



An Advent Journey into Ignatian Spirituality – 4 Webinars

Webinar 4

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Ignatian Values: Hope, Reconciliation and Justice

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Good evening! It is good to be with you all. I feel honoured by your desire to listen to my humble reflections.

Over the past three weeks we have heard about Ignatian values as strategies for personal transformation. This evening I'd like to talk with you about Ignatian values as strategies for social transformation. In the past 45 years, Ignatian values as strategies for social transformation have been a very important development in Ignatian spirituality. I would like to explain this development by sharing a bit of history with you. Then I'd like to talk about how the commitment to social justice has led to changes in some key Ignatian spiritual values, and how it has generated some new ones. Finally I'd like to share with you a few reflections about my own Ignatian practice of a faith that does justice.

History

First let's do some history. The watershed moment in this development came with the 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits in 1974-75. A general congregation is like a Jesuit parliament. It is a gathering of Jesuit representatives from around the world to decide important matters and usually to elect a new administrative head or superior-general. General Congregation 32, or GC 32 as we say, decided that work for social justice and for social change would no longer be one ministry or sector among others, but had to characterize all that we do.

It became a constitutive part of our mission and therefore also of our Ignatian spirituality. GC 32 said that “our mission today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement.” All of the four Jesuit General Congregations since then have reaffirmed this commitment and refined it. We usually refer to this commitment in a shorthand way as “faith and justice” or the faith-justice commitment.

This change in Ignatian spirituality was a spiritual explosion. It led to many other changes that are still unfolding today, 45 years later. For example, it led to the development of many centres that do social analysis and advocacy work of various forms. It has made us closer to the poor, excluded, disempowered, and has affected where we live, who we associate with, who we work with and for. It sometimes distanced us from the wealthy and powerful, who we knew from our schools. It has led us to criticize governments, corporations and others who have economic, political and social power and to encourage them to change their ways and to share their power so that societies become more just, more inclusive, more equitable. This commitment has also gotten some of us killed.

For example, in 1989, in San Salvador, a number of Jesuit university professors who worked with the poor were killed in their own house, by the army. In 2001 a Canadian Jesuit, Martin Royackers, was killed in Jamaica, outside the church. We don’t know who did it, but we suspect that landowners interested in growing drugs were angry about his work to get the government to give land to small farmers. As I speak, right now an 83 year old Indian Jesuit, Fr. Stan Swamy, S.J., has been jailed since October 8. He worked with marginalized people especially Adivasis or Tribals, the term in India for Indigenous Peoples, and advocated for their constitutional rights. The government accuses him of encouraging terrorists, which he vehemently denies.

This change in Ignatian spiritual values not only provoked confusion and anger at the Jesuits, it also provoked confusion and anger among Jesuits. For about 15 to 20 years after GC 32, there were tensions between the Jesuits working in education and those working with the poor, and between Jesuits working in spirituality and those working for justice. Our schools often put us in

contact with the rich and powerful. So those working with the poor and disenfranchised criticized our schools. Those in education criticized those in social justice for being impractical and for not recognizing the transformative value of education. Those in spirituality thought the social justice types were too worldly and political, and the social justice types thought the spirituality types were not grounded in reality. These tensions stimulated and affected each other and today have by and large disappeared. Indeed in our schools the goal today is to form men and women for others and with others, and in our universities our goal is to form men and women of competence, conscience and compassion. Many of our schools are now in poor neighbourhoods and we have developed kinds of schools for disenfranchised children, like the Nativity schools and the Faith and Joy networks. In our retreat and spirituality centres, we seek to incorporate a social sense into our practice of the Spiritual Exercises. Our social justice work seeks more deeply to be grounded in contemplation, and to have intellectual rigour.

