

COLLABORATION BETWEEN JESUITS AND LAITY IN MISSION:

ADVANCES, DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

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Reflections from one concrete experience

I am an admirer of the spirituality and charism of Ignatius of Loyola because I believe they respond to the challenges we lay people have to confront in today's world and offer us means to be able to do so. I am 39 years old and have spent 17 of them working in works of the Society of Jesus, in colleges and also in a center of investigation and pedagogical action. Even after I stopped working in works of the Jesuits in order to manage my own company in the field of corporative education and e-learning, I continued collaborating with Ignatian education, both in the Central East Province of Brazil and also in the whole of Latin America. I worked in provincial planning projects and in the elaboration and implementation of the Common Education Project for all of Latin America. I visited and evaluated colleges of the Society in Brazil, Columbia, Paraguay and Chile, I wrote articles and gave conferences on Ignatian pedagogy, developed a CD-Rom on Ignatian education ("Educating to Transform"), participated in congresses and workshops on these themes as well as on collaboration between Jesuits and the laity.

I would still like it to be clear that, although I begin these pages with a certain experience, even as rich as it is, it is necessarily limited. In light of this experience, I will speak of what I consider the principal advances and

ADVANCES, DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

accomplishments in the field of collaboration between Jesuits and lay people, but I will also permit myself to mention the difficulties which we experience, the road blocks which impede our advance and some which, in my opinion, are steps backwards. I will end by emphasizing what, to my point of view, constitute the principle challenges which we will need to confront in the next few years, if we want this collaboration between Jesuits and lay people to grow tighter and develop upon solid and enduring foundations.

ADVANCES

Formation of lay collaborators

In the last few decades, collaboration between Jesuits and lay people received special attention in the Central East Province of Brazil, especially in colleges managed by this Province. Also during these years and even now much importance has been given to the spiritual formation of the laity, particularly through the Spiritual Exercises, and also through the preparation so that lay people themselves might direct the Exercises of other lay persons. Even before Decree 13 of GC 34 on “Collaboration with the Laity in Mission,” this Province began the Loyola Centers of Faith and Culture or “Centros Loyola de Fe y Espiritualidad” [Loyola Centers of Faith and Spirituality] directed by lay people and designed to contribute both to their spiritual and religious-theological formation, and to prepare them in many ways to better carry out their lay mission in the Church and in society. Those centers, under diverse names, multiplied rapidly, not only in Brazil, but also in other countries of Latin America.

Creation of a network of collaboration

Although even before the promulgation of Decree 13 there had already been considerable advance in relations and collaboration between lay people and Jesuits, this decree certainly contributed to a new impulse and support to that collaboration. In the light of the recommendations of the decree, the Red Apostólica Ignaciana (RAI) [Ignatian Apostolic Network] was born, with centers and small teams in many fields of the apostolate, such as, for example, in the intellectual, social, pastoral, communications fields, etc., some of which meet periodically.

Opportunities for closer collaboration

Motivated also by the same decree, various laymen and women asked to associate themselves to the Society by means of a tighter bond or accepted the invitation to do so. The province today numbers about ten of these lay “associates.”

On the other hand, as was my case and for others, we were called, not only to participate but also to actively collaborate in tasks and events which previously were almost exclusively reserved for Jesuits, as, for example, in province assemblies and the apostolic planning process on a provincial level.

Promotion of collaboration at the interprovincial level

Another factor which contributed significantly to reinforce the need for that collaboration was the presence in the province of the headquarters and the central team of the Conference of Jesuit provincials of Latin America, the CPAL, which since its formation has recognized the importance of collaboration between Jesuits and lay people and organized meetings and workshops to promote it. Although these were interprovincial activities, not organized by this province as such, many Jesuits and lay people of the BRC participated in them and had considerable influence in them. At the same time the President of the CPAL was a Jesuit and a former provincial of the same province.

Those diverse activities made it possible for lay men and women to come in contact with the Jesuits which resulted in multiplying and strengthening true friendships among them.

DIFFICULTIES

Are Jesuits and lay persons prepared to collaborate with each other?

