

# THE SOCIAL APOSTOLATE AND ITS SPIRITUALITY

Jean-Yves Calvez  
Centre Sèvres and Ceras,  
Paris

## *What is Innovative after the Council?*

The commitment to the social apostolate is not a recent invention in the Society of Jesus. From my own experience, as a young religious, right after the war, I knew a large number of Jesuits both young and old, committed to the poor, working in prisons, with migrants, with nomadic peoples, with exploited workers, with women domestic workers. Generally these were men of profound spirituality and indefatigable devotion. I had the chance in 1947 to meet Fr. Alberto Hurtado of the province of Chile whom the pope has lately included in the catalogue of saints: I immediately understood the meaning of the life of this companion; he was so enthused to respond to Christ's wishes for him, with a marvellous spontaneity. What was perhaps new - surely not absolutely new - in recent times following the Latin-American Episcopal conference of Medellin (1968), the Bishops' Synod *Justitia in mundo* in 1971, and Decree 4 of the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (1975), is the insistence on the demands of justice – a word which cannot simply be conflated with charity – the insistence also on “structures” to be reformed, to be transformed, therefore the insistence on action which would have an effect on the institutions. C.C.32 said that “the structures of society are among the principal formative influences in our world, shaping people's ideas and feelings, shaping their most intimate desires and aspirations; in a word, shaping mankind itself. The transformation of these structures in the interests of the spiritual and material liberation of fellow human beings is intimately connected to the work of evangelisation.” (Decree 4, n.40). It is important to note that Fr. John-Baptist Janssens, Superior-General right after the war years, had strongly insisted in his Instruction on the social apostolate

## ===== SOCIAL APOSTOLATE AND ITS SPIRITUALITY =====

(1947) on the importance of action on structures in the social apostolate. This concern was for him most crucial in defining this apostolate.

### *The Response of the Jesuits*

I must add, even if there are opinions to the contrary, that the Jesuits have committed themselves rather modestly on these lines which are specific to their call. Decree 4 of G.C.32 had other concerns which partially led in another direction, which attracted much attention: the concern to incorporate the social apostolate into *all* the apostolate of the Society of Jesus. This is what both Fr. Arrupe and Fr. Kolvenbach sought with much effort to achieve, this is what both G.C.33 and G.C. 34 have supported. G.C.32 insisted that “The review of our ministries and the deployment of available manpower and resources must pay great attention to the role in the service of faith and the promotion of justice which can be played by our educational institutions, periodicals, parishes, retreat houses and the other apostolic works for which we are responsible. Not only should our structured activities undergo this review, so should our individual apostolate.” (Decree 4,n.76)

G.C.32 said that “all our work (n.29), all our life is involved in this process. Our life and our style of living were clearly referred to and through the spiritual aspect of our commitment. One hoped, at the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation for a conversion of our ways and styles of life. “Alterations are called for in our manner and style of living so that the poverty to which we are vowed may identify us with the poor Christ, who identified Himself with the deprived.” (n..48)

On the whole from what I know, I can say that much has been achieved over the past thirty years. The number of Jesuits in works which bear the mark of G.C. 32 has definitely grown. Even considering the decline in numbers in certain regions, the number of Jesuits in these areas of work has been definitely larger than in previous times. Today the presence of Jesuits in poor environments, shanty towns, suburbs, and *favelas* is definitely more prominent than ever before. In all kinds of meetings of the Society in all its provinces, time and space are dedicated to those who are socially committed to take stock of their spiritual experience. Many Jesuits have friends among the poor – as Ignatius wished from the very beginnings of the Society.

*What has motivated the Jesuits?*

The fundamental *inspiration* for this commitment for the vast majority of us, and also that which inspired G.C.32, in its decisive word, marked by the documents of the Church in the post-conciliar era. “The Gospel demands a life in which the justice of the Gospel shines out in a willingness not only to recognize and respect the rights of all, especially the poor and the powerless, but also to work actively to secure those rights. It demands an openness and generosity to anyone in need even a stranger or an enemy. It demands towards those who have injured us, pardon; toward those with whom we are at odds, a spirit of reconciliation.” (Decree 4, n. 18). And “there is no genuine conversion to the love of God without

conversion to the love of neighbour and, therefore to the demands of justice” (n.28).<sup>1</sup>

*justice is always the  
first step  
towards love*

Have there been any changes in this regard? I think one must note that there could have been a temptation to tamper with or sweeten this call when this was introduced in the Church, perhaps controversially sometimes, the theme of the preferential love for the poor, alongside the preferential option for the poor. But Fr.

