

The Ignatian Mission

REV. HOWARD GRAY, S.J.

Jesuit ministry is about people who want to work in ways that help other people. That humble phrase, "to help people," was the axle of grace for Ignatius of Loyola, transforming his religious experience from an introspective examination of his own life before God to a mystic summons to see the world as God sees it. Ignatian mission evolved from a conversion within a conversion and set Ignatius on a pilgrimage of

service. Much of his early apostolic life was a search for ways to help people. Because there are many ways to do this, Ignatius and his early companions catalogued a host of helping ministries. They did not privilege any one means, but gathered these

apostolic possibilities under the general heading of "Ministries of the Word."

What

they meant at first was to make the Gospel story of Jesus normative for how people live, work and make those choices that form them as ethical and spiritual personalities.

Ignatius went on to codify the process of Gospel decision making in The Spiritual Exercises. Later he codified Jesuit apostolic life and work in another key document, The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. This experience of responding to God's leadership and the principles that guide both the Exercises and the Constitutions undergirds all Jesuit apostolic formation. But, again, essential to its inspiration and operative in evaluating its apostolic effectiveness is that humble Ignatian question: Does this help people?

The directness and simplicity of this question is far removed from a fundamentalism that offers easy answers to complex realities. In the Ignatian apostolic scheme of formation, there are two other principles that guide the response to that question. These principles are discernment and adaptation.

Discernment

Discernment is the process of choosing from among many possible goods the specific good that God wants me to choose here and now. For example, in a world that desperately needs all kinds of help, what now is the most effective,

most enduring, most universal, most appropriate Gospel service that we can offer? Is it to found a school? To renew parish life? To focus resources on meeting urban poverty, violence and hopelessness by establishing a network of neighborhood centers? Apostolic discernment presumes the generosity and the capability of helping people and then asks the crucial question: "How will you help these people here and now?" Such discernment, precisely because it is focused on the Gospel for inspiration, has to be prayerful, courageous and truly integral, i.e., a concern for the good of the other and not a political ploy or a delaying tactic to protect comfortable life styles.

Adaptation

Adaptation is the ability to fit the discerned good to the specific cultural, social and psychological realities of a person, a group or an institution. The Ignatian principle of adaptation answers a third question: "What is the best way to fit this good to the concrete realities of this situation, to the particular history and personality of this man or woman, to the needs and opportunities of this institution?"

For the early Jesuits, adaptation was essential in all their ministries. For example, in giving The Spiritual Exercises, one asks which form of prayer will most help this person to find God? In working with little children, how can this Gospel be made intelligible and attractive? In a

continued on page 2

Fr. Gray (Detroit Province) is the assistant to the president for mission at John Carroll University.





Bl. Miguel Pro

(1891-1927)

Martyred in Mexico during a period of government persecution of the Church. He preached, heard confessions and celebrated Mass for the poor in secret after government suppressed public worship and closed the churches. Wrongly convicted of the attempted assassination of a Mexican general, he was shot by firing squad with one of his brothers and several others. Asking mercy for those who condemned him, he stretched out his arms in the form of a cross and cried his last words: "Viva Cristo Rey!" Thousands of workers and soldiers came to his funeral.

non-Western country, rich in its own culture and profoundly committed to its own philosophy and religion, how do you translate the Gospel so that it can enhance and not violate that culture? Adaptation was the style of these early Jesuits, what they called "our way of proceeding." It meant building bridges between the Gospel and contemporary seekers.

These three apostolic principles – to help people in a discerning and adapting way to come to the life and truth of the Gospel – structured Jesuit ministry from the outset. These three principles similarly structured Jesuit formation, the way young men became incorporated into the life and work of the Society of Jesus. Ignatian formation today asks these same questions of those laymen and women who want to be part of Jesuit apostolic work or who invite Jesuits to participate in their apostolic formation.

