

Fr Klaus Mertes SJ on addressing the corona crisis in his school community - On behalf of the annual JECSE Education Delegates Meeting 2020

The shutdown of school and boarding school (550 external + 220 internal students) in March 2020 hit us surprisingly, two weeks before the start of the Easter holidays (Palm Sunday through Easter to White Sunday). We found host-families for our guest students from abroad, especially those from China, and for some we also found holiday apartments in St. Blasien. For some of them we had to make sure that they could take the written Abitur-exams after the holidays, which were postponed by a month to the weeks after the Easter holidays.

The switch to digital distance-learning required the commitment of teachers and school management. For many teachers, the shutdown became a major training-opportunity. The school-administration was also challenged to bring the return of the students back to boarding-school and to school step by step into line with the new regulations on distance. The colleague responsible for the timetable told me after the Easter break: "I've never worked on such a complicated timetable for so long - and only for the next two weeks." At the end of the school year, the headmaster said that they had learned so much in the past few months that they were now much better prepared for the next shutdown. (For an overview see attachment)

The situation at the boarding school was more complicated. Boarding school life cannot be digitalized. The educational-staff was afraid of short-time work and dismissals - in contrast to the teachers. We couldn't expect the host-families to host their host-children into June until after Pentecost. We feared endangering the child's welfare in some families, including families of external students. That's why we negotiated with the authorities immediately after the shutdown. The health department initially linked the boarding-school-permit to the condition that the pupils should initially be sent to a single room in quarantine for the first 14 days; the food should be put in front of their door. We negotiated and were able to get the entire boarding-school and college-area under quarantine. So, we were able to re-open after the Easter break without isolating the young people individually. We were also able to save jobs with it. The boarding school stayed open over the Pentecost-holidays (two weeks). We rejected parents' demands for reimbursement of costs for the two weeks of the shutdown. Instead, we issued several "Corona scholarships" for those parents who suffered economic damage from the anti-Corona measures. Nobody should have to take their child away from the college because they were no longer solvent due to Corona.

What has life in shutdown taught us so far?

1

Corona exposes strengths and weaknesses in the system. You can see it as an opportunity when you have more to say than just what you have always said.

Corona also exposes different characters. There were and are colleagues who consider all of these measures to be completely excessive, and there are colleagues who consider the measures to be completely inadequate. The feelings of fear, the objects of fear and the handling of fears are also different. The same applies to parenthood: there are panicked parents who fear for the life of their children or the elderly in their family if there is no mask requirement in school, and there are parents who consider masks to be dangerous to health and who are strictly against it. They are afraid for their children. The college management faced the difficult task of maintaining unity in the school community. That was not possible without conflicts with all sides.

2

Digital teaching does not replace face-to-face teaching. And: school is more than teaching. The opportunities and limits of digitalization became apparent. On the one hand, digital distance learning could replace a lot. More is certainly possible for the future. But there are many subjects that cannot or can hardly be taught digitally: sports, music, art, theater. The cross-year-offers and working-groups are also cancelled. There are students who completely fall out of communication because the possibilities for control are not given. Homework needs to be checked differently. Problems of educational justice become more tragic: The good students from good family backgrounds win, the others are left behind, especially when the parents' homes do not or cannot participate - because the parents, especially the single-educating parents, have to work; because parents are not interested in education; because the parents come from other cultures and do not speak the language.

3

Students like to go to school. When I announced at school on March 13th that the school (but not: classes) was closing, the students were crying "hurrah". But that changed very quickly. The students missed their friends, the social life at school. They cheered again when they heard the school opened. / One more note on the cheering of the students. A school principal wrote to the new students at the beginning of the 2020/2021 school year: "I adhere to the distance rules ... I don't go to school to meet friends, but to learn." I take that as a negative example. It is instead correct to say: Because there are friends and social contacts in school, students also enjoy learning in school.

School is also a shelter, a protection-room for pupils. We have been talking about "child protection" for years. I was shocked by the serenity with which politics and society allowed the violence in families to increase parallel to the shutdown of child-centers and schools. The youth-welfare-offices were overloaded and were often condemned to watch violence without intervention – because of the distance rules. It became clear to me that school is indispensable for young people from precarious family backgrounds. The two institutions family and school are together indispensable for child-protection.

Young people not only suffered from the school shutdown, but also from the shutdown of sports-clubs and club-life. During the months it became clear how important these institutions are for the well-being of young people. Without sport, without dance, without social life outside of school, new addictions arise, in particular internet gambling addiction and other harmful consequences.

4

Teachers are there for students. Corona challenges the self-image of the teaching profession, positively formulated: Because we fought for the boarding school and soon the school to be gradually reopened, we have gained credibility among students and parents. At the end of the school year, many new parents even registered their children with us on the grounds that they were impressed by the way we fought to ensure that the lessons continue, that the relationship with the students is cultivated and that business is back as soon as possible is opened.

For a few weeks now, the teachers' trade-unions have been addressing the issue of "safety for teachers and students". That was not the case in the first few months. The teachers' unions were the biggest drag on the reopening of the schools. The impression arose that they only had the "safety of teachers" against infection in mind. This impression was reinforced by some statements made by the Chair. This sparked a debate about the teacher-ethos. Teachers also have a responsibility to students - not just for student safety, but also for their education. Nurses are expected to do their job even if it exposes them to contagion. Is it credible to celebrate the "heroes" in the hospitals and to present

them to the young people as models if you don't want to take any risks yourself? The self-image of the teaching profession and its credibility are put to the test.

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Corona raises questions that affect our understanding of education and our values as a whole. These issues are discussed among the young people, too. That is why we cannot remain silent about it in our schools.

1. How much power do we give fear over our relationships? What does it mean for our relationships when closeness becomes a threat? How long can this condition be endured?
2. What does "solidarity" mean when all people are potentially infectious? Who are the "weakest" who need protection?
3. Jesus touched lepers and then ate and drank with thousands? How can we preach this gospel during pandemic times? How can we celebrate worship in community?
4. Is democracy capable of ensuring security in a pandemic? Can China do better (as our Chinese students in St. Blasien claimed)? How many freedoms can be suspended - and how long?
5. What exactly is "conspiracy thinking"? How do we deal with conspiracy thinking when it spreads among young people? But how do we deal with an uncritical understanding of facts that prevents controversial debates about the interpretation of numbers?
6. Populists exploit the crisis. How can serious criticism be distinguished from populist pseudo-criticism?
7. What does the lockdown and collapse of the market mean for poor countries? What collateral gains and what collateral damage do we see for the climate crisis?

These are all questions that also affect our ignatian profile. Pedagogical core areas are affected. For example, the question of the meaning of rules. Several times I had to appear in front of the college's public and say: "We also have to adhere to those rules whose meaning does not make sense to us." I add: As the director of the college, I even had to demand compliance with rules whose meaning I didn't even understand myself. On the one hand, this has to do with the fact that the fear is not only related to the contagion, but to the closure or scandalization of the institution if it becomes a hot-pot. On the other hand, the same applies to everyday pedagogical life in schools: the school cannot make the requirement for compliance with its rules dependent on the students understanding of the meaning of the rules or agreeing to them. Otherwise, those students who do not see their meaning would not have to stick to them. But what does that mean for our understanding of critical-thinking-education - especially when dealing with disciplinary questions? Where is the place where the sense or nonsense of rules can be discussed? This is also a key question for the gospel: Jesus healed on the Sabbath - not because he thought the Sabbath-rules were wrong, but because he applied the rule to the welfare of people, not the other way around. But this question needs constant discussion. It is never finally answered. Corona makes this problem particularly clear.