

INTERVIEW WITH FR. ALAIN MANALO, SUPERINTENDENT OF DIOCESAN SCHOOLS DIOCESE OF IMUS, PHILIPPINES



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Schools can never exist in isolation. The global pact not only challenges schools to be relevant. It directs education to be at the service of the human person, with preferential option for the good of the family, the marginalized and the vulnerable, and our common home. This restores the soul in education which in many ways has been commoditized if not simply reduced to metrics of excellence or quality.”
- “I am concerned with the accessibility of our schools. To make our schools accessible [we created] the solidarity meal. We closed our canteens and offered the same meals to all teachers and students.”

You represent Catholic education in Asia in OIEC. What are the characteristics of Catholic education in the region?

Catholic schools belong to the minority in Asia, including the predominantly Catholic Philippines. But they are known to offer excellent quality education and Christian values formation. Both Catholics and non-Catholics flock to Catholic schools for holistic human development. They are missionaries, serving the poor in challenging circumstances; prophets, as advocates of authentic societal transformation; and servants of the Church in her own ongoing renewal and evangelizing mission.

You manage Catholic schools in the Philippines. What are your own responsibilities?

I am the Episcopal Vicar for Catholic Education and Superintendent of Diocesan Schools in the Diocese of Imus (Province of Cavite). I serve our local Church in the promotion of Catholic education in schools owned and operated by the Diocese, religious congregations or private individuals. In particular, I guarantee the fidelity of these schools to their Catholic identity and mission. I also support the formation of administrators, teachers and support personnel in practically all facets of school operations.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Father Alain Manalo, Episcopal Vicar for Catholic Education and Superintendent of Diocesan Schools for the Diocese of Imus in the Philippines, talks about the challenges and opportunities faced by Catholic schools and his hopes for the Global Compact on Education.

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It is my responsibility to manage the system of diocesan schools. We have at present 27 diocesan schools in 31 campuses offering basic education, from pre-elementary to Grade 12. I am assisted by 11 other priests acting as school directors. In this pandemic school year 2020-2021, we have a total enrolment of around 13,500 students and a population of 900 school personnel.

To the congregational schools and lay-owned schools with Catholic orientation, my duty is to support their associations and link them to the local Church. We also reach out to teachers in public schools (government owned schools) by providing them spiritual formation.

What are the main strengths of Catholic education in the Philippines and Asia more generally?

Catholic education is a pillar of the Philippine society as it has been serving the nation for more than 400 years already. The coming of Christianity through the Spanish missionaries also brought in the education of the Filipinos not only the faith but the arts and sciences as well. Today, more than 1,500 Catholic schools, colleges, and universities in the Philippines educate the Filipinos and citizens of other countries as well.

The main strength of Catholic education in the Philippines is its missionary dynamism. Since the very beginning, Catholic schools were opened to form and raise not only mature Christians but also responsible citizens, experts and professionals in various fields. The goal is integral human formation carried out with quality and excellence. Catholic schools go and have gone where the government and others many times seldom dare to reach. Despite significant limitations, Catholic schools are maintained in poor communities. Indeed, individual lives and communities are transformed for the better.

The same is true in the whole of Asia. Catholic schools prominently manifest their missionary zeal by being present even or most especially in places where Christians are the minority. Regardless of faith affiliations, Catholic schools serve all peoples – promoting the dialogue of faith and life and culture and serving the societies with preferential option for the poor, vulnerable and marginalized.

What are the main risks or improvements needed for Catholic education in the Philippines and in Asia?

The challenges facing Catholic schools in the Philippines are inter-related. Most obvious is the sustainability issue. More than the majority of the Catholic schools in the Philippines are struggling mission schools; they barely survive due to limited financial means. Secondary school students receive subsidies from the government, but these are still inadequate to fully support the school's programs and operations. Poor schools that they are,

teachers often leave and migrate to the public schools or work abroad. The fast turn-over of teachers will then compromise the quality of education including the school's Catholic identity and mission. If the school will charge higher fees, the enrolment will likely dwindle or the school will become exclusive to those who can afford.

Catholic schools however find ways to get out of this web of problems. They organize themselves into educational systems or associations for mutual support in almost all areas of school operations. Teacher training and development program comes as a priority to maintain excellence in education and Christian mission for which Catholic schools are known for. Students are charged with socialized fees or scholarship grants are extended to as many as possible to keep the school accessible to all while remaining sustainable.

Have you seen recent innovations in Catholic education in the Philippines and in Asia? Could you provide a few examples?

