

PROMOTING HONESTY IN THE CLASSROOM

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At this time in the history of education in the Philippines, great stress is being put on the importance of promoting true Christian (humanistic) values in our schools. In the light of this fact, I would like to share with you my own experience in connection with efforts I have been making during the past three years to promote honesty in my Religious Studies classes. As far as I can tell, the results have been encouraging enough to warrant this brief report.

Perhaps it might help if I begin by explaining briefly the basic framework within which I work in my Religious Studies classes. I present this framework under the rubric of "General Objective" in the three courses I teach, i.e., RS 21-Jesus and the Kingdom, RS 103-The Church in Philippine Society and RS 104-Life Expressions in the Christian Community (Sacraments). In it I explicate as my main goal to "promote a deeper understanding (in the light of Faith), appreciation and commitment" in the particular area of Christian Life specified by each course as part of "the on-going Dialogue of Salvation between God and Man." I make it clear, however, that my primary objective, as far as course requirements are concerned, is to promote a clear understanding of the course content. In addition to the importance of solid understanding as an indispensable foundation for a valid appreciation and meaningful commitment to the Christian reality being studied, I explain that the main reason for focusing on the cognitive aspect of religious growth and development is that I believe this is the only aspect that the school can justifiably require the students to address themselves to without violating their freedom in religious matters. It is also the only aspect of religious growth that can be measured and graded. Everything else is deeply personal and ultimately, between themselves and God. This does not mean that I am indifferent to the affective and behavioural aspects of their religious life, as this effort to promote honesty clearly demonstrates. I just don't want them to feel that we are forcing them to act against their conscience or interfering in their personal lives. Even my stress on anonymity in the various exercises or activities I utilize in this project are meant to protect the sacredness of their basic relationship with God and personal freedom and integrity. But be that as it may, I do not hesitate to make it clear to them that I consider understanding which does not lead to appreciation and commitment as being of limited — if any — real value. Actually, this is already very clear to many of them as is evidenced by their own support of this little project which they appreciate as an opportunity to "put into practice what we have learned."

Once the first part of the General Objectives has been sufficiently explained, I give the students the first quiz of the semester. The questions I ask are chosen to give me a basis for pointing out the relevance of the issue of honesty to the general objective and to the process of religious growth. Thus I ask them the

following questions:

1. What are the 3 main elements in the process of religious growth and development we hope to foster this semester?
2. Which of the 3 elements do you think is the most important? Why?
3. Which of the 3 will we be concentrating most on this semester? Why?

I point out the relevance of the questions to the exercise later if it is not already clear from what has been said above.

After placing the three questions on the board, I ask them if the questions are clear, and once I feel that they understand the questions I tell them that I have to go out for some important business and that I will return in about 10 minutes. Then I leave the classroom and they are on their own.

Upon returning to the classroom, I give them additional time to finish the quiz if needed. If not, I collect the papers. Then I tell them to take a one-fourth sheet of paper and without placing their names on it to answer three more questions honestly, namely,

1. What did you do while I was out?
2. Why?
3. How do you feel now about what you did? Why?

Invariably, I get a lot of knowing smiles from the majority who realize now that there was really "method in my madness" in leaving the room during a quiz — an experience none of them had ever had before, so they say.

While they are answering the second set of questions, I sit down and place a "10" on every paper without even looking at them and immediately return their graded papers to them. This gets them even more confused as their puzzled looks at one another clearly show. I then tell them that when they are finished with their answers they can pass them to me. As I collect them I make it obvious that I try not to notice who give me what paper so they won't think I am trying to find out what they write. Once the papers are in, we begin to process what has happened.

The processing begins with my reading out loud the answers written on the papers they give me. Their reactions to what they hear are very revealing. After reading each paper I comment on the various answers to get them to reflect on what they hear and what they themselves did while I was out of the room. For example, I point out how expressions of guilt feelings on the part of those who cheated in my absence and feelings of joy on the part of those who resisted the temptation to cheat reveal the significance of the decisions that they made in the face of that temptation. I make sure that they understand that they have either compromised or enhanced a very important part of their personal being in the free choices that they made. They are thus enabled to see the importance of their conscience and the limited nature of their freedom. In some instances however, a student would admit copying and say he felt nothing. I try to help them to see the danger of getting into such a state of insensitivity. Another issue that surfaces during the reading of the third answer is the level of awareness or feeling manifested in what evokes the feeling reported. Some are more inclined to feel good or bad about how they fared in answering the questions than in how they got their answers, i.e., whether they were the result of their own personal study and honest effort to answer or the result of copying from a neighbor or their notebook. It manifests to some extent which level of personal growth is a priority with them, the cognitive or behavioural.

The answers to the second question provide an occasion to reflect on and discuss reasons for being honest and reasons for cheating. Those who try to be honest express their own esteem for honesty and integrity and their serious desire to show their faith and reverence for God by trying to be honest. It is clear that for many, honesty is a value no matter how often they may fail. This is also true in the case of many or even most of those who cheat. The most common reason, of course, for cheating is the failure to study seriously for the quiz. But "peer pressure" often enough, is what "forces" some to go against their conscience. Their express intent of "helping a friend", or their fear of "hurting a friend" gives us a chance to discuss the real meaning of friendship as the effort one makes to do what is best for the other. In the course of the discussion it becomes clear to them that asking a friend to help one cheat is really a violation of the nature of true friendship and that the refusal to help another cheat might be the "friendliest" thing to do. Another fairly common answer given for cheating is simply the desire to get high grades "by hook or by crook" and this answer leads into the next phase of this exercise of "fostering honesty in the classroom." But before actually moving on to the next phase I point out to them that every quiz situation involves two tests, one regarding their level of understanding and the other the degree of personal integrity they have attained. I help them see that all three levels of religious growth and development were involved during the quiz and that their behaviour revealed not only what they know (cognitive level) but also what kind of persons they are or are becoming (behavioural). When I ask them which of the two tests is more important, they spontaneously acknowledge their own recognition of the priority of the latter (behavioural). With that clarified we move on to phase three of our exercise.

