

Ignatian Spirituality: What are We Talking about and Why?

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JCU Staff Services Committee
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I would like to start with a story that some of you may have heard before. I like to use it because it remains one that is very dear to me and illustrative of what I want to say about spirituality.

The year after I was provincial of the Detroit Province-1989-1990-I worked as a consultant to the Jesuit provinces of East Asia. One of their major apostolic works was the Jesuit Refugee Service and especially that organization's role in caring for a high concentration of Cambodian refugees at the Thai/Cambodian border. In 1989-1990

camp was kind of on "the make," looking for a way to get some money and to get some help.

I was only at Site II for six weeks as part of the JRS team to help the people in the Jesuit Refugee Service review their program, to see whether they were going to stay there, or to relocate in another place. We were going through a kind of discernment process. We had about 30 Jesuit Service workers from all over the World. Most of them were young women and men, very talented and dedicated but not particularly religious as a group. Given that type of background, I would work in the camp every day but Tuesday. Tuesday I would stay home and I would see people if they would like to see me for spiritual direction or any kind of advice. That Tuesday work got to be a more and more important part of my presence. But during the week, when I worked at the camp between 9:00 and 5:00, what I primarily did was teach English and give a couple talks in some areas about management and things of that sort. Cambodians would come up and they would ask, "Can you sneak out a letter? Can you get me some money? Do you know somebody that can help me?" And you expected that and the answer always had to be no because, if the Thai camp authorities found out, you'd be thrown out of the camp as a worker.

However, there was one young Cambodian man there who never asked for anything. He worked in our library and we gradually realized how intelligent and trustworthy he was. Consequently, he kept getting more and more things to do. He asked me if I would work with him every afternoon when most people would cut out for about 45 minutes to take a nap. This is the time that I would work with him every day on his English. In little dribs and drabs he said he wanted to become a doctor but he had no hope for that because of his early education being taken away from him through the Khmer Rouge invasion.

Near the end of the stay he asked me, "Will you come to my home and meet my wife and my children?" And I told him I'd be happy to do that. When the day came and we were walking over to his home, I said to him, "You know, Sambath, you have never said to me what you want. What do you want out of life?" "Oh Father", he answered, "What I want to do is teach my children not to hate because if my children hate then the enemy has won their soul. That's why it's so important for you to come to meet them. Every Caucasian whom they have met has been an authority. But you are just my friend."

I couldn't come this close to the dignity and the forgiveness and the sense of human worth of that man. He was a Buddhist. To me he lives continually in my heart as someone who gave me the privilege of trust, allowing me to enter into friendship and to

all he wanted was to pass along to his children the ability to trust human friendship? Why did he risk being a bridge between generations and cultures and not a minefield? What was it that made him such a spouse and such a father? Whatever it was, it is what I mean by spirituality. His story is the narrative of spirituality. I do not have to add anything; I simply just witness its power.

When we talk about spirituality we really mean what are the forces for the energies or the relationships that you and I have in our life so that they define us especially in those moments in which we have no reason to be honest, or just, or kind, or thoughtful, or hard working except it's who I am and what I wish to be? Spirituality looks at that one part of me that is not negotiable. I don't fritter it away. It's the part of me I'm sometimes embarrassed to talk about because it's so close to the things that I hold dear, that are important to me. Sometimes what we treasure can be humorous. Some of you may remember a few years ago when I was asked to give a talk here on Ignatian spirituality I told the story of taking care of my geen g10(ca)4(ay)14((f)2(e7()1.002 (10(c(e)-2(s)<a)12(hat)21)4(c

St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, called this power we all have, the power to help people. Spirituality is something we grow with without even giving it a name, something that liberates our energies in life so we can help other people. It begins with our first breath and it ends with our last breath when we surrender our souls over into the hands of a loving God. Therefore, Ignatius called spirituality, a pilgrimage. For him, spirituality was a kind of journey through life in which I gradually learn how to cherish the world. Spirituality is also the ability to pass along to others those values that mark my life as the being important as a woman or a man. This is what I mean by the non-negotiables of who I want to be. Now let's give names to some of these non-negotiables.

One whole set of non-negotiables focus on what I believe in. When you say, "What do you believe in, Howard Gray?" I say I believe that Jesus Christ is the best person that walked this earth and I trust him. He is more important than the Church. He's more important than the Society of Jesus and that means a lot to me. I think he is more important than anything else because he's going to save me finally. I believe in his humanity and I believe in his tenderness, his compassion and his courage. I believe that he has modeled the way in which I want to live my life. But I also believe that there are other ways in which people can come to God. Their model might be Buddha or it might be some god I've never heard about before but somehow it crystallizes what brings together in their lives their dream of what it is to be a good person. And that model somehow gives energy and direction to their life I really want to honor too. Because my Jesus is not stingy or narrow or worried that somehow he's not going to be honored if someone else is honored. He lives continually through his Holy Spirit in order to give himself away. I believe that with all my heart. And, therefore, I want to be part of the operation of the spirituality that intensely believes in itself but believes also with the generosity of heart in many ways of coming to God, in many ways of moving in this pilgrimage of life and finding one's non-negotiables--what I will not barter away. And so we call part of that whole experience faith. Part of what spirituality involves is what I really believe in. Nobody else can tell you what that is. They can help you. They can frame it. They can invite it. But faith, finally, is neither a command nor a commercial. It's an invitation.

Sometimes we can also call that movement towards our non-negotiables hope. There are many things we will not see fulfilled but we believe they will happen. Most of us are going to die realizing that there are many people whom we love whom we will not see grow old with us. I love my grand nephew Christopher very much, but I'm not going to see him see his grandchildren. At least I hope I'm not. There comes a time when we have to pass on. But what trust to be completed beyond our time is also part of spirituality. We believe especially that the works we do of justice, the works we do of education, the works we do caring for other people are not going to die if they really are seen as worthwhile. Other generations will pick them up and complete them. We really believe that 25 years from now and 35 years from now and 50 years from now and 100 years from now somebody at John Carroll will be teaching kids: teaching them how to love a poem, how to dissect a novel, how to work in a lab, how to analyze a sociological problem, how to look at economics and to be able to understand the machinery of

business, how to be able to speak in other languages. We want that experience to go on. We believe that it will go on and that's called hope. And so hope has genuinely a sense of performing before God but trusting also in the goodness and the beneficence and the endurance of God's love that the good things in life will go on because other good people will come after me. And the power we have to give that hope to our kids, to our students, to our colleagues, is so important in the work that you do. You are the major support system of hope at John Carroll. Your kindness and your honesty, your integrity and your willingness to be here day after day and let other people be stars gives great hope that this type of institution can continue. Hope is also part of your spirituality.

And thirdly, sometimes we call this spirituality love. Spirituality is not only the things we believe in and not only the thing we hope will continue to endure and come to fullness but it is also the

So love and spirituality and not far from us. From the beginning of our life we have the

a command performance, that it is a chance to enrich what you already possess not a sneaky way to make you think different or pray different.

Last year I had an occasion to visit a former Jesuit friend, his wife and their family. The occasion for the visit was the baptism of their new baby and the First Communion of their seven-year old son. My friend had become a marvelous woodcarver. Yet only one of his six sons shows any interest in the craft-the one who was to receive his First Communion. While I was in his studio, he showed me the gift that this seven-year old had given him for Father's Day. It was the silhouett