Jesuit Social Apostolate: Some Intellectual Questions
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Where are we?

In its 32nd GC (1975), the Society of Jesus explicitly chose to understand its traditional mission of defence of the faith in terms of the promotion of justice. Since then we have generated an immense amount of theological thought on the topic; we have also produced a considerable volume of social analysis, both structural and related to actual circumstances; we have developed new apostolates specifically to promote justice; and we have realigned almost all our classic apostolates towards that objective.
The Jesuit social apostolate is carried out in a myriad concrete social situations in which we have no problem finding injustices to confront. Usually we have little difficulty identifying and proposing reasonable changes which the people concerned can make to improve those situations. On the micro scale, a large part of the daily activities of the social apostolate are at that level; we run little risk of being left without tasks or without ideas. Our greatest problem is usually finding an effective strategy that really does improve things.

The situation is different however at the macro scale, by which we mean the social structures determining the local situations, such as the large markets in which our communities have to compete, or the sweeping security measures that affect our people. In passing to the macro level, we discover that globalization has so drastically affected the dimensions and complexity of the structures determining immediate social contexts that we are unable to make proposals and wield influence - unable sometimes even to understand them. To begin with, we are accustomed to thinking in national terms, given that national politics is the obvious arena for making public decisions. Indeed, over the last century we have developed good instruments for influencing that arena, such as social centres, journals, links with grass-roots movements and NGOs, and contacts with politicians and functionaries. But the phenomena that now affect us are increasingly global and far too difficult to change if we adopt merely national approaches.

Our vision of social reality and our professional training have tended to favour perspectives drawn from sociology and political science. For at least two decades now, however, it has been evident that it is impossible to understand what is happening in the world and respond to it without a profound understanding of the underlying economic structures and dynamics. Many of our working teams lack the expertise needed for dealing with the enormous complexities of the global economy; many lack an understanding even of its most basic elements, such as the different types of market, business organization, and state intervention.

Why try to go further?

It may be thought that these deficiencies are not very serious, that it is enough for us simply to develop significant projects that are beneficial at the local or sectoral level, with, on occasion, national or even regional impact. We might argue in addition that we could join the many protests that groups with diverse interests and convictions are making against one or other aspect of the present state of world affairs. We could make our presence felt thereby on the stage of global structures by speaking out against the negative fallout of the dynamics now at work. We could also eloquently announce our grand objectives for human society. Both stands have solid theological grounds. We would not really need to have a very precise idea about how to handle worldwide tensions and limitations practically, apart from the most self-evident aspects.

Maybe that is the best way to go, and we could have a worthwhile discussion regarding that. I, however, have at least three reasons for holding that such an
attitude is inadequate for our apostolic goals, and I maintain that we should attempt to move beyond that stand.

The first reason is that our vocation is one with a universal outlook, which orders all our intentions, actions and operations toward the realization of God’s plan for humankind. Even if our particular project were limited to a single locality or sector, even if its relevance and meaning are fully evident in that context, it would still be valuable to situate it realistically in the larger context of orienting human society towards the reign of God. In that way it would be endowed with a significance that goes beyond the immediately local or sectoral sphere; our small-scale actions, placed within a broader perspective, would appeal to many other people and motivate them to join forces.

The second reason is simply the matter of the viability and effectiveness of our local and sectoral projects. There is the risk of frustration if our particular project gets swept away, like the sandcastle the child builds on the beach, or if its immediate aims are drowned by the waves of a tide we fail to foresee and are helpless to prevent. That happens, for example, when we educate young people for the purpose of improving the society to which they belong and, with their increased skills, they end up migrating to wealthier countries. A broader structural vision would allow us to build our little sandcastle where it can better resist the waves, perhaps even master them.

The third reason is that, given the present state of our thinking about global structures and dynamics, we have great difficulty formulating a common discourse about many important global topics, once we pass from the larger objectives to the necessary means, however generalized they may be. We are in agreement about the possibility and the urgency of eradicating poverty in the world, but if we begin to discuss the practical policies for promoting this goal, we inevitably find serious ideological differences among ourselves. We have only to look at the divergent assessments that emerge at any of our international meetings when we are asked to write a meaningful page about the market or about globalization.

As is obvious, such a situation limits the possibilities of serious discussion between the Jesuit social apostolate and those who make decisions at the global level. Moreover, it hinders the contribution that the apostolate can make at forums where the discussion is not about general principles but about concrete proposals that can be translated into reality. In practice, every Jesuit who has access to those levels of dialogue concerning global structures ends up supporting the conclusions he has reached on his own, or jointly with his immediate working team; he seldom expresses a line of thought common to the whole social apostolate; nor is there even a discernible convergence of ideas. And that is because such consensus simply does not exist.

