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Sanctuary for the Heart

By Howard Gray, S.J.

Introduction. Marilynne Robinson's trilogy (*Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*) has been widely praised for the density of its themes, the palpable sympathy for its characters, and the elegant simplicity of its style. The series celebrates the theology that lies within human experience. One of Robinson's recurring themes in the trilogy is that of human loneliness and the longing for a home. What some commentators on the trilogy have noted is the parable-like structure of the narratives, pointing beyond themselves to a deeper and wider reality about North American culture, specifically our hunger to belong and our pilgrimage for a wel-

coming and safe environment that we can call “home,” as a place where we belong. Before I pursue this theme, I want to emphasize that this longing is not exclusively American or unique to our contemporary culture. It is a longing embedded in our sacred narratives, the Exodus of the Hebrew people and their dream of the Promised Land, as well as in our formative literary tradition, the journeys of Odysseus. It is also an Ignatian theme caught in Ignatius’ self-designation as “the pilgrim” and in the early Jesuits’ self-description of their order as a “pathway to God.” To be human is to want to find a place where we can belong.

Nonetheless, we find ourselves at a cultural and political moment when many AJCU personnel experience directly or vicariously challenges to the security and certitude of *being at home*. Often political divisions resist genuine communication and cooperation; racial and ethnic distinctions are exploited by demagogues into islands of mutual fear and resentment; meanness, caricature, and downright lying and exaggeration too frequently displace dialogue and civil discourse. These might not be the worst of times but they are certainly not the best of times. We experience and share in this sense of social imbalance and ethical ambiguity, sometimes bewildered about how to respond without ourselves becoming part of the problem, struggling to check our own resentments, tame our own fears, and discipline our own drift towards polarization. Yes, we have a tradition of seeing our loneliness as a witness to solidarity with the human family. Yes, we have a communal hope to find a safe resting place for love and understanding, for compassion and forgiveness, and for reconciliation and new beginnings. Like the wayward son in the Lucan parable we just want to come home. Or as Robert Frost put it, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

Telling anyone that there is no room for them here, no home for them to rest and be safe, to identify them only as the stranger, the outcast, the foreigner –

this enforced alienation is wickedly a violation of what it means to be human. As the pilgrim himself, Ignatius learned to respond to the plight of the outcast. As a new religious order, finding its identity and its mission by following the sometime obscure journey God called them to undertake, Jesuits became Jesuits. The experiences of Ignatius and of his early companions explain why Jerome Nadal could say that the Society of Jesus was founded to care for those for whom no one cared. Ignatian humanism is to recognize that “Christ plays in ten thousand places.”

How does all this fit into Jesuit-sponsored higher education? Let me call attention to one of the most succinct presentations about Jesuit education. It is to be found in Part IV of the ten-part Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, the introductory reflections on the education of young Jesuits. There the aims are succinctly laid out: to live a good life, to learn well, and to communicate effectively. These are what Ignatius expected his young recruits to become: good people who practice what they preach, intelligent and effective ministers of the word of God and its significance for life. Let me employ this paradigm to our work in higher education.

The sanctuary of higher education. The word *sanctuary* refers to the custom of designating sacred sites like a cathedral or church to house fugitives from imprisonment or even death by the state. Recall the plot contrivance employed in Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, where the gypsy Esmeralda is whisked from imminent execution by the hunchback Quasimodo and swept into the sanctuary of Notre Dame, safe from her persecutors.

As I write this essay, the movement to declare some sites, such as churches or schools, sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants has attracted interest and active participants. I want to use the metaphor of sanctuary to describe an important aspect of Jesuit higher education as a sanctuary from the inhumanity that has cast a cloud over our contemporary culture. I refer to the sanctuary of education, the sanctuary of

Left: The Sanctuary Ring on a door of the portal of the Virgin, on the western facade of Notre-Dame de Paris. In the Middle Ages, grasping this kind of ring on a church door gave the right of asylum. (Photo: Myrabella/Creative Commons)



The sanctuary of learning at Boston College.

dialogue, and sanctuary of vocation, paraphrasing the three Ignatian motifs of sound learning, effective communication, and good example.

The sanctuary of learning. From the outset of his exposure to the methodology of the University of Paris Ignatius of Loyola was convinced that well-educated priests were a grace for the life of the Church and the people of God. The establishment of the schools expanded that mission of solid education to the laity, becoming a principal ministry of the Society. That tradition holds firm today. The courage to explore the continents of knowledge no matter where these lead, the dedication to pursue research no matter the challenges it presents, the encouragement for young minds to explore new writers and new viewpoints – the adventure of education needs room to wander and to test possibilities. Learning needs the assurance that the university protects investigation and welcomes inquiry. Learning needs a sanctuary.

The sanctuary of dialogue. Higher education invites the exchange of ideas, the opportunity for civilized debate, the plurality of approaches, all in the kind of climate where listening is as important as speaking. The soul of dialogue is mutuality, seeking the truth together. Higher education should provide safe places to work together to learn. Dialogue puts winning on hold; dialogue confronts the fallacy of

intellectual manipulation and imposition masking as education. Dialogue is a sacred space in the spirituality of Ignatius, a place where God can be heard and adapts to the blessed idiosyncrasies of the individual. Dialogue needs a sanctuary.

The sanctuary of discovering one's vocation. Not too long ago the columnist David Brooks distinguished between résumé virtues and eulogy virtues. The résumé celebrates the accomplishments of a life; the eulogy celebrates the values of a life. Much of higher education consists of building a résumé. There is nothing wrong with building a résumé. Higher education prepares people for a profession and orients them towards a career. But Jesuit education asks more. It provides space to ask what kind of doctor or lawyer or public servant or businessperson do you want to be? What ethical and spiritual focus do you bring to your one life? To rescue a commonplace, do you really want to be a woman or man for others? The discovery of one's vocation needs a sanctuary too.

In the Ignatian view, sanctuary is not a retreat from the world but a challenge to all that would dehumanize our world.

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