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Fintan Kilbride

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Learning by Doing

Fintan Kilbride



Each summer in Jamaica we work for AIDS victims in a little home called Matthew 25. How appropriate that a humanitarian organization should be named after what is such a key chapter in the gospel, the essence of what Christianity is all about: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Nigeria

This text has been my lifelong motivation — during my fifteen years in Nigeria, my earlier years in Trinidad, and especially now that I am fully retired from teaching.

In Nigeria I felt that I was not there to convert people so much as to show them a better way of living, “that they might have life more abundantly”, in Jesus’ own words. We did that through education. I remember when my Igbo bishop Godfrey Okoye learned that my father was a civil engineer, he presumed that by osmosis I had to be one too. I knew nothing about building, but I was often called out of class to answer the head mason’s question as to what mix I wanted in the foundations of the new dormitory. “What do you usually do, Alphonsus?” I’d ask. “3-2-1, fadda.” (3 sand, 2 gravel, 1 cement). “Yeah, that sounds good,” I’d answer, “go ahead with, that.” I’d

go to bed every night with a Tilley lamp outside the mosquito net, working with graph paper, every line equaling one foot, making out the plans for a labour ward or the surgery in the new hospital, or the dimensions of a dormitory. A very by-the-seat-of-the-pants approach. I learned by doing. Sixteen years later, on a return visit, I remember going through the wards of one hospital I built and there wasn’t as much as a hairline fracture in the floors or walls. I thought, “What an apt metaphor for what we missionaries did. Our work perdured.”



Jamaica

People sometimes think I was crazy to bring students to Jamaica, one of the most dangerous places in the world. Where we worked in western Kingston, not even armed police would go. Outlaws, murderers on the run took refuge in its garbage dump. Yet the people loved to see us come. Each summer the question on everybody's lips was, "Is Fintan Kilbride coming with his group from Canada? As long as he brings his group we'll have a summer school." Learn by doing. I knew I took a chance the first time; in fact it's a chance every time. We take reasonable precautions. I take appropriate precautions when I drive on the highways around Toronto. There's an element of risk about a lot of things that are really worth doing.

When our visit to Jamaica became a volunteer program with no school credits, it proved even more popular and drew students from across Canada and the United States. We've even had eight or nine from Germany. Almost all of them want to return. They learn a different perspective on life. Sometimes it causes a career change. They want to become teachers so that they can challenge young people as they themselves have been challenged. Many go into development studies. Agata Szlanta from Montreal wrote: "Nothing could have prepared me for those two extraordinary weeks. After 13 years spent in classrooms, thousands of dollars invested in private schools, my greatest teachers have been the poor in Kingston. They may have few material possessions to call their own, but they understand the value in such timeless and irreplaceable gifts as friendships, generosity and warmth. Material gifts are quickly consumed and forgotten, but friendships last forever...." A few days ago I stumbled upon a farewell letter a girl wrote to me: "I couldn't swim and you taught me. I couldn't float and you put me on your knee and let me float... May God bless you and never make your store basket empty."

A life-changing plane crash

An incident that turned my life around took place thirty-seven years ago — a plane crash in Nigeria. During the Biafran civil war, after a year of total blockade, my bishop asked me to go to Catholic Relief Services in New York for aid. I accompanied fourteen tons of medicines, food and medical supplies on a return flight through Lisbon into Biafra. The plane crashed

Photo by Katerina Leach, iStockphoto

thirty-five feet short of a totally darkened runway at 12:45 a.m. Friends in Port Harcourt, five miles away, heard the exploding fuel tanks and thought the airport was being bombed. The left wing sheared off and the fuselage hurtled down the runway upside down and in flames. By the time I regained consciousness, the other five passengers had escaped over the crates and boxes through the rear exit, and by the light of the flames, I could see myself hanging upside down in my seatbelt. I escaped by the cockpit.

