

AGAINST ALL ODDS, FAITH DOING JUSTICE

Ignatian Spirituality in a Public Life: An Interview

Précis. Vitaliano Nañagas is at present a consultant for the World Bank, the Philippine government, and private corporations. Educated by Jesuits at the Ateneo de Manila, he studied business with the Christian Brothers. He began his career with Citicorp Manila and in 1981 moved to Citicorp New York, where he handled the debt defaults of several nations. Back in Manila in 1988, he joined the government of Cory Aquino at cabinet rank as President of the Philippine Deposit Insurance Corporation (PDIC). One success was bringing banks to handle the transfer of earnings from abroad—U.S. \$600 million a year then, now around \$12 billion—to keep workers from smuggling and being swindled. Besides his consulting, Mr Nañagas also currently serves on the Finance Board of the Archdiocese of Manila (and of other dioceses and the Jesuit Province) and as Treasurer of the Loyola School of Theology and of the Xavier School (a Chinese grade and high school). He is a leader of the Christian Life Community, which he represented at Itaiçi in 1998.

At your level of operation in government and finance, what can the preferential option for the poor possibly mean to you?

Well, here's a case. A big bank in the city folded very recently. There is nothing left, really; the funds have been dissipated. Now, the owners of the bank want to delay payment to depositors for three years while they get the

bank in order. Then, they say, “if there is anything left,” they will pay the depositors. Of course, there won’t be anything left. But the owners will have something—they will have plenty—because of the way the laws are written and also because of their connections.

What can anyone do about that?

Well, I keep plugging away at the structural issues, trying to make the people who can do something about it understand that the bank default, taken as an event and as made possible by the laws, is against the poor. There is a preferential option for the poor, all right, but a preferential option to stick it to the poor. We have to turn the default upside down. The people who brought it about ought to be, by law, the ones who lose because of it. Not the poor.

So the option plays out at your level as an interest in getting the law, which is not now in favor of the poor, re-structured, changed.

Not only the law, but the attitudes of those who administer it. That’s another shame, too. If a farmer shows up at the Department of Agrarian Reform and he isn’t dressed well, he won’t even be allowed in. Where the farmers should have first right, they are summarily dismissed, and violence is used to take them away.

How did you get to the way you think now? After all, your career has followed a pretty standard trajectory high up into finance.

It started in the Christian Life Community at the Ateneo. That was the seed, really. But I left CLC in the early seventies when I went to graduate school at the Asian Institute of Management. From there, I went right into Citicorp, and then I had nothing to do with CLC. But in eighty-one, I joined a group that was beginning to grow. Then in eight-five, I went to New York and I had a prayer group there. When I came back to the Philippines in eighty-eight, the seed was still there, and I really got back into CLC.

With all the experiences you’ve had, what makes you turn to Ignatian spirituality?

Frankly, because the Exercises keep me going, focusing my daily prayer. I make a five-day retreat every year, which my CLC group does, or else we

make the Annotation 19 Exercises. I've gone through the Exercises in Daily Life twice with a Jesuit directing me. I've been directed by Fr Benny Calpotura and studied the Exercises with Fr Benny Sim, who is the Ecclesiastical Assistant for the Philippine CLC.

I was sort of an apprentice with Fr Calpotura, starting in ninety-four or ninety-five. I was training to be a group guide within the CLC. I did not want to direct the *Exercises*. Fr Calpotura said yes, I did. So once there were two of them working with a group making *Exercises*, and Fr Calpotura just started not showing up. I had to direct. So I had had some formal training, but in ninety-five, my real apprenticeship began. And for four years now, my community has been taking courses with Fr Calpotura at the Loyola School of Theology so that we can give *Spiritual Exercises*.

But that's all about CLC. Does the spirituality really make any difference in the workplace?

Yes. All the time. It's a matter of perspective. At the beginning, what kind of job to accept is already affected by spirituality. A job comes along: accept it or not? And just now in my life, I am making choices of jobs. And then, as soon as you are in the job, you find that your perspective is different from the others' around you. The technical work, of course, you do like everyone else. But your perspective is different.

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And is this recognized? Would it influence the work that you get to do?

I believe it's the reason why I am being called on, and why I have been asked to do the work that I am now doing with this bank failure. I have the idea that those who call on me recognize a kind of objectivity in my work that they do not find in others' work. It's an objectivity in looking out for the interests of the poor, and even for the country as a whole.

It seems to me that spirituality means that I feel a critical concern also for the Church, even a critical concern applied to the inner workings of the Church. I think that people are paying me now for working out of this perspective. The country is in a lot of trouble right now—the financial system, companies going bankrupt—and more and more people are calling

me either just to talk about what they're dealing with, or else to do jobs. That's fine.

Some ideas there sound like they might come from the "Two Standards." Or is it your experience that these "ignatian meditations" do not really apply today?

Let me take them chronologically. I'd begin with structural sin. This is very important to me. I think it is understated in the materials that are written by priests and for priests. But when it's written or given by someone who is connected with the real world—well, we know that we are not in control, that sin is not just you, it's part of the structure, itself. I can connect with structural sin.

And the other thing I really connect with is the Incarnation. I look at the world, all of it, and I can see a mess every time. But the Lord's coming... saying in effect, "I'm in charge. You do your best. I'm the Boss." This is really important to me, because without that faith and hope I'd be in terrible shape.

So what you're saying is that these "Ignatian meditations" are not just one-hour exercises?

Nothing like it. The Three Couples, the Three Kinds of Humility, these are important all the time to me. In my last big trouble, I found out what the third degree of humility means in me. In 1996, I accepted the presidency of the Stock Exchange. I shouldn't tell you the whole story of how that came about, but let me say that those who asked me to take the position assured me—really agreed with me—that they wanted reform. The exchange absolutely needs reform. But on March 8 of 1997, I walked away. They had not really wanted reform. Well, the headlines were humiliating, bitterly humiliating. I was humiliated in public by people who were in the wrong, but I could not publicize how they were wrong. I did not want to destroy the system.

