

MY EXPERIENCE IN SOCIAL APOSTLESHIP

Álvaro Alemany

Biographical Profile

I was born in 1947 in Zaragoza, Spain, into a middle class family which lived out its Catholicism in a natural and traditional fashion. My father, a medical doctor, dedicated many hours to volunteer service as a member of Catholic Action and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. My three brothers and I were all educated in Jesuit schools. When the oldest among us joined the Order, the rest of us also dreamed of becoming Jesuits some day; and, one after the other, each one began to hear, and act on, the call to join the Order, despite the fact that our mother's health began to decline as a result of our going away.

I, being the youngest, joined the novitiate at Veruela in 1964. I studied Humanities for a year in Salamanca and then did two years of philosophy in Munich, Germany, after which I longed to embark on an education in the sciences. I studied mathematical science at the University of Zaragoza and, before the end of my final year there, had joined a Jesuit community in the neighbourhood of Picarral (a working-class ghetto in Zaragoza) to which I still belong. We are a "Workers' Mission." Some of our companions are involved in salaried manual labour; others are in charge of pastoral duties in the parish of Our Lady of Bethlehem. For my part, I worked as a teacher of mathematics for 25 years in a Catholic elementary school in the same neighbourhood.

Since I didn't want to give up the work I was doing there, I requested permission to study theology through a distance learning programme associated with the University of Comillas. I was ordained priest in 1978. I then spent 13 years as parish priest, during which time I also assisted in the politics of the local unions and participated actively in the Neighbourhood Civic Association. In 1999, I stopped teaching

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in the elementary school to join a team of Jesuits at the Pignatelli Center, an organization with a long history of service in the name of faith, culture and justice. But in 2004, I returned to my old work in the parish.

I have participated in numerous Social Action meetings and also meetings of the Spanish and European Workers' Missions. From 1992-99, I was coordinator of Social Action in my Province (Aragón), and for eight years now I have coordinated the Inter-Provincial Commission for Social Action for all the Spanish provinces. I have played an active role in the initiatives of the Social Apostolate of the Society of Jesus and was a participant at the Naples Congress in 1997.

Watershed Moments

Ironically, it was to be in Germany, while studying philosophy, that I discovered the world of the Spanish working-class, since there were large numbers of Galician and Andalusian immigrants (not to mention Turks, Yugoslavians and others) who were working there in wretched conditions, far from their families, supplementing the precarious Spanish economy with their remittances to their loved ones back home. It was then that I learned to distinguish the hidden mechanisms at work within our historical and social reality, perpetuating structures of inequality, injustice and poverty. I also witnessed radical Christian living there such as I had never seen before; for example, the case of Marcelino, a Spanish diocesan priest, an intellectual and mystic, who lived in the hovels of the working-class ghetto while completing his doctoral thesis.

When I returned to Spain to study mathematics in 1969 during the final years of the Franco administration, our Spanish universities were in a feverish state, politically speaking. My companions and I were interested in harmonising devotion to scientific culture with our concern for the student and workers' movements, our commitment to universal brotherhood and the promotion of social justice as a sign, anticipating the promised Kingdom. At this time, many of my preconceived notions and conventional perspectives began to crumble, but I also learned that not all crises are necessarily negative. I began to value the autonomy of what is "human" as distinct from religious considerations, and came to think of this as being ultimately a gift from God, not as opposed to the Divine Order. The call to a more intensely radical approach burst forth from the external historical

circumstances and the internal psychological evolution I was experiencing. At this point, some of my colleagues (not all of whom were Christians), and I, felt compelled to make significant commitments in word and deed to the service and welfare of the poor in a particular working-class neighbourhood. We searched for a “more” (magis) that persisted through time and through all our incongruencies.

The Political Dimension

Once in Picarral, I began to experience in a more intimate fashion the importance and limitations of the struggle to change the political and social structures of our society. My contact with local political figures filled me with profound admiration for their capacity for self-sacrifice and service. But the diversity of political strategies for achieving even a minimal improvement in human rights, coupled with the defects of our still nascent democracy, made it all too clear that there was a systemic resistance to immediate radical change, and that we would have to redirect our attention to long-term goals. My experience in politics has come as a result of my activism at the grassroots level; namely, my association with the labour unions and other neighbourhood organizations. It wasn't long before I noticed the corrosive forces

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stemming from the temptations of power, individual enrichment and favouritism, the very issues that plague humanity in a more universal sense. To really bring about a true change of heart in individuals and political systems, it is necessary to make a slow and deliberate effort to transform the existing culture. We, as Christians and Jesuits, must always refer back to our personal closeness to Jesus Christ among the poorest of the poor; otherwise we will succumb to the temptation of converting our pastoral service into just another mechanism of domination.

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Notes on Exclusion

The economic development and modernization of the country, facilitated by the shift to a democratic system and our reintegration into Europe, have done little for the weaker sections of the population who have been quietly excluded from the general rise in the standard of living.