Evaluation

Clearly, antecedent to any program of formation, there must be some kind of scrutiny or evaluation of those who want to enter into an Ignatian apostolic mission. Does this man or woman have a desire to help people? From where does this desire come? Does this individual show the kind of sound judgment and flexibility of spirit that are a prerequisite for discernment and apostolic adaptation? In any serious apostolic formation program, screening and assessment are important. Here, the Ignatian criteria for making the Spiritual Exercises and the dispositions necessary for Ignatian apostolic mission coalesce. As in the Exercises, so, too, in apostolic service, one looks for generosity, religious maturity, self-reflection and self-knowledge, a faithful heart, psychological balance and a desire to serve the priorities embedded in the Gospel. Clearly, simply being employed in a work sponsored by Jesuits is not enough. We are talking about those who want to become more directly involved in deepening the religious foundations of a Jesuit social ministry. These are the kinds of people who can profit from Ignatian formation, because they possess both the call and the grace to answer that call.

Apostolic Formation

Formation is not a term universally understood in the same way. Ignatian formation is closely associated with integration, or bringing together in a harmonious way. It is a process that takes time, patience and mentoring. The Spiritual Exercises should be an integrating process, as men and women look at how they have incorporated God's hopes for them into their lives.

Throughout the four Gospel portraits of Jesus, we meet someone conscious of his call as a summons from his father. The father's call guides Jesus' choices: what to teach, how to heal, when to comfort and when to confront, with whom to share his mission as his disciples. In The Spiritual Exercises, Christ is central as the integrated, fully formed way to God. The work of the Exercises is to learn him, to love him and to serve him. These Ignatian guidelines constitute the imitation of Christ: to accept his truth, to accept his friendship and to accept his mission. Ignatius presents a developmental process, a formation that brings heart and head and soul together in relationship to Christian discipleship. He called the personal acceptance of this discipleship an election. It means integrating one's life with Christ. It does not replace other loves — for family, for friends, for life — but it does reorient them into a relationship of even deeper loyalty and care. Everything I genuinely love is more deeply loved by Christ.

Ignatian formation is radically spiritual. Consequently, it is a liberating formation. It is a formation that can take place only within my freedom, one that honors my personal experience and guides my talents and graces. This freely chosen and personally enriching process of following Christ creates a feeling of consolation, an affective realization that I am doing what God wants me to do. The call is God's, the inspiration is Christ's, but the acceptance is mine.

What should be clear is that someone who wants to become intimately involved in an Ignatian enterprise has to have a desire to link that work — be it a school, a retreat center, a social work, a parish — to the ongoing work of the Kingdom preached by Jesus. Professional excellence, years of

practical experience, quality training, specialized skills — all these can serve the Kingdom, but only a genuine union with Christ can reveal what the Kingdom means: to help people to love God and to love their neighbor.

There is vulnerability in such spiritual formation. Easy pieties, sentimental devotions and do-it-yourself mysticism crowd today's bookstores under the headings of inspiration, meditation and spirituality. What most of these present is self-fulfillment without self-sacrifice or a life conversion. What Ignatian formation demands is the radical humility to stand before God as a loved sinner who serves best when he or she acknowledges the weaknesses that have led to loving Christ as Redeemer. The First Week experience of The Spiritual Exercises has to be incorporated into any Ignatian formation process. Radically, one helps others best by a profound experience of the solidarity of helplessness. Because I know my need of Christ, I can work all the more humanely to make his forgiveness and compassion available to others.

Foundation of Formation

For these reasons, then, I am increasingly convinced that the foundation of effective lay formation for apostolic ministries lies in the experience of the Spiritual Exercises. But I am also aware that few lay colleagues have either the time or the financial resources to make the full 30-day retreat. Likewise, while the adapted retreat in everyday life is more accessible, it, too, demands a consistent outlay of time that many will not be able to sustain. Therefore, we need to create adaptations of the Exercises to fit the schedules and resources of laywomen and men who want to be more intimately involved in Jesuit apostolic work. For example, create a formation cycle in which lay people can make a week of the Exercises over the course of a year. In a three-year cycle of formation, laymen and women could make the Exercises and also have the opportunity to discuss what this spirituality means in their social and/or international ministries. The possibilities of an accessible but in-depth program of lay formation are exciting and challenging. ♦