreat program has the goal of allowing the opportunity for students to “examine their own spirituality and their relationship with God, form a community with fellow classmates and faculty members, and open their minds and hearts to the experiences, beliefs and feelings of others.”⁸ Started in the late 1970’s by Father Ned Coughlin, SJ, the Emmaus retreat program has maintained popularity the years, and it undoubtedly is a hallmark of the spiritual life of Prep.

Reflecting, perhaps subconsciously, the notion within Jesuit Spirituality of “Seeing God in All Things”, students who make the Emmaus retreat begin to look at each other more deeply and more personally. Indeed, a 2003 graduate reflecting on his experience of the Emmaus retreat remarked that “It reinforced the notion that God is present in everyday people.” Although not every student who made an Emmaus retreat articulates distinct concepts of Ignatian Spirituality, the sentiment at a basic level seems always to be present. Another young alum demonstrated this by saying “I try to see others, especially my former classmates, from the inside first now rather than the outside,” while yet another former Emmaus retreatant comments on the unity between students as well as the unity between God, saying, “The whole Emmaus program made me realize, I was not alone. It is here that I realized that God has always been with me.”

While students often recall their Emmaus retreat as one of their most positive memories of Prep, they also point to September 11th as a deeply challenging time. Being in such close proximity to the World Trade Center, and with a clear view of downtown Manhattan, students were in the undesirable position watching the buildings fall. It was a very trying time, as emotions flared and Prep students, like much of the country, struggled with their reactions to the tragedy. Although Prep was not impervious to some bigamous responses to the attacks, many students recall September 11th as a time when the bonds between students were strengthened, not broken down. One student, only a freshman at the time, noted “It ensured me I could count on the people at Prep during any hard times in my life.” A student who was a Junior at the time suggested that the events brought the students, and the whole Prep community together by being forced to deal with a harsh reality. Many who were students at the time described it as a loss of innocence, a loss experienced by an entire student body.

Unquestionably, the experience of a Prep student is grounded firmly in a powerful community often described as a brotherhood. The student-student relationship is paramount in the St. Peter’s Prep experience, and its supportive nature allows students of different activities, interests, and passions to interact positively with each other.

Bridging the Gap: The Teacher-Student Relationship

A significant part of the Jesuit secondary educational experience relies on the quality of the teacher-student relationship. Teachers and staff of Jesuit secondary institutions serve a crucial role in fulfilling each school’s educational and spiritual

⁸ www.stpetersprep.org/emmaus.html

mission. This belief is rooted in the official teachings of the Church, as Maher notes that “teachers in Catholic education must model the faith they are teaching.”⁹

Interestingly enough, many teachers come to Jesuit schools not knowing what they are getting into. Fr. James Keenan, SJ noted that Jesuit priests are often mandated to go to a certain school by their superiors, whether or not the Jesuit himself is particularly eager to do so. A lay teacher we interviewed had no previous knowledge of the Jesuits and merely made the switch to Prep for monetary reasons.

There are some, however, who are familiar with the Jesuits and seek Jesuit high schools out. One former college professor decided to come to Prep to experience Jesuit spirituality and social justice in the frame of an urban environment. At the time of applying for a religion position at Prep, he was in a period of transition and had to choose between the college and high school levels – he chose Prep because he felt “called” to secondary education.

Once at Prep, many teachers experience a transformation with respect to both their teaching and their personal lives. One lay teacher noted that at Prep, there was a strong effort among some Jesuits and lay faculty to spread knowledge of Ignatian spirituality to all faculty. This was a contrast from previous Catholic high schools she has taught at, where orders of priests or nuns made little or no effort to share their unique spirituality.

Ignatian spirituality is, as stated by one faculty member, one of the main reasons for continuing to teach at Prep. Frustrated with local parishes, Prep remains the sole spiritual center for some faculty. A religion faculty member praised the role of the faculty chaplain; it gives all faculty the opportunity to undergo spiritual direction and to better find God in their lives in a personal, one-on-one environment. Many Prep teachers strengthen their faith by not only employing Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises and use of the daily Examen but also by other Prep faculty who lead and encourage by example. By far, however, many Prep faculty recognize the teacher-student relationship as a special characteristic of both Jesuit secondary education and Prep. Most faculty are thoroughly involved in Prep, through extra-curricular activities, fundraising, retreats, and other events. One faculty member noted that after years of battling depression, it was Prep students that gave her the courage to continue day after day and to seek help. Other faculty view Prep students as teachers; one faculty member noted that inside the classroom, he aims to learn just as much as he teaches his students. He often utilizes the term “Eucharistic classroom” to symbolize the solidarity between teacher and student in a spiritual setting, and stated that “right here, right now, more than anything, I can see God in the students.”

Many alumni we interviewed also praised the teacher-student relationship as crucial to their high school experience. One student noted how his senior year English teacher stressed the importance of keeping up with current events and has since then made it a habit to read the newspaper daily. Another student noted that a teacher’s role in his junior retreat allowed him “for the first time in my life...to look into the interior of people.”

Who the teachers are themselves, be it their life story, personality, or outlook on life, has also made a significant impact on many students. An older alumni respects the passions

⁹ Maher, p.64.

of Prep faculty in their own lives and what they did at Prep; he remarks that “they were committed to the teachings of Loyola, and were not shy” about expressing their own opinions and emotions in the classroom. A graduating college senior, soon to be a secondary school teacher himself, noted that Prep teachers differ significantly from others he has worked with; they stress continuing relationships with students long after they leave Prep and truly forge friendships among those they teach. This has allowed him to grow as a person, and like many other Prep alumni, has called him to a life devoted to social justice.

