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Overcoming Superficiality and Indifference

Opening Up Institutional Vision

By Christine Firer Hinze

In 2010, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, addressed this provocative challenge to a global gathering in Mexico City of leaders in Jesuit higher education:

Picture in your mind the thousands of graduates we send forth from our Jesuit universities every year. How many of those who leave our institutions do so with both professional competence *and* the experience of having ... during their time with us, a depth of engagement with reality that transforms them at their deepest core? What more do we need to do to ensure that we are not simply populating the world with bright and skilled superficialities? (From “Depth, universality, and learned ministry: Challenges to Jesuit higher education today”)

Echoing Fr. Nicolás’s call to resist the “globalization of superficiality,” Pope Francis has called upon us to reject the “globalization of indifference” – indifference to the immense suffering of the human family, especially those who are among the poorest and most oppressed in the world today. Both phrases – the globalization of superficiality and the globalization of indifference – bespeak failures to see or to engage with the reality of the world around us, leading to further failures to evaluate and respond effectively to the real lives and sufferings of people the world over.

For U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities, rootedness in a particular place and engagement in local communities are both facts of our existence

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Santa Clara's Casa de Solidaridad.

and values in which we take pride. Yet in today's world, we also have a larger, global mission, and the exhortations of Fr. Nicolás and Pope Francis, therefore, provide an invitation to engage in personal and institutional examinations of conscience related to our global responsibilities. They remind us that as we recruit students, teach courses, run programs, and prepare graduates for life after college, we must self-consciously and systematically combat the unreflective superficiality and indifference that mark so much of our globalizing culture.

For relatively advantaged persons and institutions, the habits of superficiality and indifference often become shields against encountering, engaging, or even seeing our different or marginalized neighbors, except on those occasions when we choose and on terms that we dictate. Superficiality (a vice of the mind)

and indifference (a vice of the affect and will) diminish our humanity by short-circuiting our capacities for seeing, judging, and acting in solidarity with these neighbors. By narrowing institutional vision and constricting minds and hearts, superficiality and indifference provide cover to the advantaged, reinforce unjust status quos, and undermine our pursuit of the common good understood in a global perspective.

In other words, these two vices advance precisely the opposite of what we aspire to accomplish in Jesuit higher education.

To combat superficiality and indifference, Jesuit colleges and universities must be prepared to foster a full range of transformative engagements with reality. To prepare ourselves for this work, it seems necessary that we perform personal and institutional examinations of conscience – asking what have I/we

done and what have I/we failed to do to challenge superficiality and indifference and to foster transformative engagements with reality.

In undertaking such examinations of conscience, we may have to face up to the fact that we fail to create transformative engagements with reality because we are busy with other things, because we fear the burdens of what true engagement might entail, or because we fear we won't know how to respond effectively once we see the suffering world around us. We may also have to admit that we too often leave ignorance – our own ignorance and our students' – undisturbed, leaving us stuck with what we do know and unable to embrace what we do not yet know.

I suggest that we especially commit ourselves to a rigorous and persistent examination of how well our personal and institutional efforts cul-

tivate robust habits of solidarity with suffering people in other areas of the world. From our North American perspective, this scrutiny may require an uncommon level of courage and humility: courage to travel down paths that take us out of our comfort zones and may make us feel powerless before immense challenges; humility to pursue learning and relationships that may radically change our perspective and require that we give up ingrained assumptions and behaviors, both as individuals and as institutions.

Thinking in terms of solidarity will also prompt reflection on how we as individuals and institutions put Catholic social principles into action within a global framework.

To what extent does our commitment to the global common good shape everything from our course offerings to our offerings in the dining hall? In other words: to what extent do we and the institutions where we work put into practice the ideals we profess as Jesuit institutions of higher learning seeking to bring transformation to a suffering world?

By emphasizing solidarity, we will invariably be challenged as scholar-teachers and as institutions to help our students think critically about atomistic individualism, whereby each person starts as independent and becomes connected to others only by choice. Such a view is, at its core, superficial – encouraging connections to others who are similar to us, allowing us to be satisfied with relationships that are built on a foundation of untroubled harmony.

By emphasizing solidarity, we also begin to think more seriously about the interdependency that binds us together both to our nearest neighbors and to our neighbors in far flung places. We begin to reimagine ourselves not as an isolated individual “me” or an isolated institution-

al “we,” but as individual and institutional participants in a vast and varied web of interconnected difference. This recognition is the foundation for making real the vision of a global common good.

What are some concrete examples of existing initiatives that challenge habits of superficiality and indifference and form women and men committed to solidarity at our Jesuit colleges and universities? One notable example is Santa Clara University’s Casa de la Solidaridad program, which offers undergraduates an intensive, immersive, solidarity-focused educational and service semester in San Salvador, El Salvador. During this program, coursework on Spanish language and Salvadoran culture, history, and politics are complemented by two days per week of accompaniment with and service to local communities, creating a holistic experience that students must integrate into their lives and carry with them after their return to the United States.



another example, founded by Boston College’s James Keenan, S.J., is the Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church initiative. The goal of this initiative is to allow scholars in theological ethics, drawn together from both northern and southern

hemispheres, “to appreciate the challenge of pluralism; to dialogue from and beyond local culture; and to interconnect within a world church not dominated solely by a northern paradigm.” With substantial institutional support and encouragement from many Jesuit universities in the United States and abroad, this project has built a vibrant and evolving international network of regional, cross-cultural, and international scholarly relationships, meetings, and publishing and teaching endeavors that have been the product of prolonged and intensive conversation across a full array of cultural and economic boundaries.

The siren songs of superficiality and indifference are unlikely to cease any time soon. While there are no guarantees that our personal and institutional efforts to resist them will be easy, programs like the two cited above are signs of hope and sources of encouragement that can spur the rest of us to invent yet unimagined programs and practices that will enable more of our students to be transformed by their engagements with reality – and thus allow Jesuit higher education to become what it aspires to be on a global scale. ■

(For further information please consult: on Santa Clara’s Casa de Solideridad: www.scu.edu/casa/; on the Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church initiative www.catholicethics.com/)