

IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AND THE SOCIAL APOSTOLATE

William Ryan

My story

I was born, in 1925, in the town of Renfrew, Ontario, Canada, as the middle child of nine in a family of modest means. My father abandoned subsistence farming for logging and sawmills in the Gatineau valley in Quebec, thus leaving his wife and children in a distant town close to schools and church. For my mother daily Mass was not optional for us boys. We children quickly learned hard work and responsibility. I spent my summers with my dad in the lumber camps and sawmills, carrying a full 10-hour-a-day job as early as 14 in abominable working conditions. But here I began a lifelong love affair with nature. I attended public high school and later St. Patrick's College in Ottawa. In 1944, I was about to join the airforce after making a retreat decision not to be a priest. A few days later, on hearing a Jesuit alumnus praising the Jesuits as good priests – I had never met a Jesuit – I knew instantly and forever that I must be a Jesuit. For the rest of my life in different ways I have always been trying to relate faith to justice - trying to give spiritual value to striving for a better world for poor people living and working in unjust conditions such as I had experienced in the sawmills, where I had risked being killed or severely injured.

Jesuit life and social apostolate

I loved novitiate life, discovered prayer and did not want the Long Retreat to end. However, I felt boxed in and took advantage of every available occasion to do physical work on the farm and to take long walks. I asked to join the new Canadian mission in Darjeeling, India. I could not escape

so easily my frustration with textbook neo-scholastic philosophy which put me in constant tension with my professors – and eventually with a Rector who considered me somewhat crazy because I could not fit into the system as other Jesuits did. Exhausted, I sought refuge in shoveling manure at the Guelph farm. Our provincial, Father Swain, missioned me to Darjeeling, but his consultation insisted that I study philosophy. An amicable agreement sent me to St Louis University to study economics.

At St Louis I came to grips with philosophy through the study of the history of economic thought. I understood the reductionist nature of all economic theory, indeed, of all scientific methodologies; and I felt a great

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sense of freedom in doing so. I have never been beholden to neo-liberal economic theory or paradigms. I did my MA thesis on the history and ideology of the Catholic trade unions in Quebec, which gave me lasting insight into the ambiguous relationship in real life between the church and labour, between faith and justice. My thesis won me an invitation to expand it slightly for

a doctorate – but I felt that I should move on.

I asked to do my theology in Europe. With some hesitation, I was sent first to England and later to Belgium. I was bored with the theology presented at Heythrop, and spent much time cutting down trees to let the forest breathe. Arriving at Eegenhoven, Louvain, in 1956, was a totally different experience, living with Jesuits from 24 countries. The Dean, Father Malevez, immediately introduced me to the ‘forbidden’ writings of Teilhard de Chardin and Henri de Lubac. I was finally coming to grips with how to relate heaven and earth, my economics with my spirituality, and discovering how the Risen Christ was leading all creation to its eschatological fulfillment.

Rene Carpentier SJ helped me to integrate spirituality with theology, and with Andre Vachon SJ, I translated the seminal book of Gerard Gilleman SJ, *Le Primat de la Charite en Theologie Morale* into English. My licentiate paper was on the question “Is all our scientific and industrial work irrelevant to the coming of the kingdom?”

My Tertianship at Paray-le-Moniale was prayerful and energetically pastoral. I was accepted by Harvard for doctoral studies in 1959. I changed

my field of specialization from labour relations to economic development, because world poverty had become the priority problem of justice in the world.

Early panic at Harvard – an older Jesuit competing with young geniuses – gave way to exhilaration on discovering I could compete here. My professors were interested in Catholicism and indulged Jesuits, especially the Russian economic historian, Alexander Gershenkron, who was fascinated with the relationship between religion and development and directed my published thesis: *The Clergy and Economic Growth in Quebec*. Unexpectedly, my provincial and his consultants initially vetoed my thesis topic, fearful of opening old wounds in French/English Catholic and Jesuit relations.

I was bailed out from teaching economics at Loyola College, Montreal, by the Canadian bishops inviting me to join their national conference staff. These were the bishops' glory years, they gave their staff full trust and we ran with it – especially with Vatican II Catholic social teaching, developing social ecumenism and forging links with the exciting staff of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace. In 1969 I became a problem for Father Arrupe. The Canadian bishops still wanted my services, as did the Gregorian University in Rome. The Vatican wanted me for SODEPAX, the new joint Vatican-World Council of Churches social justice centre in Geneva; and the American bishops wanted me for their proposed joint international development centre with the Jesuits. Father Arrupe missioned me to Washington where I founded the Center of Concern, owned by neither bishops nor Jesuits. We built on the insights and teaching of the Roman Synod on Justice in the World and had the enthusiastic support of religious, especially women religious, as well as many bishops and laity. It was the right model for the time and was imitated widely, especially in USA.

