Service Learning for the Common Good

公益服务习得

Dennis P. McCann 丹尼斯 interviews
Rev. Dr. Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J.

The MRI Journal features interviews with academics, business leaders, and other professionals who are developing positive responses to the changes underway in Macau, Hong Kong, China, and SE Asia. This, the third of these interviews is with Rev. Dr. Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J., Archbishop of Luxembourg and formerly Vice-President for International Affairs, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan. At the 2017 Symposium on "Education for the Common Good," co-sponsored by the Macau Ricci Institute (MRI) and the University of St. Joseph in Macau, November 23-24, Dr. Hollerich made a presentation on "Service Learning at Sophia University in Japan: A Case Study." In our interview we discussed not only the service learning programme at Sophia University and its impact on those who participated in it, but also Dr. Hollerich's efforts to organize similar programmes as Archbishop of Luxembourg. He shows us why he thinks service learning is an important educational resource for deepening students' awareness of the common good and their contribution to it.

DPM: Your topic at the MRI Conference was "Service Learning at Sophia University in Japan". Tell us about the programme and your role in organizing it?

JCH: I was teaching for more than 17 years at

Sophia University, where I served my last four years there as a Vice-President and as a member of the Board of Trustees. The University's Motto is: "MEN AND WOMEN FOR OTHERS WITH OTHERS." The "WITH OTHERS" is very important since we live in a modern world, with its growing individualism, and therefore students are not very good at real (interpersonal) communication. God, however, is always to be found in reality, therefore we have to open reality with others for students, and for that reason I organized student trips to Thailand.

The main part of our programme was focused on a small village Ban Huay Hee. Here there are the Karen people (in fact it is a Protestant village). The village is near the border with Myanmar close by the city of Mae Hong Son. For my students from Sophia University in Japan, going there meant leaving a world of comfort and personal habits and entering a very different reality. There's no real road going there, so you need a line of jeeps. The village sits at 1280 meters high in the mountains.

The Karen people live in these villages. We did homesteading in the village, where two or three students would live with a single family. At first, I took ten students, but since then I've organized usually 20 in each programme. For some students it is a real cultural shock. I remember the first evening one of the students, a girl, was crying, because Japanese girls love their cosmetics, but she had no mirror, and she was upset by the lack of a mirror, which she needed to look beautiful. Now the same girl was crying again when she left the village—and not only she, but all the students, boys and girls—because they became so attached to this village that they didn't want to leave it.

DPM: How long on average were you in the village?

JCH: Ten days. The families were very nice and had taken the students to heart. The students experienced something they couldn't find in modern life in Tokyo. People showed them a way of working. They still have rotational farming there. Each year a part of the forest is burnt in order to prepare fields for rice planting. But they do it in accordance with nature. In four years you won't know where the previous field had been. They plant all kinds of vegetables and fibres for making their clothing.

At the time we were there, maintenance of the fields was going on, and so the young people could work at home. My students were told to go to the village school to teach some English to the kids. Maybe not the best way to learn the language. My students were rather good at English among Japanese, and much better than the local kids who were so happy to have these visitors, who were also teaching basic arithmetic. The Karen children have prodigious memory, and so retain everything they learn.

Each day I would say Mass at the Protestant chapel, and all the kids came to observe what I was doing. I was teaching them some songs, like Alleluia, and some psalms. And when I returned in following years with more students the kids would sing these songs to me. Very good memory. The people are very committed to their church. They have services twice in the week, and on Sunday they spend almost the whole day in church. All the village business is done in the church, like the distribution of the fields. I remember a young widow who couldn't cope with her family, and so the people did her work in the fields to make sure they had enough rice to live on.

Living among such people became so normal for the students. We would have an evening of sharing during our stays. Not so easy because of the language barrier. My students spoke in Japanese. I translated into English, our Thai guide translated into Thai, and one of the young villagers translated into the Karen language. Their willingness to communicate was intense. But words were not enough to communicate what life in Tokyo is like and so we used drawings to show what city life is like. Of course, they preferred living in their village compared to that. How easy it is to forget things living in big cities.

After we spent just 10 days in the village, we returned to Chiang Mai, where we went to the Jesuit retreat house. There we did a retreat

for non-Christians (since most of my students were not Christians). I asked them to write their reflections in silence in a journal—what did they learn from their experience, what was important to them—so that it would not be just another floating experience but would remain and might make a difference in their decision making later on.

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DPM: And what kind of a difference did it make for them?