It is clear that many lay people are still not yet prepared for an effective collaboration. Sometimes they lack the necessary spiritual and religious formation to relate with and collaborate in mission as members of

the same team. But also they sometimes have not had either the opportunity or the means to be able to collaborate, as equals, with Jesuits, who have spent long years forming and preparing themselves for the mission that would be entrusted to them.

Lay persons are frequently offered opportunities for forming themselves spiritually, and at times this formation is emphasized as if it were the only thing necessary for effective collaboration. But often they are not offered opportunities to form themselves professionally for the tasks which have been assigned; or they have not been given the space to take the initiative and form themselves “on the job,” without having to leave the work they have already been doing.

On the other hand, it also does not seem that Jesuits have been prepared yet for this closer collaboration with laymen and women. Father General, in the meeting of major superiors known as “Loyola 2005,” affirmed that “Jesuits require an on-going formation in education and still more in

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collaboration.” Among the recommendations made by the provincials in this same meeting at Loyola, in view of the upcoming General Congregation, we read: “There will need to be changes in formation so that

Jesuits can work effectively with lay and religious collaborators... that they may be persons who can respect others, relate with them on an equal basis, work with them as a team and function as team members and good facilitators.” My experience in this province corroborates the opportuneness of those recommendations.

Another factor which makes relations between Jesuits and laymen and women difficult is that, in many cases, the religious, and not only the Jesuits, are oblivious to the real conditions in which lay people live and work and often treat them as if they were “semi-religious.” For example, many lay people, invited by Jesuits, volunteer to work in activities and projects organized by the latter. But most of these lay people depend upon their work to sustain themselves and their family and cannot give their time without compensation (either part-time or full-time) as they might like. It often seems that religious do not take this fact sufficiently into account and

expect lay people to collaborate and offer their services freely, making themselves available at any day or hour.

Other times they are invited to move one project or another forward, to participate in some activity, but suddenly they are shoved aside. It seems that the Jesuits no longer need their services. They are not always informed of the reasons that led to this decision, nor are they thanked for the collaboration they have already lent. This seems to assume that laymen and women, by virtue of their vocation and mission, or because they have made the Exercises of St. Ignatius, have, as do the Jesuits, a certain obligation to lend those services. I do not wish to exaggerate, but these cases happen and do not help to foment and reinforce collaboration.

***Do Jesuits really believe that lay persons can strengthen
the common mission?***

We in Brazil are living today a grave situation from the social point of view. Vast and deep inequalities persist; the working class is frequently exploited; widespread violence and corruption threaten the sustainable development of the country. Opportunities for young people are lacking and the future appears frightening for the large urban centers. Such a scene as this worries all those who have, in the light of what the Gospel asks, hunger and thirst for justice, who want to fight for a world with opportunities for everyone and are ready to dedicate their time to social change. Is not constructing a society more resembling the Kingdom our common mission? For many of us lay collaborators, that is a cause that we embrace.

However, many lay people who have prepared themselves to collaborate with the Society have the impression that Jesuits are not all that convinced that lay people can really add much to their work. I say this because many times they do not take advantage as much as they could of the skills of their lay collaborators. On the contrary of what we see in the business world, in which the most talented people for each task are sought out, in the Society of Jesus the way of identifying, choosing, accompanying, and evaluating the work of lay persons is deficient. Many works could be more apostolically effective if the most qualified persons were being mobilized.

At the same time, it often happens that strategic positions are filled by unqualified lay people, who perhaps are closer to Jesuits, or have often

made the Exercises, but who don't help achieve the best results for the mission. It also happens that positions are sometimes occupied by Jesuits who are not always sufficiently prepared. Having them in a leadership position over lay people who are better prepared (not in spiritual terms but in terms of management experience) often does not lead to the best results and ends up discouraging the lay people, because they get the impression that apostolic effectiveness is the not the first criterion in placing persons in the works. Even if for St. Ignatius the success of the apostolate depends in first place upon God, it should also be hoped that, on our part, we would use the most adequate human means to achieve it.

Another point which makes me question whether Jesuits really believe that lay people can add to the common mission is the fact that the Society rarely collaborates or dialogues—I speak from my limited experience—with lay people who are not linked professionally with them

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in some work. Persons who work outside of the Society and who know, for example, the principle advances and trends in the management of human enterprises in today's world, or work with leading-edge technologies, or who are

experts in communication, could be invited to initiate a dialogue with the “leaders” of the province, the superiors and directors of works, in order to be able to share with them what they know and make it available to the service of the mission.

