

JESUITS: BOURGEOIS OR FRIENDS OF THE POOR?

A SPIRITUAL REFLECTION FROM A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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It has been moving and inspiring for me to read the narratives of my fellow Jesuits and our collaborators. Most of them not only nourish my longing to become more and more (“*magis*”) a good companion of ‘the poor Jesus,’ but also teach me existentially how this can happen. Thanks for these testimonies! Telling these socio-spiritual biographies is the first part of what St. Ignatius calls “love”: “sharing what one has, what one is with those one loves” (SpEx. 231). Let me try to add a second corresponding part so that together we may realize this love in mutual communication.

To be with the poor and with “the poor and humble” Jesus Christ

Not surprisingly, in telling their stories the European Jesuits as well as other Jesuits and friends have centred on the person of Jesus as poor and humble (Alemany), understood in the sense of the second week of the spiritual exercises (SpEx. 98, 146). The key motivation behind these narratives is to follow Him as closely and concretely as possible. This personal identification with the poor and humiliated Jesus Christ leads them to seek poor persons today and to make friends with them, because Jesus - and Ñigo! - did the same. The narratives do not stress the moral point of this consequence; on the contrary, they emphasize the grace of becoming more familiar with Jesus Christ through close contact with the poor. C. Herwartz, for instance, tells how easily he understood the Bible in the tram on his way to the day-labourers and how, in sharing the hardship and contempt

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they suffered and in breaking bread with his fellow workers, he found Jesus Christ. Working and living with the poor stimulates belief in the present Lord, who teaches us, breaks bread with us, and shares with us His joy and peace.

In these testimonies three key phrases (“to be with”, “the poor”, “the poor and humble Jesus Christ”) are used to formulate the central process and experience: *To be with the poor is a sign and a means (a sacrament) of coming closer to the poor and humble Jesus Christ.* A human action - to try more and more to “be with” the poor, and eventually to “live with” or close to them (“*estar-con*”, “*vivir-con*”: Alemany) - is seen as the natural prerequisite to the grace of the Lord’s revelation of Himself as present among us. So, the contemporary language used by our fellows does not stress action for the poor, such as establishing social projects or struggling politically, but underlines as most important *being somehow with the poor*; and through this becoming, in some respect (for example, as Bingham says, in prayer) like the poor.

This human action consists in seeking the poor, making contact with them, getting close to them, being touched by and invited by them. This corresponds exactly to the lifestyle of the newly converted Íñigo who

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dissociated himself from the comfortable world of the Spanish court and his brother’s house, started to wear clothes like the poor, to beg and to live like them in hospitals and other such places. In the European narratives such an involvement with the poor is realized by being inserted in, living and working in poor parishes (Alemany, Bingham), or by

offering hospitality in an inter-religious community in a poor area of Berlin (Herwartz). Both these approaches are influenced by the worker priest tradition. Elsewhere, additional ways of involvement with the poor are reported. Ryan offers the example of social science research; Isamu combines this with inserted community life and JRS work. Again, other narratives speak of itinerant Amazonian pastoral work with indigenous peoples (López), accompaniment of victims of violence in Congo (Minani), and victims of the caste system in India (D’Lima).

As the grace and spiritual fruit of this involvement with the poor, our fellow writers report a growing familiarity with Jesus, so that we can speak of an interconnected dynamic process according to the second week of the Spiritual Exercises: the one who prays (Jesuit or collaborator) wants to follow Jesus Christ, the poor and humble person, more closely. This longing motivates involvement with the poor, and results in encounters with labourers, unemployed persons, drug addicts, youngsters in pre-care jobs, elders with a small pension and/or immigrants (to use European examples). In these Jesus Christ reveals Himself as being present, and through them familiarity with Him increases.

***Exclusion, death and the presence of the risen Lord
the triad of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection***

Some Catholic traditions concentrate only on the **one** reality of the cross, e.g. Spanish processions of the Way of the Cross, or the religiously plausible hard work in rural Poland. Since Vatican II it has become “politically correct” in Catholic theology to bring together explicitly both aspects, crucifixion and resurrection (“pascha-mysterium”), which in practical spirituality sometimes lead to a stale, uninspired mix. A different and truly Ignatian characteristic is to be found in the narratives, which include the triad of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection (as in Lopéz). According to the course of Ignatian meditations beginning with the second week, the explicit integration of the mystery of incarnation (SpEx. 101 ff) seems to have profound practical and spiritual meaning, especially in the process of involvement with the poor. This is to be understood:

1. First, as *analogy*. As it was for Jesus Christ a “*kenosis*”, a relinquishing of God’s perfect sphere, a “degradation and humiliation “ to enter a “strange”, corrupted, slave-like world and equality with human beings (Phil 2, 6-8), so initiation into the milieu of the poor consists of letting go of a rich, safe sphere and stepping into a culturally strange, “dirty”, broken world.

