

INTERVIEW WITH SR. JOSEPHINE R. GARZA, FMA, PRINCIPAL OF THE DON BOSCO SCHOOL IN MANILA, PHILIPPINES



*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon in collaboration with Sr. Martha Séide and Sr. Runita Borja
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EXCERPTS:

- “As a Salesian Sister, I resonate with what has moved Pope Francis to organize the global compact because I see in it the reasons that moved St. John Bosco, our Founder, to begin his work of educating young people and to establish our religious congregations which continue the work he has begun.”
- “To strengthen Catholic education in the Philippines, it is not enough for Principals to be persons of professional competence. They also need to be formed on educational leadership as a form of ministry and on living a spirituality that is modeled after the person of Jesus.”

Could you please explain your current responsibilities and how you are engaged in supporting the education and development of girls?

I am the Principal of Don Bosco School (Salesian Sisters), Inc. in Manila, Philippines. For the FMA Philippines – Papua New Guinea Province of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, I am also the Coordinator of the basic education sector of the Commission on Education (ComEd) and the FMA Delegate to the Provincial Educating Community Core Group (PECCG). All three roles provide me with many opportunities to support the education and development, not just of girls, but of children and youth of both genders and their families.

As Principal, I am the school’s primary educational leader and the one responsible for the daily operations of the school and the effective and efficient implementation of its policies and educational programs which are currently delivered online due to the pandemic. Don Bosco School (DBS) caters to girls and boys ages 4-18 who are in the Pre-K to 12th Grade levels, and to boys and girls 18 years and older enrolled in our free high school under the Alternative Learning System in the Philippines called the R.E.A.C.H. Ed (Rekindling A Child’s Hope Through Education) program.

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? This interview is with Sister Josephine Garza, FMA, Principal of Don Bosco School (Salesian Sisters), Inc. in Manila, Philippines. She talks about the work in the school, the challenges of providing an integral education, and how the mission of the school relates to the vision of education proposed by Pope Francis under the Global Compact for education.

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Our R.E.A.C.H. Ed students are boys and girls past the regular high school years who were unable to earn their high school diploma mostly due to situations of poverty. With the help of volunteer teachers from among the DBS faculty, staff, parents and senior high school students, boys and girls in R.E.A.C.H. Ed prepare for the equivalency and placement examination given by the Department of Education which, when passed, will give them eligibility to pursue higher education or take on the other exit points such as employment or entrepreneurship with better educational qualifications.

Over these years, the R.E.A.C.H. Ed program has graduated several batches of girls and boys whose lives have been changed by the opportunity to study and to undergo holistic formation in a Catholic school. In both the Pre-K-12 and the R.E.A.C.H. Ed programs, I supervise and collaborate with the faculty to ensure that our educational programs are Catholic, Salesian and according to 21st century standards, and responsive to the various needs, abilities, talents, and interests of our students and to the demands of the time.

I also work directly with the Educating Community Core Group (ECCG), the animating core group in the school composed of parents, teacher and youth representatives and Salesian Sisters. Through the ECCG's financial assistance program, the school is able to accept poor girls and boys from elementary public schools into the junior high school levels of DBS and sponsor their school fees until they graduate in senior high school. The ECCG also animates the local implementation of the Family Ministry of the Province through activities and programs for the formation of families and their involvement in the evangelization work of the church, in social action and in causes for the environment.

As ComEd Basic Education Coordinator, I work with the Directresses, Principals and lay coordinators from all our basic education schools in the Province to ensure that the programs and services of our educational institutions remain distinctly true to their identity and mission. I organize our regular meetings during the school year which are for our common formation as Catholic school leaders, our regular updating on curriculum and instruction, technology integration and the community involvement of our schools, for benchmarking on best practices and as well as for ensuring the schools' continuous upgrading and recognition by reputable accreditation bodies.

