

Social Apostolate

Place of spiritual experience

Martin Pochon SJ

'Place of a spiritual experience' was the theme of the meetings of Jésuites en monde populaire (JEMP), held on 24 and 25 January in Sète and on 31 January and 1 February in Mours. I would like to recapture the sense of unity we felt during those days as we heard testimonies that dropped like royal pearls, as well as the eclectic interventions of people like Georges Cottin, Guilhem Causse and Martin Pochin. As always, there were friendly exchanges and reflections in small groups and plenary sessions. All in all, 36 people participated in the meetings: 10 religious and three members of young European volunteers (JVE) in Sète, and 29, including nine religious, in Mours.

A spiritual life that transfigures our everyday existence

What is the objective of taking on such a vast theme? We dared to compare this theme with the common assumptions that underlie our liberal societies. Spiritual life releases us from the contradictions of materialism, from a type of atheistic humanism, which, to safeguard human liberty, rejects divine transcendence as alien. There is an internal contradiction here, for how is it possible to think of liberty if everything that takes place in the material world is governed by chance or by necessity? Chance should not be confused with liberty. Spiritual life is a path of reasonable freedom that allows each person to intertwine his or her life with the One who granted it to us. Far from alienating us, the notion of an alliance establishes our liberties. The **expression and affirmation of these in the word** (of God) is surely what distinguishes us from our cousins the chimpanzees!

Moreover, spiritual life is simply **part of our most ordinary human nature**; it consists, among other things, of **integrating** our "humanist values" into an **eschatological** perspective. The movement of this transfiguration is implied in the **beatitudes** of Mathew: "*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied*" growing in the vision of God: "*Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*". The justice we seek to promote in our apostolate is written into the perspective of constructing the **kingdom of God**, with its hope of a union of hearts. It is characterised by a faith in the meaningfulness of life, in man's self-realisation in God. For example, when we accompany someone through his vocational training, his story is not just a human journey with its fortunes, wounds, psychological strengths and weaknesses; it may become a holy story; reading it again, the person may notice how God gives him life, which

endures and survives, which stands out in contrast to others. Nothing of what is given is lost.

Founding discernments

Openness to this transcendence makes us more open to the unexpectedness of God, to the life of the Spirit, and our Ignatian tradition gives us the precise tools to recognise this. Various discernments have led us **to live out a social apostolate**, to live at the frontiers and on the margins of our society “among the poor and with the poor”, as the 35th General Congregation (1.15) invites us to do in a novel way.

Over time, vivacious spiritual discernments have demonstrated their worth. For example, one participant spoke of how every evening, when he returns to the housing estate where his community lives, he feels a sense of lightness and joy despite his modest surroundings. The joy of heart and spirit lies in being reunited with those whom Christ calls on us to love. Indeed we love everyone else too, but give precedence to the poor .

The founding discernments give meaning to our action and help us endure through difficult times. One of the participants evoked this foundation of his devotion in relation to his mission in a hospital in Chad.

To be at the frontiers, on the margins, acting as bridges, gangways, mending the links between city centre and suburb, between the *Gallic* and North African French, between French culture and the cultures of the world, between Christian faith and other religions...this is important. Modestly, to bear witness to the fact that links are possible, that it is always better to discard caricatured stereotypes and discover real persons, to give them a place to learn from one another, to become brothers—all this helps us learn that joining brothers is a powerful spiritual experience, but that discovering brothers is even more powerful.

Living in the suburbs is an experience

1) Reconciliation: The point is not wanting to make the suburbs a small city, but but posing the question of its bonds with, and links to the city. The suburb is a question addressed to the city, and through that, to society. It is to discover in the excluded the direction which our brothers are taking: “Little by little, they have become brothers, both in fact and in hope. And my own relationship with God has deepened; increasingly God has become everyone’s Father, and I have become more fully his son, with all my own inner contradictions, my inner suburbs, the excluded zones, discarded memories,

the parts of myself I would not want to see in order to seem more presentable.”¹

The social apostolate brings us face-face with adversity: burnt cars, burgled apartments, provocative abuse. This type of adversity sometimes leads to us being seen as opponents or troublemakers a priori. How do we go from divergences, antagonistic resistance, good and bad cowboys, to the recognition of difference, to the articulation of compromises? We do it by changing the basis of the relationship: going from Arab/French to neighbours/disaffected youth, by coming together to engage with the social housing agency (HLM) of which we are tenants. Having the know-how, we established links with the agency. We no longer live in an era of class battles, we live in a time which calls for mutual understanding, demanding as that is. Overcoming contradictory positions is also about giving and receiving forgiveness.

2) Inner tension: to deal with this we need to establish links between differences and divisions. *“The frontier has a double meaning: it may simply be the meeting place of two people, two cultures, where each one adjusts in his own way and gives the other the best of himself, giving what he has and what the other does not have. But the frontier also has another meaning: it is also a place of rupture, which opens up like a wound in order to separate the social body of a particular group of persons”*. From this perspective, technical and geographical links, institutional links such as AFEP (Association Forézienne d’Ecole de Production - Saint Etienne), the vocational training secondary school in Marais or the AJE (L’Association Jeunesse - Éducation), are important, situated as they are between the city centre and the suburbs.

3) The Generation gap with its triple dimensions: social, intellectual, spiritual. *“What makes the human begin to be human is what makes a human society, the quality of the links between the people who constitute it, those links based on a twofold experience, in two dialogues, the dialogue of promises and the dialogue of forgiveness, the possibility of the second sustaining the first”*.

a) The social apostolate frequently puts us in contact with wounded people: recognising the face of Christ in them forces us to go beyond mere appearances and human capacities. More than in other environments, we are driven to a truth. We cannot take shelter behind knowledge, know-how or games of appearance or power, precisely because these people have been wounded by those who live on false pretensions. Instinctively, they understand our fundamental approach, our fears and our dismay vis-à-vis them. And they help us to be ourselves: “Ah! Take it easy man, be yourself”.

¹Causse Guilhem, *Les banlieues*, collection of “Que penser de ?”, no. 74, Editions Fidélité, Namur, 2009.

b) Experiencing the joy of a first assignment drives the desire to rejoin “the poorest”, as testified by Anne-Marie. She worked for the Local Mission, but efficiency norms required her to prioritise young people most able to find employment. She decided to go and live with those least able to find employment and to recognise the face of Christ in their faces. It was they who allowed her to discover Christ. Now she no longer reads the Gospel in the same way. The social apostolate teaches us to recognise the face of God in the other; or rather, it is those we meet who teach us, who teach us to be genuine. God is revealed in his nakedness when poverty removes all our worldly rags.

c) As many have borne witness, living in these places means learning to count on God to show his love to those to whom we have been sent. Working with the poor always attracts worries and difficulties. It means carrying a part of their difficulties and many of them are “accumulators” in this regard – if not, they would not be the poorest. One participant at the meetings told us about the difficulties he faced when he tried to organise a first outing with the young people in the district and the difficulties of finding appropriate transport. Finally “providence” helped him accomplish what he had set out to do. It is all about learning to count on God, and also on others since providence frequently comes through individuals whose spirit warms the heart... It is about learning to live together with difference.

Synergy between the social apostolate and Jesuit educational institutions

The social apostolate drives us to appreciate the richness of our complementary associations and institutions: district houses, social centres, parishes, classic institutions, and male and female religious communities. It also pushes us to work with the educational institutions of the Society. The recent gathering in Lourdes was a good opportunity to become aware of existing synergies, to raise awareness in others about them and to help them grow. We would like to promote the development of these synergies at our next social apostolate meeting.

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*Original French
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