JCH: Most of my students were in their 4th year of studies at the University, and they were about to begin a year-long effort at "job hunting" that is, making the transition from being students to their careers ahead. Of course, they were focused primarily on getting good jobs, and I wanted to help them learn to make a choice, say, between jobs that pay best but leave you with no time for your families, and other jobs that might pay less but in which you would have time for family and other responsibilities. I asked them to make their choice, not telling them what to do, because my experience is different, but they should make a choice, and some of them decided to do a year of volunteer work. I was deeply touched at how they took this experience in Thailand and worked with it in their own lives.

After our conference in Macau this past November, I was in Japan and met a young family where the husband had been with us in the Karen village. We were having a glass of beer in the evening, and he could still sing some songs he learned in Karen.

DPM: Let's try to conceptualise service learning from what you are relating. Students have the experience living in the village, but then it is essential that they have time to reflect on what they have done.

JCH: Yes. It is just one out of many experiences they might learn from. For they don't lack experiences, may have too many experiences, but not those that really mark our lives. Young people want to do something for others, they are very generous, but doing something for others can also be very egoistic: I am the good one. You should accept what I do. You should admire me and thank me, and so on. So the first point is to be with others, to learn from other people, to enter their lives, no longer to have my own lifestyle at the centre of my thinking, but to see how people live, feel what is important for them, understand them, and then do something with and for them.

The first time we were in Ban Huay Hee the villagers asked for two modern toilets, since they were becoming an ecotourist village. Just a start. Maybe every third week a tourist would come by and want to sleep in the village. Once they discover that people want to sleep there, they also want modern toilets. And so we got the toilets and started digging to set them up and of course the village people helped us. They could do in one hour what it would take us one day to do. If you really want to do something for others, you must do it with others. That is what people really appreciate.

DPM: Are there problems in both Thailand and Myanmar for the Karen?

JCH: There is peace in Thailand, but only some villages are recognised by the Thai, and have schools. Others do not, as if the people do not exist. But in Ban Huay Hee, the people live close to a very high mountain with the peak at the border with Myanmar at 1700 meters. Many white orchids grow naturally on the mountain which the people care for. They live in a kind of natural park. They care for the orchids.

DPM: So in addition to subsistence agriculture, which you were describing before, the cultivation of orchids is a major part of their economic strategy.

JCH: The people live with nature. They get up when the sun is rising, and they go to bed when it is dark, since there is nothing else to do. It's quite new for my students, who get up when the sun has already risen, and may not get to bed until the sun is about to rise again. In the village they have to cope with a different way of life. But they can do it. Young people are flexible. They can see that people live with nature. In the big cities people cannot imitate the village way of life, but they can start to reflect on our way of life and learn how to respect nature a little bit more. We have been doing this even from Luxembourg, since I took a group from Luxembourg to the village this past summer. We used a morning prayer with the sunrise, to begin the day respecting nature in the sunrise.

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DPM: As you say, we cannot replicate village life with its natural rhythms in the cities, but we can learn to appreciate the environment….

JCH: We could be offering just a romantic experience, but this is meant to create a new challenge to their urban lifestyle.

DPM: That is a great point. In service learning programmes you have to make sure you don't just provide exotic or romantic experiences, but something that might have a transformational impact.

JCH: Still, it's easier to start with an exotic experience. Because people are touched very deeply when you bring them to a place where there is no escape. Otherwise there are usually plenty of escapes, where your body can undergo the experience, but your mind is not engaged.

DPM: When there is no escape, you must open yourself to the transformational possibility.

JCH: It also means you have to believe in the people in the village, you have to believe they can teach something to us. You must also believe in the students. You can only believe in the students if you are having constant dialogue with them. It's not that I want them to undergo an experience for which I already know the outcome, but you put them in a situation where they have to struggle—like learning to swim—but I also have to learn from their experience.

DPM: Situations where the outcomes are not predetermined, but where they can be challenged?

JCH: I have a kind of Socratic function. To get out of the students what is already in them. But not crammed in them.

DPM: Since you became Archbishop of Luxembourg have you been able to continue your work in service learning?

JCH: I am now in my seventh year as Archbishop of Luxembourg, but in those seven years I have twice taken 130 young people to Thailand. I divided them into two smaller groups because the village cannot accommodate that many people. One group built a college for poor people, like the Jesuits built outside of Shanghai. Another group built a church.

