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# The Possibilities of African Jesuit Universities

*Embarking on a New Journey*

**By Terry Charlton, S.J.**

**A**s an American Jesuit who has worked in Africa since 1988, I would judge that until recently the traditional wisdom about any Jesuit university in Africa was that such is not a priority. We were focused, initially, on primary evangelization in parts of Africa (I'm speaking of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, always including Madagascar - which make up the African Assistancy) to which Propaganda Fidei initially assigned us. As we established the church in these places and then gradually were missioned to additional parts of Africa, we saw our work in a whole variety of areas, including pastoral care, primary and secondary education, fostering spirituality, especially through the Spiritual Exercises, and working with refugees. There was, of course, the unique situation of our founding the University of Addis Ababa, due to the invitation of Emperor Haile Selasse, but this was certainly not a Jesuit university. We served various government universities throughout Africa as lecturers, administrators, and Catholic chaplains. We founded professional colleges in such areas as teacher training and agriculture; and these had profound impact in the countries and regions where they served. Of course, we made important contributions through our Jesuit scholasticates in Africa; these

usually had some kind of university affiliation. We became involved in the foundation and development of various Catholic universities in Africa in the last decades of the 20th century. But I think I can accurately say that the usual thinking was that our resources of manpower and finance were so limited and the other needs so great that it would have been a distraction to think of Jesuit universities in Africa.

By the first decade of our present century, another way of thinking was beginning to emerge, frequently spearheaded by younger African Jesuits who had earned or were earning doctorates in philosophy, theology, and a variety of other fields. They argued that we needed to look into serving church and society in Africa through Jesuit universities. To put it bluntly, they also questioned, "Is Africa the only part of the world where we are so poor in resources – and vision – that we cannot have Jesuit universities on this vast continent? The provincial of my own province, Eastern Africa, set up a committee to explore the possibility of a Jesuit university. There was also a commission to explore

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the feasibility of an African Jesuit university under the auspices of the African Assistancy. The conclusions reached at all levels were negative; at least, in those early years of the century, it was not time to move toward a Jesuit university.

But the Spirit blows where he will; and now, mid-way through the next decade, we actually find ourselves in a very different situation in many parts of Africa. Let me speak anecdotally to suggest what seems to have happened almost overnight in various parts of Africa. My provincial, who began his term in July 2009, said words like these at a province assembly early in the present decade: “After the conclusions of the province and assistancy commissions about not going forward with planning a Jesuit university, I looked to other planning. But here is what I kept hearing from non-Jesuits, from lay people and from religious and priests: ‘A tremendous need in our society is quality higher education; if our church is going to be all it should, we need well-educated church people and laity and that means quality Catholic university education. This is your charism; this is what you Jesuits do well. Start a Jesuit university in Eastern Africa.’ Well, I had to listen to these opinions, coming from many sides; and so I think we have to bring an examination of the feasibility of a Jesuit university in Eastern Africa to our province planning.” I can only suppose that there were similar occurrences in other parts of the assistancy. Rather quickly, at the beginning of the current decade, we moved to a new reading of the signs of the times indicating that we are invited to discern about beginning Jesuit universities.

Let me continue this reflection by writing about what I am aware of that has begun or is on the drawing board in the African Assistancy. I will then conclude with some thoughts on why these initiatives and others like them are so important and can contribute much, even at the level of being a force to transform higher education (with great impact on secondary education) on the continent of Africa.

1. Early in 2015, Fr. General gave approval to the Province of Madagascar for Magis University. The university’s initial development will be based on three institutions that the province already runs: St. Michele College, where Jesuits in formation and others study humanities and philosophy, a school of agriculture, and a school of construction trades. The home of the university will be where the two latter schools are housed at the outskirts of Antananarivo on a campus of over 60 acres.
2. The West African Province runs the Centre de Recherche et d’Action pour la Paix (CERAP) in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, which offers programs

including the following: MBA in entrepreneurship, MA in governance and ethics, and BA in economics, management, and law.

3. The Province of Northwest Africa has proposed Loyola Jesuit University in Nigeria, which will include departments of business administration and economics, computer science, theatre arts, biological sciences, and agricultural and environmental science.
5. The Province of Eastern Africa has proposed Hekima Jesuit University. It is likely to be founded in liaison with the assistancy Jesuit theologate, Hekima University College, Nairobi, Kenya, and begin with undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs in three schools: business administration, education, and engineering.

Each of these initiatives speaks of vision and mission for forming leaders, professionals, and scholars who will be agents of change for a more just society. There will be a focus on caring for developmental needs of the host country and/or region of Africa. The institutions do or will provide an education that forms men and women for others, based in sound African values and the Catholic and Jesuit tradition of Ignatian pedagogy including *cura personalis* and an education based in a faith that does justice.

