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Deputy Heads Conference
“Freedom in the everyday”

Choosing your Life or Putting up with It. Promoting Freedom in Everyday Life

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Last September Marie-Thérèse said this to me : ‘The deputy head gets eaten up from all sides : the head, the pupils, the parents, the teachers, the secretaries, the other deputies, timetables, administrations, school trips and international exchanges, discipline problems, culture clashes, ethical issues, questions of good teaching practice. All this without forgetting the most difficult thing of all: teaching the Christian faith, the pastoral and catechetical task of the school. The deputy head has to deal not only with intellect but also, quite often, with emotions and above all with people’s egos. Pedagogue, psychologist, sociologist, *chief scout*, even—among the parents—marriage counsellor. They might try to be a wise philosopher, but they end up firefighting, nursing, coaxing, absorbing tension, rubber-stamping. They are just eaten up by it all. At night, as they snuggle under the duvet and turn out the light, what have they got left? Not much. Often perhaps no more than a great desire for another way of life.’ And then she said : ‘What can you do for these people?’ !!!!!!!

I can at least say that I once felt your pain. During my ten years teaching at the Jesuit colleges of Bordeaux and Toulouse I was for some time prefect of studies, under two Jesuits and one lay person as heads. But that’s not enough, above all because it was a very long time ago. Already then, things weren’t easy, and my sense is that they have not got better. Whatever problems a society has you can find in its schools. That’s what makes school life at once so fascinating and so draining.

I’m not going to give you practical advice on how to organize your schedules, nor any psychological tips on how to get on with the head, with your colleagues, the parents, and those whom you are trying to manage. There are experts on all these things, and you can go and talk to them if you think it’s useful, I just note that their fees are very high.

This Jesuit standing in front of you can only talk out of his own experience: out of what has helped me get through difficult moments, what continues to inspire me and to help me organize my life as one who is still active as a university teacher. I would have loved to talk to you about the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola—how there’s a mysticism there connected with decision-taking in freedom. But another Jesuit is going to talk to you about St Ignatius and his spirituality tomorrow.

I’ve been asked to talk to you in secular terms, and to offer ‘some resources for reflecting on your convictions and your practices, so as to help you discern what should be fostered and what needs changing’.

The big questions exercising you are all connected with the problem of freedom: in professional relationships, in your school's management structure, in the decisions you take, both as individuals and institutionally. How can you be *free*? To start with, that's a question about your own selves and about the blocks to freedom within your selves. I'll talk about freedom under two different headings.

Firstly, I'll talk about liberty in connection with *authority*. What does it mean to exercise authority and to be subject to authority? What is the relationship between your own authority and the authority delegated to you?

Secondly, I'll talk about freedom and *time*. For my time is like my freedom: in one sense, my time just is me. Time is the most precious thing I have. If I give you my time, it's not like my giving you money; I'm giving you of myself. I am free, but I am also time-bound. One thing distinguishing me from an animal is that I know that one day I shall die. And this awareness is part of what it is to be human—that's what Heidegger taught us. I *am* my time; time is an element in what I am. If you tell me how you spend your time, I can tell you who you are. Is there any way of getting beyond a sense of being imprisoned in one's use of time, in one's diary?

What I am going to say may appear just obvious, matters of common sense. But Albert Camus used to say that such straightforward truths are the ones you discover after all the others. And it's always helpful to hear others saying things again that you know perfectly well in your heart of hearts, but that you often forget.

I – Liberty and Authority.

Our pupils think of freedom as doing what I want, when I want and how I want. Of course we gave up thinking like that ages ago. We know that there's no such thing as absolute freedom. We know—as Hegel famously put it—that absolute freedom would be sheer terror: the terror which Robespierre and others caused to reign in revolutionary France. Freedom of that kind has caused many people to be shot dead or to lose their heads.

We know that the only freedom that exists is a one that is relative to other freedoms. Our freedom ends where that of others begins; theirs ends where ours begins. We are all too well aware of how things get tangled: our freedom and that of others are closely interdependent. We are well aware that there's no such thing as absolute freedom. Liberty is inevitably under constraints. The only thing we can sensibly think of is acquiring some greater measure of freedom, going through processes that make us freer. So then, how do we do this?

Here we come up against a reality fundamental to any sort of life in society: authority. It is authority which establishes, fosters and guarantees human freedoms, the exercise of freedom.

So, here I am as a deputy head. My authority depends on that of the head. But I too am an 'authority'. How are we to understand authority in such a way that this delegated authority of mine makes sense?

