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## Letting Cities Shape How We Pray and What We Choose

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“There you will see him” (Mark 16:7):

## Letting Cities Shape How We Pray and What We Choose

William Reiser, S.J.

Delivered at Loyola University, Baltimore, November 16, 2006

“Bernard loved the valleys, Benedict the mountains, Francis the towns,  
but Ignatius the great cities.”<sup>1</sup>

Valleys, mountains, sea coasts, meadows, even islands, deserts and plateaus: they draw the poet, the artist, the musician out of us. Lots of people withdraw to such spaces to meditate and pray, and they usually pray well there. The quiet, the natural beauty, the apartness, the rhythms of wind and water, the soothing sight of earth colors—these, no doubt, entrance our religious sensibilities and from our hearts draw prayers of gratitude and wonder so deep and so earnest that they surprise us. These prayers feel so refreshing, so intimate, so utterly real, because when we are close to the earth—close to its wind and its soil—we also feel close to the hands and heart that created it.

The psalms were composed by a people who lived close to the land; they were, after all, farmers and herders. They enjoyed an unimpeded view of the night sky, and so their prayers are abundantly rich in earth imagery. “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established . . .” (Psalm 8:3). “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night tonight declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words [they do not really speak]; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (Psalm

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Richard Blake, “‘City of the Living God’: The Urban Roots of the Spiritual Exercises,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 34:1 (January 2002), 1.

19:1- 4).

The psalms made up the prayer book of Jesus' people. And yet, however conscious Jesus was of the presence of God in creation, and however alert he might have been to the sounds of the firmament, the gospel stories draw our attention on his presence in the cities, towns, and villages of Galilee. John the Baptist may have preferred the open space of the desert, and by temperament he was attuned to contemplate God in the wilderness. But Jesus was at home in the everyday world of farmers and fishermen, of merchants and housewives—and their children. I can't imagine Peter inviting John the Baptist to his home for dinner, but he apparently had no hesitation about bringing Jesus.

Last August I had the opportunity to visit Loyola, the tiny Spanish village—more like a hamlet—where, in 1491, Saint Ignatius was born. I toured the family castle where he recuperated after a hopeless battle against French invaders in Pamplona. The window of the room where Ignatius was recovering looks out at a hillside. In fact, there were hills all around the old family castle. Today, sheep still graze there, on the slopes. The cries of roosters can be heard off and on during the day. The population is a bit larger than it was in May of 1521, the month Ignatius was wounded, but the landscape has not changed all that much.

I found myself wondering whether the encircling hills and the rural quiet might only have intensified the sense of confinement in the mind and imagination of someone forced to stay in bed and look out that window. I was feeling restless after only six days! Loyola must have seemed like a pretty small world to a personality as ambitious as Ignatius. There was, out there beyond the hills of Loyola and Azpeitia, a Barcelona, and a Salamanca, and a Paris, and a Rome, and a Venice, and a Jerusalem, just waiting to be explored. And to match the external thrill of Europe's great cities, awaiting Ignatius was the inner thrill of the world of the university—the world of ideas, of conversation with ancient authors, and above all the great possibilities for lifelong friendships and companionship that university life offers. By and large, Jesuits would gravitate toward the cities, and where there were no

cities (as in Paraguay and Bolivia), they would create them.

I did not grow up a city person. I don't have a soul that is naturally, instinctively urban. That is, my sisters and brothers and I saw ourselves, as most people probably do—even those who grow up in large cities—in very local terms: a family, a neighborhood, and across the river, cousins who also lived in a quiet neighborhood and whose world, like ours, was fairly well contained. We identified ourselves more in terms of the parish church to which we belonged, the parochial school we attended, and, for the grown-ups, the places where they worked, and less in terms of a town, a city, or a state.

Even when I was older, my relationship categories consisted primarily of family, parish, and later, religious community. To this day, whether at the college or in church, I relish people telling me about their families—how large or small they are, ethnic roots, favorite meals, family rituals, and, once they trust me, their struggles. That is how I contextualize, relate to, and remember individuals. I gravitate towards religious language that speaks of the household of faith rather than the body of Christ. Hierarchical imagery is less appealing than that of home and family. My imagination enjoys that gospel scene where Jesus, seated in Peter's house and surrounded by Peter's family and neighbors, says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:34-35). Given the anonymity one associates with cities, especially large ones, defaulting to the personalist category of family relations may represent a defensive response on my part; but that is how I organize the world and, more importantly, it reveals how I would like the world to organize itself: around the family.