Since I am the ComEd Basic Education Coordinator, I am also the FMA Delegate to the PECCG. I work with a core group composed of parents who are chairpersons of their school's local Educating Community Core Group, teacher representatives and youth leaders from all our basic education schools. Our main role is to animate the Family Ministry program which was drafted by the PECCG as a

response to a felt need in the FIL-PNG Province to make our ministry among children and young people more authentic, relevant and holistic through a ministry that includes the families. Hence, every year, the PECCG organizes formation activities and initiatives that empower individuals, families and educating communities to respond to relevant issues and realities affecting the family.

Our annual Family camps and PEC general assemblies participated in by families from our various presences have made us draft our common "Laudato Si commitments," undertake mangrove-planting, provide training on urban farming and gardening, undergo formation on Salesian accompaniment, mental health education, to name a few. All these, I believe, promote the education and development of the girls and boys we serve because, aside from learning these in our schools, parents are empowered to take on their role as the primary educators of their children and our main collaborators in our work of educations.

What do you believe are the current strengths of Catholic education and in particular the strengths of the activities you are involved in?

Catholic education focuses on the education of the whole person or the integral development of persons. It is not just about the academics or the intellectual formation of the students. It also fosters their physical, emotional, cultural, moral, ethical and spiritual development. In our schools, it even includes and involves the families of our students. The formation of the parents of our students and their families are an indispensable part of our mission. Parents are empowered to take an active role in the education and formation of their children. With their participation, educative interventions also become more effective because the home and the school are one in their proposals and ways of educating the boys and girls towards character and conscience formation. As empowered families, they willingly seek for means to participate actively in their local communities and parishes. This then makes the school's scope of influence wider, and opens some possibilities for our educative programs to trickle down to or reach the greater society and the local church.

Catholic education is also a direct participation in the evangelizing mission of the Church and in developing members of the society who can be at the forefront of initiatives and programs that benefit those at the peripheries. As we say about the FMA mission, "We evangelize through education; and we educate through evangelization." Faith formation happens in all the learning areas of the curriculum, and opportunities for students to imbibe the Gospel values and practice their faith in worship and service abound no matter the age or circumstance of the students.



Photos: DBS Families and students' outreach activities, and graduation of a R.E.A.C.H. Ed batch.

Aside from having organized outreach projects involving the students, teachers, parents and alumni in our schools, a simple Math lesson on subtraction for Kindergarten students, for example, can become an opportunity for our students not only to learn how to apply the rules in subtraction but also to “take away” from some of their prized possessions like their toys, books or clothes in order to share them with someone who may have need of them. In Catholic schools, one is never too young to imitate the ways of Jesus, and to strive to help make this world a better one for all.

True catholic education involves the interplay of 3 pillars: the school, the home and the parish. Active involvement in the parish completes the solid formation of the person's head, heart and hands given by the school and the home. In the Catholic Church are countless opportunities where boys and girls can learn and discover the joy of service and of radical self-giving. Parishes are usually very supportive of the programs of Catholic schools, not just in

providing for the sacramental needs of the students and the members of the school community, but also in opening opportunities for students and educators to serve and make a difference in whatever way they can. This is true for our students who, after being given the possibilities for service and self-giving in our schools, learn to find joy in committing themselves to activities, projects or even to careers and professions that promote justice, peace, solidarity and care for others in this world.

In which areas could Catholic education be improved and how, especially again with regards to the activities that you are personally engaged in?

There is a need to strengthen in the religious education program of Catholic schools conscience and character formation and education to commitment as active citizens. Students must not only be helped to grow in their knowledge about the Catholic faith, but they have also to be formed in the moral and worship dimensions of the

faith. Many times, students have their heads filled with the doctrines of the faith, but their hearts and their hands remain underdeveloped. Hence, many graduates of Catholic schools in our country who are holding public office are among the most corrupt and unjust officials we have. They are unable to live out the call to be a leaven of transformation in the church and in the society. The faith they believe in is detached from the life they actually live. Thus, making enlightened and courageous choices and being able to commit themselves to work for the common good and to dare to be different when pressured to stand for something that is against Catholic morals and traditions do not really come naturally to them.