From humanity's beginning, authority has been a *force*, a force imposed on others. Normally it appears as a constraint, a limitation. Authority contrasts with spontaneity, and prevents me from being myself. But—and the etymology of the word reminds us of this—it is a mistake to think of authority as something that limits. It is the opposite which is the case: authority enables growth.

1. Authority as a force of growth.

Authority is a force of growth, in service of the human group's protection and growth. The Latin root brings this out: *auctoritas* (authority) derives from *augere*, which means to

produce, to foster growth, to increase. In English, an ‘author’ writes a book; in Latin, an *auctor* can do many other things besides: win a battle, produce something of any kind, act in a particular way. *Augere, auctoritas, auctor*: this word-family also contains *augustus*, which means ‘divine’. Authority is a power in some way connected with the sacred, the more-than-human. But this power is also at the service of humanity and of society, enabling them to exist, to grow harmoniously, and to mature.

In short, authority is ‘a force, a power generating social bonds’. It channels the growth of a human group or of a society, and enables its fulfilment.

2. The Three Types of Authority

Even if authority may seem like some sort of juridical capacity, any juridical power is grounded in an ability actually to make things happen. Authority is a force that is imposed. And authority has various ways of imposing itself, various ways involving greater or lesser degrees of violence.

I shall tell you in a minute who the philosopher is who is inspiring me at this point. He distinguishes three kinds of authority, three kinds of force, three kinds of leadership:

1) the authority of the *charismatic leader*, the ‘born leader’, who exercises—to use Max Weber’s term—charismatic authority. The born leader has a prestige and authority that imposes itself naturally on the group, without his or her having to exercise any sort of physical constraint. Some examples: Joan of Arc, Gandhi, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, Nelson Mandela.

2) the authority of the *patriarch*, an authority like that found in a family setting, exercised by what Latin calls the *auctor gentis*, the ‘author of the family’. This model predominated in ancient societies (patriarchal societies, monarchical states: the king is the ‘father of the nation’). It is still operative in modern democratic societies where respect is given to family to ancestry and thus to the family leader. But new legislation about marriage is calling such arrangements into question, and suppressing or transforming the idea of paternity and lineage.

3) The authority of the *master* imposed by physical force, by violence, as the result of an interpersonal struggle, a war or a revolution. This model was taken up in the famous dialectic of master and slave analyzed by Hegel and given new life by Karl Marx. We take up just one point: the slave has been conquered, but the master has spared the slave’s life on condition that he becomes the slave. The slave has thus opted for servitude in preference to death. He is in subjugation to the master, and his service rests on fear. Supremacy has been given to the strongest, to the ‘stronger’ master. The Latin comparative adjective here is *magis*—‘more’; a term that sounds familiar in Ignatian circles. From *magis* we get *magister*, ‘master’: in the social and political sense, obviously, but also in the educational one—the schoolmaster. From the same root, the word *majestas*: His Majesty the King.

Thus any regime of law depends, not just on law, but more fundamentally on an act of force that was subsequently codified in law. Pascal, following Montaigne, was able to put the point vividly. We don’t obey the law because it is just; we obey them because the law is the law, and because we want to avoid collapsing into anarchy. There is nothing intrinsically just about laws: we can see this from how they vary according to cultures and periods. Laws always originate in the strong exercising power over the weak. It is just that humanity has forgotten about it.

Three kinds of authority, then: the charismatic leader, the patriarch, and the leader who imposes himself by force. In practice, these three types rarely exist in pure form, but in any system one is normally predominant, and the others are admixed to various degrees.

Why am I giving you this framework, this threefold typology? I think it might help you understand the way authority works in your institution: both the head's and your own. In the reflection period following this presentation, perhaps you can ask yourself some questions. Look at the instances of authority in your institution, including those which centre on you. How far are these about charism? How far about patriarchy (obviously this will operate more where the head and/or the deputy is a Jesuit, but also where a lay head is appointed by an ecclesiastical—and thus patriarchal—authority)? How far do they depend on force, on intimidation and finally on *fear*, fear of a certain kind? Don't be too idealistic or pious. Power relations are operative in Catholic establishments too. Do these three ways of thinking about authority enable you to name what is happening in some particular situation?

The question is a very important one. I don't know if you realise that when a new head arrives in a school, the chief concern he or she has in the first year is about how they are going to impose their authority? Am I going to have enough authority? There are already vested interests in place, particularly the deputies, who have been there for much longer than I have, and have established sometimes quite powerful, almost feudal networks. How am I going to impose myself, and establish my own profile? This is the question that takes up the greater part of the new head's concern and time.