In 1978 Father Arrupe acceded to the wishes of the Canadian provincial that I succeed him as provincial. I came back to Canada pondering how to implement CG32. After months of consultation and prayer we came up with a plan "Our Way of Proceeding in the 80s", which Father Arrupe blessed, insisting that it should not be changed without his permission. Building up our Native apostolate had the highest priority - but other social justice projects such as a Jesuit Centre for Social Faith & Justice, a farm community for handicapped persons, etc were included. It was a good time

to work closely with the Canadian Conferences of Religious and of Bishops on social justice issues and social discernment processes.

In 1984, the Canadian Bishops Conference elected me their General Secretary - which opened up a still wider vista for promoting social justice. But my chief effort here was to work with a Task Force of senior bishops to rethink and update the CCCB. A serious concern was to have the bishops take stronger responsibility and ownership for their conference and its public statements on social justice and other initiatives.

In the period 1990-93 I worked with federal members of parliament and senior civil servants across political parties in informal discussion on issues of social justice. Later, I was special advisor to the International Development Research Centre, a respected secular centre in Ottawa, on a Science, Religion and Development project. My published research was *Culture, Spirituality and Economic Development: Opening a Dialogue* [1995]. It centered on a survey I made in 28 poor countries on how experienced people saw the relationship between development and culture and religion. I was also given the distasteful task of terminating the Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice, primarily for financial reasons. Since then I have been part of an effort to keep the Jesuit Centre alive as a smaller Jesuit project, and have been involved in research and public lectures on development, globalization, ecology and spirituality. Ecology and interfaith dialogue, especially with Islam, have gradually taken centre stage. With the help of John Coleman SJ, I organized an international seminar on Globalization and Catholic Social Thought: Present Impasse, Future Hopes - which will appear as a book published by Orbis and Novalis in fall 2005.

Spiritual Experience

Given the extraordinary grace of a strong vocation, I am not given to wide swings of consolation and desolation, and mostly enjoy peace at my core even in the middle of surface storms. The Spirit played a big part in my early spiritual life, but detachment - letting-go - was my chief preoccupation. First experienced as a negative burden of giving up friendships and other things dear to me, it gradually became a new freedom in my life. I came to identify the presence of the Spirit with energy, whether in myself or in others or a group. Boredom and impatience with dated textbook philosophy and theology was a source of frustration which I

compensated for with visits to nature where I began to find God present and active. Long walks became a chance to review happenings in my personal life as well as in my administrative decisions. In philosophy, my impatient restlessness was misunderstood by my Rector and my doctor, but somehow I was given the grace with the support of my spiritual father and another senior Jesuit to stay free in my critical stance. I came to see that spiritual freedom involved speaking the truth as I saw it, even if it cost me dearly. This trial strengthened me considerably on how to deal openly and humbly with authority and obedience without losing my deep peace. It also gave me a certain serenity in our soul-searching difficulties with Pope Paul VI during CG32 where I took a bold initiative to have the congregation link faith and justice in all its work even before striking the traditional commissions. In the complex difficulties in founding the Center of Concern as well as in my easier task as provincial I found strength and freedom in knowing that I had the complete trust of Father Arrupe. We did not separate justice from spirituality at the Center of Concern. We organized a task force on social consciousness and Jesuit spirituality and published its findings in *Soundings*, just before CG32. I found the warmth of good friendships and teamwork helped me to manage a deep anger that possessed me on first experiencing horrendous poverty in northeast Brazil in 1969. In accepting election as General Secretary of the CCCB I made an additional 30-day retreat seeking the grace not to compromise my spiritual freedom in undertaking this daunting responsibility. Over time I had come to appreciate how to live with uncertainty - trusting the Spirit to guide me in a prudent reading of the signs of the times.

I have managed to remain mostly faithful to my Jesuit spiritual practices of prayer and Eucharist – even if at times weekly breaks to commune with nature and freely review my life seemed more vital to my sanity and discernment. I never separated my struggle for justice from my union with God. Somehow, at least since my Louvain days, I tend to see things whole - both spiritually and intellectually. My enemy has been reductionism in any form. A holistic view that sees the economic system as only a subsystem of the ecosystem came naturally to me. My regular bridge between justice and union with God is built on a persevering search for spiritual freedom based on a stable attitude of gratitude, supported by prayer to the Trinity to receive the grace to be placed beside Jesus, carrying his cross for the recreation of the world and all its peoples – especially the poor; and also frequent prayer to see and find God present and active in

myself and every other person, and in every circumstance - and that my *Suscipe* be accepted. Sadly, I am all too aware that I do not heed generously enough the constant call to give more time and attention to prayer¹.

¹ For more detail on some of this see *Faith & Freedom: The Life and Times of Bill Ryan SJ*, by professional journalists Bob Chodos & Jaimie Swift [Novalis, 2002].