I had been teaching theology at a Jesuit college for nine years before I discovered the city beyond our front gate. That is not to say I didn't go downtown or drive across the city, but I did not know its streets from walking them; and I certainly did not know its people. For some of us, university existence creates the illusion that one is living and working in the world that really

matters: it's the world of ideas, a world where students from many different parts of the country, and even beyond, interact. It's the world of the academy, of laboratories and libraries, where large questions are asked and where one of the principal events taking place is the ongoing discovery of personal identity.

One Saturday morning about twenty years ago, a friend who worked for a human service agency in Worcester walked me through some city neighborhoods scarcely a mile and a half from campus. Along the way we met a number of young people he knew, and we visited several apartments in a project that housed mainly Latino families. I envied his ability to speak in Spanish with kids who, in other circumstances, I would have run away from, and the ease with which he interacted among the teenagers.

One apartment we walked into was nearly bare of furniture, except for a television and some pillows on the floor. A box of cereal was the only food in the apartment, and not a drop of milk. By mid-day, I was overwhelmed by the numbers living in those apartments, the conditions in which they lived, and the variety of places they came from: Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia. How, I was asking myself, could I have been living so geographically close to these families and yet, in mind and sensitivity, been so far away? I simply glossed over the Latino names that were appearing in the local paper—news items, court records, births, obituaries, divorces. My mind darted back to the scribes of the gospel whom Jesus criticized so sharply, those teachers of religion who knew so little about the will of God because they understood so little about the conditions of God's people. They had not instructed poor widows that God never expected them to be donating to the temple all they had to live on, that God did not want them to be going hungry once they walked out of God's house. The scribes were on the banquet circuit. They did not travel in the circles of poor widows. The teachers of religion had money in their pockets and wore elegant clothes.

I guess the question, therefore, ought to be: How do we keep ourselves from turning into

the scribes?

There's a marvelous appropriateness in reflecting on the university and the city today, because today, November 16, marks the seventeenth anniversary of the assassination of the Jesuit educators on the campus of the Catholic University in the city of San Salvador. More than any other event, the assassinations in November 1989 drove the attention of Jesuit colleges and universities towards the link between university life and its surroundings. Those Jesuit educators had committed themselves to studying the structural unevenness in Salvadoran society—the way it disenfranchised the poor—and then proceeded to create literacy and awareness-raising programs for people without land, without voice, and without rights.

Those who speak “Ignatian,” or who have heard “Ignatian” being spoken, are most likely familiar with the phrases “option for the poor,” “the faith that does justice,” and “men and women for others.” These phrases are connected. In his celebrated and provocative address (some claimed it was controversial) to alumni of Jesuit schools in Europe—the talk was given in Valencia in 1973—Father Pedro Arrupe, the 28<sup>th</sup> Superior General of the Society of Jesus, employed the expression “men for others.” Today we would translate Fr. Arrupe’s formula *hombres para los demás* as “men and women for others.” This is what he said: “Today our prime educational objective must be to form [men-and-women] for others; [men and women] who will live not for themselves but for God and his Christ—for the [Word-made-flesh] who lived and died for all the world; [men and women] who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors; [men and women] completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for [others] is a farce.”<sup>2</sup>

Cities can tell us a great deal about the kind of people that we are. From one point of

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<sup>2</sup> Pedro Arrupe, S.J., *Justice with Faith Today: Selected Letters and Addresses*, vol. 2, ed. Jerome Aixala, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1980), 124.

view, their arrangement and architecture, the layout of city streets, their enterprise zones and living spaces, their transport systems and the placement of their parks, their museums and libraries, their courthouses and schools, their theaters and musical halls, their fire stations and houses of worship—all these things that make up a city both fashion and reflect the human spirit. To walk through a city is to know the sort of people who live there, because the city puts its stamp on them even as they create its ethos and character.