The same applies to the new deputy head. Often, before becoming a deputy, he or she was one teacher among others. How are they going to adapt to their new authority? How are the other teachers going to regard them? As one who has sold out, and is just currying favour? Or someone who is trying to co-ordinate what everyone is doing in the best way possible?

Whatever we say to those questions, the relationship between the head and the deputy is crucial. The school's good order, and its spirit, depend in large part on that relationship. That is why when a new head arrives, the best thing a deputy can do is to show the new person some trust. Avoid saying: here is a rival, someone who will be paranoid about me and treat me like domestic staff or like a secretary. If with time it becomes clear that this trust has been misplaced, there will still be time to change tack. The first weeks are normally decisive.

The philosopher who put forward these three ways of thinking about authority was a twentieth-century French Jesuit who died in 1978: Fr Gaston Fessard. He was a great friend of the famous political theorist, Raymond Aron. Though Aron was by far the more famous, he admired Fessard greatly.

Fessard brings out a surprising paradox inherent in any healthy understanding of authority: authority's purpose, authority's goal, is to disappear. Good authority is one that allows individuals to grow and to mature, to the point of no longer needing control or constraint from authority. We can see this quite clearly in the case of parents or schoolteachers. The teacher's greatest satisfaction is to form others who in their turn will become teachers for the next generation: teachers who will no longer be dependent on their own teachers, and can function and teach in their own turn. The teacher's satisfaction consists in being equalled and even surpassed by the pupil. Authority here is a force promoting the common good, and its function, its *raison d'être*, involves its disappearance. Authority has fulfilled its function once it no longer needs to be felt as such, when the human collective has interiorised the rules for its own good functioning. There is something utopian, eschatological here, of course. This blessed state of affairs is not going to happen tomorrow. But nevertheless, it's worth thinking about this when one is exercising authority or when one is reflecting on how authority functions.

I would like now to invite you to think about how authority functions in your school, both your own and that of your head, and to take as your starting point an organizational principle of great importance for the good order of human institutions: the principle of subsidiarity.

3. The Exercise of Authority and the Principle of Subsidiarity.

What is the principle of subsidiarity? Briefly: an institution following this principle will exhibit the maximum possible delegation. In political theory, the principle of subsidiarity states that responsibility for any action needs to be entrusted to the lowest level capable on its own of meeting the need.

The principle of subsidiarity is complemented by its corollary, that of supply. When issues cannot be dealt with at a lower level, then, with due respect to subsidiarity, the higher level must supply for the need, and support it.

Experience bears out the wisdom of all this. Higher authority will always benefit if it delegates to a lower instance whatever can be done more efficiently at that level. Subsidiarity enhances an institution's good functioning.

Note that this principle, adopted by modern societies, and particularly by the EU as it struggled to form itself, originates in the Church's canon law and in the teaching of St Thomas Aquinas.

One of its grounding assumptions is an important theoretical conviction: all healthy political authority, even that of a king by divine right, is always delegated. All human authority comes from somewhere higher. Paul tells us that all authority comes from God (Romans 13:2); and Jesus, in John's gospel, tells Pilate that he would have no authority if he had not been given it from above (John 19:11). The idea of supreme or absolute power is a mythical fallacy, and the claim of a dictator or tyrant to hold such power is an absurdity.

Educational institutions should follow this principle of subsidiarity as fully as possible. Both the head and the deputies should think instinctively in such terms. But experience shows that this is not easy. The principle challenges some deeply rooted reflexes. One thing that helps here is for the roles and responsibilities of staff at all levels to be spelt out as clearly and explicitly as possible. This is very important: many problems and malfunctions in schools occur because no-one quite knows who is doing what. If the responsibilities have been well defined, then the deputy is free quite deliberately to avoid giving those under him or her the impression that they are being spied on, or being used by the management to spy on their colleagues. Delegation implies a basic level of trust. Of course there have to be control and quality assurance mechanisms; for this, there can be regular meetings, organized in advance, rather than individual interventions whenever a problem arises. Difficulties are better addressed in times of cool reflection than in the heat of crisis.