Into the Real World: Social Justice in the Lives of Prep Students

The aforementioned relationships intrinsic to Prep – the “brotherhood” among students and the unique student-teacher interaction – form a supportive matrix for social justice in the lives of both current and past Prep students. Almost all the students we interviewed, some even coming upon their 8th year reunions, noted Prep’s role in forming their consciences and its importance in life choices they faced, both during their years at Prep and afterwards.

We’ve already touched on the Jesuit ideal of “seeing God in all things”, and this principle once again comes into play in forming social justice as a personal virtue for each Prep student. A current college junior noted that he “cannot stress enough” how seeing God in all things has made him believe that “we must be a people for and with others.” He goes on to say that he believes this ideal “fosters a sense of optimism and community building through reaching out...to aid those in need.” This message, encompassed by his teachers at Prep as well as some of his fellow students, is alive in his work today; he is head of student life for his university and tries “to incorporate themes of social justice and giving back” in all of the events he runs or sponsors.

Other students note how experiences outside of Prep, like 9/11 and service trips to Appalachia, are incorporated into their social consciences. Given Prep’s close proximity to the World Trade Center, after 9/11 teachers took time off in their classes to discuss what had happened and how students were feeling. Prep even sponsored a speaker from a local mosque to speak to students on Islam and to answer questions about the differences between fundamentalist Islam and local mosques in Jersey City. One student appreciated these presentations and felt that it gave him perspective on the world that he would not have had otherwise.

As part of the community service requirement at Prep, many students opt to go on service trips to communities in need in New Jersey and Appalachia. A graduating college senior noted how after his weeklong trip to Camden, NJ, his religion teacher inspired him to start writing to his local politicians and newspapers, a practice he continues until today. Another student noted how his involvement in Pax Christi shaped his political views as he participated in trips like the Good Friday Peace Walk, a rally for peace activists in NYC, and presentations on homosexual discrimination and the death penalty.

All of these examples point to social justice as a personal virtue. While Prep was a relatively tight-knit community, many students felt a calling to a specific role, be it newspaper editor, star quarterback, lead actor in the school play, or community activist. Students viewed their role and others students’ work as not only fun but also crucial to Prep’s development as a school. One student explained that coming from suburbia to an inner-city environment opened his eyes to the different types of people out there and their

diverse passions. It is here that one can see how a Jesuit high school experience, like the kind experienced in St. Peter's Prep, has opened the eyes of many students to the "outside world."

St. Peter's Prep: Not a Utopia

Although students going through St. Peter's Prep, through powerful interactions with fellow students, teachers, and the larger world, develop a personal sense of social justice and often contribute to the cause of social justice as their respective passions dictate, St. Peter's Prep is no utopia, nor are its students and faculty faultless.

While many Prep faculty members have a background in Jesuit education, and there are faculty retreats and meetings throughout the year to discuss JSEA documents regarding tenets of Jesuit education, one Prep teacher worries that "because there have been so many [faculty] changes...a lot of people didn't go through any other kind of Jesuit education." Being in such close proximity to Manhattan, many younger teachers come to Prep from other parts of the country for its desirable geographic location. However, often these teachers don't stay at Prep very long, resulting in high teacher turnover rate, and perhaps a faded sense of Jesuit spirituality among faculty.

Furthermore, the close knit fraternal spirit of the student body has, on some occasions, been problematic from an administration standpoint. One faculty member described the Emmaus retreat, the paramount spiritual experience for many students, as a brainwashing, because of the late nights and little sleep that often occur. Another teacher suggested Emmaus was a "spiritual cult". This teacher went on to cite an example of a Prep student, who was aware that another student from his Emmaus retreat was involved in an illegal activity, refusing to cooperate with administration, saying "I can't rat on my brother. I learned that on Emmaus." Fr. Keenan, SJ, reverberates this notion, mentioning that students don't want to be seen as "snitching" on another students.

Additionally, it would be remiss to ignore the fact that while this paper has described the experience of many Prep students, there are certainly some students to which none of these experiences can apply. While many get involved in any number of the many activities and co-curriculars that Prep offers, some students still remain members of the 2:30 Club, the term used to describe the students who leave school immediately after the academic day ends. So while many students are embroiled in social justice issues, some students are only engaged in them minimally, simply because it is "required" for course credit.

While these issues arose during our research, they do not detract from the overall spirit of the paper. Rather, we see them as opportunities where the Prep community can further grow. Each of these issues demonstrates that Prep has room for improvement, and by no means embodies perfection. However, they are secondary in relation to the focus of this paper, and ought to be examined separately, perhaps in the future.

Conclusion

While it often seems difficult to articulate the experience of attending St. Peter's Prep in a way that makes sense to anyone outside of the community, we hope to have accomplished that by juxtaposing our personal reflections with the experiences shared by those who we interviewed. Finding one's own passion towards a particular social justice issue is a natural development in the experience of a Prep student. With an overt structure that places a premium on justice, reinforced by actualized mantras of Jesuit

spirituality, St. Peter's Prep seems to have achieved an environment where many students work towards justice within areas and issues appropriate to them.

None of this could be possible, however, without the support structure of positive relationships between students, and with teachers. These inspired interactions provide a sound base for students to develop personally, and in the context of a Jesuit high school experience, find their own passion for social justice.