A city fallen on hard times, by contrast, tells us a lot about its past, about the women and men who created it; yet it also says something about its present. Who moves into a housing project when another generation moves out? Who takes over a storefront once the original owners have moved on? Within cities transition may be going on all the time. One of the developments that caught my attention is how, as the numbers attending services at large churches on Main Street dwindled, tiny churches or faith assemblies would gradually appear in old shops, storefronts, and even abandoned garages. The new languages of Spanish, Portuguese, and Vietnamese had replaced Italian, French, and Polish. Many of you may have observed the same sort of change where you live. My favorite Italian market gradually became Brazilian. Its small, adjacent restaurant has turned into a *churrasquería*, and as cannolis disappeared from the bakery across the street, *tortas* and rice puddings took their place.

Cities, of course, are about a lot more than sociological and ethnic transition. They are about people. In particular, for Christian eyes and ears, cities are about those people who are drawn there because they need to survive—and cities make survival possible, however tenuous, however marginal urban existence may be. Cities offer the grace of anonymity to those who want protection from being noticed or discovered: immigrants, dysfunctional families, the addicted, those infected with HIV, those just released from prison.

There is in chapter twenty of Matthew's Gospel the disturbing parable about vineyard

workers who get hired at different hours of the day yet in the end were all paid the same living wage. The story assumes a kind of labor pool. The laborers would gather at a well-known corner or town plaza, desperately hoping that someone will hire them. They were day-laborers, not unlike those who used to assemble in front of the temporary employment agency—a storefront—around the corner from where I lived. Some men would then walk to their job placements, others would squeeze into a van and be ferried off to a warehouse or factory where they worked an eight- or ten-hour shift, earning the minimum wage.

I have witnessed the same routine at various street corners in poor countries in South America. There, families leave the countryside either because they have fallen into debt and are forced to sell their plots of land, or because of disappointing harvests, or because they are not paid enough for their crops. They descend upon the cities, clustering in poor neighborhoods with other *campesinos* who, like themselves, had no choice but to abandon their farms and villages.

Or they may create new settlements on the outskirts by squatting on unused (and often unwanted) sites. These communities are more vivid, far more visible than what you will see in one of our cities; but the economic dynamic is pretty much the same. In order to survive, the poor descend on cities; and in order to prosper, cities often have to depend on the labor of the poor to do the jobs that folks higher on the socio-economic ladder have the freedom to refuse.

All of us stroll through cities now and then. We notice, as I said, the obvious—the buildings, the movement, the parks, the stores, the churches, the libraries, the museums and hospitals, the monuments—everything that creates an urban landscape. We may even notice the occasional odd person with all her possessions in a shopping cart, or the men who have salvaged cans and are carting them to a redemption center, or the poor soul at an intersection with a sign “unemployed veteran-willing to work for food.” In the gospel story, the blind Bartimaeus sat at an ancient intersection in Jericho, doing much the same thing.



Yet figures like these appear and then disappear fairly quickly. They are noticed, but their presence does not fully register. Between the eye and the imagination there is a door. Unfortunately, we may not realize that it's been closed until too late—like when the party-goers are startled to hear, “I was a stranger and away from home, and you built a 700-mile wall to keep me out!” Or some such words. You know that the door is open when, at night, those odd figures of the day return: when you find that their mannerisms and faces have not been erased, but have managed to slip through the fire walls we download from our culture in order to keep the world's unsavory elements securely outside.

Why let cities and their people engage us? Why should we want this? Well, there are poor reasons and then there are holy reasons. Poor reasons are self-serving: what we do in the city might look good on our resume, or it might win us approval with those we are trying to impress, or it may assuage some deep-seated guilt we harbor over the sheer multitude of blessings we have received.

Sound reasons are that we want to learn, and we believe that people living in the city can teach us something about ourselves, and about life, and about the mystery of God. A sound reason is that we feel ourselves called to help those less fortunate than we are. But the soundest reason of all is that we are looking for God. Without seeking there is no finding, and there is no finding God—at least not the God of Christian experience—that bypasses God's people.

Now, I readily grant that folks are drawn to cities because of their cultural life—to sample the rich resources that nurture our imagination, refresh our humanity, and delight our senses. The very existence of cities affirms the fact that human beings are by nature social. No one would question the appropriateness of a university's involvement with cities when it comes to music, art, letters, and commerce. Indeed, a university graduate who never learned to appreciate what cities have to offer along these lines may have a degree, but she or he would not

have much of an education. No one would question, further, the value of that civic virtue which leads people to promote and fund cultural life; we call it “philanthropy.” Cities have always had their benefactors. What we are thinking about this afternoon, however, is not what is obvious about cities but what lies hidden. An old, industrial city like mine can boast a splendid concert hall and convention center, for example, yet within a few minutes walk I come across a homeless shelter, four pawnbrokers, and the Salvation Army.