The truth is that authority should neither be too loose, nor too pernickety, nor too controlling. But getting the balance right is sometimes difficult. A deputy, for example, will support the authority of a teacher who is being challenged or having discipline problems, but only up to a point. To support such a teacher too much is effectively to replace them and to destroy whatever authority they have left. When I was prefect of studies in Bordeaux there was a very competent French teacher, the only one with a higher degree on the staff. But when I passed outside his classroom, it was like being in a western, with the Indians staging a hold-up. What was I to do? If I went into the classroom, calm would of course be established, but only for the attack to begin again a quarter of an hour later. If I did nothing, the situation would fester, and eventually become disastrous. It is not always easy to find solutions to this kind of problem. Experience suggests that several heads are better than one, and that it is worth involving other teachers and appealing to their sense of solidarity.

One of the big temptations against the principle of subsidiarity is that of using higher authority as an umbrella. If I am in a tight spot and I do not want to lose face, I can open this umbrella, so to speak, and say: 'the head wouldn't like it', or 'raise that with the head'. I lack the courage to accept the responsibility that is mine, and to take a risk. I forget that by acting in this way, I undermine the figure I cut and my own authority.

Another temptation is that of the bunker. I encountered this forty years ago when I was visiting Xavier High School in Manhattan, New York City. I had just finished studying in Berkeley and was preparing to go to the school in Bordeaux. I spent a fortnight at Xavier in January 1974 to learn about the system of tutorship that we were going to introduce in Bordeaux. The young Jesuit priest who was prefect of studies was very proud of the delegation system he had developed, inspired by the principle of subsidiarity. He spent the whole day in his office and never left it. He would make appointments with teachers, and they might drop in on him. But he never saw a pupil. Almost never. He spent the whole day in his bunker, and he was proud of it. Frankly, I was scandalized. How can you remain in touch with reality if your sense of authority is as bureaucratic as this? I shan't tell you who this Jesuit was, because later he was responsible for educational matters in the Society at global level—and did that job, in my view, pretty pathetically. I am giving you this example to show you, in case you need to be told, that even among Jesuits things don't always go very well ...

By way of bringing this section on subsidiarity to a close, it seems to me that each of you might think about how much real room for manoeuvre and initiative you have in your school. Where exactly does my responsibility begin and end? It may be that the problems arise partly because matters have never been clearly demarcated with the head. This is not about giving the deputy a territory over which he or she is absolute monarch. One might rather see the deputy as a kind of signal operator on a railway: when a problem arises, rather than resolving it myself (which might perhaps be the quickest option), I ask myself: is it that someone else is not able to take care of it, or alternatively would be happy to do so? Actually, the deputy head is a co-ordinator as much as a signal-operator. He or she is trying to evoke and co-ordinate what each person in the school community can best contribute to the common good.

If so, then deputy heads should be the first, it seems to me, to ask themselves the question: what idea can I suggest on my own initiative so that the school's educational aspirations can better be put into practice? I do not have to wait for the head to use his or her imagination for me.

A final point on authority. Let me point to something that seems to me as every year goes by more important for the smooth running of an institution, be it a secondary school, a faculty of theology or a national or multinational business. In all these institutions one constantly hears the complaint, 'we're not informed. We're not being kept up to speed. Decisions are being taken without anything being said to us, and without any element of our being consulted.' Information deficit. It happens in school staff rooms; it happens too in places like the Centre Sèvres in Paris.

Everyone knows that information is one of the keys to power. To have information is to have power. To keep information to oneself is to hold on to power. A policy of keeping information to oneself is a way in which power can be exerted so as to make one's authority more sharply felt.

In institutions everywhere, 'the management' is suspected of a general lack of transparency as a way of holding on to power. Experience shows that this suspicion is sometimes well founded. But most of the time, it is simply a matter of oversight on the part of those responsible. 'We just forgot to tell them'; 'we didn't realise it would be important for the staff as a whole'. 'The staff as a whole' can be very sensitive when it comes to information. Internal communication is a chronic shortcoming of all institutions. The deputy head, as an intermediary and a co-ordinator, is the one best placed to keep a constant and eagle eye on this point.

The second and last part of my presentation will be very brief. Rather than make an argument, I shall simply put forward a set of convictions about the issue of time and time management.

II – Freedom and Time

When we were children in France, we used to write down obediently in a new exercise book the timetable dictated by the master. But today the timetable has become the master: the list of things to do, time as such.

Time has become our master, and quite often our slavedriver. It possesses us, challenges us, tortures us; we haven't got time; other people are never available when we are and vice versa. One can't get everything done; the weight of regulations and schedules; people and groups being late; everything happening at the last minute; things being in a mess, slapdash.

What of our freedom here? How are we to get control and make choices? Or do we just have to put up with it. As I said, I've no neat answers. But I can invite you to ask yourself some questions.

