

SOCIAL COMMITMENT AND IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY

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In reading the “narratives” of companions

In reading the different narratives or stories of companions I am aware that it is the contact of the person with situations of inequality, of injustice, of poverty, of exclusion, which move to a reflection and an action, but one must say at once, that this reflection immediately leads the companion to look for a solution in the depth of his commitment of faith.

In what concerns Africa and Madagascar it emerges that being plunged in dramatic situations which move the Jesuit companion to ask himself concerning what he can do as a religious in the midst of his own.

The experience of the Jesuit who is exposed to situations of suffering, of injustice, of exclusion lead one to meditate on our identity as companion of Jesus. The 32nd General Congregation with its Decree 4 was, certainly, for some a challenge which opened unsuspected horizons.

This awareness leads to different commitments according to the circumstances of place and of persons.

In Africa: The dramatic situation of poverty, of wars, of conflicts, of corruption and of dictatorship leads one to question himself on our option to serve those whose rights are ignored. Our religious commitment cannot be placed outside this context, and thus, it is important for the African Jesuit to situate himself in this place and to opt for all those who are marginalized. The passion for God will manifest itself by the passion for suffering humanity in search of justice

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and of recognition. The danger that has to be avoided is to choose to install oneself with the great and the privileged, and to look at the “friends of Jesus”, the poor, from a distance.

In Europe: In a Europe where there are men of every race, language, culture and religion, the Jesuit companion after becoming aware of the situations of inequality and of exclusion, feels called to go over the barriers to meet the stranger and in this way, have the same experience as Christ, who had no place where to lay his head. In Europe also, the awareness of the social inequalities can lead to a call, to a radical change and to a greater discovery of the image of Jesus as the one who is the “pioneer of our faith”, that humble leader who calls those who want to follow him and do as he does. Jesus who made the option for the poor, the excluded, for those who are more vulnerable, that Jesus who by his whole attitude, challenged those who held power. Then the desire for a radical poverty emerges or the desire to seek a greater radicalism. The companions discover the importance of the Spiritual Exercises to support and to fortify their commitment in behalf of justice and even a totally new manner of living the Exercises. A true contact with the poor is always the place for a conversion.

In Latin America: The places of conversion for the companions were frequently the encounter with the poorest, the more destitute, the indigenous of the Amazonas. (An itinerant mission in Amazonas). The Spiritual Exercises are considered as the bread which nourishes and gives strength to act daily and which permits to set the bond of union or link between faith and life, justice and contemplation and action. The community dimension in the experience of the companions is mentioned.

In India and in the rest of Asia: The work with migrants in Japan and the service to the refugees in Laos, Cambodia or in Vietnam have been places of social commitment for the Jesuit companions of this Assistency. The apostolate in the Dalit milieu in India has opened for the companions of India and Asia a

horizon of a commitment for justice and has renewed and given them a completely new way of looking at the world in which the Jesuits lived.

A new spiritual vision has come into being for the person and they have a more profound grasp or understanding of the Gospel which emerged from the encounter with these simple persons who expressed their life and their faith in a totally simple manner. Therefore, it was possible to understand that the call to follow Christ as companion of Jesus, was a call to follow Christ in poverty and that could be expressed in several manners, one of these being the sharing of life with the poor (being with...)

The contemplative dimension of the commitment for justice is strongly underlined in showing that it is truly when union with God, to that God of goodness and of justice, is joined to action for justice in the relationship with persons that the Jesuit becomes a powerful agent to carry out the will of God to establish on our earth a community of justice, of love and of peace.

In Africa where the priest or the religious enjoys a privileged social status, how are we to manifest our option for the poor and the most destitute?

Places of conversion

***In contact with the situations of suffering;
to be exposed to the dramas of the continent***

In reaching this level of my reflection I ask myself the following question. How are the African companions in the Assistancy of Africa prepared, during the time of their formation, for this commitment for justice in our context?

In the face of these dramatic situations it can happen that the Society of Jesus as a body remains foreign to the situation or at least it does not know what to do.

A serious reflection and an understanding of the African situations are indispensable for the social action of the Society and this reflection should

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be based on concrete experience and this is why the presence of companions with those who suffer injustice, the sharing in their concrete situation is irreplaceable for the Society if it wants to give an authentic witness. In Africa where the priest or the religious enjoys a privileged social status, how are we to manifest our option for the poor and the most destitute?

It is relatively easy to dismiss or discard, with the back of the hand, the perspective of insertion communities in pointing out the fact that the Africans already live the experience of poverty and are inserted in situations of poverty everywhere they live and this since they were children.

Nevertheless, a religious formation has frequently taken the African Jesuit out of his milieu. The experiments during the time of the Novitiate which are recalled, many times, with emotion, belong to the heroic period of times now gone by. The studies made on other continents have frequently cut him away from the realities in which the African continent lives. The return to Africa and the insertion in certain types of apostolate is difficult for some. The life style of communities is superior to that of modest families. We are perceived or considered as being “rich”. This is why it is convenient to repeat that the preferential option for the poor which the Society has taken is not something facultative and that it will be necessary, at every moment of our history as companions, seized by this passion for God and for humanity, to express it in choosing to live with persons who are less favored and who suffer situations of injustice. A community of insertion, a commitment with the poorest, can be for the companions of a Province a place of true conversion, the discovery of a call to follow Christ, and to follow Christ in poverty.

A community of insertion could make us discover which is the face of our vow of poverty in the face of the truly poor. We could discover in ourselves when comparing with those poor in the midst of whom we have decided to live that in fact we are ‘rich’ in power, money, influence, education and other advantages, but that we are poor in generosity, availability, mutual dependence, in authentic relationships and in spontaneity, and therefore, a conversion would be possible.

There is a great need for creativity in the Society of Jesus in Africa. The young companions in the Provinces seem to me to be very timid and very little inclined to undertake an adventure into new situations, preferring a well structured apostolate to a space of creativity where their imagination could be displayed.

In the accounts of the companions it is easy to see how the sharing of life with the poor has given certain Jesuits a new vision of their vocation in the following of Christ.

Besides, it is convenient to stress that in the narratives, the companions refer to the impact that Decree 4 of the 32nd General Congregation had on their vocation and apostolic commitment. Nevertheless, the reflection of the lived experience in general continues to be poor.

***The Spiritual Exercises as a Source of our Passion
for God and for Humanity***

The grace asked for in the second week “to be received under the standard of the cross, in great spiritual poverty, accepting insults and humiliations so as to better imitate Christ”, already opens the retreatant to this dimension of communion with those who are excluded, despised in our society.

The experience of the Spiritual Exercises could lead to the discovery of Christ poor, a discovery of a hidden treasure. This discovery fills the person, who is seized by Christ, with joy, he/she joyfully goes to despoil himself/herself of what he/she possesses and comes back to take possession of his/her treasure and to live in union with God for the rest of his/her life.

It is important to maintain this union with God, this contemplation in the midst of a social commitment. This union with God makes one see that the God of goodness is already working in those toward whom we are sent even before we arrive to be with them.

We are convinced that what unites the instrument with God and disposes one to allow oneself to be led with docility by God’s hand is more effective than what disposes one toward men.

As a conclusion to this brief article I would like to repeat how important the contact of the Jesuits is with the situations of injustice, exclusion or social inequality. It is important for the Society of Jesus that some of the members of the Body choose to share the condition of the poor and the excluded. This “*being with*” is not a facultative option in the Society, it is itself in the very heart of its vocation.