This third phase starts with my going around and asking several of the students what grade they got for the quiz. All of them answer "10", of course. When I ask them how they feel about the grade they got, most say they are happy. When I ask them why, they say because they got a perfect score. When I ask them what that means they say they got all the answers correct. When I point out to them that I obviously gave the grade without even reading their answers they show signs of being more confused. When I ask them what they think my motive was in giving everyone "10" without checking the answers some say they think it was because I believe they all studied hard and are very bright (honestly!). Others say it was because I want to give them a good start for the semester. But the majority do not really know what is going on. At this point we undertake a discussion of the purpose and meaning of grades.

In our discussion of the matter of grades, I explain to them that grades are a form of feed-back to both student and teacher as to how each is performing in the matter of promoting or growing in understanding of the course matter. I try to get them to see that a grade which doesn't measure their level of understanding is meaningless, at least it is meaningless to those who come to school to learn. For those who come just for grades, high grades no matter how attained, are meaningful in a functional, if not, a moral or academic sense. In the light of this discussion, I ask them once again how they feel about the grade that they got. They realize that actually their "10" has no real value or meaning. I then invite those who really want to know how they did on the quiz to return the paper to me so that I can grade it properly. Needless to say, all do return their

papers to me.

Once I have clarified the reasons behind my rather mysterious behaviour as an attempt to help them see what their performance on the quiz revealed to them about their level of understanding of the matter, the level of their moral development and their basic motive for coming to class, I introduce them to the Honor System and explain my intention of implementing that system for the rest of the semester. I tell them that I will follow the same procedure in future quizzes that I followed in the first quiz, i.e., after placing the questions on the board and clarifying anything that needs to be clarified, I will leave the room and let them answer the questions on their own without the presence of any proctor. I try to deepen their understanding of the reason and value of having such a system by pointing out the need to cultivate the value of honesty and integrity now as a means of preparing for the challenges and temptations that they will be faced with later on in life in matters of greater moment than grades on a quiz. By pointing out the moral dimensions of many of the problems facing the country today and appealing to their own desire to contribute to the creation of a better world, I invite them to take advantage of this opportunity to begin to change the world by changing themselves here and now.

After these exercises and discussions, I give them an assignment to be done at home after they have reflected on their own experience during the previous session. I ask them to answer on a one-half sheet of paper two more questions: 1) Are you in favor of the Honor System? 2) What are the reasons for your answer? I collect their answers the next class and after reading through their papers at home I process these answers with them. I list down on the board the main reasons against the system (very, very few are opposed to the idea) and the main reasons for the system and then discuss each. Among the more common reasons against are fears that some will take advantage of the system to become lazy and dependent on others for their answers since some are clearly only after grades. Some of the objectors claim that the system is unfair because those who study hard and try to be honest may get lower grades than those who don't work but get by through cheating. To these objections I simply respond that these possibilities and students' reactions to them are a test of one's personal values and that these issues will surface over and over again in their lives in the future. I try to help them to see that those who are responsible and honest are the real gainers and that those who are irresponsible and dishonest are the real losers, if we really believe in the values we claim to believe in. One other objection that comes up frequently is the difficulty of resisting temptation. This gives me a chance to explain that while it is true that the "devil is prowling around, seeking whom he may devour" as St. Paul warns us, the Holy Spirit is also around trying to help us to become better men and better women. Here I have the opportunity to say something about the importance of a serious spiritual life in order to become the kind of persons we all aspire to be. I try to help them see that this is true of every aspect of their moral lives, not just quizzes here in school.

Upon completing our discussion of the objections presented, we take a quick look at the reasons why they favor the system. Among the more significant reasons given are their felt need and desire to test and prove their love of and faith in God. Many see the value of being challenged and of being given a chance to prove that they can be trusted. Some see it as an opportunity to grow

in maturity and in their sense of responsibility for their own actions. Still others see it as a chance to develop self-discipline and self-control. So, by and large, their over-all response to the challenge presented by this Honor System reveals in them a real desire to do the right thing on their own and to begin the moral resolution we are all talking about by starting with a conversion in their own hearts. Several even express the wish that this system could eventually be adopted throughout the whole academic system here at the Ateneo. As unrealistic and impractical as that may seem to be, I can really say that their responses have proven very enlightening and inspiring to me.

This report would not be complete if I did not say something about the realization that has developed in me regarding my own contribution to the success of this effort to promote honesty among the students. For it has become very clear to me that if I myself am not honest and open in my dealings with them, I have no right to impose on them the burden of struggling to be honest in their dealings with me. This system has made me more serious and careful in preparing, presenting, and facilitating understanding of the matter that I present to them. It has also made me realize the need to be more reasonable and understanding in my expectations and demands on them, seeing that they are under so many pressures from other teachers and their social and domestic worlds. So I make it a point to assure them that if they prove honest and open with me, I will do everything in my power to be fair in dealing with them. I encourage them to feel free to give me feed-backs—either personally or through the headle—if there is anything I am doing or not doing to their detriment. In this way I try to make it clear to them that I am willing to make my own contribution towards promoting greater honesty in the classroom. I assure them that I am therefore willing to carry my share of the burden involved in our corporate effort to make the world "a better place to live in", even in the admittedly small way of trying to promote the value of honesty in R.S.