Since Catholic education involves both religious and lay educators, strengthening the faith life of our lay mission partners through formation is another area that could be improved. Many of our lay mission partners did not grow up in Catholic schools or in homes of practicing Catholics. Their formation on the faith is either weak or lacking. To address this, faculty and staff formation in our schools include a systematic and differentiated formation on the faith and in Salesian spirituality.

The formation empowers them to accompany better the young in their care. It results in unity of interventions between the lay and religious educators. It also opens the eyes of the lay educators to the evangelization ministry of the church which the school is participating in. Consequently, it becomes easier for them to extend their service to the larger community especially when they see certain needs for help or problematic circumstances arise. Modelling service and community and parish involvement to students become a strong lesson that teach the young about the school's commitment to help the church and society address issues to promote justice and peace, care for creation, etc.

Accessibility of Catholic education to the poor is another area that needs improvement. Catholic education is generally available and accessible only to families who can afford to pay its cost. If Catholic institutions would make true their preferential option for the poor, there should be programs and activities that will enable those who are in the peripheries to enjoy Catholic education despite the circumstances they are in.

Aside from allocating slots and providing scholarships for students from public schools who wish to study in our schools, we also involve the parents, students and teachers in activities that will increase the school's capacity to welcome and help the poor. In addition, formation is always geared towards sensitizing the families who make up the school as well as our lay mission partners to their duty, as members of a catholic school community, to share their resources and support programs that uplift the quality of life and nurture the dignity of those who are poor and marginalized.

Have you observed recently interesting innovative initiatives in Catholic education, especially for girls? If so, what are they and why are those initiatives innovative?

In the Philippines, only a very small percentage of students are in Catholic schools. The majority of the school-age population are in public schools and in non-sectarian private schools where catechesis and religious education are not offered. Another way that we participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church, is through the groups of parents of our students who undergo a systematic formation on the faith as "Volunteer Parent Catechists" in order to become catechists in public schools and in private non-sectarian schools served by the parish where our schools are situated. Aside from teaching the faith, they also prepare the students for the sacraments of confession, communion and confirmation.

Their service is also complemented by the service of our high school students who are also formed to become catechists in the public schools as part of the service component of our Christian Living Education (CLE) classes. With the lockdowns in place, catechesis is now done online – although attendance is not as strong as in the in-person catechetical sessions due to the public school students' lack of gadgets to use and due to poor internet connectivity. To address this, our students have come up with catechetical materials in our mother tongue which they plan to develop into a simple phone app using their coding skills learned in school for next school year's catechetical ministry to go on and to have a wider reach.

For our students, their involvement in this endeavor allows them to use their catechetical and technological skills in order to make a positive contribution in the evangelizing ministry of the church and in making a better society for all.

The development of school consortia where a small group of schools team up to meet common needs and maximize their human and financial resources is also one innovative initiative in Catholic education. Catholic schools have banded together to address issues on lack of resources in their operations and to strengthen their impact or scope of influence in the society and in the church. Indeed, this is no longer the era for unhealthy competition on being the best between Catholic institutions. With education becoming borderless due to technology, Catholic schools can easily share human resources to strengthen its programs and to expand its reach and influence.

How do you understand the call from Pope Francis for a new Global Compact on Catholic education? How do you think you and the FMA sisters could contribute to the Pope's vision?

In my opinion, the Global Compact on Education proposed by Pope Francis is an initiative that is so needed at this time when a dignified, peaceful and harmonious life seems such a far-fetched reality for many peoples and nations. The COVID-19 pandemic, with all its devastating effects, has even made it such an imperative for all sectors of the world to embrace. In reality, there is indeed a marked disparity in so many aspects among those who are well off and those who are marginalized, and among them the opportunity to receive quality transformative education. As a result, selfishness, a lack of fraternity and injustice continue to divide humanity. The Pope's call for action through the global compact truly brings a flicker of hope for the world especially if it will be welcomed and supported by all, starting with the world leaders and the education leaders.