Why was the faith-justice commitment so challenging and divisive? In the 18th and 19th centuries and much of the 20th century, many in the Western world felt that religion was primarily about the vertical, spiritual and personal relationship with God and did not involve the external, public, social world. Indeed as secularization grew, “the religious” was more sharply distinguished from other fields of life, for example from politics and from the economy. In some places it began to be sharply separated from public life and even to be marginalized into private life. So connecting faith with social justice meant going against this trend by connecting something private and marginal with something public and powerful and even secular.

Concern to help the needy through charity was nothing new in Christianity. But this form of it did seem new. It was a concern not only to help the needy but to change this world in ways that enabled more people to benefit from the goods of the earth, without waiting for the world to be changed in the final judgment. New too was the idea that this was justice, giving people their due and their rights, and not simply charity, which was an “extra”. Justice was not an extra but a moral obligation.

This change was enabled by significant transformations in the Catholic church that began in the late 19th century. First of all, in the 1890's the popes began to make authoritative comments on social, political and economic life and to promote social justice and social transformation in various ways. Pope Francis's recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, is the most recent in this tradition. Secondly, the Second Vatican Council, or "Vatican II", a gathering of all the Catholic bishops of the world from 1962 to 1965, also prepared the way for the Jesuit faith-justice commitment. It inaugurated a profound renewal in the Catholic Church. Among many other things it encouraged a non-defensive, positive and collaborative attitude toward the modern, secular world, even when the Church felt it had to make criticisms. This willingness to be engaged in the world led to a blossoming of social justice hopes throughout the Church.

These changes in the Church and similar changes in secular culture built the mood or spirit in the Jesuits in which grew a passionate concern for social justice and a desire to change the world for the advantage of the poor and marginalized. It was in the context of this exciting and demanding ferment that GC 32's commitment both to faith and to justice, and to combine them, emerged. It made the spiritual more "worldly" and the worldly more spiritual.

Now I would like to trace how this change also changed some classic Ignatian spiritual values like finding God in all things, and discernment.

Changes in Ignatian Spiritual Values

Twenty years after GC 32, another General Congregation was held, the 34th. A major aspect of GC 34's work was assessment of the previous twenty years of faith doing justice. After twenty years of trying to practice this commitment, the Jesuits in GC 34 recognized that while the service of faith was always the primary goal, experience had shown that the promotion of justice had three important dimensions that needed to be recognized and distinguished without separating them from each other. These dimensions were the social, the cultural and the religious. Separate decrees were dedicated to mission as a whole and to each of these dimensions. They were called, "Servants of Christ's Mission", "Our Mission and Justice", "Our

Mission and Culture” and “Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue”.

There was a very interesting pattern in all four of these documents that had to do with finding God in all things. In each of these documents, the Congregation recognized how Jesuits around the world had found the crucified and risen Christ present and active in that aspect of the world. Thus, in “Servants of Christ’s Mission” the Congregation talked about how we had met Christ through the faith-justice mission. In “Our Mission and Justice” the Congregation talked about how we had encountered the Lord through working for social justice and meeting people who were poor, oppressed, marginalized or disempowered. In “Our Mission and Culture” the Congregation talked about how we had met Christ through trying to appreciate and enter into different cultures, including secular cultures. In “Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue” the Congregation talked about how we had met Christ and learned about him through encountering other religions.

But GC 34 went further than describing how we had met Christ in these aspects of human life. In each of these decrees, GC 34 talked about how the Jesuits had been transformed by these encounters with Christ. In each instance talking about such transformation meant outlining what we had been transformed from and what we had been transformed into, that is, how we had grown because of our encounter with Christ. In other words, it talked about how we were converted through the faith-justice commitment. Thus the faith-justice commitment was confirmed not by rational argument or theological explanation but rather experientially, because it enabled us to meet the Lord in the world, to be with him and to be transformed and converted by him. It gave us a better corporate relationship to Christ. And it gave us martyrs.

