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Jesuit Education in Qatar Today

Diversity Enriches a Teaching Environment

By Thomas Michel, S.J.

From the earliest days of the Society of Jesus, Jesuits have opened, administered, and taught in schools in a wide variety of countries and systems of government. We have had schools in autocracies, monarchies, oligarchies, and democracies. We have operated educational institutions in regions under exploitative colonial domination and shaped by discriminatory apartheid ideologies. Our maintaining schools in such manifestly unjust social situations does not imply that we endorse and bless the evils and injustices of those places. We are called to live in sinful environments and to work there for God's greater glory and so to make a contribution to the building of the Kingdom.

For this reason I am always surprised when people ask me how Jesuits can have a school in Qatar, as though this were an unprecedented departure from Jesuit history, or that in doing so we had made a pact with the devil or compromised our integrity. The presumption of many people seems to be that Qatar has a more oppressive government or abusive social situation than other countries. Looking at the condition of workers in our neighboring countries in the Persian Gulf region or at the societal problems in other parts of the world, I am not sure that this is the case. Having grown up less than five miles from Ferguson, Missouri, I know the perils of throwing stones while living in a glass house.

Hence, I feel no need to defend or apologize for Georgetown's decision to accept the invitation to open a campus in Qatar. Ten years ago, the Emir Sheikh

Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani invited Georgetown University to offer students an undergraduate program in Doha modeled on Georgetown's School of Foreign Service. The Emir's proposal was part of an effort to offer Qatari and other students the opportunity to obtain quality college education in their own country. The Emirate agreed to build the university structures and pay the salaries of faculty and staff in order for Georgetown to replicate the SFS curriculum.

At the moment, I am the only member of the Georgetown Jesuit community serving in Doha. But I am not the first. Fr. Ryan Maher, now of Scranton University, and the late Fr. Jim Walsh both taught in Qatar. But for three years now, I am the only Jesuit in Doha.

Before I arrived here, I was not sure how I, as a priest and Jesuit, would be received in this small country on the east coast of the Arabian peninsula. I was encouraged by the knowledge that Qatar is almost 100 percent Muslim because, having studied in Lebanon and Egypt and having taught frequently in Indonesia, Turkey, and the Philippines, I have lived among Muslims for a long time and found them to be both welcoming hosts and challenging partners in the dialogue of life. I can honestly say that in the almost 50 years since I went

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to Indonesia in the 1960s to teach English, I've never encountered any serious prejudice or rejection when people learn that I am a Catholic priest and a Jesuit. In fact, the opposite is true; I find the people I've known to be easy to love and easy to live with.

One thing I was not prepared for was the small-school family-like atmosphere. Faculty, staff, and students basically all know each other, eat lunch together, rub shoulders in the library, and see one another at student clubs, basketball games, lectures, movie nights, and debate competitions. There is a strong student organization aimed at conscientizing society about the problems faced by disabled persons. There is a video dialogue with students in Gaza and in Iraq and a variety of projects aimed at bringing students and faculty to a better understanding of the living situations and working environment of the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers in Qatar. The point is that there is plenty to do together. SFS-Qatar has little of the anonymity and loneliness about which students sometimes complain in huge American universities, and in fact our students who spend a semester on the "main campus" in Washington complain about feeling alone and at sea in the vast student body.

Our student body can be broken down into three groups. About one third of the students are children of Qatar families who trace their ancestry back to the desert-dwelling Bedouins and coastal pearl fishers who made up the bulk of the population when Qatar first became a British protectorate in 1916. Because of the vast numbers of expatriate workers who have arrived in the past decade, Qataris today are estimated to be only 12 percent of the population, while Indian and Nepali workers make up, respectively, 24 percent and 17 percent.

Another a third of our student body are children of foreign residents in Qatar. These students, who may have lived part or all of their lives in Qatar, are not Qatar citizens but take the nationality of origin of their parents who are from Pakistani, Egyptian, Lebanese, and a mix of other countries. These parents play an essential role in the economy of Qatar; they are the shopkeepers, office workers, and petroleum engineers responsible for Qatar's current prosperity. Quite global in culture, these students have attended international schools often from nursery school onwards. Their first language is English, and they seem generally disinterested in national origins or cultural barriers.

The final third of our student body is truly international, with students from China, Thailand, Switzerland, Poland, Somalia, U.S.A., Mexico, and Brazil, among others. The SFS-Qatar student body has 42 nationalities represented.

What about the sensitive subject of religion? Can we talk about that? Is it divisive, a cause of tension? I have had an interesting experience in this area. On Georgetown's Washington campus, I taught a course in "Muslim-Christian Relations Since Vatican II." There all the students were Christian, except for two Muslims. In Qatar, I teach the same course, same material, except here all the students but two are Muslim. We take up the same material we studied in Washington, some of it positive, some negative. In both places I sense an underlying current that this generation really does not want to repeat the mistakes of the past. These students live in a global culture where national, racial, and religious prejudices are simply not acceptable.

I teach in the theology department. Since Georgetown requires two courses of theology and two in philosophy, I have virtually every student in class during the course of their four-year program. The theology

program offers Islamic studies for those who choose, as well as world religions, and basic introductions to theology. The most popular course I teach is an introduction to Biblical literature, which I have to offer each semester because of a long waiting list.

It is a challenge to teach Biblical studies to Muslim students because of the great disparity of presuppositions concerning Scriptural revelation, inspiration, and textual interpretation. However, the students continue to surprise me with the level of their insights into the biblical text. Their critiques of the Sermon on the Mount and the Book of Job are among the most thoughtful and profound that I have encountered in my years of teaching.

As is the case elsewhere, many things could be better here. We do what we can to ensure that the rights of our workers are respected, but there is also much that we cannot do. We are now experiencing the unhappy effects of a 30 percent budget cut from our governing body, with the ensuing reorganization and inevitable layoffs. But I am still convinced that Jesuit educational vision, well expressed by Fr. Pedro Ribadeneira, one of St. Ignatius' early companions, is still inspiring our work here: "the proper education of youth will mean improvement for the whole world." ■

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