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Ignatian Vision and Contemporary Realities

Our Spiritual Vision

When Jesuits get to discussing their mission and their ministries, they are likely to begin with the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the most formative spiritual experience in their own training and an instrument which has been of immense value to many in the Church. I am no exception to this inclination. What the *Exercises* have done for me and others is to give shape to the fundamental configurations of an Ignatian vision of the world, a vision which Jesuits have tried to carry into the creation and formation of their preaching, their teaching, and their institutions.

I want to suggest that the Jesuit commitment to higher education is rooted in at least three key insights of the *Exercises* and those insights give shape to the vision which we bring to higher education today: that God is good and purposeful; that God is incarnate; and that God is present, working and loving us, in all of creation.

First, in the consideration called THE FIRST PRINCIPLE AND FOUNDATION, which begins the *Spiritual Exercises*, we learn that all people are created to praise, reverence, and serve God and that all of creation exists to assist us in this over-arching orientation of humanity towards God. Our God is seen as good and purposeful, having a distinct purpose for us; and all aspects of reality are oriented to that purpose. From science to literature, art to ecology, mathematics to politics, the Christian and Jesuit worldview encompasses all of reality and sets it in a context of the service of God.

Second, in the key meditation on THE INCARNATION, the *Exercises* envision God looking down on the earth and on humanity in all our dimensions—rich and poor, some being born while

others are dying, all races and nations, some at peace and others at war—and God chooses to become one of us with all that this humanity of ours means: birth, growth, life, change, and death; family, race, gender, nation, and society; love, hate, anxiety, doubt, and joy; religion, faith, hope, tradition, and revelation. The divine is blended with the human; and all the ordinary concerns of humanity become caught up into the realm of graced and sinful reality, theologically significant in all their aspects and important to the proclamation—or not—of the Gospel. And, again, the various dimensions of human existence which are the concerns of the university are likewise the concerns of people of faith who see this world as divinely charged and destined.

Third, in the closing CONTEMPLATION ON ATTAINING DIVINE LOVE, the *Spiritual Exercises* present a God who is present in all of reality, who works persistently to draw the world back to unity and to God, and who calls us in love to act to enfold that love in reality. Again, this is a worldview which positions God in all the arts, sciences, disciplines, and fields of knowledge, within all the elements of a university, and in all of the people who make higher education a reality: including faculty, board, staff, families, benefactors, alumni, and students. It is also this worldview which has called Jesuits to the crossroads of faith and history, of church and world, where we have seen our vocation as situating us in the midst of the world, especially the city, and determined to find God there and to bring the gospel into all aspects of that world.

To repeat, those with an Ignatian vision look at all aspects of the life of the university and of the world in which the university is situated in light of these three key insights of the *Exercises*: that God is good and purposeful; that God is incarnate; and that God is present, working and loving us, in all of creation. Jesuits understand these themes to be central to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and to a principal task which is drawn from another key meditation of the *Spiritual Exercises*, that is THE CALL OF CHRIST THE KING to each of us to join him in building the reign of God, no matter what cost to ourselves may be involved in following Christ and in struggling against the forces of evil in the world around us.

History and Development

For Jesuits, our sense of the importance of the college or university begins in its own role in the life of Ignatius of Loyola, that his mission of preaching the gospel and instructing others in discerning the ways of God in themselves and in the world was suddenly transformed by an order from the Inquisition that he could preach and teach no further without a university education. And so he went off to the University of Paris and there met Francis Xavier and a small group of young men who would become his disciples in the ways of God and the first members of the Society of Jesus. Along the way, Ignatius acquired his own bachelor's and master's degrees and positioned himself for ordination to the priesthood, religious leadership, and the creation of a new band of apostles in the Church, one which soon would make education central to its ministries in service of the Gospel.