Firstly, some self-awareness. Am I greedy or wasteful with my time? Can I move fast when I have to? Can I be infinitely patient? The great temptation, since time goes so fast, is to try to go even faster. So the timetable gets fuller and fuller, to the point of suffocation: reading files, meeting teachers, administrative staff, parents. Eventually you forget you have a problem because you haven't got time to think. And you all know as well as I do where this ends up: exhaustion, and sometimes burnout. Time always wins the battle.

The sensible policy, I think, is not to try and go faster than time, because that will never work. Rather, try to *take hold of time*, slow it down, so to speak.

Don't just survive time; make choices. You *can* look at things in another way. Obviously you can't stop time passing. But you can make an option to appropriate it, to make real choices.

A first way of taking hold of time, of making choices, is that of *taking a break*. If someone in charge, someone who has to take decisions that involve others, does not have in their daily timetable a minimal break time, time for letting go (as the life coaches say), there is reason to worry about them.

Some rest time—say twenty or thirty minutes—ringfenced in the diary, and not in the evening, before going to bed, when one is exhausted, but preferably in the morning before the engine starts running, or at the beginning of the afternoon. Not perhaps every day, but at least one day in two. Rest time is not a time of doing nothing. It's a time when one does something other than what one does in the rest of the day. It's time wasted, intentionally wasted—time not given to my job, my role, my image. It's a time of just letting things be. It's time when I stop being the Deputy Head. Moreover, it's time when I am not defined by what I do. I am being myself. I'm doing what I like doing. What? There are plenty of possibilities. I can write: a novel, or my journal, real or fictitious. Read a book that is nourishing: the Bible, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Blaise Pascal, the diary of Etty Hillesum, the life of a wise man like Gandhi—read something which makes me want to stop reading and pause because the book gives me pause for thought.

I know two or three very senior people in the financial and business worlds who begin each day with half an hour of Bible reading. Some might go for half an hour of yoga or zen, or for bible-based meditation. This half hour is probably the most precious time of all in the day, because it enables a person to be fully in the present moment throughout the day. They can actually occupy the time given them, rather than be playing a constant game of catch-up.

The second way of keeping a sense of choice in time is in fact this *living in the present moment*, at the rhythm of the present moment without trying to get ahead. The rest time is not an end in itself. Rather, it's a way of staying in shape for what is the most important thing: living through what life throws up during the day, and doing this with the control, the freedom of spirit, the clarity, the quality of presence that enable you to be more effective. In other words, to save time! In our jam-packed days much time is in fact wasted: fruitless meetings where the agenda is not clear, or which go on too long because of trivial chat. You discover, above all, that in one-to-one meetings you are more present to the other person, in a way that enables them to speak more freely because they feel they are being listened to for their own selves. So crazy has the modern world become that people now just need to be listened to. Being in charge these days primarily means being someone who listens.

There was once an editor of the Paris newspaper *Le Monde* who was on the editorial board of our Jesuit review *Etudes*. He explained to me why he wrote so few articles: 'I spend my time talking to the journalists and listening to them. And the conversations are not narrowly professional—they are talking about themselves, about their personal lives. It's incredible that people have such a great need to be listened to.' This distinguished editor is one of the people I mentioned who begin their day with half an hour of yoga. Indeed at *Le Monde*, the day used to begin with the editorial board at 7 am: the heads of department, all standing up around the editor's desk. The editor in question had a policy of not accepting evening engagements ...

To live in the present moment, to be present to the present moment; we all dream of managing this. Someone who doesn't just endure the inexorable passage of time, someone who can live fully in the present moment—that's a person of freedom. A sage. A saint.

There are probably not many sages or saints among us. But they asked me to talk about freedom, and I can't do that without being challenging. And we all need challenge from time to time.

Thinking like this encourages us not to let ourselves become imprisoned by what we recognise as the constraints placed on our freedom: our fears, our lacks of confidence, our vulnerability to temptation, our openness to intimidation, our fears of disappointment, the memory of old humiliations, our need to have it all taped. But we will not deal with such realities if we simply shut our eyes to them. We need to recognise these constraints, to tame them, to learn to live with them without becoming their slave. That takes time. We never fully manage it, but we can make significant progress. I have now been around for quite a long time, and I have met plenty of people, both close up and at a distance, whose lives are a living witness of how this is possible.

Each person needs to find their own way. You have come here to help each other with this. It helps not to be completely on your own. We need each other. I wish you a good journey!