

An Ignatian Approach to Social Ministry

© David Holdcroft sj, 2005.

“Why the need for a dedicated social ministry? Isn't that what we should all be doing anyway?”

The social ministry of the Society of Jesus in particular and of the Ignatian tradition in general can trace its origins to the very heart of Ignatius' experience of conversion at the age of twenty five. It was Ignatius' own spiritual journey, so greatly intensified during his period of convalescence at Loyola, that led him to intentionally take on the outward appearance of one in poverty, exchanging his nobleman's garments with those of a pauper at the monastery at Montserrat, where he was to spend the night in vigil before the statue of Our Lady. In so doing, he gave outward ritual expression to his interior 'pilgrimage', a journey toward a deeper interiority and freedom so as to be ever more available for the service of God and his fellow human beings.

It is important to note that this action did not constitute merely a kind of humanist alignment, on Ignatius' part, with the poor of his day (good though this might well have been). Nor can one rightly describe it as a purely emotional reaction to a particular encounter with someone, much less as a carefully planned response to a particular political agenda. For Ignatius, rather, it expressed in ritual something of what was happening inside him and into which he had, at the time, little insight. The way he chose to give authentic voice to his experiences, indeed the only way he could do so, was within the ritual and language of his community of faith, the Church. It was thus a statement of religious solidarity, a first but important step of someone in the early stages of development of a mature religious sensibility yet at the same time possessing an intense desire to express in his life that ever growing relationship with God.

The exchange of clothing also formed recognition that in some mysterious manner this development of religious sensibility, indeed his whole future, would always have connection and find some kind of expression with those who in human terms have been marginalised in some manner. The beginnings of his search for "God's will" in his own life mysteriously placed him near to these people, psychologically, spiritually and materially.

But this was also just a first step: to stop there would leave his growth incomplete and its expression superficial. At Manresa, over many months, Ignatius, the 'pauper', slowly began to learn the tenets and the art of discernment of his inner spiritual 'movements'. He learnt by reflecting upon his present experiences and upon his previous life. He could do this effectively partly because he had been led to step outside his original social/cultural context and could

now look upon it more objectively: indeed he was now able to look at the world from the perspective of someone relying on others' kindness for the material aspects of his existence. Indeed this position was one of freely chosen poverty.

It follows that this process of learning cannot be seen as purely a matter for Ignatius' individual relationship with his 'private' God. His journey of conversion (which really lasted his entire life) saw Ignatius constantly developing the ability to become more aware of his context and at the same time to look beyond it, to 'read' the world around him, to see and to respond to the "signs of the times", to the areas of need in the building of God's kingdom on earth. The months he spent at Manresa were a time of withdrawal and intense reflection, yet even this time had overall an outward orientation, one in which a view of the world was being established and future directions were beginning to be indicated. In short, it was a time of preparation for later action, for what Ignatius was subsequently going to *do* in discerning and fulfilling God's will for his life.

One of the many fruits of these years in Ignatius' life, and of the ways of discernment that he learnt then, was his subsequent constant ministry and outreach to the poor and the sick around him. This was a personal ministry that continued throughout the remainder of his life, even when his main response to God's call was centred elsewhere (such as when he was elected as Superior General of the Society and thus obliged to work in mainly administrative roles). It was also a ministry in which he utilised whatever resources, personal and material, that became available to him. At times, this meant sharing the food or money that he had been given such as his distribution of money, while travelling from Rome to Venice, to "whoever crossed his path, who were normally poor people."¹ At other times he listened to the experiences of those around him and those with whom he travelled. At still other times he undertook advocacy on behalf of his fellow travellers, such as when during his journey from Gaeta to Rome, he intervened with some soldiers on behalf of a mother and daughter who had been assaulted. In many ways his approach might seem to us as rather ad hoc, but it demonstrated an inner consistency and was carried on by virtue of a great interior freedom. *Always, it meant somehow living a simple life prudently relying upon the gratuitous providence of God that he believed would sustain both him and his work.*

A further aspect of Ignatius' response to the conditions of his time was more planned, more

¹ *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, transl by J. Munitiz & P. Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), 40, pp. 31-32, see also 38, p.31.

'structural' or institutional. Probably the first institution of the infant Society was the "House of Santa Maria" for 'reforming' prostitutes founded by Ignatius in Rome in 1539. Realising the potential for scandal, Ignatius prudently transferred its management away from the Society's personnel proper, preferring to continue his personal ministry largely in places run by other, more suitably placed, people, as well as in large institutions such as hospitals and directly on the street. This was less an act of distancing as a way of ensuring both the work's survival and also the interior freedom necessary for Ignatius to retain the centrality of this aspect of his life. Such is borne out in Ignatius' instruction to Diego Laynez and Salmeron upon their departure to the ecumenical Council of Trent they were to spend their out-of-session time in preaching and ministry of all kinds, each visiting the poor "at least once every four days".²

Hence for Ignatius, and indeed for the first companions, the constant engagement with, and ministry to, the poor and outcaste of their time appears as both a 'natural' part of their lives, and a more planned ministry. Whatever form it took, I believe it must always be seen in the context of their deepening relationship with God and their discernment as to how best to give expression to this relationship in their daily lives: it thus can be seen as a central part of their spirituality.