Let us take, for example, one of the major questions being discussed at the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Are we for, or against the lifting of the tariffs that the First World countries use to protect their farmers, that is, are we for or against throwing their markets open to Third World producers? What is justice in this case? Why is it so? If we had access (which we do not have
at present) to the actual process of these negotiations, what positions would we defend? Would each one defend the positions that he judged most appropriate in the short run for his own context of work? In such a case, someone who was working with farming cooperatives in Europe would want to continue the government protection for his associates, while someone else working with Latin American or African farmers would support the opening up of the markets. Or would each one support the position best suited to his ideological sympathies? In that case, those who are in favour of nationalism or structuralism would certainly support protectionism, while those with more liberal convictions would favour free markets. And if, between all of us, we had to write a document on the matter, it would probably end up being the famous horse with two humps designed by a commission.

Of course, this is a very sketchy presentation of the question. The Doha Round discussions treat very complex, detailed points, which may appear minor, but which in reality have great practical repercussions. Certainly, those points can be discussed from the viewpoint of justice, and they have much to do with such important concerns as the most viable way for Black Africa to become capitalized and incorporated into the world economy. Would the Jesuit social apostolate be doing enough if, while pronouncing on these matters, it limited itself to expressing praiseworthy hopes, but failed to propose concrete ways of attaining them on the excuse that concrete suggestions have to take account of a technical slant and specificity? If that were the case, we would be in the curious position of refusing to offer at the global level what we do every day in our local or sectoral context. The social apostolate exists not to enunciate principles and admirable aims, but to seek and try out concrete, practical ways of making justice a reality.

What do we have and what do we lack?

Thus far we have suggested that we should try to attain an understanding of the mechanisms of injustice at work in global structures and dynamics comparable with our understanding of the local and sectoral contexts of our projects, and that our proposals to overcome that injustice should be as concrete as those we develop for our local projects. What do we have now, and what do we lack if we wish to attain that goal?

This is tantamount to asking how to move intellectually from the theological formulations and spiritual experiences that motivate us (the seeking of the “justice of the Kingdom of God” that GC 34 speaks of) to concrete positions with regard to the great global problems, their local specifications, and the public decisions by which they will either be resolved or get worse. Our greatest resource for this task is to be found at the two extremes: the theological-spiritual on the one hand, and the practical on the other. As a group our greatest limitations are to be found in the intermediate terrain that unites those extremes: social analysis and a theory of justice. Let us try to organize our argument according to the classical schema “see-judge-act”:
The Jesuit social apostolate has a presence in a wide spectrum of social situations, from the marginalized classes to the ruling classes, in urban zones and rural areas, in workplaces and domestic situations, and so on. As is the case with the distribution of Jesuits themselves, however, this contact has a clear bias toward the West (Europe, America, Africa, Australia). Our first-hand experience in Latin America or Europe is much greater than in China or Russia. In earlier days that would not have been an especially great obstacle to achieving a comprehensive overview, but in our multi-polar world there can be no doubt that, if our vision fails to include Islam, Russia and China, then we are losing sight of whole civilizations that constitute true centres of power and creativity.

Direct experience greatly enhances our capacity for wider influence; our various campaigns, interventions, and alliances are then credible testimonies and proposals firmly rooted in reality. It enables those efforts to have broader objectives. With the exception of the geographical limitation mentioned above, our position in this regard is quite strong.

In most cases, however, what we know at first-hand is only the local or sectoral situation in which we work. Certainly we stay informed to some degree about the national situation and, to a lesser extent, about regional matters and major world events. We examine perhaps some academic studies or reports from the NGOs, and we read newspaper articles on topics that interest us. However, in order to achieve a coherent integration of the information and interpretations provided to us by others, we need a method of social analysis that allows us to separate what is fundamental from what is anecdotal, to distinguish the causes from the effects, and to understand the situations in their far-ranging dynamics.

A solid method of analyzing reality provides yet another benefit. We need it if we are to trace the “arrival horizon” of our efforts, that is, to offer a realistic idea about how we envision the best possible world. We cannot propose a realistic horizon without first understanding the basic structures and dynamics of the world, an understanding of how and why we ourselves are situated therein, where we are coming from and what we are moving towards, and at which points we can exert an influence to reorient those dynamics. Without a method of social analysis, our proposals regarding a horizon may look beautiful but they will, in fact, be fanciful. Designing future ideals without asking what the real conditions of possibility might be constitutes an error that any serious social thinker would attempt to avoid. Such an error makes it easy for opponents to discredit them and leaves supporters frustrated and disoriented.