In my imaginative exercises with gospel scenes, as I attempt to bring Jesus’ world into mine, it is easier to view him inside a thrift shop than, say, a boutique; a soup kitchen than a four-star restaurant; a tenement rather than a condo. Then again, I have the same difficulty imagining an indigenous *campesino* from the altiplano of Bolivia inside the Solomon Pond Mall. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of images and locations can be pretty helpful, pretty salutary, because this juxtaposing makes me more aware of unresolved tensions in my own soul. It’s not the mere fact of difference that causes soul-tension; the world, after all, is full of difference. It’s the unevenness of privilege—privilege largely unearned, as one of my colleagues puts it<sup>3</sup>—that unsettles me and makes me ask myself, once or twice a day, “What is the basis for my having and the others not-having?” Jesus does not immediately fit into some of the places I may go, not because he does not speak English or because he doesn’t know how to dress right. He doesn’t fit because he does not belong to my social class. It’s as if some chairs at the table are higher than others, and Jesus’ is too low; but he’s not a child, he is a grown-up.

Jesuit schools offer many opportunities for engagement with the off-campus world. Service-learning, volunteer or community outreach programs, internships in local agencies, and academic courses specifically designed to study the cities or regions where schools are located: all of these things serve the university’s overall educational mission. In the case of Loyola

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2000).

College, the Center for Community Service and Justice lists some forty-plus service sites. That is impressive!

It is important to add, though, that we necessarily approach the city from the public platform of the university, with the power, social standing, privilege, identity, and security that institutional affiliation gives us. In order really to learn, however, that platform needs to be temporarily suspended or placed in brackets insofar as possible. We cannot completely erase the differences between us and the invisible or marginal ones who find cover in the city, but we can reduce that distance enough to be able to meet them more or less on the same ground.

Why step off the platform? At the outset I have to confess that we cannot step off as completely or fully as we might wish; we are who we are. Nevertheless, to draw for a moment from John S. Dunne's book *The Church of the Poor Devil*, we can make a mighty effort to "pass over" into the world of those who travel aboard humanity's lower deck.<sup>4</sup> And we should make this effort for two reasons, I believe, both of which have to do with the formation of true intelligence.

The first reason is that we need to learn who and what we are. We need to recognize our defenses, the way we organize and post guards around our inner selves, the particular way we stabilize our experience against a world—both the human world and the natural world—that frequently manifests itself as unpredictable, unstable, and even untrustworthy. Spiritual writers might refer to such self-discovery in terms of our coming face to face with "existential poverty"—the poverty of the human condition. This means that neither our origin nor our final destiny is in our hands; we did not call ourselves into existence. And despite all our efforts, even the present is not totally under our control. Our existence is fragile at its core.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Church of the Poor Devil: Reflections on a Riverboat Voyage & a Spiritual Journey*, (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

The psalmists are profoundly alert to this truth, that neither armies, nor tall fortifications, nor wealth, nor prestige, nor treaties, nor (we might add) dazzling displays of technological wizardry, nor medical breakthroughs, nor daily trips to the gym, nor nutrition can ever undo a most important fact:

When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. (Ps 104:29)

Human understanding remains incomplete until it comes to terms with the poverty that is woven so deeply and permanently into human nature itself. We step off the platform and “pass over” into difference: not the lateral distance that distinguishes one culture or language from another, but the up-and-down distance that finds many people on the bottom and comparatively few at the top. For by coming face to face with the poverty that is constitutive of our existence (and thus of our identity), we stand a good chance of experiencing, of having visceral knowledge of the link that ties us together and makes us fundamentally the same.

Actual poverty always points to something deeper, more radical, more universal about us. Actual poverty points to how every human being looks in the eyes of God. “When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.” What profit would a university education be if, after four years of study, a student were exposed to every aspect of the human being except the major one? Yet to come into contact with this major aspect, I have found, one needs to step beyond the classroom into the world outside the college gate. Natural science departments will not allow their majors to enroll in a course and skip the lab. In the business of learning who and what we are, the same principle should apply. We need the lab component, engagement with the up-and-down difference, in order to understand what we are.