GC 34 was a collective examen of consciousness of twenty years of Jesuit experience. It was not done by an individual but by a large group, elected to represent the whole Society of Jesus. It was a seeking and finding of God in all things, and the finding was done by a group, not an individual. I believe this was an important development in the Ignatian value of seeking God in all things. Secondly, the “things” in which Christ were found were also collective forms of

human life, the social, the cultural, the religious. I would also add that these things were what Vatican II called the “signs of the times”. The Council understood the signs of the times as phenomena in human life that seem to characterize a particular era for good or ill, and where God is inviting the Church to respond. To interpret these signs in Ignatian terms of discernment, I think these characteristic phenomena are large scale spiritual movements of consolation and desolation in which large parts of society are cooperating with or resisting the actions of the Spirit of Christ in the world. GC 34, discerned these large scale spiritual movements by noting how we ourselves, the Jesuits, were interiorly affected by them.

I would say that seeking Christ in the world in these ways has changed our sense of mission, making it much humbler. Instead of “going out into the world” to bring something that we thought was maybe not already there, we are more like pilgrims going in search of the Lord, like the three magi in the Christmas story. Then we are surprised by where and how we find Him, and by how we are changed in the process. In the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, it is as though we are the retreatant, not the spiritual director, and the spiritual director is the “signs of the times” and Christ present and acting in the world. Under the influence of the faith-justice commitment, the generosity and magnanimity that St. Ignatius recommends in his notes to the Spiritual Exercises is turning into a form of humility and openness in the Jesuits.

The classic Ignatian value of discernment has also changed. It is becoming communal. Personal discernment is still very important, but communal discernment or discernment in common, as we say more often now, is growing quickly. It was officially urged by our last General Congregation, the 36th, in 2016. Discernment in common is based in some of the discernment and decision-making experiences of the first companions of St. Ignatius just before the Society of Jesus formally began. While communal consultative processes are quite normal in the Jesuits and in most organizations, specifically Ignatian spiritual processes of communal discernment and decision-making were redeveloped in the late 20th century especially in Canada and the US, and somewhat later in Belgium. These processes had an important impact on GC 36, which in turn led GC 36 to recommend them to the whole Society of Jesus. In discernment in common

we seek to discover how the Spirit of Christ is working in a group and how the group is resisting and cooperating with the Spirit. The means for this discernment includes of course the classical attention to personal interior spiritual movements, but also to the qualities of interaction in the group and to how consolation and desolation are manifested in these qualities of interaction. Conversation and interaction are essential to discernment in common. The Christian Life Communities have become quite good at this, and have helped the Jesuits on this path.

In Canada, we have a social centre in Toronto directly inspired by this insight into the social nature of faith. It is called the Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice. Furthermore, in 2015 discernment in common led the Jesuits in Canada and our partners in ministry to an important change in our commitment to Indigenous people. This exercise involved many people, and through our interactions we felt that we were being called to shift our focus from “Indigenous ministry” where we “served” or “gave something” to Indigenous people, to Indigenous relations where we seek to be partners, allies and maybe friends, and even support the leadership of Indigenous people. This was a big shift in point of view. I will come back to this in a moment.

If social justice is a constitutive part of faith, then faith is affected too. It is not only that justice and engagement with the world becomes spiritual, but faith too becomes not only personal and interior, but social and even political. Discernment in common makes faith social. Thus under the influence of the faith-justice commitment made in 1975, the Ignatian practice of spiritual discernment is becoming more communal. This has been a big development indeed.

Throughout the course of these developments, some new Ignatian values have emerged: a faith that does justice, and men and women for others and with others. I do not know exactly when these expressions emerged but under the influence of the faith-justice commitment they have become common expressions in all our ministries. They express general goals for our work. Thus a faith that does justice is the kind of faith that we want to promote in our preaching, our parishes, our retreat and spirituality centres. Men and women for others, and men and women

working with others express the kind of people we hope to graduate from from our schools and universities.