Ten people left, counting me. I went to the Exchange building in the middle of the night and emptied my files and brought them to my house. I put a desk in the middle of my living room, and the ten of us would come and work every day. We would begin with prayer. My right hand was a member of Focolari and four others were in CLC. All nine now have better

lives than ever, better quality of life. And they are making more money! Even I am....

But that's not what matters to you.

It isn't. What matters is service. Take the RMAF, Ramon Magsaysay Awards Foundation. I'm on that board. It gives five awards every year, sort of the Asian Nobel equivalent: for public service, community service, government service, journalism and human rights, and international understanding. Well, it seemed like a good thing to create a model community for the forty current and the sixty past employees and for the benefactors and all the families. So someone donated a tract of twenty-five hectares, and I figured to sell fifteen and build the infrastructure for housing on the other ten: roads, sewage, water, electricity. Everyone would build their own house, but everyone would subscribe to a covenant. The employees themselves created the covenant, with the help of a facilitator we brought in. The fences—you've seen how high they usually are—are not to be higher than three feet. If someone "undesirable" wants to move next door, well, according to our covenant, we let them. The employees decided all this. Took two days, but they decided it. It was just a good idea we had but I am glad it is working out. The facilitator is now the president of the Foundation.

When you look around the Philippines—especially now with the impeachment of the president being bruited about—how many things run like that?

Almost none. As you know, we are again in crises, yes, many crises – of leadership, of values, of nationhood, etc... We need all the prayers that we can get... Things are in a mess. I sometimes wonder, giving Annotation 19 Exercises—I give a couple every year....

Even to people in government and public life. With all those good people, why are things still in such a mess?

Well, they are. Why? I think, first, because many of them try their personal best, but they are not effective in changing structures. During Cory's time in office, many of the people in government, perhaps five percent, had made the *Exercises*. Nothing happened. They were fighting among themselves, for one thing.

But it's not just the people in government. It's everyone. The people don't have a vested interest in the country, so they sell their votes. Any chance they get, they take a green card [a permit for employment in the United States] and they go. But you have to understand that. Here, middle management makes perhaps 17,000 pesos a year; in the U.S., they would make 400,000. And anyhow, everyone wants a big deal.

But you came back to the Philippines and got into public life. So you stay with it.

Well, as I said, I find in the Incarnation, stay with your work, and "I'm in charge." CLC is not so well known here in the Philippines, and there's work to do. We have about thirty fully accredited communities, another ten growing and another ten emerging. It's a matter of recruitment, passing on real ignatian spirituality, and challenging people to generosity.

Do most CLC members work at the universal mission—I mean the Itaici statements—of Christianizing culture where they are?

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Our mission this year is formation, and the contribution of my own community is to formation. It's important. Giving retreats, recollections, values formation, helping people learn to discern. We have to train a lot of guides. But the whole of CLC now has three centers. The first is the *Formation Institute* run by Bebs Sim (sister-in-law to Fr Ben Sim) at the Ateneo here. It is really an outreach outside CLC, but many members are involved in the work. Then there's the *Social Development Institute*—which will do livelihood and outreach work, creating sparks and linkages, and which is run by a CLC full-time employee. And the third is the *De la Costa Retreat Center*, on some land that Fr Ben Sim found and on which we are patiently building because we can't afford to use the regular retreat houses, which are too expensive for most CLC members. This is where the Formation Institute has most of its activities, and also the Social Development Institute.

Now, I don't mean to challenge you—or maybe I do?—but that's all inside CLC. How could the mission possibly reach out in the present situation here in the Philippines?

Our discernment on the situation is that we are to do the following: *Pray, Increase the Pressure*, and *Study*. *Pray* for the miracle that we need, which is the change—from within—of the people who are in power and those people who want the power. *Increase the pressure* so that the needed change will happen. Pressure on those in power to do the right thing and also on those fomenting the change not extend to violence. And *study* so that we are informed of the data and events so that we can continue to discern the everyday moves that must be made. You have probably heard that the official Church, including the other denominations, have denounced this administration as having lost the moral authority to govern. This is true; it has. But even more important to my mind is that this administration has lost its ability to look after the poor! It has lost the ability to truly serve... Sure, it has the ability to give out dole, but not to look after the long-term interests of the poor! And the sad fact is that there are many among the poor who do not understand, much less appreciate, the truth of this. Without faith, it would be so easy to go to the mountains and take the violent overthrow method....

Thus, the struggle continues, not only outside but more importantly, the inside.... the battle for people's hearts... Actually, I now get a better appreciation of the psalm, “give us a new heart...”

That's a lot of work, important work, inside CLC and, emphatically, in public life.

It may be too much. There's always a tension, because we all also work in our parishes. And in fact, when my community joins a rally or a demonstration these days, we go as the parish, Mary the Queen, not as CLC. That's all right. It's important to be working within the Church, because that's part of our charism.

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And so is hope, and the gratitude at the basis of ignatian spirituality, and that you seem to hold on to.

The other day, I really got depressed at all the negative things that have been happening in the Philippines, what with the war in Mindanao, the depressed state of the economy, the shameful things going on at the top of the government, the closure of some financial institutions, and the overall difficulty of the situation here in the Philippines compared to some other places in the world, who are having a better time... And I began to despair at how many “bad” people there are and how little “good” is showing forth....

It was then that I began to recall the wondrous things that the Lord does and the way the Lord acts without too much fanfare but with much impact. Example: my life and what the Lord has done for me and my family.

Mr Nañagas, thank you very much.