There is a second reason for stepping away from our platforms of security. Our experience of the basic poverty that is common to all human beings has a redemptive side. The ache of poverty levels us; it enables us to feel for the first time the possibility of a world without

so many degrees of separation. Lateral or horizontal differences will remain; those things that make us distinctive add to the richness of the human world. The mechanisms that produce separation and division, however, the attitude of entitlement, and the blinders that keep us from even noticing those who live in the shadows, have to be dismantled.

The urban decay we sometimes read about in newspapers is only secondarily about buildings, streets, and sewers. Primarily, it's about what happens within human lives when the urban atmosphere spoils. Demons assume many forms, but one trait they share is that they hate the light. Vested interests—unacknowledged advantage—bully people into ignoring them by walking away. To defend themselves, vested interests cultivate the prejudice that consigns some human beings to live at the bottom, outside the gate, and they foment the irrational fear that enables prejudice to get away unchecked and unpunished.

It is easy to understand how the politics of fear works, where it gets its negative energy from. Just consider the rhetoric some commentators and politicians have been using to frame the debate over immigration. But if the human world is to be changed for the better, to render it more just, more humane, and more secure, then intelligent, committed men and women are going to have to roll up their sleeves and collaborate in the rebuilding.

Another way of stating this idea would be to pose the question, How can we hope to become men and women for others without having met “the others”? And once we've met them, once the transformation of identity gets going inside of us, what are we going to be invested in, if not the grand project which is the human city, the space that forms the urban soul?

My description probably borders on the romantic. I'm trying to avoid sounding that way, however. The song refrain “Let us build the city of God” comes into my ears. The tune is an

annoying distraction, even when I'm not in church.<sup>5</sup> The refrain bothers, first, because the wording competes with the psalm verse that says,

Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the LORD guards the city,

the guard keeps watch in vain. (Psalm 127:1)

Building the city involves a lot more than architects and contractors; a city needs spirit and life. Spirit and life have to come from the people, but the people will have neither if they do not have God. The psalmist knew that God does not literally carry mortar and set the bricks. Rather, he was getting at the human project itself: a human being without “soul” or without depth—the human being whose mind and imagination have never been tilled by the Spirit—is like a building fated to collapse.

The tune bothers, second, because “city of God” is what religious writers refer to as an “eschatological” reality. It’s an ideal. “City of God” is what is supposed to happen at the end of history. It is what was glimpsed by the author of the letter to the Hebrews when he wrote of Abraham, “For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). Or again: “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Hebrews 13:14). The author of the book of Revelation glimpsed this, too. He was instructed to say to the church in Philadelphia (the city in ancient Greece, not in Pennsylvania!), “I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven” (Rev 3:12).

So, I do not want to romanticize cities by conflating them with the kingdom of God. And yet cities are what get created when people gather and live together in numbers. Would it be stretching things to suggest that cities, in turn, generate their universities? Cities attract and thus

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<sup>5</sup> The song is *City of God*, by Dan Schutte.

concentrate human capital—intelligence, imagination, inquiry, and memory. And universities create yet another universe, a universe within the city, where people take up residence in the world of ideas, art, science, and technology. Still, this new world of the university has its roots in the everyday world of those human communities that it both studies and serves. “Women and men for others” logically turns into “the university for others.”

I am familiar with the city where I live. The supermarkets, the schools, the churches, the parks, the office buildings, the hospitals, the museum, the court house, the police station. But for whatever architectural merit they may have, these remain merely places, locations, structures.

What counts, always, is the people.

Whenever I walk an older sidewalk—we still have some in our inner-city neighborhoods; I’m sure Baltimore has them, too—the cobblestone prompts me to imagine the many people who would have walked those stones over the hundred-plus years since they were set in place. Imagine the stones, scuffed uneven from endless stepping. Who were those people, where were they going, what did their voices sound like, how did their lives turn out? Were they distracted, arguing with somebody in their heads? Were they poor, and did they realize how poor they were? What did they worry about, or joke about? Were they children en route to school? Why shouldn’t sidewalks, like street fossils, retain their memories?