2. Second, as *process*. Keeping incarnation explicitly in mind inspires the gradual, never ending *process* of stepping more and more into the surprisingly different world of the poor - a process of gradual learning and

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understanding, of being invited by and getting ever more familiar with the poor, their life conditions and the unexpected light of the present Lord. This orientation to the process of incarnation helps to avoid short-term, single-action-approaches and fosters a continuous, serious involvement with the poor, like that of Jesus and Ignatius. A difference between European narratives and, for instance, those about the work with Dalits in India or with *Indios* (indigenous people) in the Amazon area, might be that the latter seem to demand a more fundamental process of cultural and inter-religious learning (López; Herbert).

The approach to and with the poor, explicitly called an “exegesis” of Ignatius’ pilgrimage (Herwartz), is like a real “downward” process: The Jesuits and their friends who have taken seriously this kenosis, this way of becoming close to the poor, have themselves experienced, like the poor, exclusion, devaluation, scorn (Herwartz), alienation (D’Lima) and being a “persona non grata” (Bingham) - even among fellow Jesuits! Additionally, the apostles are touched by the sufferings of the poor for example, the lack of rights for immigrants, the loneliness of elderly people, accusations from the unemployed or personal guilt (Alemany) and the experience of multiple forms of “death” (Boyle; Alemany). Again and again they feel in reality as if “divinity hides” (SpEx. 196), and they can only put their confidence in Jesus Christ’s “office to console” his disciples (SpEx. 224). And this happens! Jesus, who himself transgressed social and religious barriers and was therefore treated like a criminal, walks as the Risen Lord together with the poor and His disciples, ‘prays’ in His disciples and enables the Jesuits’ mission to discover, and help others to discover, His presence (Herwartz). W. Ryan, a rare example of a social scientist, writes convincingly of having discovered how the Risen Christ is “leading all creation to its eschatological fulfilment”, how His spirit gives him “mostly peace” at his core “even in the middle of surface storms.” All this, he says, is “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 (...) especially the poor,” and also by “frequent prayer to see and find God present and active in myself and every other person, and in every

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circumstance". So the Ignatian line beginning with the second week is finally drawn not only to resurrection, but also to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

Discernment and prayer

The narratives stress the importance and fruitfulness of personal and common discernment as a means of discovering how to follow Jesus Christ more authentically in involvement with the poor. Personal discernment has helped an apostle like Bingham to take seriously not only the fight for others, but also his own personal needs, and so be nourished himself by the concrete gifts of the loving God – foundation of our life and of the spiritual exercises. Having discerned together with poor parish members and other local organizations, Alemany has learnt not be seduced by immediate efficacy and confidence in human means alone. Regularly, between the boat trips, the itinerant Amazonian pastoral team (consisting of men and women with different spiritualities) takes ten days of "contemplation time," says Lopez, in order to recover and better discover God's call by "discerning concrete faces." Not having known how to help a Laotian pending expulsion, Isamu "prayed and prayed", and this and other cases were "miraculously solved". The lesson to be drawn from these narratives is that , the more regularly the apostles take time for discernment and prayer, the more fruitful the Jesuit (social) apostolate will be. These narratives, incidentally, disprove the former biased perception that Jesuits in the social apostolate 'do not pray'. If ever there were such tendencies in the past, they have now been overcome by a clear conviction and practice, as Alemany says, "to cultivate the spiritual"

Common forms of redemption

The narratives from the social apostolate give a "counter-cultural" testimony: a meaningful life, joy and salvation are not to be found in an individualistic "one-man-" or "one-woman-show" which aims at a satisfying, and/or materially richer, life for oneself. On the contrary, to live for and with a multitude of friends, making a path together, is considered a "privilege", a "privileged presence of the Holy Spirit" (Alemany). Reflecting

on this frequently mentioned community aspect of redemption in the narratives, two points astonish me: (1) The disappearance of the notion of “justice” and, correspondingly, the changed character of eschatology, and (2) a silence about Eucharist. In the narratives I miss the **Eucharist**. Working in the social apostolate, the celebration of this holy sacrament is essential. To enter more and more into Jesus Christ’s self-giving way of love and to be united with Him, to listen to God’s word and to discern life conditions in this light, to learn from Jesus’ inclusive kind of community with the poor and sinners is explicitly expressed in the form of common meals. And this ‘form’ of the common meal is indeed a sign and anticipation of hope, of the eternal life to which the present patterns of social realities should as far as possible correspond. Frankly, the daily celebration of the Eucharist gives my commitment to the social apostolate the example, hope and strength which it needs. All, not only I, are called to be children of the One God and to be redeemed.

