

STRUGGLING & LIBERATIVE NEW SPIRITUALITY

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“I was shocked and demoralized that we allow human beings to live like this. How can the economic policies of our world allow hundreds of millions of people to go hungry every day”? This is genuine Christian agony and anger. The puzzled outburst comes from Suzane Geaney, lay co-ordinator and collaborator in the social apostolate of the Maryland Province. The anguish resonates well with the Trinitarian sentiment after the contemplation of the earth as described by Ignatius in the Spiritual Exercises. There the retreatant is asked to see “how the three Divine Persons gazed on the whole surface or circuit of the world, full of people”. Filled with divine compassion, God decides on the great work of the Incarnation, for the Restoration of the disturbed divinely established human and cosmic order. ‘Born in a poor stable to die on the wooden cross’ comments Ignatius, contemplating the Incarnate Word in the manger. It is in this marginalized human situation, the modern ‘manger’ that the Restorer has taken His stand and invites co-workers. Today He finds there crime, exploitation, violence, drugs, poverty, neglect, de-priced half-persons. Jails, refugee centres, ‘boat people’, slums and ‘human garbage’ colonies, refugee camps, resettlement shanties for the displaced and evicted, the landless, and the unemployed – are the underside of our history, the backyard of our civilization. In the words of Christian Herwartz, “Jesus lives among us at our working place, amidst the exertions of, and the distinct disdain for, the worker”. All the afflicted need to be reached, served and reclaimed. As the Hound of Heaven pursues the ‘escaping’ evader with passionate and steady love, so the oppressed and the oppressor, the victims of injustice as well as their perpetrators, the creators of systems and those groaning under their burden, are being pursued by God in

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Christ through the workers of Justice. The distortions have to be rectified, change has to take place, and for that Faith has to be transcribed as Justice in transforming action.

It is from this situation and perspective that Jesus reads the human situation, enters into it, and commences His great work. For this He enlists supporters, collaborators, walkers and workers with Him. It is with this company that the Jesuits are invited to walk through the re-interpretation of our Charism by GC 32.

Two striking issues stand out from the frank sharing by our Jesuit enterprisers in and through their narration.

One is about the nature and stature of Jesus Christ. Both in theology as well as in the Exercises the person of Jesus Christ is presented and treated. In the Exercises we see Jesus sending His disciples in poverty, and summoning His disciples to embrace 'even actual poverty' in order to work for the Kingdom of God. In theology Jesus Christ is treated, constructed and presented, using the materials supplied by Greek philosophy raised to eminent abstract theological heights. But some of the narrators confess that even with maximum interest in the re-construction of war-torn and later consumerist western civilization they found what was imparted in formation centres and faculties "boring". To fight the actual poverty of the masses the world over, and to struggle for their God-given rights, they had virtually little in their armory or academic knapsack. They had to "re-explore" ways and means of being a true and effective disciple of Jesus whose Father in the Old Testament had intervened in human affairs with a concrete re-construction programme for the human family.

This we find from Exodus and through the highly instructive Jubilee testaments and the extensive prophetic literature. But the cry of the prophets and the pedagogy of Jesus of Nazareth disappeared with the dawn of the imperial heyday. And so theological formation, and for that matter, available spirituality, did not supply the wherewithal with which to attempt to actualize the Kingdom of God in terms of historically empirically realizable projects. For that they had to experiment with life situations and learn afresh what the social processes and social sciences had to say. This lacuna is being increasingly discovered today by Jesuits and others in the field of Justice and Human Rights. Those who have ears, let them hear, that seems to be what these Jesuits are saying. Send us, but equipped, they tell us.

The second issue seeping through the rich and fresh sharing by our fellow Jesuits and their committed collaborators is about the reduced social

content of religion and the small and fragile God of religions. Religions' ability or willingness to set the world aright appears thin, so the history of religions tells us. After the days of their founding, religions seem to withdraw from the areas where healthy human social order is made or unmade into self-made limited chambers. Besides, till recently, each of the world religions did present their God, to the exclusion of an 'other'. Even Christianity cultivated and maintained that culture. If walls or borders were crossed it was to ransack or demolish the god of the other. But the narrators who were actually working in and with diaspora culture were, by force of the new circumstance, forced to experience actual inter-religious dialogue and to find that the colour and the fragrance of God was more or less the same in the religion of their co-workers. Consequently, the collapse of many a Berlin wall took place quite spontaneously.

Those involved in issues of justice and human rights, Christians and Muslims alike, find to their astonishment that from each one's religious tradition rich materials can be drawn to apply to human problems, to try to build up a society different from the one available today. Crossing of borders and the collapse of walls seem to bring about such discoveries.

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What kind of walking with Jesus is expected of Jesuits? As one narrator has it, it is not mere following of Christ, but Christ in poverty who wants and wills the destruction of poverty enforced on helpless people by fraud and violence, actual and structural... The situation of the excluded, the deprived, the marginalized, the ones with slender resources, is the new Mission field to which Jesuits are sent. This plunge implies owning all that this new world is afflicted with: scanty food of the much-despised 'Dalits' (T. Herbert), their powerlessness and consequent forced eviction from the ever-competing world of achievers and wielders of power, and being in solidarity with their anguished life of rejection. It is by making this the centre of the world that Jesus reads and interprets the world above: of possessions and wealth, power and influence, but one in which God's Presence is scarcely felt. Many a narrator feels that the spirituality and formation he was has

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been trained in needs to be re-explored, re-educated, re-learned, to enter this world of the poor and the rejected, the direct victims of injustice. A new vision and new reading of the total human situation is needed.

