
“Thomas Rochford”

“EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE SPIRIT OF THE EXERCISES”

This phrase summarizes a new approach to living religiously that draws on Ignatian spirituality as a creative source of renewal and conversion. Nine Jesuits came to the Curia in Rome for a consultation in November 2003 to reflect on their considerable experience in communicating faith and consider what more we might do.

In recent years we began to speak of “giving the Exercises in everyday life.” Now we focus on the next step: everyday life in the spirit of the Exercises:

What do we suggest to or provide for people after the retreat is over? What can they do on a regular basis to lead an authentic religious life as they deal with their families and jobs and communities?

We are speaking about a way of understanding religion that is creative and tied into conversion; even those who have not made the Exercises can profit from the kind of faith that develops from them.

An important note: this question touches not just individuals but communities as well because what people do to express their religious quest involves rites and devotions, prayers and practices that form communities.

The sponsors of the meeting were Joe Tetlow, Secretary for Ignatian Spirituality, and Tom Rochford, Secretary for Communication. Tetlow: “To the early companions, defending the faith meant a comprehensive Catholic way of life. I hope that we will find in Ignatian spirituality a way of creating such a comprehensive Catholic way of life in our times.”

Rochford's hope was that the Society of Jesus would eagerly turn to the communications specialists to play a key role in collaboration with other Jesuit experts if the Society as a body undertook a broader role in renewing religious practice in the church.

Jesuits specialists in spirituality or communication cannot do this project by themselves. Rather, they can only do it as part of a much bigger project involving Jesuits in spirituality, pastoral work and education.

Five characteristics of this approach to living out a communal faith life:

1) BE IN TOUCH WITH NEEDS

Religion belongs to ordinary human living in the basic experiences of everyday life. It needs to be in touch with the real and basic needs of people, for healing and problems within the family, for economic pressures and conflicts with other people; people also need self-understanding and meaning. Listen and pay attention to what people say about their needs in confession and counselling.

2) LEAD THE MILLIONS IN THE MIDDLE DEEPER IN FAITH

Many (perhaps most) people are still in the catechumenate level so growth means a personal relationship with Jesus tied into service to others. We need to recognize the different levels of faith and respond accordingly; we need to understand whom we are addressing. Most people will respond to a First Week or an 18th Annotation Approach. Think of conversion as an ongoing process.

3) DRAW OUT THE EXPERIENCE OF THE MINISTER

You can't give what you don't have. People want priests who can talk about God with the authority of personal experience, whose faith is “transparent” in the sense that they talk about something whose importance to them is evident. We need to learn to trust God and be willing to experiment without fear. There is a distinctive Jesuit approach to religious practice flowing out of the Spiritual Exercises that mediates a path between the rejection of organized church activity on the one side and the attempt to return to a pre-Vatican II practice of religion on the

other. From Ignatius on we have followed a way of proceeding that starts by looking for the Spirit at work in people's lives and then moving to the Son and finally to the Father. This method leads to conversion and to a renewed community life. On the other hand, a Jesuit approach that is hyper-critical of popular piety leads us to ignore elements of religion that matter deeply to people or too casually dismiss a culture's symbols, such as those that deal with death. We need to be aware of our own prejudices and biases.

4) ROOT IT IN COMMUNITY

The individual searching for God is central but he or she finds God in connection with others, not in a solitary pursuit; and the experience of God is rich with associations of ritual, Biblical readings, church activities, even the sights and smells of liturgical seasons. People need things to do: rite and ritual, devotions and symbols. A faith-filled people forms both large and small communities where people can share faith and be known. Community comes alive as people experience God together, both in prayer and in action. People are looking for a “practical religion” in the sense of James 2: 14-26. Devotional practices are a way of being in touch with peoples' deepest selves. People respond to something that is felt more than to just an idea (seeing, listening, smelling and touching).

5) CONSIDER IT IN CONTEXT

The group made it very clear that there are significant differences in context around the world; Africa and Latin America are relatively similar and both contrast strongly with Europe which is not exactly like North America. Europeans willingly admit to being spiritual but are loathe to say they are religious because organized religion is looked down upon as a negative. Africans trust religious groups to provide services more than they do NGOs. In Latin America they are trying to look on Jesus as both person and project without falling into the fundamentalist camp that rejects social issues or the magical search for controlling God to get what you want.

The consult noted that individual Jesuits are very active in promoting and defending religion in the sense described above. In this sense we

must take into consideration not only what is being done by institutions where the Society of Jesus is active as such but also the great deal of works and pastoral commitments where individual jesuits are inserted and serve.

Such activities include community development within parishes; many varieties of retreats, prayer groups and associations such as CIC/CVX; TV, radio and publications including what the Apostleship of Prayer does; and promotion of some devotional activities. We also noted many opportunities, including new ways to teach people how to pray and to make use of institutions like retreat houses; new communication media such as the internet which has had good success with web sites devoted to prayer. We could focus on spiritual formation of our lay colleagues so they can do more and we could give young Jesuits more time after ordination to the experience of explicitly pastoral-religious ministry.

This view of the importance of religion has implications for our self-understanding and practice as Jesuits. The group quickly moved to making “should” statements: We need to have a change of attitude and no longer separate religious practices lived within an organised church and the day to day life in the Spirit.

We need to affirm our religious identity more openly and explicitly so that our commitment to religion is clear to people. Our self-understanding of ministry is changing as an explicit religious ministry impacts what we do; we need to integrate our lives rather than dichotomize them. We should not be afraid of saying why we do what we do (especially social action work.)

The consult affirmed the need to focus more Jesuit energy on the “middle millions” by doing what would help the many in preference to restricting ourselves to what would help the few. The sense was not that Jesuits should change who they are or abandon their advanced specializations but should aim those capabilities at a more popular, much broader target. We should integrate our knowledge and people’s needs.