As a Salesian Sister, I easily resonate with what has moved Pope Francis to organize the global compact because I see in it the reasons that moved St. John Bosco, our Father and Founder, to begin his work of educating young people and to establish our religious congregations which continue the work he has begun.

The Pope's hopes for global change to happen, and for a culture of peace, solidarity, fraternity and justice to prevail through education are exactly what I experience and touch, albeit in a micro scale, as I go about my mission as a Catholic educator and a school leader. In all the educational settings where I have served, countless are the girls and boys I've encountered whose lives and the lives of their families have been transformed because of the opportunities to study and grow in a faith-filled environment permeated by Gospel values and filled with occasions to appreciate differences, build community and participate in social action.

Like the Pope's intention to involve as many sectors as possible in ensuring the success of the global compact, educating in our schools is definitely not the work of single persons doing the mission by themselves. In my experience, it is most fruitful when it is the outcome of a collaboration among many people capable of making their own contribution to quality transformative education. This is our style of educating in FMA settings. The home and the school, with all its sectors, collaborate in the educative process. Since we are a congregation fully engaged and given to the education of children, young people and their families, our efforts to carry out our educative mission in the best way we can and in collaboration with the family and the educating community, making education available and equitably accessible most especially to the poor, the least, the vulnerable and the marginalized, and to seek for

creative and relevant ways to educate those in our care to global and ecological citizenship are means by which we can contribute to the Pope's vision.

What events, projects, or activities could be suggested to strengthen a common identity for Catholic education at a global level? What are your ideas?

In its national convention in 2016, the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP) invited all its member schools to undergo an institutional self-evaluation vis-à-vis the defining characteristics, benchmarks, and standards for Catholic basic education schools. In response to that invitation, our Commission on Education organized an orientation for our school leaders and lay mission partners on the Philippine Catholic Schools Standards (PCSS) drafted by the CEAP. It included tedious and challenging lectures and workshops on 5 domains: Catholic Identity and Mission, Leadership and Governance, Learner Development, Learning Environment, and Operational Vitality to understand the PCSS document which is based on Church documents and teachings on Catholic education not as a tool for accreditation but for self-improvement, i.e. for Catholic schools to ensure that it is truly catholic in its identity and mission.

We are now in the implementation phase of the PCSS in our respective institutions, but the lockdowns have either slowed down or stalled the process in some of the schools. However, the experience has really been beneficial in terms of strengthening our common identity as Catholic institutions. I believe an initiative similar to this, done on a global scale, can also help strengthen the common identity of Catholic education in the world.

What are some of the priorities in terms of training and capacity building for school principals, teachers, alumni, parents, or other groups to strengthen Catholic education in your country or area?

To strengthen Catholic education in the Philippines, Catholic schools can seriously reflect on the question "How Catholic is your school?" using the Philippine Catholic School Standards. Its five domains on Catholic Identity and Mission, Leadership and Governance, Learner Development, Learning Environment, and Operational Vitality touch on all the groups of people or sectors in a Catholic school: principals, teachers, parents, students and alumni.

To strengthen Catholic education in the Philippines, it is not enough for Principals to be persons of professional competence. They also need to be formed on educational leadership as a form of ministry and on living a spirituality that is modeled after the person of Jesus. Teachers and parents also need to be formed towards becoming

witnessing Catholics so that they can be models of the Gospel values and the teachings of the Church for those in their care and the people around them. The alumni, as another potent group who can make a positive impact in the places and circumstances they are in, should also be organized so their faith formation may be reinforced and they may be empowered to live their faith and be inspired to be the extensions of the presence of the Catholic school in their respective realities through their witness and life of service.

Could you please share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

It was on my third year as a Sister in temporary vows in 1999 when my Provincial Superior sent me to earn my Master of Arts degree in Education, majoring in School Leadership. Two years later, I graduated and was eventually assigned as Principal in one of our schools. That assignment led to a string of other assignments that has taken me to all our five basic education schools in the Philippines where I served as Principal for a total of 13 years, plus 1 year as head of a college department while I was recuperating from an illness that took me away from the basic education ministry for a while.