In 1548 in Messina in Sicily, these Jesuits would open their first school for laymen, the first of what is now a worldwide network of secondary and higher education institutions. In the United States, there are now 28 well-known Jesuit colleges and universities, 50 high schools, and a new breed of what are called Nativity elementary and middle Schools and Cristo Rey high schools designed to reach out to ethnic minority and other central city youth. These educational institutions of various kinds are only part of an emphasis in Jesuit life and training on the intellectual life, or, in other words, on the capacity for sustained reflection and purposeful discourse on the world and the human problems of today in the light of faith. (See John A. Coleman, SJ, "A Company of Critics: Jesuits and the Intellectual Life," in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, November 1990.)

Contemporary Realities

Now we must turn from the Ignatian vision to the second half of my title tonight: contemporary realities. Increasingly, in recent years, documents of the Vatican and various conferences of Catholic bishops around the world begin with what we might call "an environmental scan." Look around, they say to the Church and to people of good will. **Look Around.** What you see is hundreds of millions of people starving. A simple fact of life. In the

opening part of their 1986 pastoral letter on economic justice, after naming a complex list of positives and negatives on the U.S. economic scene, the U.S. bishops wrote this:

And beyond our own shores, the reality of 800 million people living in absolute poverty and 450 million malnourished or facing starvation casts an ominous shadow over all these hopes and problems at home.¹

Arthur Simon, president of Bread for the World, put the same reality in terms of the children, “Every day at least 40,000 young children die from malnutrition and disease...”² This initial insight needs no more explanation than that provided by the bishops.

Beginning with this observation, the Christian observer stands firmly in line with the frank and bold posture with which the bishops at the Second Vatican Council opened their monumental document on THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ.³

Having looked out at the world, the followers of Christ see what all men and women whose eyes are clear of ideology see: horrible economic conditions for hundreds of millions of women, men, and children and those conditions are worsening, not to mention violence, discrimination, hatred, abuse, war, and so many other assaults on human life, human rights, and human dignity. It is a simple perversion of the goodness of the original creation, of God’s vision and Christ’s dream for the human community, and of the working of God within all of reality.

And, if we take a deeper view of the social and economic systems in much of the world—a look that takes us more deeply into the realities of the world around us—what do we see there? We see that the systems and structures of most societies are not working well, not serving that vision of the purpose of humankind and the action of God within reality. What do I mean by this? Put simply, and without time to develop the details:

- we have schools that do not teach;

- prisons that do not rehabilitate;
- cities that do not work;
- governments and political parties that are unresponsive to people's real needs;
- a food and agriculture system that pays farmers not to grow while many people go hungry;
- a health care system that leaves 44 million people out, makes some people very rich, and often is out of focus in its approaches to human life, happiness, health, and dying; and
- an economic system in the United States and worldwide that is making some people very, very rich and billions of other people poorer and poorer.

In addition to the world's problems, within the Catholic Church itself, we see a church which is both scandal-ized and polarized.

A Church Scandalized. The scandal of the violation of children in and by our Church—not restricted to this country by any means—is with us to stay for many years, even decades. Many of us in ministry—not just the hierarchy—closed our eyes to sexual abuse of children and adolescents; and now we are paying the damages for that scandal. The damages are multiple. Tens, even hundreds of millions of dollars have been paid by dioceses and religious congregations and their insurers to victims, dollars intended for education, charity, formation, and faith. The priesthood is damaged in the eyes of the faithful and in our own eyes. The faithful distrust the hierarchy; the clergy distrust their bishops; and outsiders distrust the Church. Our credibility as advocates for charity, justice, and peace has been deeply eroded, from the halls of Congress to state houses to international tribunals. Finally, the damage is manifested in the incredible amount of our Church's time, talent, and energy drawn to the scandal and its aftermath and away from the proclamation of the gospel to the world.

A Church Polarized. Even before the recent scandal, our Church and, to a lesser extent, the Jesuits and our institutions have been buffeted by wars of ideology, theology, and liturgy, all to be expected in the wake of a profoundly dramatic and transformative Vatican Council ... and yet poignantly sad among a community of faith and love. Tens of thousands of priests and religious left the ministry, their communities, and sometimes the Church itself. Some theological

dissenters questioned both the trappings of faith and the faith itself, and the neo-orthodox often responded by welding dogma out of historical custom and practices. Many dioceses now contain self-appointed and often untutored ecclesial vigilantes who pepper diocesan chanceries and Rome with complaints of liturgical irregularities and doctrinal deviations and with *ad hominem* attacks. The late Cardinal Bernardin and others sought to bridge these divides by promoting creative dialogue and seeking common ground on Church issues, and even that effort was attacked by some in Church leadership. Our Church has not been a very pretty picture for many years now.

