

## **To Jesus or Not To Jesus? (JECSE, January 22-25, 2019)**

2019 started with a bang for some pastoral workers and teachers of Jesuit high schools from all over Europe. From Tuesday January 22nd until Friday January 25th, representatives of pastoral care groups assembled in Manresa, Spain, for a conference that was dubbed *Can we talk about Jesus?* About 100 participants from 17 countries gathered to learn from each other. The conference was organized by JECSE (Jesuit European Committee for Primary and Secondary Education).

The participants were divided into several "dynamic groups" to exchange experiences and reflections about their work and the speakers of the conference. This proved to be encouraging and inspiring at the same time. Encouraging, because the challenges a Christian pedagogy is faced with are similar across the European continent, and no Jesuit high school has to face these challenges all by itself (we indeed are part of "dynamic groups"). And inspiring, because people could hear new promising ways of dealing with those challenges from their international colleagues.

Apart from the different workshops, key note speakers Fr. Adrian Porter sj and Fr. José María Rodríguez Olaizolasj gave food for thought and practice. Both these Jesuits mainly focused on the multi-convictional context in which today's Jesuit high schools have to develop their pedagogical vision.

Adrian Porter went back to the sources of the Jesuit projects, namely the life and spiritual development of the order's founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola. Paradoxically, this "step back" presented a clearer picture of the current situation and of possible answers to that situation. José María presented some important features of the Christian faith and how these features might contribute to an emancipatory project in the face of some of today's potentially suppressive psychosocial dynamics. The second part of his talk focused on how the emancipatory character of Christian faith could be transmitted. The following text is an attempt to summarize the content of both speeches in a reflective way. The speeches themselves can be found elsewhere.

### **Shifting Contexts**

First of all, concerning the question about the characteristics of the situation in which Jesuit education takes place, it is clear that the context in which Ignatius developed his spiritual life and pedagogical vision is different from today's context. Ignatius lived his life in countries whose culture was marked by Christian references. It is true that people can still encounter many of those references in contemporary Europe, but they often don't understand them anymore. The cultural idiom has changed. Therefore, if we want to talk about Jesus at all in a sensible way and in a way that "sticks", it is important to develop a "Jesus culture" in schools. This can be achieved through a conscious use of images, music, plays and other forms of cultural expression. The Jesuits can build on a long-lasting tradition in that respect. It is no coincidence that the pop band of the so-called MUNDOSI group performed at the conference one of the evenings. The group consists of lay people and Jesuits.

Jesuit education has always tried to reconcile human culture and religion. It does not consider "the world" as a place that we should liberate ourselves from to encounter God, but precisely as the place that we can co-develop in a responsible manner in order to find and even please God. This goes right back to the spiritual growth of Ignatius. At first he experienced his new life in the footsteps of great

monks and saints in a military fashion (being the knight that he had been, but under different circumstances). Gradually however, he discovered that the spiritual life was not about "abandoning the world" or "conquering the life of a saint over the life of ordinary man," but about "ordering the life of ordinary man in light of God's vocation and grace." Ignatius eventually no longer sought some sort of entitlement to God's grace through his own efforts, but realized that God's love had already been given to him apart from his efforts – which is in fact the experience of grace. In Manresa, Ignatius started writing his Spiritual Exercises. The Exercises consist of forty contemplative imaginations of the life of Jesus. Apparently, Ignatius himself developed a "Jesus culture" right from the start. It allowed him to actively accept what he saw as God's love. Ignatius lived that love as a dynamic that allowed him to give back love and to do things for the good of the world.

One of the things that Ignatius and the first Jesuits developed for the good of the world was good education. An Irish Jesuit at the conference used to hear quite regularly that "the Jesuits know their Cicero better than their Scripture." From the get-go, Jesuit institutions indeed focused on young people, from all kinds of social backgrounds, who were destined for a worldly career. As Ignatius perceived the world as God-given, a worldly career for the benefit of mankind could very well be a service to God. However, in today's multi-convictional and also often secularized context, this creates a tension between the expectations of certain parents and the motivations of Jesuit pedagogy.

### **The Place of Ignatian Spirituality**

Many parents are very much interested in the fruits of the Ignatian tradition, a good education for their children. They often are less interested in the sources of that tradition, the belief that it is God who desires human beings to be "fully alive". Hence it comes as no surprise that a second point addressed by both speakers is the question why we should talk about Jesus if today's context might not be interested in the so-called "good news" proclaimed by Christianity.