As a religious Sister, I serve wherever my vow of obedience leads me to. I was a young religious, not even perpetually professed when I was first asked by my Provincial Superior to be a Principal. Before that, I was a full-time high school Religion and Music teacher who also held various mid-level assignments in the schools where I was assigned in. I enjoyed teaching and was humbled by the privilege of being able to accompany my students in their personal journey.

Having to give up being a classroom teacher then in order to become a principal was very hard for me. My first few years were always haunted by a great resistance to doing administrative work. The longing to return to being a teacher just wouldn't die down. Yet, being a person who grew up giving always my best in everything I do, I also tried to take on my new role seriously and poured my energies into its numerous demands. Among them is faculty training and formation.

From experience, I knew that the quality of a school rests on the quality of its teachers and staff. I eventually realized that a Principal is also a teacher to the teachers and staff he/she works with. I teach them, not just through the lessons I impart during the formation sessions I hold, but most especially in the way I deal with people and do my work.

I still, time and again, long to be back to the classroom to teach young people, but I also have come to accept already that, for now, my mission is to accompany and form the teachers in my care. It is such a delicate task as I

see how thin the line is between empowering a teacher and extinguishing the passion in a teacher's heart through mishandling.

Over these years, I have learned to be fully convinced that, indeed, relating with all kinds of people remains to be the most challenging part of my ministry. As a Catholic school leader and a consecrated religious at that, it is therefore what I give more importance to. It is not easy because, by nature, I can actually be more task-oriented than people-oriented. Every single day, I need to strive to strike the balance because I know that, more than being a professional, I am a religious leading a Catholic educational institution.

Under my leadership, school programs, plans and initiatives can only turn out well if the school is centered on Jesus, and if relationships are good and life-giving, and there is co-responsibility, collegiality and subsidiarity. Thank God, I have Sisters and friends who have helped me realize this early on in my service, and hence, this is the same conviction I live by wherever obedience brings me – and it has always worked well for me and for the school community where I serve.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

My mother was a teacher for a total of 39 years – five years in a Catholic school and 34 years in a public high school. I grew up seeing her as a very dedicated teacher who would even bring home loads of paper works and diligently accomplish them at night or sometimes during weekends. At the same time, it was also very common for me to see some of her students coming to our house to ask for her help for school needs or projects they could not afford, to seek her intervention when there are conflicts in their families, and for many other reasons which, to my young mind then, made the teaching profession look very difficult and unattractive.

Hence, when I was deciding about the career I would like to pursue as an adult, the teaching profession was farthest from my mind. But truly God works in mysterious ways. He led me to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, a congregation fully given to the education of children and young people. By my religious profession, I became an educator like my mother, and yes, I also have experienced countless times the life my mother has lived as a teacher – the endless paper works, young people and lay mission partners needing my assistance at even the most unholy of hours, having to put on many hats just to meet all the demands of the ministry, etc. – and I just love it!

After all these years in the ministry, I know I can sincerely say that education is indeed something I am very passionate about. I say this because I am fully convinced of its power to transform lives, communities and the world. At the same time, I also see myself taking on a determined attitude when faced with seemingly unsurmountable challenges in the ministry. I know that the “go-getter” attitude is very strong in me even from when I was much younger. As an FMA who is passionate about education, I know I can also say that it has transformed me into a “go-giver” who is ready to give my share in whatever concerns the mission entrusted to me no matter what it takes.

The support I receive from my Sisters and the collaboration of those with whom I share the mission inspire me to give my best always and to work for God’s glory. I really thank God for this gift of being an educator and a Catholic school leader because through these, I am able to share in the evangelizing mission of the Church and in the building of a world of greater humanity. On May 24, I will be celebrating the 25th anniversary of my profession as an FMA, and I have no regrets being an educator like my mother, and most of all, like Jesus, the Greatest Teacher.



Photo: Salesian Sisters, students, teachers and parents at a mangrove-planting activity of the PECCG.