The formula of the institute upon which the Society of Jesus was first founded carries this broad message. The aim, "to strive especially for the defence and propagation of the faith and for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine", is given expression through "means of public preaching, lectures, and any other ministration whatsoever of the Word of God" and through a readiness to "reconcile the estranged, compassionately assist those who are in prisons or hospitals and indeed to perform any other works of charity..."³ Ignatius sees all these activities as essential to the carrying out of God's will. The mission of the Society, it follows, is one undertaken with its "eyes wide open", taking into account its own social, political, cultural and other contexts, and those in which it finds itself, at the same time always reflecting a solidarity and engagement with the poor.

Down through the centuries there have been doubtless many people, men and women of the Ignatian tradition, who have quietly but with great efficacy and fidelity shown in their lives this readiness to extend charity to others especially those who are marginalised, often when the 'centre' of their ministry lies elsewhere. It has seemed to be a kind of 'natural' extension to their life of faith. Some, such as Peter Claver, have led distinguished lives of conspicuous

service to the poor, but many more have quietly gone about their service largely unheralded and continue to do so in the present day. So, one may well ask, if Ignatius in his own life emphasised a "personal" social ministry of outreach to the disadvantaged, why is there the necessity for a specialised, institutional Social Ministry now?

In one sense the answer to this question has been, and is being, lived out in the countless lives just referred to, and is only just beginning to find articulated expression. However, I believe an important clue comes from the deliberations of General Congregation 32, especially in its decree 4. Here is an "unpacking" of the Society of Jesus' original stated mission placed in the context of the social, economic and other developments of the contemporary world: "The service of faith of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement since reconciliation with God demands the reconciliation of people with one another".⁴

For some of us, this linking between justice and faith may seem like a watering down, a secularisation, of those areas of our lives which we define as religious. How does an issue of justice concerning, for example, a group of people who do not profess Christian belief (for instance the current debate concerning treatment of asylum seekers in Australia), link to *my* faith and life as a Christian, as well as to *our* life as a Church community?

One answer to these questions is contained within the texts of the Gospels, where Jesus' healings carry implications for the person's contribution to, and participation in, society, as well as restoring his/her physical health. Another answer, as we have seen, is contained within Ignatius' life itself, in his constant awareness of, and practical help given to, the poor and marginalised of his day. For those of us within the Ignatian tradition, any emphasis upon the justice dimension derives from the ongoing carrying out of the Society of Jesus' mission of helping people to achieve a better personal relationship with God. The Congregation, in linking justice and faith, recognizes that the prevalence of injustice in the world is *both* an obstacle for proper human flourishing *and*, as important, an *obstacle to belief*. For many people, lack of *experience* of a loving God, forms a mitigating, if not prohibitive, factor to belief.

It is perhaps easy to see this statement when it is applied to situations involving very obvious injustice, for example in that of a child suffering from malnourishment, a situation that severely and directly curtails life expectancy and radically diminishes the life possibilities for this person. Nevertheless its

² Letter 14 (1546) in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, transl by J. Munitiz & P. Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 166.

³ *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and their Complementary Norms*, (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), p. 4.

⁴ General Congregation 32, d.4, n.2 (48) in *Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), p. 411.

application also extends to those of us who feel we are largely in control of the context of our lives, who may not ever have felt on the end of any significant injustices. It tells us that our lives, both private and public, are lived within a context, a social and cultural structure, and therefore that our understanding of our faith has been formed within, and thus 'framed' by, this structure.

Such a context is not in itself a bad thing: humanly we need a social and cultural milieu in which to nurture ourselves and in which to grow. The gospels tell us that Jesus lived his life within the social, cultural and religious context of his day. But it is this same context that sets limits to both our view of the world and thus to our freedom to respond to the transcendent, to God's call within it. It skews our 'reading' of the world. Jesus, through careful discernment of, and obedience to, the will of the Father, was able to act in such a way as to admit that there is a "beyond" in a person's or a community's life that can affect the way in which it is lived in the here and now. (It was precisely this orientation to his life that brought him into conflict with aspects of his social, cultural and religious context.) According to General Congregation 32's understanding of the contemporary world and its social structures, it is the presence of the disadvantaged person at some level within our lives that more than often prods us to properly recognise and to reassess our context and to sometimes look beyond it. If we do this, we begin to see ourselves in a surprising, new light. We begin to see possibility where before we perhaps previously saw only barrenness or despair. Our relationship with God, so affected by the manner in which we see ourselves, begins to change, to deepen.

Like Ignatius, we may perhaps begin to respond at the level of the heart, with encounter and with a gesture, a resolve towards solidarity with a poor person. But we will then be led to a learning and reflection process where we develop the ability to read our world in the light of our and others relationship with God. We begin to see the ways in which God can and does bring life to otherwise hopeless situations, to discern God's presence in *all* situations. We will begin to use the tools that our individual and collective human capacities, our creativity and intelligence, have given us.

Such discernment leads us to frame a response:

- either individually or perhaps as part of a group.
- on a small or large in scale, always using every means available to us.
- at once having both personal and public dimensions.
- emphasising both presence to the poor but also expressing an understanding of the forces that lead people to their being marginalised or in poverty.
- that increasingly reflects our growing understanding of the manner in which this marginalisation /poverty may prevent or inhibit

the same people from knowing and responding to the love of God in their lives.

- that is prudent and flexible, open to further reflection and learning.
- always to be grounded in, and oriented, by our deepening relationship with God who desires only to reveal his/her love to us more fully.

In this manner, we become companions in the mission envisaged by Ignatius. It is a holistic vision, one of liberation so that the love of God, the kingdom wrought by the life and death of Christ, may be ever more fully realised both in the hearts and daily lives of us all.