Then I notice, around a corner, the line of people in a store waiting to pay a gas or electric or cable bill—people who don’t have, or don’t know how to use checking accounts or electronic banking. Maybe they’ve never even stepped into a bank or applied for a credit card. They may cash their checks, for a fee, at the same convenience store where they pay their bills.

Everywhere in the city there are people, and most of them appear as strangers. While I would not encourage my children to start talking to strangers, neither would I want them to isolate themselves in the safety of the known world, where their fences will be cell-phones,

iPods, and headsets. For the city has taught me something about “the stranger,” and the mental mechanics we use in sizing others up as strangers. The city has made me examine closely my own insecurity. It reminds me over and over that most of the people we shall be meeting in heaven will be folks we shall be running into for the first time. Why shouldn’t our belief about what yet awaits us affect the way we see one another now, on this earth? There is no anonymity in “the city of God.” In that city, we shall recognize one another for who we truly are, namely, daughters and sons of the one Creator and Lord.

When I walk through downtown, therefore, in the back of my mind I’m hearing, “These people, who are so unfamiliar to you now, will someday be closer to you than even your own family.” And once I hear those words, my gaze grows steadier, confident; my attention, sharper. Whatever apprehensiveness I may have been feeling loosens up considerably. It’s not that I feel “safe” because I’ve never been seriously accosted, or because I take fast refuge in a pious thought about a guardian angel. I think the reason is, simply, that I’ve gotten to meet the sort of people who used to make me nervous. Occasionally I would avoid them by crossing to the other side of the street, or delaying before coming out of a store, ignoring their glances as best I could.

I learned that the most effective way to move beyond stereotypes is to get to know the other, to level the lateral differences between us. Still, people who live towards the bottom of our socio-economic life unnerve me. They unsettle me because often I do not know what to do, I don’t know how to help, I don’t know whether I’ll be accepted, and I’m not sure the people I live and work with at school would understand. Yet how can I call myself an educated person if I do not know how to engage or sit down with families who barely make ends meet? Isn’t my education somehow unfinished, incomplete, if there are people I am nervous or fearful of being with because I do not understand their world, because it never occurred to me to wonder how their world got that way? Where then is my moral freedom?



Am I really educated if I have never visited someone in prison, never been friend to an addict, never shared a meal with families in this county without documents? Jesus said on one occasion, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors ... But when you give a banquet, invite the poor ... “ (Luke 14:12- 13). What does it say about us if we cannot think of a single poor person to invite? One thing I am certain of: anyone who is totally oblivious to the existence of that other world should hide their diploma in shame.

The title of this talk was taken from the last chapter of Mark’s Gospel: “There you will see him.” At the end of Mark’s story, a messenger in the tomb directs the terrified women to tell the disciples that Jesus will be going ahead of them, back to Galilee, where the ministry of Jesus began. The idea that Jesus constantly walks ahead of his disciples, in every age and every generation, in the Galilees of their own lives, remains as exciting and intriguing today as it was for the apostles. Not to the mountains, not to the valleys, and maybe not even to the small towns, but to the cities: to Damascus, and Corinth, and Ephesus, and Rome, and Athens, and Alexandria. Christianity was to become a predominantly urban religion. Nazareth at the time of Jesus, we are told, boasted a population of no more than 500, while Capernaum may have been only twice that size.

The evangelical instinct, therefore, to move towards the cities may be telling us something about where the apostles went looking in order to “see” the risen Jesus. They gravitated to the cities, not because of their cultural life, but because of their people, especially the most vulnerable among them—orphans, widows, prostitutes, slaves—the ones who would be most attracted to the new community Jesus had begun. Walking through the city with eyes and ears open, it won’t be difficult for us to find things to talk with God about when we kneel and pray. Sights, sounds, images, encounters, and conversations will pour into our prayer, giving it direction and shape. What we see, what we hear, and what we remember from the city is going to

call forth a response from us that will be more than momentary. Immersion in the life of our cities—their schools, their diversity, the housing projects that are often squeezed to the outskirts—can make us rethink our goals and career choices. It can challenge us to reverse direction and set a new course. It can help us understand better who we are, and better yet, it can open our eyes to the possibility of being a different kind of human being—human beings who carry the world in their soul.

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