The answer from a merely cultural and pedagogical point of view is, essentially, that the Christian tradition played a major role in human history on several levels – for better or for worse – and that no emancipatory pedagogical project can leave its students in the dark about the way that the Christian tradition co-created the world we are living in. In order to understand and critically question today's society, we need a basic insight into the worldviews that are still at work in that society. Since the Christian tradition is often no longer explicitly understood in today's culture, a re-introduction into the Christian cultural idiom might be mandatory. From the sixteenth century onwards, Jesuit education has always given attention to inspiring and influential historical figures from the past, and made those figures known. One workshop in particular, *Educating the Hero Within* by David Tuohy sj, reclaimed that tradition. It is clear that Ignatius and Jesus are figures who could use a renaissance today.

From a spiritual point of view, the Christian tradition functions as a critical resource vis-à-vis several current and often dominant ideas on happiness, freedom, (religious) faith, the meaning of life and what it means to be human. As Friedrich Sperringersj made clear in his workshop on his experiences in Kosovo, the focus on Jesus paradoxically might intensify an open and multi-religious conversation about those questions.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the Jesuit order does not take its name from its founder, as is the case with most other religious orders in Christianity. The Jesuits want to stress that, ultimately,

Ignatian spirituality is relative to the goal of that spirituality: the challenging emancipatory yet "comforting" encounter with Jesus. Ignatian spirituality is not about Ignatius, it is about Jesus. And if it is about Jesus, then Christian spirituality should – imitating the example of Jesus – imply an openness and respect to people from other cultures and traditions.

Adrian Porter referred to a presentation by Michael R. Carey with the title *If You Meet Ignatius on the Road, Kill Him!* (for the Jesuits of the Oregon Province and their Collaborators in Ministry – Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington July 30, 1992). Carey explains this title as follows: "The title is an allusion to the story of the Zen Buddhist master who struggled to bring his disciples along the road to the achievement of *satori*, or enlightenment. His were good disciples, reflectively reading from the Buddhist scriptures, earnestly chanting their prayers, patiently sitting in *zazen*, or seated meditation, in front of a great statue of the Buddha. The master understood that the disciples' focus on Siddhartha Guatama as the historical Buddha might stand in the way of their each individually becoming the Buddha (which means, simply, 'one who is awake'), so he asked them, 'What should one do if he should meet the Buddha on the road?' A few of the disciples attempted answers while others sat in reflection over this new *koan*, or problem, of their master. Finally, the Zen master warned, 'If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him!' It was said that many of his disciples achieved *satori* on that day. Others, very possibly, became even more confused!" The analogy is clear. If, in our search for the reality of the type of love that is present in Jesus, we get stuck in the Ignatian tradition as such (and its mediators, teachers and pastoral care workers), we should reorient our attitude towards that tradition: it is a means to another end, not an end in itself.

On the other hand, mediators are necessary in spiritual growth. Ignatius followed the example of the saints and of Jesus, and he also acknowledged the importance of intellectual work not to fall in totalitarian forms of subjectivism and relativism – wherein "the other as other" is reduced to a highly personal interpretation or experience of the other. Eventually, every true spirituality fosters love of oneself and of others. Hence it opposes both the tendencies of a totalitarian subjectivism and objectivism.

### **Creating Opportunities for Spiritual Growth**

An important third question both speakers addressed was how to share the life-giving experience of the encounter with Jesus. The present text already hinted at several ideas concerning this question: the creation of a conscious "Jesus culture", using today's cultural language to recount the story of Jesus (this world is not a place that should be avoided), and the creation of multi-religious communities (as is the case in Kosovo) around the figure of Jesus and figures from other traditions ("educating the hero within" by providing the experience of inspiring examples). It is also important to provide students with the intellectual means to counter both the temptations of religious fundamentalism and the so-called New Atheism. As José María Rodríguez Olaizola put it, "if you're going to be an atheist, be an atheist in a truly critical manner." If one thing became clear concerning the question how to transmit the idea that faith is a critical and inspiring option, it was that there is a lot of dynamic creativity in Jesuit high schools.

The JECSE conference in general proved to be a hotbed of inspiring ideas and of heartwarming international encounters. It was an opportunity for spiritual growth in itself. Mass was celebrated intensely at the place that was so important for the spiritual growth of Ignatius – the Cave in Manresa –, also because some of our colleagues had to cope with the sad news that some of their

students had recently lost their lives. In the end, Ignatian spirituality is about empowering each other and about the encouragement to use all of our human faculties the best we can, for the good of ourselves and of the world, based on the faith that there is a loving God in whose hands we find shelter.

For sure the conference brought together the group of Flanders. Each of the seven high schools had sent one representative to the conference. Under the guidance of Peter Knapen and Tom De Bruyn, Wouter, Liesbet, Anne-Sophie, Heleen, Vera, Ruben and myself experienced four days of authentic, open, reflective and energizing encounters among our group. Just thinking about it makes me smile. I'm sure that I'm not the only one looking back with much gratitude, and with a great desire to develop some projects from within this group in the future.

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