At the present moment in the Jesuit social apostolate we lack a common method of social analysis. Each of us, to the degree that he feels the need, adopts one of the methods already available in the social sciences or creates his own synthesis with greater or less consistency. This explains why we find it difficult to agree on our general visions or diagnostic designs when we meet together as colleagues from different regions, teams and/or areas of work. It also explains
many of the difficulties we have in communicating with our colleagues in the
intellectual apostolate.

To be sure, the contemporary social science scene does not help us much in
remedying this deficiency. On the one hand, the social sciences are extremely
segmented and do not easily integrate different perspectives (economic, political,
sociological, and cultural); neither do they integrate different theoretical schools
within each science. Each scholar tends to analyze things according to the
professional training he or she has received. Such segmentation inevitably affects
us as well, except for those teams of the social apostolate where all the relevant
specialties are represented and which engage in lively dialogue.

On the other hand, as a result of positivist influence, many of the dominant
approaches oversimplify the human person by explaining behaviour in quasi-
mechanistic terms. The most widespread characteristic of this approach consists of
the assumption that people or social groups always act in their own interests
(wealth, power, or whatever may be at stake). It is thus assumed that if we know
their interests and the conditions they face, we can predict how they will react, just
as we can with physical objects. Such a view, however, ignores the ethical
dimension of individual and collective actions. Interests are certainly important,
but persons and groups also act in accordance with convictions about what is best
for all, an approach that does not necessarily or always coincide with their own
interests.

This situation offers crucial opportunities for transformative mobilization. If
we are going to invite others to join us in our proposals for social transformation,
do we not usually appeal to their moral conscience, expressing our convictions in
such a way that they can share them if they find them attractive? It would be
strange indeed for us as Christians to base all our political influence on interest-
oriented alignments without leaving space for the moral conscience of the social
agents.

Thus, as regards the “seeing” moment in social analysis, our challenge is not
just a matter of reaching agreement about a complete and consistent
methodological synthesis. It also involves bringing the ethical dimension back into
social analysis by going to the very root of the matter: the suppositions about how
and why persons and social groups behave as they do.

Judge:

Once social analysis has helped us to know a particular situation, the
underlying structures and dynamics that brought it into being, the possible
decisions and actions to be taken are clearer. In the light of this analysis, we must
judge the situation and determine which alternative to promote. For that we need
an operational theory of justice, that is, a concept of justice capable of precise
application in concrete situations. Only such a concept can tell us whether a
particular situation is unjust, what the injustice consists of, and which decisions
and actions we need to take to combat it effectively.
Since the beginning of the 1970s, philosophy and the social sciences have been engaged in lively debates about the meaning of social justice, and a number of theories compete with one another. I may be mistaken, but I cannot remember a single Jesuit author whose work is considered indispensable in those debates. This seems strange to me, because the debate is precisely about how to determine in a rational manner what is just; it is a question that should be of great concern to us, committed as we are to promoting justice and making it a reality in collaboration with others who do not necessarily share the Catholic faith.

We do have, to be sure, the order’s official documents on the promotion of justice, and a substantial amount of theology has been produced on the topic, but there is no operational concept in the strict sense. GC 34 can help us understand why this is the case, for it states: “The vision of justice which guides us is intimately linked with our faith. … It transcends notions of justice derived from ideology, philosophy, or particular political movements, which can never be an adequate expression of the justice of the Kingdom” (GC 34, D 3, 4). Our vision of justice, therefore, does not consist in a rationally formulated concept that can be used for analysis, but in a religious symbol. As such, the notion possesses the symbol’s power to motivate and also its intrinsic ambiguity, which allows it to be embedded in different contents according to the occasion, to the exigencies of the moment, the sensibilities of those who use it or of those to whom the message is addressed.

As a consequence, given the need to make specific judgments in concrete situations, each one of us interprets, more or less consciously, the symbol “justice” with the concepts that we find most fitting. Having worked in the social apostolate in different contexts and various countries, I can recall having heard concepts being used that came from a great variety of Marxisms, anarchisms, structuralisms, egalitarianisms, communitarianisms, contractualisms, human-rights liberalisms, feminisms, ecologisms, indigenisms, from social democracy as well as scholasticism and the most classical principles of the social doctrine of the Church.

While some conceptions of justice from the past have fallen into disuse, perhaps the most popular conception prevalent among us nowadays is of justice as the realization of human rights. The option implied by this conception is not free of problems.