The Philippine Catholic Schools Standards (PCSS) project seeks to assist our Catholic schools to become sustainable and truly Catholic schools. As a self-assessment "quality assurance" instrument, PCSS supports the continuous development of the schools in the domains of Catholic identity and mission, leadership and governance, learner development, learning environment and operational vitality. Its standards, benchmarks and rubrics were inspired by the Church's teachings on Catholic education. The PCSS for basic education was rolled out in 2016. We hope to publish the PCSS for higher education this 2021.

The JEEPGY program is another important project of Catholic schools in the Philippines. It is a nationwide advocacy for J – justice and peace, E – ecological integrity, E – engaged citizenship, P – poverty alleviation, G – gender equality, and Y – youth empowerment. Social Media Education was added to the program recently. JEEPGY is the practical and contextualized translation of the Transformative Education agenda of Philippine Catholic schools to respond to the concrete challenges of the times in society.

What do you think of the global pact for education proposed by Pope Francis?

We truly appreciate the leadership of Pope Francis in the field of education through the Global Compact on Education. The priorities he proposed in this global pact very well address the needs of our present times. Schools can never exist in isolation from the world. The global pact not only invites or challenges schools to be relevant.



Photos: Selected activities in the schools.

It succinctly directs education to be at the service of the human person, with preferential option for the good of the family, the marginalized and the vulnerable, and our common home. This restores the soul in education which in many ways has been commoditized if not simply reduced to metrics of excellence or quality.

What can Catholic schools in the Philippines and Asia do to contribute to Pope Francis' vision?

The Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines has already organized a commission to review the Philippine Catholic Schools Standards (PCSS) in the light of the Global Compact on Education. The educational vision of Pope Francis will more easily reach and influence our schools through the PCSS. The PCSS serves as our Catholic schools' self-assessment instrument that guides us in our school improvement planning.

The superintendents of Catholic schools similarly launched a study on how the schools can incorporate the priorities of the global pact in their curriculum, policies and programs. A series of training of school leaders in the light of these priorities are already planned. Also, the national advocacy program of Catholic schools, called JEEPGY, is also being reviewed to be enriched by Pope Francis' global pact. The JEEPGY pillars are very much aligned with the educational priorities espoused by the Pope.

What is your personal journey? How did you come to the responsibilities that you exercise at this time?

I consider my engagement in the Catholic educational apostolate as a vocation within a vocation. Since my seminary days, I am open to any assignment in the diocese except Catholic school administration. But our Bishop appointed me director of the diocesan school adjacent to the parish where I was also assigned pastor. The parish was one of the farthest from the center of the diocese and the Bishop cannot afford to send another priest, a qualified one, to run the school which then was at the brink of closure. In short, the bishop had no other choice then but to "request me to simply look over the school next to my parish church".

I obeyed my bishop and relied in the providence of God trusting in the "grace of office". Assisted by the religious sisters in the place and the parish community, we were able to grow the school. Years later when our Superintendent died unexpectedly, the Bishop appointed me Superintendent of the Diocesan Schools; and later on Episcopal Vicar for Catholic Education. I was elected regional trustee and national secretary of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP). CEAP sent me as their representative to the International Office for Catholic Education (OIEC) where I now serve as Regional Secretary for Asia. In the Philippines, I remain

very involved with the Philippine Catholic Schools Standards for Basic Education.

The call to serve Catholic schools as a priest was indeed unexpected as it was not desired at all. But this is the mystery of every vocation after all. God calls and we simply respond.

Can you share with us an anecdote about what you are personally passionate about?

I am very concerned with the accessibility of our Catholic schools. *Gravissimum Educationis* no. 2 speaks of Catholic education as a right of every baptized Christian. Catholic education therefore does not only concern itself with quality and excellence, sustainability, and fidelity to its Catholic identity and mission. Catholic education also asks itself: Am I open and available to all, especially the minority and the underprivileged?

This for me is a litmus test to discern who are truly Catholic schools and Catholic educators. Indeed, it is a serious challenge to keep the school stable and viable yet opening itself to welcome as many as possible. Difficult it may be but the vision is not unattainable.

To make our schools accessible, we adopted the socialized tuition fee program. We offered economic scholarships, i.e. tuition fee discounts to those who cannot afford. We mandated the affordability of school requirements and activities. We organized the schools into an educational system so that resources may be shared and struggling schools may be assisted. We instituted strict auditing policies to keep school expenses also at the minimum.

A unique program borne from our desire to make our schools accessible is the solidarity meal. We closed our canteens and offered the same meals to all teachers and students for less than twenty pesos (less than half a dollar) a day. It was at first a response to cases of students coming to and staying in school hungry. The school still earns the same income that it gets from the regular canteen operations. But no one gets hungry anymore and feels poorer than others. It has fomented relationships, towards solidarity and communion, among teachers and students coming from different social strata. It has also transformed mindsets to consider even the simple act of eating as an activity that has a social dimension.