Now, before I share something of my own practice with you, I would like to complete my exploration of the faith-justice commitment with two more developments that it has led us to: reconciliation, and ecology. The faith-justice commitment pushed us out into the world, especially the world of people experiencing injustice of any form. Over time, this gave us a greater appreciation of the importance of relationships: relationships as the medium or vehicle for justice work done from an inspiration of faith, right relationships as the goal of justice work, relationships as healing and transformative for us, and the importance of attending not only to the oppressed but also to the oppressors. Thus the 35th General Congregation in 2008 expressed the mission of the Jesuits as promoting reconciliation God, with each other (that is, among humans) and with the rest of creation. This formulation of a three-fold reconciliation was not meant to replace the earlier faith-justice commitment but rather to refine it on the basis of our experience of the previous years and to strengthen the spiritual and interpersonal aspects of our understanding of social justice.

GC 35 did not say much about ecology. Nevertheless, it made a very profound change by incorporating it into our mission in a way that made it a constitutive dimension of our service of faith and our promotion of justice. Doing so meant that our relationship with creation was not simply a question of responding to climate change and environmental injustice but also a question of treating our relationship with creation as part of our relationship with God and with each other. Pope Francis has gone much farther and deeper in this direction with his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*. I believe that seeing our relationship with creation as a fundamental part of our relationship with God is a "spiritual explosion" in the same way as was seeing our social relations as a fundamental part of our relations with God. These two significant changes, the roles of social justice and ecology in faith, have strong roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but we had forgotten them in recent centuries or at least we are now recognizing them with fresh eyes.

My Own Practice

For the last part of my talk I would like to share with you some aspects of my own practice of Ignatian values and social justice and how I have been transformed by them. First of all the 1975 commitment of the Jesuits to faith and justice was a big part of what called me to the Jesuits in 1983. It was not the whole story of my attraction, but it was a big part of my story. I will skip over many years and come to the last eight that Pat referred to in her introduction.

When I was in a leadership role, the Society's commitment to a faith that does justice led me to be concerned with our relationships with Indigenous people in Canada and to face the shadowy sides of that story. The big challenge of this commitment was that we were one of the parties that needed reconciliation. It is one thing to work for reconciliation between oppressed and oppressors in general, but it is quite another when it seems that you are part of the oppressor group. I believe it was the Society's faith-justice commitment that gave me the courage, humility and desire to walk this path.

On my very first day as provincial in May 2012, I attended a public gathering of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or TRC in Toronto. The Commission worked from 2008 to 2015 and their job was to bring out the stories and experiences of Indigenous people in the Indian Residential schools that Canada had from the mid 19th century until as late as the 1990s. Usually they were run by the churches. The Jesuits ran one. From the government point of view the goal of these schools was to assimilate Indigenous people into white, settler culture. This was done by separating the children from their families, communities, languages, cultures and spiritualities. While the churches' intentions were to educate and evangelize, nevertheless we generally bought into the myth of white superiority and the "need" for Indigenous people to become more like us. The TRC's job was to bring out how Indigenous people experienced these schools and the damage it did to them, in the hopes that the public revelation of such truth would be healing for all parties and would eventually lead to right and respectful relations between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people in Canada.

I return to my story. I had been warned that the Catholic church would be weakly represented at this public meeting of the TRC, where residential school survivors would tell their stories, often in public. I was advised that it would be important for me to attend, and to be visible as a priest. So I did. I showed up in a roman collar and a grey suit. I quickly realized that I had made a terrible mistake when I saw Indigenous people cringing or looking away or in other ways showing discomfort that they were not showing toward others. I felt that my visible identity as a priest was not a symbol of peace, reconciliation and good news, but rather a trigger for terrible memories of trauma, of experiences of physical, sexual and cultural abuse from the past. I tried to dress down by removing the tab from my collar, taking off my jacket, rolling up my sleeves. This didn't really help. I felt uncomfortable and exposed. I felt ashamed to be a church person, which I had never really felt before, and I felt ashamed of my association with an oppressive past. It got worse. At the end of the gathering there was a banquet. I went in, found a table with some empty chairs, sat down and introduced myself. There was a bit of conversation and a lot of silence. After almost 20 minutes I noticed a very small sign in the middle of the table that said, "Reserved for Residential School Survivors". I was in the wrong place! But I was too embarrassed and self-conscious to apologize and ask if I should move, so I stayed and squirmed.