Three thousand miles away in Ireland, at that exact moment, my sister Nuala awoke

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from a nightmare in which she saw me trying to get into a burning plane and shouted at me not to enter it. She woke her husband and they knelt down and recited the rosary at their bedside. Ever since then, I have had a clear sense that my life had been spared and given back to me. For what?

Teaching Catholic Values

I've always loved challenging young people, getting them to reach outside of themselves. There's so little expectation of young people. One of the things I always loved as an English teacher was that I could bring in any topic for discussion. I could show them the introduction, the body and the conclusion of an article. For example, when the Canadian bishops came out with their wonderful statement, *Ethical Reflections on the Canadian Economy*, January 1983, I brought that in to my Grade 13 students. I gave them five days to read and analyze it as part of their final exam. I couldn't have got them to do that if it wasn't an assignment.

Every topic is legitimate. To this day when I meet a former student, he'll say to me, “No man is an island.” At least he remembers the first line of John Donne's poem: “No man is an island entire of itself; / Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.... Any man's death diminishes me/because I am involved in

mankind./ And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;/It tolls for thee.”

Twenty years ago we were told to teach the Catholic religion across the curriculum, so every subject was fair game for catholicity. I remember when Cardinal (then Bishop) Ambrozic came to our Neil McNeil staff meeting. “Your goal is to introduce Catholic values in every subject,” he told us, “whether it's science or math or biology or religion.” I always found it easier to teach Catholic values in English class than in religion class. I've done both. I met more resistance in religion class, ironic as it sounds. A

successful Catholic school is one that teaches social justice — Matthew 25 again. That's one reason why I love setting up drinking water systems in Haiti and Nicaragua, irrigation systems so that people can produce more crops. Learn by doing.

Building Schools

A teacher's reward is rarely short term. It happens down the road. Some of us former teachers meet the alumni of Neil McNeil each Christmas. One of them, now a wealthy businessman, heard I was building schools in Haiti. He said, “I'm going to build you a school there.” Just like that. Teaching is very rewarding, but the rewards usually come years afterwards. Teaching is planting seeds, throwing little pebbles into a pond. The ripples go in every direction.

St. Bernadette's Catholic Elementary School, Oakville, has recently raised \$17,000 to build a four-room stone schoolhouse in Haiti. This means that their counterparts in Haiti no longer have to call two trees their school. When it rains they're no longer sent home, because they have a roof over their heads now. And a secondary school is currently under construction to be served by a dozen feeder schools. The school day consists of three shifts from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily, and on weekends the building is used for community meet-

ings and as a health clinic. We challenged the boys and girls to raise \$20 each — loonie by loonie, toonie by toonie, month by month.

The essence of our faith

If tending the poor — the social gospel — were not the central message of Christ, I think I'd be a Buddhist — a religion where it is key. Whether the Buddhists would welcome me, I'm not too sure!

I feel very strongly about the sexual issues that are so predominant in the church's current teaching. Don't use condoms even if it's going to save a life. Look at the disaster of AIDS in Africa. All those pelvic issues, including birth control, are so many things I don't agree with. Then there's the incredible shortage of priests today. Let celibacy be an option — it doesn't have to be mandatory. Obviously we need structure in the church, every household does. But we must take more seriously the opinion and viewpoints of lay people. The church today is not the church of 50, 60 or 100 years ago when the only theologians were religious and clerics. Now with the number of lay people studying and teaching theology it's a different church.

The essence of our faith is the social gospel. I think of Bishop Helder Camara's famous observation: “When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.”

Learning by doing. Grass roots, hands on, person-to-person, many littles make a lot. No big bureaucracy, no administrative costs, no advertising budgets, no business class travel, no overheads. Once you've seen conditions such as these in Haiti, Jamaica and Nicaragua it leaves an indelible mark on your mind, on your soul, on everything. I just love what I do.■

“Fintan Kilbride is the person we all aspire to be as Catholic teachers. He walks and talks the gospel message, leading by example and providing opportunities to others to be of service.... Colleagues describe Fintan as a special teacher who brought the world into the classroom and his students into the world.”

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