These initiatives speak of concrete means of educating persons according to their ideals such as required courses in ethics, including professional ethics in one’s field of studies, or courses that instill a Christian and humanistic understanding of the human person and of a just society that fosters integral development of its citizens.

I conclude my reflections on the potential that Jesuit initiatives at the tertiary level and, most especially, African Jesuit universities have to be a force for positive change on secondary and tertiary education in Africa in ways that will have a wide-spread effect on African societies, I suppose including in subversive ways. While my thinking has been honed by numerous conversations with other Jesuit educators in Africa and with our collaborators, I want to take personal responsibility for what I observe and suggest, and I use my varied work in Africa in institutions of secondary and tertiary education to guide what I suggest.

I begin by describing most education at the secondary and tertiary levels as I experience it. I cannot say that I know the “system” well beyond English-speaking Africa, most especially East Africa with direct and ongoing experience of Kenya. Yet I think the system elsewhere in Africa must have similarities because I see such great similitude in the “product” of the educational system throughout Africa.

In Kenya, secondary education is focused on the Kenya Certificate for Secondary Education (KCSE), taken during the last month of one's high school career, the results of which are the only guide for placing those leaving high school in any program of tertiary education. Students sitting for the KCSE are tested on their mastery of a body of knowledge in the following subjects: mathematics, at least a couple of lab sciences, namely biology, chemistry, and/or physics, social studies, language always including English and Swahili, and a practical subject like computer science or home science and another academic elective or two. Since the examination papers are most basically concerned with mastering a body of knowledge (rather than skills, competencies, or the discipline's mode of thinking or viewing reality), the main capacity engaged is memory. Students learn to memorize. Bright and clever students probably listen to their teachers who tell them that they will remember best if they understand and recognize the connections. But more average students tend to be so overwhelmed by the amount to be memorized that they do not think they have time to understand. Our education is hardly about "leading out" but mostly about "pouring in."

**W**hat about Jesuit values originating from Ignatian pedagogy, such as critical and independent thinking, or even forming an enlightened conscience? We are hard pressed to do more than pay lip service to these because even our Jesuit educators or our Ignatian-inspired lay teachers realize that, if our students critically examine what they are taught, there will be less time to memorize. Indeed, we come to recognize that students who are educated to be critical might decide, "I don't agree that this part of what I'm expected to master is true, so I won't commit it to memory." But we know our students' academic future depends on their success on the KCSE, and the reputation of our school and, indeed, of individual teachers depends on our students' success on the KCSE. Would you be surprised if I opine that the atmosphere of our schools can feel a lot like "Dead Poets Society"? The "system's" only measure of success militates against and even overwhelms our desire to educate according to principles of Ignatian pedagogy.

Sad to say, tertiary education is more of the same. The tremendous pressures of population growth "force" government universities with limited resources to educate large numbers. It is easiest to educate by making our lectures about what is going to be on the exams.

Only the professor who is a glutton for punishment will think of offering an exam that is anything but multiple choice as he or she thinks of correcting thousands of papers per term, given that both Continuous Assessment Tests and final examinations are required. My experience is that tertiary students in Africa pretty universally resist any discussion in class that requests critical thinking or assignments that require reflection on experience or creativity. It goes against the system's valued ways of succeeding and provokes insecurity and fear. A professor might persist over the course of a term with his or her odd approach to education and it might just pay off in some students coming to value thinking for themselves, but it is not easy to avoid giving in to the pressure on one's students just wanting to know what is going to be on the exam. At best, if the "system" does not break down, due to overwhelming numbers, African universities produce graduates who know a great deal. It is up to the employer to train their fresh graduates to think, to critique and to create.

I dream of a Jesuit university in my province which would say about admission: we are interested only in a certain minimum on the KCSE (and its equivalents in other countries), say a C+, which is considered a minimum university qualification. Other qualifications for admission will be examination of the prospective student's background in service to community, extracurricular activities, and evidence of leadership. The university will provide its own required entrance examination to test critical and creative thinking. How that could liberate our Jesuit secondary schools to be schools of true excellence by our own criteria of producing scholars whose potential has been "led out" through teaching according to Ignatian pedagogy and who are formed as men and women for others!

I firmly believe that the products of our Jesuit universities, including those who enter the universities with prior foundations in Ignatian pedagogy, will actually be the kind of well-formed critical and creative young adults for which the best of African industry, of business, and even of government and the educational sectors will compete. Over time, but pretty quickly, non-Jesuit secondary education and tertiary education in Africa will begin to transform itself, since its old "product" is no longer competitive.

Well, that's a dream. But I am firmly confident that, just as, even within our strictures, we have done so much of excellence at the secondary level in Africa, we are embarking on a journey with our African Jesuit universities that will bring God's reign so much closer. ■