DPM: So there was carryover from the service learning programme you developed at Sophia, into the effort you have made as Archbishop of Luxembourg to engage young people in the experience and sharing work with the people of the Thai village. Your new programme is no longer university based, but based at the Cathedral, still

in service to the Karen people in Thailand. You've done it twice so far and will do it again in 2019.

JCH: We will continue to do it in Thailand. We now have a new professor formerly from the Asian Development Bank, who had done a project with us in Laos. But he will take students to the new Jesuit College for Tribal People, the Xavier Learning Center in the so-called golden triangle region, up the Mekong River. We hope to get some help from not only Sophia, but also from the Sannata Dharma, the Jesuit university in Indonesia.

DPM: But I have a question about the impact of service learning: What kind of follow up have you done? How do you measure outcomes, as in educational "outcomes assessment"?

JCH: I still meet these people when I visit Japan. They are very faithful in their relationships. I just met now one young man from Keio University who had been on one of our trips. He has a very good job. Doing well. But he told me he changed his job because of his experience in Thailand.

DPM: What kind of change?

JCH: He has chosen a job in Tokyo with less money, but more time and more human interaction. Another example: I had a student who worked for a Japanese bank, who chose to go to the countryside where he'd hoped there would be less stress, but he was deceived. In the countryside there is more of the old system, with its demands and stresses, than in the capital. He went into heavy depression. His wife saved him, but his experience in Thailand gave him the courage to change jobs and return to Tokyo, where he now has a less stressful job and they have a beautiful daughter with a second child coming this year. He got a job that gives him time to breathe. He's rediscovered that life is beautiful and that you have to take responsibility for your own life.

We must remember that happiness can only be achieved through interaction with other people, unless you have a vocation as a monk in the desert, but most people do not. We believe that every man and every woman is an image of God, and that there is goodness in each human heart. So we must start with our desires, some of which are good, even though our desires are usually mixed, some good and some bad, and you must learn to discern the difference.

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DPM: Yes. I firmly believe it is not the suppression of desire, but its transformation that is the key to happiness. It's the elevation of desire to things that are appropriate. We reach out through desiring, reach out through love.

JCH: We see this in marriage, which is good and holy, and not simply a concession to lust or disordered desire.

DPM: Did you find in your interactions with students in your groups of 10 or 20 that not only were students learning from their Karen hosts but also rediscovering each other in new ways?

JCH: Yes, of course. Sometimes, there are couples coming out of these experiences. Sometimes they are listening to each other's stories for the first time, since they had time, in the evenings and there was nothing else to do. No lights. No TV. No cell phones.

DPM: And that is part of the path toward the common good. It is not just exotic or romantic. It's not just they are processing a world they never imagined before, but that they are processing it all in a new way. Forming bonds and relationships that set them on the path to the common good.

DPM: You have challenged us by showing how service learning can have an enormous personal impact, seen in terms of the choices people make about vocation, career, the true meaning of happiness, the embrace of healthy family life, balancing family and work responsibilities. How do you conceive of all that in relationship to the common good? Is service learning a way to focus or intensify our awareness and inclination to serve the common good?

JCH: Surely it is. First of all, you bring together people from very modern cities like Tokyo with those in a mountain village in Thailand, and they discover in each other the same humanity, their mutual human being. We learn that I cannot live my lifestyle in such a way that it is hurting my friends in Thailand. The service learning experience teaches us that we must now think of the common good as global. Not America first, or Luxembourg first, but the world first, all the people first, each treated equally on the same basis. Similarly, with the environment. We must consider it as integral to social justice. As Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* has pointed out, this is an integral dimension of Catholic Social Teaching. We must strive no longer for just my own small happiness, since I can only be happy myself if I am working for the common good. I enjoyed the conference because we had the common good linked to so many concepts, showing just how broad it is.

DPM: Your contribution, I think, was to help us find the experiential basis for understanding the common good. Too easily it becomes jargon, just another abstraction, but you've shown us how to structure an experience, rural and urban, city and mountain village. What we discover together is that we can no longer live a lifestyle that proceeds at the expense of others, or out of indifference to others, but must proceed from a global common good that must include care for the environment, care for our common home.

JCH: We all must have experiences which lead us to the common good. But there are opportunities to do this through our human family, working through our faith communities. Today young people live in a world where such experiences are rare or smothered by distractions. So they are in need of new and different experiences. Service learning programmes can provide the opportunity to intensify these experiences, in which we create occasions for an expansion of thinking and feeling.

Rev. Dr. Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J., Archbishop of Luxembourg