What is common to the narrations is that it is in this arid zone of a struggling and liberative new spirituality that one has to sustain our works for Justice-Faith commitments. For, the newly opted vision is for another social order. It was set in motion by Yahweh the Creator, pursued by the Prophets, and confirmed by the life and ministry of Jesus. By breaking bread with the unemployed and the drug addicts, and regularly returning to the Spiritual Exercises for re-charging, and offering the Exercises in new ways, the promoters of Justice invent and integrate a spirituality befitting a secular order where the values of the Reign of God shine. The dynamics or components of that spirituality are new. Experiments with involvement in human affairs, bearing the scorn and snarls of the looters of the goods of the world now in power, putting up with isolation, alienation and discouragement, all contribute to that spirituality. In other words, the chairs and pulpits need to be replaced in the midst of the disorganized, confused and unsettled crowds of the deprived. All these need to be supported by high academic competence in the disciplines that relate to the making or marring of a fitting human social order.

The divine insertion in the human situation at the Incarnation is preceded by the divine experience ('com-passion', suffering with) of the wretchedness of the fallen human situation. One can say that the 4th Decree of the 32nd General Congregation, which according to GC 33 is 'application for our times of the Formula of the Institute and of the Ignatian charism' (38), is a call to another level of identification with Jesus in His redemptive labour today. The narrators here begin this task with a daring and awful plunge into the world of the poor, the afflicted and rejected, victims of multiple injustices. The experiences contained in the 'Histories' (relatos) go a long way to comply with the directive in the retreat, now in actual practice by Jesuits and lay collaborators as we have above. The Narrators lead the entire Society to this incarnate plunge with Jesus to be with the victims of injustice.

Another striking feature of the rich personal narration is the mutuality and interrelatedness of the two apparently distinct and disparate ministries: Faith and Justice. Here Faith meets Justice; one nourishes the other, interprets and illumines each other, and enriches each other. The 'social' oriented exertions are completed and fulfilled by the Faith dimension, and Faith is

rendered empirical and incarnational. Disembodied spiritualism is granted a corrective and an incarnational spirituality shows itself in its integrality. There is frequent reference to the need to return to the Ignatian sources, for discernment and prayer, for reading the Bible in quiet hours as well as while in the midst of travel or work. There is the new altar for the celebration of the Breaking of the Bread, as one narrator testifies. The two, Faith and Justice, are seen here healthily interacting and integrating. In its early phase, advocacy of Justice was seen by some Jesuits as bereft of any trait of Faith – a purely secular thrust. In India not only among a few Jesuits but even among some religious activists, the ‘Justice as a cause by itself’ approach was seen as a way of life. And since the ‘Marxist’ suspicion continued to haunt all of Liberation Theology, a fair degree of alienation not only of the personnel but even of the ministries and ideology delayed the rapid growth of this authentically Biblical sprout. The CIS project can be a good contribution to this much-discussed new ministry in the Church.

For us Jesuits this emerging integration of Faith and Justice is important for two reasons. First, the 4th Decree’s main stress is on the new identity of the Jesuits. When the GC 33 stated that the 4th Decree is application for our times of the Formula of the Institute approved by the then Pope, the finger points to the new Jesuit identity. It is a healthy combination of the Faith-Justice development that will define Jesuit identity today.

Secondly a current phrase in contextual theologies is the ‘semi-sacramentality of the poor’. By this is meant that it is through this sector of the human family that God intervenes, challenges distorted and warped human consciences and systems that are anti-poor, and confronts unjust value systems supportive of such structures. Yahweh’s intervention is in and through the oppressed people. Jesus Himself right at the outset of His ministry tells his times that He is anointed and sent to free the captives. The ‘Society of Jesus’ has a special vocation to mediate God’s correcting and reconciling intervention through the unheard voice of the deprived so that all listen to God and accept His offer of reconciliation. The narrators are seen fulfilling this new Mission.

To me the 4th Decree of GC 32, a main source of the Justice thrust thereafter, is a most brilliant exposition of a spirituality- in- action; and through that a recovery of Yahweh’s Mission, so to speak, in the Old Testament, and the Synoptic depiction of Jesus Christ in action. Both Yahweh and Jesus Christ are seen standing by and walking with victims of injustice

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—societal, religious, economic, and cultural. And I find the narrators above as continuing the same pedagogy of human integral restoration.

The emerging liberative spirituality holds a vision for the human family. This inspires and propels people to organized and sustained actions aimed at changing the situation. Such actions will generate experiences in an effort to convert the vision into a way of life dictated by this vision. The same prompts a programme of action. The vision operative in these stories above is of a just and human and humane society. But in startling contrast is the pathetic situation of the have-nots, the devalued and dehumanized in a world of abundant wealth and vulgar display. Organized actions over protracted period of time are required. That calls for patience and sustaining power, as well as adequate knowledge of the dynamics of the social processes, and the skills to utilize them in order to re-orient a dis-oriented society.

Ignatius commences his Exercises with attention on God's creation as mediating humankind's return to God, and ends with the invitation to be in ever-absorbing communion with a God-filled world that reflects and contains the love and glory of God. The Jesuit as worker priest, the Jesuit in the midst of Dalits, and with those forming new communities of the migrants, the unemployed, the refugees in search of recognition and affirmation, is depicted as finding Jesus in His journey of rejection, humiliation and helplessness. The visibility of the struggling Jesus catches the eye of the Jesuits in the midst of such rejects. Jesus is found right in the midst of this anonymous crowd, this crowd of street-walkers, asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, the mass of uprooted and socially displaced people of the world. The 'contemplatio ad amorem' of the Exercises is seen in 'contemplation in liberative action'. The summit of the Jesuit the co-worker with Jesus is to see Jesus ever more clearly and be with Him in increasing intimacy—in labour as well as in glory.

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