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Only in the context of a retrospective view of the years 1969-74 is the “struggle for a more just society” seen as a “sign and anticipation of the promised Kingdom” (Alemany). In the latest, contemporary reflections I did not find explicit references to the term “justice”. It seems to have been replaced by “being” or “living with the poor”. Correspondingly, the explicit idea of a collective eschatology related to the social conditions of this earth also seems to have vanished. I wonder whether socially committed Jesuits would express it in such pointed terms as the then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger who said in an interview in 1994: “The object of our hope is not a future better world, but eternal life” (*Salz der Erde*, 126; my translation). Stated in this way, this sentence could be misunderstood in the sense of mere individualistic redemption, which is disconnected from this world. But such an understanding would fit neither the mainly societal and concrete notion of redemption in the Old Testament, nor Jesus’ healings and table fellowship, which are ‘real symbols’ of the Kingdom. To paraphrase the restrained implicit eschatology of some new spiritual movements: “We are called to love one another. As this mutual love can only be realized within the Christian community, not towards the world (which cannot adequately respond), we

cultivate (only) our community". In an individualized world where committed Christians are perceived to be dispersed minorities, such (possibly) individualized eschatologies might be considered plausible. But Christian theology, especially a Trinitarian Ignatian theology inspires its followers to hope, pray and work so that **all** and everything (including the socio-cultural, economic and political spheres) will be directed to the "greater glory of God" (*omnia ad maiorem Dei gloriam*). It 'must' therefore include a collective eschatology that is somehow 'related' to socio-cultural, economic and political progress or development (*Gaudium et Spes* 34f, 38f, 45). We Jesuits long, pray and work for a personal and common redemption, and believe, consequently, in an all-embracing eschatology - contrary to the individualistic "*Zeitgeist*" whose liberal anthropology Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger in 1994 so convincingly rejected (*Salz der Erde*, 178-180).

Promising impulses for the Future

From the narratives I draw five innovative ideas that have potential to re-vitalize the social apostolate of the Society of Jesus.

1. St. Ignatius described himself as a "pilgrim" and has called us to follow the example of the itinerant Jesus and his apostles. Comparing the narratives of F. López on the Itinerant Mission in the Amazon and C. Herwartz of being "itinerantly at home" with the de facto fixed and comfortable life conditions of many Jesuits, at least in Europe, I am convinced that a conversion to a more *itinerant style of mission* and, correspondingly, a *poorer, more insecure lifestyle* would result in more fruitful apostolates, credible communities and contented and authentic apostles.

2. A concrete exercise to enter this poor itinerancy can be seen in a spiritual innovation, called "*spiritual exercises on the street*" (Herwartz). This promising model of retreats in the midst of big cities takes Ignatius' mode of poor, urban life during his original spiritual exercises in Manresa seriously - a real-life precondition which also fostered the fruitfulness of the spiritual exercises of Ignatius' first companions.

3. Additionally, I consider activities in cross-denominational and multi-religious contexts as promising fields of our (social) apostolate. That

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Jesuits build bridges between hostile confessions (Northern Ireland, cf. Bingham), consider Muslim fellow-lodgers also as their spiritual “teachers” (Herwartz), or see cross-religious befriending and theological learning as their task (e.g. the Jesuit community in Ankara), is to be read as a “real symbol” of the “One God and father of all” his children (Eph 4,6).

4. In this respect, some narratives, for example those of. Bingham and Herwartz, allude to the global dimension of our social apostolate. Without any doubt, a much more intense and institutionalized *globalisation of the Jesuit social apostolate* (e.g. JRS) would better correspond to St. Ignatius’ meditation of the incarnation (SEx. 111 ff), his favourite image of the “body of the Society as a whole” (Const. 135 et passim), and to his apostolic criteria in the Constitutions (622f). Who, or what, other than the dynamic, relatively competent and universal body of the Society of Jesus could act in the church as an effective “sign and means” of the economic, political and - in a certain sense - socio-cultural unity of all mankind?

5. Fr. Alfred Delp SJ (1907-1945), a fascinating Jesuit martyr who was killed by the Nazi regime because of his committed, cross-denominational resistance, characterized the bourgeois as “a human being vis-à-vis whom even the Holy Spirit stands, so to speak, perplexed and cannot gain entry, because everything is blocked by bourgeois securities and insurances” (*Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV, p. 299; my translation). How can Jesuits and their friends best avoid becoming bourgeois? A clear answer is given in the narratives: try to make friends with the poor! In order that this constant contact can be realized not only within the social sector itself, but as the *social dimension* of our Jesuit identity, i.e. by all Jesuits and their collaborators, I propose the institutionalisation of *St. Ignatius’ counsel to the Jesuit theologians at the Council of Trent* in 1546. In his letter to Jay, Lainez and Salmeron he asked them, in addition to their main duties as fathers of the Council, to - *inter alia* - teach children, to set a good example, and to visit the poor in hospitals (MI Epp. I, 386-389). Accompanying foreigners pending deportation in a German detention centre and in advocacy for them, I am gifted with greater apostolic credibility and a closer sense of belonging to Jesus Christ. By means of such part-time commitments we become rooted in the reality of the poor - and share the following promise: “Friendship with the poor makes friends of the Eternal King” (34th GC, D. 2, nr. 8).