The first generation of human rights, the so-called civil and political rights, have a clearly liberal, individualistic stamp to them. The second generation, economic and social rights, express as subjective rights (rights due to individuals by the mere fact of their existing) what are clearly, at least in the case of competent adults, objective rights (rights derived from the subject’s contribution to social life). Aristotle, Saint Thomas, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx would all have thought it strange that capable adults should be guaranteed the right to receive certain material goods, without asking how they have contributed to the production of those goods or of other goods that might be exchanged for them. Finally, the so-called third-generation rights form a catchall category to which can be added any right that is considered desirable, and this is sometimes done in clear contradiction to the individualist conception of the first two “generations.”
The most important weakness of human rights as a theory of justice lies in its subjective character. Such a theory does not consider objective rights and reaches only so far as it treats of distribution of goods, but not of their social production; it treats of the rights of persons and groups, but not of their duties. This is seen clearly in a conflict where one side cites certain human rights in its favour, and these rights turn out, in concrete situations, to be incompatible with the rights invoked by the other side.

Another conception that enjoys prestige among us tends to identify what is just with the interests of the poor in each situation. The option for the poor then becomes the criterion of justice. Although it is true that the poor are usually the weaker party in many social relations, and therefore the most likely to suffer injustice and the least able to bring about justice, such an automatic identification is problematic. This is because the poor, like everybody else, can commit injustices as soon as they acquire power themselves. To ignore this reality would mean either denying them moral capacity and thus rendering them objects, or else believing in their innate goodness and thus idealizing them. Neither of these options helps them to grow as social subjects, which is one of the most consistent objectives of our social apostolate.

Furthermore, we find that many of the situations in which we work have losers and winners among the poor themselves. If a transnational company decides to move its factory from Mexico to India, that decision on the part of capital undoubtedly harms the Mexican workers, who would be left unemployed. But it benefits the Indian workers, who are probably poorer than the Mexicans, since they would obtain the industrial employment they need. Is such a decision, therefore, an unjust one which we should oppose, or not?

Finally, we sometimes seem to understand the option for the poor as an option for the losers in each period of social change (this is one interpretation, probably erroneous, of Ellacuría’s phrase about “turning history around”). If this were to be our understanding, our discourse would be a litany of complaints and protests about the fate of those who suffer from the changes. Of course, these persons need to be taken into account, and we must insist that care is taken to provide people with decent and practicable alternatives, but we cannot call unjust every social change that produces some suffering; that would make us reactionaries opposed to the course of history.

Although we draw on the religious (spiritual, biblical, and theological) inspiration contained in our symbol of “justice”, it is worth stressing that what we need is a rational concept that will give us a basis for dialoguing with non-Christians. That concept cannot be attained by extrapolating from the scriptures or from Christian tradition. Both the Bible and tradition tell us about believers of past ages who were faced with difficult situations and of how they analyzed their situations in order to reach conclusions about the injustices involved and ways to eradicate them. Their example is admirable but not always imitable: not only were their criteria for judgment and their conclusions sometimes widely different, and even contradictory, but the cultural and historical distance that separates us from them is very great.
Considering only our western frame of reference, we can easily see that there have been enormous transformations between the age of the Church Fathers and our own time in the field of the subject, such as the individualist revolution of Nominalism (in which Ignatian spirituality is certainly rooted), the anthropocentric turnabout of the Renaissance, the rationalism of the Enlightenment and of Positivism, the emotive nature of Romanticism, and the revolutionary movements of 1968, with the subsequent post-modern fragmentation of the subject. Any person who is heir to these processes has a consciousness of self and of others that is bound to be different from that of an inhabitant of Jerusalem in the days of the prophets. For example, a modern person has great difficulty understanding morality in terms of objective order.

In the field of social structures, we have witnessed since ancient times the following: the scientific and industrial revolutions, the bourgeois democratic revolutions, several social revolutions, massive urbanizations, the emergence of the middle classes, and successive waves of technological change, each one more far-reaching than the one before. The social setting in which justice must be relevant today bears only a faint resemblance to the social setting of Saint Jerome. We are talking now of a global setting, where the bulk of wealth is no longer derived from nature but from human industry. Capital and knowledge have appeared on the scene as decisive factors of production; the social classes have been expanded; self-sufficient small communities are not longer practicable, to mention only a few instances.

Given the historical distance, any attempt to develop an operative concept of justice from the scriptures and tradition and apply it to our time will face insuperable hermeneutical problems; the meanings of other ages can be carried over into our own only with great difficulty. Of course, it is worth making the effort, as long as we expect not very much from it. While scripture and tradition can inspire us to undertake the work, they cannot provide us with a solution to our problem of formulating a sufficiently rational concept of justice.

In sum, as with social analysis, so when it comes to an operational concept of justice necessary for establishing consistent criteria for judging situations, we will benefit from greater elaboration and more internal discussion.