There exist lay people who function today as consultants or contractors in some of the principle Brazilian companies or occupy important positions in society, but they are invited only to participate in liturgical celebrations or to make the Exercises—something very good, without a doubt—, but without asking them to offer their assistance in areas where they might contribute. At the same time, these same lay people recognize, from outside, that there are management problems in many works, or in the form of realizing the mission itself, that could be avoided if the know-how that they know of would be applied. In fact, many lay collaborators could help Jesuits *to think more strategically* about their apostolic position in this world of constant change. Jesuits ought to find ways to identify those

lay people who are well prepared and motivated to collaborate and tighten their relations with the Society.

These lay persons could add to the mission contributing the knowledge and techniques with which they are familiar in the diverse areas in which they work: politics, economy, social communication, the world of work, business relations, etc. They, in turn, could learn from Jesuits ways of playing a greater role in the area of education and promoting values and taking a prophetic and coherent stand with these same values. In the end, where “the game is being played,” hands are lacking to promote the principles that are so necessary today.

Is true dialogue between Jesuits and lay persons possible?

A true dialogue exists when the two interlocutors meet on an equal level, when what one says has relevance to the other and provokes a response in them. Mikhail Bakhtin, a philosopher writing in Russian, spoke of polyphony as an ideal situation in which all the voices are heard, the significant points in each can be appreciated, and a harmonic whole is produced. The opposite is a monologue, in which but one voice dominates.

In order to collaborate, I believe it is fundamental that a true dialogue exist, in which lay persons most closely linked to the realization of the mission do not fear to express their opinions or to make decisions (when their role permits) even when these contradict the opinions of a Jesuit. To dialogue means to accept with respect other points of view and implies a certain democracy and openness.

In the past, relations between laymen and women and Jesuits were primarily around work. Laymen and women would collaborate *with the Jesuits* in works directed by them, more than Jesuits *with lay men or women*, or lay people among themselves. As the same Fr. General emphasized recently in Loyola: “There is still a resistance among many Jesuits, even the youngest generation, to abandoning the idea that it is a matter exclusively of *our* work.” For these reasons, relations can be more transparent and authentic when they are established between Jesuits and laymen and women who are not working in works of the Society, nor depend upon them for their support.

It would help to promote and reinforce this collaboration among Jesuits and lay people that it be situated in the widest context of the specific

ADVANCES, DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

vocation and mission of laymen and women in the church and in society, and not be simply conceived as a more internal problem of collaboration among lay people and Jesuits within the Society of Jesus and its works.

Sometimes, disillusioned by the difficulties and one or other failure, some Jesuits are tempted to go backwards. The following observations are heard: "Lay people are not prepared for this collaboration." "We have our vocation, they have theirs; it is not good to mix things." "We first need to put our house in order, to define and strengthen our own identity, before we open ourselves to this collaboration; otherwise we will lose, or at least weaken our identity." "It is time we Jesuits are a bit to ourselves; the lay people are everywhere today." In some environments –and again I insist that I am speaking through my limited experience—this collaboration with lay people in the mission is spoken of even less than before. Several specific facts would seem to reveal these tendencies. Besides those already mentioned, I would point out a few more:

Works previously directed by lay people and initiated for their benefit and formation are once again being directed by Jesuits, without any previous information or dialogue to explain the reasons for the change. Sometimes those most directly involved with these tasks are not consulted.

Activities organized for formation of lay persons are predominately confined to the spiritual, as if this were the only dimension needing to be developed to form a lay collaborator.

Works such as the RAI are often directed mainly within the Society and project very little the charism and spirituality of the Society "ad extra."

CHALLENGES

Putting collaboration between lay people and Jesuits in a wider theological and ecclesial context, it seems clear that collaboration is more necessary than ever because neither the mission of the church, nor that of the Society can be conceived today without the participation of the laity. It is a common mission which we must learn to share.

This does not mean that everyone needs to perform the same role. Each one has his/her specific role, with complementary commitments and in need of one another. Collaboration in mission on an equal plane, but with clear recognition of the contribution that each is called upon to make

by vocation, would help to better define and reinforce the specific identity of each one. There is no need to define an isolated apostolic identity, but rather an interchange with those called to share the same mission.