This divisiveness is not new to the Church. It may well reflect the fact that matters of faith go deep into the human soul and psyche and threats to them are perceived as threats to the very nature of the self and one's fidelity to God. We have seen such divisiveness in the earliest Christian communities to whom the evangelists wrote. It was part of the Europe of the reformation and the counter-reformation in which Ignatius and his companions labored. And we see it all too vividly and bloody again in today's Middle Eastern religious wars.

What does it mean then to bring the Ignatian vision to bear on this contemporary world and on this scandalized and polarized church? And how might a university in particular make that match? The Ignatian vision contrasts the key elements of how God is involved with the world—God's creative goodness and purposefulness, God's incarnate presence, and God's working through and throughout all of reality—with those forces that would demean and destroy creative goodness, divide humans from one another and from our environment, and deny the presence and action of God within all of this reality. Contemporary Jesuit leadership has framed the response to this deadly conflict in the world—between God's action and the work of destruction and evil—in terms of three aspects of our contemporary mission: faith and justice; faith and culture; and faith and religious dialogue.

We articulated the *mission of faith and justice* first and most clearly in the 1970s, following the leadership of the universal Church which had declared that "action for justice [is] a constitutive element of the preaching of the gospel..."⁴ The church arrived at that clarification

of its mission and gospel in two ways. First, it discerned that the reality of widespread injustice in the world was a denial not just of human dignity, but of the very existence of the God who created all people, became incarnate among them, and loved each profoundly and uniquely. Second, the church recognized that the practical atheism of injustice was not just person-to-person, but structured into the social, economic, and political systems of all societies, large and small. The gospel then must have, as a constitutive part, the denunciation of unjust structures in imitation of the Scriptural prophets, including Jesus of Nazareth, but also the announcing of more just and life-giving ways of living together as sisters and brothers, children of one God who loves all of us, including how we structure the societies around us.

This recognition of the essential connection between faith and justice then commits the Church, the Jesuit and, we would hope, our colleagues to work to eliminate the individual injustices between individuals. But it also commits us to challenge those systems and structures which allow, embody, and/or enforce, for example, such structural evils as I mentioned earlier: schools that do not teach; prisons that do not rehabilitate; cities that do not work; unresponsive governments and political parties; a perverted food and agriculture system; a broken health care system; and a profoundly troubled economic system in the United States and worldwide.

A university community can be incredibly powerful in these tasks. It can point students towards community service and tutoring opportunities as part of creating people-for-others who will work to make this a better world for all. And, equally or more important, it can use the academic disciplines that are central to its mission to address the systemic and structural realities of city, state, nation, and world. This would occur with a active consciousness, for example, of the kinds of “strategic moral priorities” named by Jesuit moralist David Hollenbach:

- 1) The needs of the poor take priority over the wants of the rich.
- 2) The freedom of the dominated takes priority over the liberty of the powerful.
- 3) The participation of marginalized groups takes priority over the preservation of an order which excludes them.⁵

Such a consciousness and such moral priorities begin to flesh out and make real the connection between faith and justice which is essential to a contemporary Ignatian vision.

In the past decade, moreover, we Jesuits came to realize that the mission of faith and justice needed to be fleshed out in two complementary dimensions: faith and culture and faith and religious dialogue.