**Act:**

As regards action on behalf of justice, we have done much and done it well, above all at the local and national levels, and, in some sectors, even at the international level. In many places around the world we have for decades been working at grass-roots projects, creating public opinion, waging juridical battles, and doing advocacy at all levels of political decision-making. All this constitutes a source of contact with social realities and a basis for transforming them, something certainly not to be underestimated.

At the same time, despite various past and more recent attempts, we still have not managed to make the leap to promoting justice in a consistent, sustained way on a global scale. In addition to the aforementioned difficulties (agreement about
how to analyze situations and what justice reasonably requires in such situations), there are obvious obstacles arising from the territorial structure of the Society’s government (based as it is on provinces, and ultimately on regions). That structure makes it difficult to allocate the persons and resources required to maintain stable institutions with global projection. To place the additional task of organizing of such a projection on persons and institutions already burdened with local and sectoral commitments seems quite unrealistic. In fact, the only Jesuit organization which has the ability to make an impact on a global scale in its area of interest, the Jesuit Refugee Service, was deliberately created by Father Arrupe outside the territorial structure of the order’s government. That should give us food for thought.

As regards organizational forms and strategies of action, I detect a curious tendency to follow the current fads; we might do well to reflect on this. I enumerate here the various forms assumed by our social apostolate over the years, more or less chronologically, considering the dates when each type of work began: cooperatives and credit unions; “white” (as opposed to “red”) unions; “Christian” political parties; social centres for analysis and doctrinal instruction; worker priests inserted in class-based unions; alliances with secular political parties; vanguard-led liberation movements; horizontal grass-roots organizing; NGOs in defence of human rights, social services, or cooperation for development; and finally, of course, networking.

My impression is that we passed from one model to another “generationally,” so to speak. Each new generation of Jesuits tends to reorganize the social apostolate, including both the existing works and the new ones it creates, in its own way. What cannot be reorganized tends to disappear (as was the case with the worker-priests), or to be superseded by other works (as happened with the trade unions and the credit unions). I wonder whether this results from a true discernment that includes evaluation of the earlier strategies, or whether it is simply a matter of lighting candles wherever the wind happens to be blowing, without really discerning. If we were to develop more of our own social thought, shared and enriched from generation to generation, then it would help us to evaluate better what is at stake when we abandon a given strategy or take on a new one, and perhaps it would also make us less beholden to organizational fashions or to sources of financing.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, I believe that the Jesuit social apostolate would benefit greatly in its capacity for global impact, and also indirectly in its local and sectoral influence, if it were to undertake a couple of joint intellectual tasks: 1) synthesizing a method of social analysis compatible with our basic convictions, and 2) elaborating a rational theory of justice for judging situations and evaluating alternatives.

For these tasks we can, no doubt, count on the collaboration of many persons in the intellectual and university apostolate (many of whom come precisely from the social apostolate or have vital contacts with it). Might it be possible to think of
starting a “Jesuit school” of social analysis and justice theory, to which people from all over the world would contribute? Such a “school,” coordinated and organized by a small agency based in the General Curia, could organize ongoing conferences and provide frequent opportunities for debate. Even if it does not attain its most ambitious goals, the very attempt would probably contribute greatly to a certain concurrence of perspectives and instruments in the social apostolate, which in turn would make it easier to engender a consistent profile for impact on a global scale.

I am well aware that attempting this would demand of all of us a sincere search for the truth. Joining such an initiative with the intention of promoting one’s own criteria and predetermined theses would be to kill it before it was born. Only if we are aware of the inadequacy of our own analyses and our own criteria for judgment in a world as complex as today’s, will we be moved to make an effort of collective intelligence that will enable us to reach, by working together, a point that none of us can reach by himself: a worldview that is more comprehensive and realistic, and therefore truly more helpful for poor people.

The Church attained its greatest capacity for dialoguing with the political and economic spheres during the Renaissance, the era of the first globalization, an epoch that was also replete with radical novelties, and it was precisely during that time that the Church had such a “school,” the so-called Second Scholastic, in which brilliant Jesuits took part: Molina, Mariana, Lugo, Lessio, Suárez .... along with Dominicans, Augustinians, and others. At that time there were far fewer Jesuits, of course, and they had fewer points of contact with the social reality; they had fewer institutions and fewer capable and committed collaborators than we have today. Yet their practical impact on the Church’s social action was undeniable: much of what was most humanizing in that first, extremely harsh wave of globalization was inspired by the concepts of justice and by the practical implications that were formulated by that school. Perhaps now is the moment to ask ourselves whether we could once again offer the Church a similar collective service.

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