Kolvenbach has reacted specifically at the start of his office as General Superior of the Society, against any abuse that some could have been made through the use of the first formula, which is *softer* and preferred for that reason. Fr Kolvenbach maintained that it is no less demanding, and that justice is always the first step towards love; he has held this position firmly notwithstanding some criticism.

*In relation to the “Spiritual Exercises”*

The question put to me is about the relationship between the commitment to the social apostolate and the major traits of our spirituality – let us say of the spirituality of time *immemorial* of the Society of Jesus, which we receive specifically through the Spiritual Exercises. We know how much this was present in the documents of G.C.32, it brought together the essential elements of its message, in the true spirit of the *Exercises*: “To promote justice, to proclaim the faith and to lead others to a personal

## ===== SOCIAL APOSTOLATE AND ITS SPIRITUALITY =====

encounter with Christ are the three inseparable elements that make up the whole of our apostolate” (n. 51).

Definitely Fr. Arrupe had to maintain this deep orientation, against some secularising tendencies which manifested themselves at times, in his letters and major conferences on the spirituality of the Society of Jesus especially in his letter: “For an authentic integration of the spiritual life and the apostolate” (1976), his Prayer to Jesus Christ our model ‘I have discovered that the ideal for our way of proceeding was your way of proceeding, etc...’ (1979) and his conferences “The Trinitarian inspiration of the Ignatian Charism” and “Rooted and Grounded in Love”, in 1980 and 1981.

The most frequent reference made by the Jesuits engaged in the social apostolate in recent times to the *Spiritual Exercises* has undoubtedly been to the contemplation of the Incarnation. They have referred less frequently to the Kingdom or the Two Standards (the *programme* of the Lord). Definitely one can refer to humanity before the Incarnation, in a way rather flatly to underscore God’s universal concern for all men and women. The Jesuits very often have gone much further, insisting on all that is miserable and violent in our world, according to the terms used by Ignatius : men “at war”, people “who are crying”, “sick”, men “who are dying”, surely alongside others who are at peace, in good health or have a whole life ahead of them (this same contrast is also part of the picture). Men who are “blind”, and men who “beat up” their neighbour, who “kill”, and thus go “to hell”. After all it is to these men to whom we are called – just as the Word was sent to them - and this is the social apostolate, in the wider meaning of the term, the call to the social apostolate is definitely part of all these human situations.

The response is, on the other hand, *love*, according to St Ignatius in his Contemplation for obtaining Love: effective *love*, love which “works”, love which is “reciprocal communication”, which is precisely at the root of all the social apostolate. I think that these characteristics have been truly present in the Jesuit social apostolate since 1975.

### *Stages*

Have we known different successive stages since the great awakening of the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation? It seems to me that at a certain time we gave too much importance to the differentiation and distinction

between spiritual and social apostolate, as “sectors” of the apostolate- and that a particular Jesuit is part of this and not of the other, or he is dedicated to the first but not to the second at the same time, or to the second but not to the first. Definitely there is an element which plays a part which is the demand for a certain specialisation (this was not less true before G.C.32.) but we used to distinguish between a specialisation in the field of education and a specialisation in the field of the social apostolate, seldom making distinctions about the spiritual apostolate except in the case of those who were specifically assigned to retreat work in our house for retreats or those who were spiritual directors in seminaries.

Certainly there have always been some tensions between the spiritual aspect and the social aspect of the apostolate – notwithstanding the fact that the inspiration of the social apostolate is evangelical. In a short biographical note, five years ago, I noted this about my own itinerary: “I have often asked myself questions about the meaning of the social apostolate and the study of the social questions in particular especially in 1965-66. The Second Vatican Council which was nearing its end had inspired and generated questions; one can also say destabilised the established order. It seemed to me that the essential element of the social apostolate in its various forms consisted in helping one’s neighbour from the point of view of his relationships, even the institutionalised ones, helping one’s brothers together with others to live as brothers, brothers of Jesus Christ [...] Some types of social apostolate which did not put one in direct contact with men and women, which help others only indirectly (e.g. research on some models of society) can be problematic sometimes. Interpersonal communication, through “conversation”, a term which seems to me essential to St. Ignatius, is truly at the centre the rest is ‘indirect’”. I would insist: “However this indirect aspect is necessary, I have never been able to escape this conclusion each time that I put these questions to myself”. “There are on the other hand some illusions, I would add, that the idea of immediate communication does not hold water”.<sup>2</sup> I have reflected often and at length on these questions and definitely there are no simple solutions.