The Society, which in the field of the apostolate has at its disposal more means than many laymen and women, would need to take the initiative and: a) promote apostolic works in which lay people would have the principal or sole responsibility, but in which Jesuits might collaborate; b) common works in which Jesuits and lay people, although exercising diverse functions, would share the same responsibility to move it forward; c) maintaining ownership of works as, for example, colleges, the Society would make it clear that, from now on, they would not be works simply of Jesuits, but rather works somehow in common, with shared responsibilities for their maintenance and progress.

In order to reach this point it would be necessary to delegate more responsibilities to lay people from this time forward, and, at the same time, direct some resources for their formation—not only spiritual. It might be necessary to offer them some of the opportunities that Jesuits have had during their formation. Naturally, this presupposes a selection on the basis of a model of management based upon skills, but also assumes the risks inherent in such a system. Some of the lay people will not persevere, nor meet the hopes that were placed in them, as also happens with Jesuits.

Laymen and women are not the only ones who need to be better formed for the requirements of this collaboration, but also the Jesuits. Beginning with the earliest stages of their formation, selected laypeople ought to be present in houses of formation to speak of their experiences and of the difficulties that they encounter in fulfilling the function of “protagonists of the new evangelization of society” that the church attributes to them. Jesuits ought to get accustomed at the very beginning of their religious life to seeing in laymen and women their collaborators in a common mission: a mission that they share with them and that is not exclusively theirs.

Vision of the future: networks of collaboration and interchange

The figure of the layman or woman “associated” seems to have lost its attractiveness and power because this closer linkage with the Society was interpreted almost exclusively in spiritual terms and in a unilateral way.

The layman or woman would associate with the Society more for personal motives of a spiritual order and in the internal forum, than for apostolic motives. That is, their linkage would be something like religious vows and would be more with God than with the Society. Needless to say, there ought to always be a spiritual motivation, identification with the charism and spirituality of the Society; but the desire to collaborate apostolically with the Society ought to predominate and, as is said in Decree 13, a contractual linkage which would define the mutual rights and responsibilities resulting from this contract. Often only the obligations or promises of the lay people were insisted upon, and not those of the Society. Fr. Kolvenbach affirms that what would mark the “association” would be, above all, the apostolic availability of the layman or woman to receive an apostolic mission from the superiors of the Society. In that case, this association would be for very few, since the lay vocation supposes a series of obligations in relation to third parties, familial as well as professional, which would decrease this availability greatly, in comparison with the religious. The upcoming General Congregation ought to clarify this point or abandon the idea of associated lay people.

I believe that, for the majority of the laity or women, structures that would potentiate their collaboration with the Society, structures such as an Ignatian Apostolic Network, which by being configured as a network, have

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more possibilities of being dynamic, of penetrating into the diverse apostolic fields and sectors, and also more flexibility to unite people in function of activities and projects. The network can also mobilize a greater number of persons and so have a

greater impact. The apostolic networks that I have known in diverse countries in which the Society is at work bring me to this conclusion. I have felt in many of them a life, a dynamism, a potential, a passion for mission translated concretely in concrete actions. The very fertile interchange among the members of the network can only increase the apostolic impact of collaboration between Jesuits and lay persons in the mission. To strengthen and dynamize these networks, modern means and technologies of

communication could be employed, in order to foment the interaction between their members and make the projects that are being undertaken more efficacious.

A more structured network could also be a way of strengthening the lay apostolate under Ignatian inspiration, and would even “keep in the network” many laymen and women with talent and apostolic vocation who, if they do not find space, or see that it is taking too long to achieve results, may leave to connect with other groups or favor other forms of collaboration which will help them to realize their lay mission. There exist today, for example, a great diversity of organizations which accept and promote volunteer efforts, including a growing number which attract capable and available professionals to social work dedicating their time, energy and understanding. Some of these would be called “secular.” Others, however, defend values and principles that we would also defend. Personally I would prefer that these laymen and women, admirers of the Ignatian spirituality and charism, could find in collaboration with the Society the most conducive space in which to fulfill their mission.

Translated by: Robert E. Hurd, S.J.