While carrying out my functions in the community I have witnessed directly the dark side of this scenario: how those who are jobless for extended periods are blamed for their situation; how rapid technological transformations are forcing many into early retirement in various industrial sectors, to say nothing of the ravages of drug addiction among the underclass, the gross exploitation of the adolescent and youth labour forces, the struggles of the elderly trying to sustain themselves on measly pensions while dealing with debilitating physical or mental illnesses, and, in recent years, the increasing number of immigrants who live and work in wretched conditions, deprived of their rights, like those Spanish emigrants I remember from my days in Germany. Our Jesuit community, in attempting to combat or relieve these social ills, does not concern itself so much with the foundation of new organizations and institutions as with cooperating with organizations that have already sprung organically from the neighbourhoods themselves. Many of my companions do intensive work in centres that work to intervene in social and work-related activities among the local youth, with those who are most in need and who find themselves disenfranchised vis a vis the mainstream. I am personally involved in a centre where I make use of my skills in mathematics to train adults in this subject, especially women, hopefully empowering them and instilling at the same time a sense of pride. This is the way in which, as a Jesuit community, we are in contact with the marginalized groups in our city. It is true that we are often overwhelmed at the thought of all the work that remains to be done, and by the fact that, despite our efforts, we don't seem to have answers to all the problems facing our communities.

Cultivating Spirituality

Among the networks of people working in similar circumstances and engaged in social commitments such as ours, it may be true to say that

we have occasionally grown excessive in our activism but that other dimensions, such as cultivating the faith that underpins our social dedication, remain relatively impoverished. To compensate for this tendency, we have turned to supportive activities (base communities) aimed at revitalizing and renovating our ecclesiastical affiliation. In this sense, we have also benefited from an increased reliance on the Spiritual Exercises in daily life and other forms of Ignatian spirituality. At present, I am working with a team comprising one nun, one ex-Jesuit, and six married laypersons, the majority of whom are women.

In 1989, my Provincial invited me to participate in a policymaking round table for social affairs, culminating in the Commission of 1991. At that time, “social insertion” and Ignatian spirituality seemed to be quite distinct aspects. However, for me and for so many of my companions, both lay and religious (as well as for a significant number of women religious), the spiritual expression linked to our work (for example, the Workers’ Mission, working-class parishes, and other forms of service in marginalized areas) was and will always be a fundamental concern. Little by little, news about activities such as ours began to see the light of day, surfacing in chats, conferences and eventually in periodicals with extensive distribution. One volume in particular, which we published at that time, no. 4 in the Ignatian collection “Manresa,” contributed greatly to the diffusion of our commitment to a social justice inspired by Ignatian spirituality. These were the same policies that would be formally reiterated in the G.C 34 (d. 2, no. 8).

Experiencing Death

In my years of experience together with my companions and with the people of the neighbourhood in Picarral, I have survived all sorts of peaks and valleys, everything from celebration to mourning, enthusiasm to dejection, progress to regression. It is because of this that I have learned not to allow myself to be seduced by the allure of quick or short-term success; and I have also learned to be wary of overconfidence in my own capacities.

With that in mind, I would like to say a few words about one of the greatest challenges that we face in our efforts. I am thinking here of the human experience of death. When it comes to the social apostolate, it is

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impossible to reduce this to an individual or interior experience. Our mission is a collective endeavour, and the loss of one affects the whole.

For example, it often happens that the death of an individual brings about the decline or cessation of an entirely worthwhile project in which we had placed all our hopes and aspirations. Sometimes death touches us in the form of work-related accidents or traffic accidents, and many people in the community are affected by these dramatic circumstances in which we are called upon to offer words and deeds of consolation. The hardest to understand are the heart wrenching cases in which children and adolescents are involved in fatal, sometimes accidental, circumstances.

Then there is the fact that our companions must face up to the illness and ageing that are a prelude to death. Over the years we have lost some of our dearest friends and loved ones, resulting occasionally in the termination of some of the most cherished projects on our socio-political agenda. Time and time again, we are humbled by a sense of helplessness as we comprehend “how Divinity is hidden”; all we can then do is turn to Christ and put our faith in Him, and act as agents of Christ’s mercy through “the office of consoling that Christ our Lord brings.”

At this point I should like, if I may, to acknowledge a very recent case, the struggle of Julia, a widow and a dear friend, who had no formal education and only a meagre pension, yet a woman who has lived her life in complete and humble service to others. As I write this note she is fighting cancer, undergoing chemotherapy in her tiny living quarters, where she tells me the same words she has always told me: “My faith gives me the strength to carry on.”

To live-with

It gives me great pleasure to acknowledge that my life has been lived out for the most part with an emphasis and a reliance on community. I have enjoyed and cherished the company of many friends and colleagues, especially the modest people of my neighbourhood as well as others who share our values and commitments. It is important to point out that my sense of the Holy Spirit working in my life has come about within the context of “being-with” and journeying together, and I am grateful that the road I have chosen has been one of companionship.

All this has enriched my life and has helped me to correct the erroneous tendencies within me of “voluntarism” and “perfectionism”. As a result, I have been able to surrender myself to a larger sense of service rooted in the present conditions and circumstances as I experience them together with my companions and neighbours.