There is, in a way close to this argument, the opposition which one can make and that is often made between the “spiritual” need, the spiritual hunger of the world, and the “material” or social needs, important but not primary, some might say except in exceptional cases. We have definitely become more sensitive to this opposition after a long period of time when we were not. There are definitely the extreme cases which are not easy to

unravel. But the decisions in a number of situations are never easy. And the Society necessarily always lives these tensions.

*Different forms and different problems*

If one takes the term social apostolate in its wider meaning to include such activities as the direct commitment, through advocacy (defence of those who are suffering), the organisation of pressure groups in the struggle for justice, certain research work, formation of leaders, one cannot but help note big differences in the difficulties encountered by those engaged in one field or the other. The first type of activities lead to a politicisation, let us take the word in its most pejorative meaning, that is more concern for the means rather than the end.

This can also lead to ideologies which can often characterise political action. At the end of the 70's in several regions of the world it was noted that many were "burnt out", a condition of both physical and psychological fatigue and eventual spiritual emptiness which knows no

*effective love, love which  
"works", love which is  
"reciprocal communication",  
which is precisely at the root  
of all the social apostolate*

rest or retreat. One burns the candle at both ends and quickly one is empty of all resources. This is not only true of the social apostolate, but definitely in the social sector it has often been observed.

In the intellectual field of this apostolate one encounters the same problems as in any other intellectual work, mainly in the areas of research, to which Fr. Arrupe had previously drawn our attention. A distancing from concrete experiences and a satisfaction from the intellectual mastery of things becomes merely pretentiousness.

Research, one must note has changed in nature in the social apostolate. There was a time right after the war and the era when *development* came to the forefront as the major problem, as well as the *revolution*- when one felt capable of offering solutions for the transformation of "society". The awareness of the complexity of social realities invites us today to more modest responses. But we are definitely less stimulated. And

perhaps the creative contribution of Jesuits towards a Christian social thinking has decreased. The social apostolate has focussed mainly on the participation through lived experiences, and the accompaniment of persons in their life situations without necessarily hoping to transform these situations. We note that we have fewer illusions but we are also less present in those projects and proposals that are linked to structures in society.

The centres such as the Centre de Recherche et d'Action Sociale, or CIAS in Spanish, have sometimes suffered, alongside a distancing within the same provinces to which they belong, when they should be playing a leading role in motivation. Fr. Kolvenbach has recently recognised this type of difficulty and asked insistently that we not give up.

### ***The most important problem***

Observed over a long period of time – of about fifty years - the social apostolate in the Society of Jesus, one can conclude, has had an uneven history. On the contrary, for the Society it has been a difficult yet essential enterprise. In recent times one has noted failures as well as regressions. The texts recently published by *Promotio justitiae* bear witness to the fact that the various interventions made by Fr. General Peter- Hans Kolvenbach in the different meetings of Provincials as well as of Procurators, or of coordinators of the social apostolate. We are affected by the small number of vocations in various regions; the effect of this on the social apostolate is very noticeable. We also feel the effects of the dominant pastoral tendencies in the Church today that are often hardly favourable to the social apostolate and we have to be aware of this.

But the most important problem seems to be a question of integration, in the strongest meaning of this term. We must avoid a concept which renders the social only an *ethical* dimension of Christianity, something lateral, “deduced” from that which is essential, even though of great importance: this direction is not convincing and one often ends up “tiring oneself” a ending up worn out. One must, on the contrary, make the social a theological dimension, indeed an integral part of theology, a dimension *of the faith itself* as a commitment to God which demands a commitment to the neighbour and cannot be separated from it. “Slightly less than a god” this man, this brother according to the Psalm! One can therefore distinguish between a spiritual apostolate and a social apostolate as (relatively) different

---

---

## SOCIAL APOSTOLATE AND ITS SPIRITUALITY

---

---

specialisations, but it is important to recall that we give ourselves to God though our giving of ourselves to our neighbour – and there is no true self-giving to God (“whom you do not see”) without the gift of self to one’s neighbour (“whom you see”). Ethics is fashionable, but it is not always considered as a dimension of the faith itself, in such a situation we must never be satisfied with the ethical view point.

It is clear that the demand for integration which I have emphasised has its effects on the “spiritual” apostolate, which must always include, intrinsically linked and always present, the “social” dimension – the spiritual apostolate as often understood nowadays does not always include this dimension. What else but to invite a full and deeper sharing within the Society and among companions.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Hence fidelity to our apostolic mission requires that we propose the whole of Christian salvation and lead others to embrace it. Christian salvation consists in an undivided love of the Father and of the neighbour and of justice.” (ibid.)

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Yves Calvez, *Compagnon de Jésus: Un itinéraire*, Desclée de Brouwer, 2000, p.29-30