Faith and culture. When the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus expanded upon the mission of faith and justice first developed in the 1970s to add the concepts of mission and culture and mission and religious dialogue, I was initially hesitant. I feared that this was a watering-down of the strong sense of the faithjustice mission called for by the 32nd General Congregation, a mission so consistent with the larger Church and one which we Jesuits have yet to fully appropriate. In the twenty years between the 32nd and 34th Congregations, however, I had become more and more persuaded that the problems of social and economic injustice which are so true of this nation and the nations of the world are woven deep within the fabric of our own culture and other cultures as well. The cultural myths, for example, that undergird our rugged individualism, manifest destiny, American pragmatism, private property, and economic self-sufficiency are so strong and so deep within our people that they make it difficult, if not impossible, for many Americans to hear the gospel's call to community, stewardship, solidarity, and a special care for the *anawim, the poor of God*. Pope John Paul's emphasis on the diabolical economic and social role of the "desire for profit" and "thirst for power" is reflected so strongly in our economy and our culture that it really does require a "conversion" of heart to hear the gospel in this society.

For us to preach the gospel in this society and culture requires that we take stock of our own cultural myths: How driven are we by rugged individualism and competition? How captured are we by the consumerist need to have more and better possessions, clothes, technology, positions, power? How capable are we of discerning the incredible power of social systems and structures in this nation, our Church, our Jesuit institutions, our community lives,

and our ability to love and serve generously? How does the competitive ethic shape our attitudes towards the poor, elderly, sick, disabled, and uneducated?

We Jesuits need to ask these questions of ourselves, our own individual lives, and our lives in community. And a Jesuit university should provide a holistic environment that can allow young people to see into the values of the society in which we live, to judge those values over-against the gospel, and to work to make of themselves persons who appropriate what is good of this culture and to reject what is not. The classroom can be an important venue for this endeavor; but there is also a key role here for campus ministry, student life, prayer groups, retreats, insertion programs, community service, and the *Spiritual Exercises* themselves. Not to learn the critical role played by culture in promoting injustice or justice is to miss its subtle but profound force in society and, for us, culture's role in preaching the gospel and building the reign of God ... or opposing those efforts. As the members of the 34th General Congregation put it, Justice can truly flourish only when it involves the transformation of culture, since the roots of injustice are embedded in cultural attitudes as well as in economic structures.⁶

Lastly, *faith and religious dialogue*. The 34th General Congregation also realized that the mission of faith and justice required a commitment to inter-religious dialogue. Central to most cultures is the role of the transcendent, so the transformation of culture in the pursuit of justice required attention to the role of religion. And, in a world where Christianity is the faith of fewer than 20% of the population, "any commitment to justice and peace, human rights, and the protection of the environment has to be made in collaboration with believers of other religions."⁷ We came to this consciousness from both the awareness of the key role played in many societies by religion and also from the practical experience of working hand-in-hand with representatives of other faith traditions in advocating for justice and peace. Moreover, the experience of the past two years of terrorism and war should have brought home clearly to all of us the critical role of religion in world affairs and the absolute importance of learning to understand other religions and hopefully to bridge the religious divides in the interest of a more just and peaceful world.

Again, the role of the university—from the more obvious department of religious studies to sociology to history to campus ministry—can be critical in opening our minds and hearts towards greater inter-religious understanding, mutual respect, and collaboration in service to the world.

The Ignatian vision that is committed to the faith that does justice, then, presupposes a commitment to the transformation of culture and to dialogue with the religions that inspire cultures. As GC34 put it,

...this justice cannot be achieved without, at the same time, attending to the cultural dimensions of social life and the way in which a particular culture defines itself with regard to religious transcendence.⁸

For those working out of an Ignatian vision, then, the call of the King and the commitment to build the reign of God—in light of our contemporary realities of church and world—becomes a commitment to faith and justice, faith and culture, and faith and religious dialogue. These should also become intrinsic to the mission of the Jesuit university as well.

1. Economic Justice for All, No. 4 (emphasis in original).

2. Arthur Simon, “Greed Keeps Third World Hungry,” Baton Rouge Morning Advocate, Friday, March 11, 1988, p. 9B.

3. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, No. 1.

⁴ 1971 Synod of Bishops, Rome, “Justice in the World.”

⁵ David Hollenbach, SJ, *Claims in Conflict* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 204.

⁶ General Congregation 34, “Servants of Christ’s Mission,” No. 17.

⁷ General Congregation 34, “Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue,” No. 8.

⁸ “Servants of Christ’s Mission,” *op. cit.*, No. 18.