I recognized that it was important for me to feel this shame about the negative aspects of the Church's and the Jesuits' past with Indigenous Peoples and especially with residential schools, and to accept this responsibility. When I stopped feeling sorry for myself and started to pay attention to the people around me, I realized that no Indigenous person was being rude to me. Some even tried to make me feel welcome! This broke my heart, that I as a symbol of oppression, should be treated kindly by those who were victims of the institution I stood for. This experience marked the rest of my leadership and continues to affect me now.

Earlier developments gave me the courage and humility to go through the experience I just described. When, in the late 1980's Indigenous people first started telling us about sexual abuse

by Jesuits in our residential school and our parishes, we refused to listen. So they sued us. We reacted defensively, and used the law as a weapon. After a while we realized that we were treating old friends –families we had known for generations—like they were enemies. Then we started to listen more closely to the allegations and to do some research, and we started to realize that many of the allegations were true. We decided to admit responsibility, to ask for forgiveness and to ask if we could help promote healing. This change of attitude, made in the late 1990's, was empowered by the Jesuits' faith-justice commitment of 1975, and in turn gave me the courage and humility to accept responsibility for the damage we had done and by buying into the myth of white superiority.

The hardest part of accepting this truth was the change in our view of ourselves and in what we had seen as our “glorious” Jesuit past. While we may have done many good things, that was not the whole story. Part of the myth of our own Jesuit and church superiority was even in our desire to be generous and to serve. We thought we knew what Indigenous people needed, but we never thought to ask them what they thought or what they wanted. Even in our holiest desires we found shadow and ambiguity.

About 5 years ago in a gathering of Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people involved in Jesuit Indigenous ministry, mainly parishes, everyone’s “garbage” came out. One of the Indigenous Elders said about the Jesuits, “Yeah, that’s true. But I can see in the dark and I can see Jesus there.” She knew our dark side and accepted us anyway. The Indigenous Catholics, knowing our past, and having gone to our residential school, have never asked us to leave. And we, for our part, have stuck around too, despite the shame of being part of the “colonizers”. In my experience of reconciliation work I have hardly ever been treated as a defendant, when there was good reason to be so treated. I have almost always been treated as a potential partner. We could never have gone through the transformations that I have just described without the friendship of Indigenous people.

Where am I now? Now that I have more Indigenous friends, I have become more aware of my own privilege and power. I come from a working-class family. We were happy, but we never had a lot when I was growing up. So I never saw myself as privileged. Now I recognize that I am white, I am a settler, I am a priest, I am a Jesuit, I am well-educated and well-connected. I don't expect to be discriminated against or to be insulted. I don't expect to be treated as a drunk when I go to a clinic. Some of my privilege comes from the unjust power dynamics of Canada's colonial past and the Church's cultural self-confidence. I feel embarrassed about this, but I still have this privilege just by being.

At the end of the Spiritual Exercises comes the Contemplation to Come to Love as God Loves. In the introduction to this exercise Ignatius points out that friends who are in love want to share what they have with each other. If one has something that the other does not, then that is what is offered. I have become aware that I can use my privilege to empower those who do not have such privilege so that in the end everyone has the same power and no one has privilege.

As my heart and my horizons expand, I feel that I am getting smaller. I know that my pilgrimage of transformation and conversion continues, but I also have learned in my own flesh, that my own hopes for social transformation are fundamentally connected with my own personal transformation and conversion.

Thank you for your kind attention.