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Putting the Pieces Together: Nicolás's Pedagogy of Ignatian Contemplation

By Mark Ravizza, S.J.

She never expected to have her heart broken by a puzzle. Julie was a Santa Clara University student studying abroad in El Salvador at the *Casa de la Solidaridad*. As part of the *Casa* program, she had been spending two days each week accompanying the people of *San Ramon*—a community that suffered daily from the harsh effects of poverty. Over the past few months, the local preschool had come to be her favorite place in town, but today her students seemed more filled with life than usual. A rare donation had arrived from a wealthy, European foundation. Inside the box were shiny, new puzzles in the shape of a school bus. One by one the little children excitedly unwrapped their puzzles, and began to place the brightly colored blocks into the wooden frames. Knowing the many struggles that so often defeated her students, Julie was delighted to see their joy each time they succeeded in fitting a new piece into the puzzle.

Her delight, however, soon faded. One girl, who had been assembling her bus faster than the others, stopped suddenly in confusion. “What do I do?” she asked, holding up her two remaining pieces. “They won’t fit.” Looking at the pieces, Julie realized that they were exactly the same. The puzzle was defective, missing one piece, duplicating another. Soon the other children began to ask for help as well. All the puzzles were equally defective. None could be completed. The children kept trying and trying, asking Julie what to do. But as she told me later, “There was nothing to do. It was heartbreaking. The children couldn’t seem to understand.

And neither could I. How could I explain to them that someone gave them defective toys because no one wanted them in Europe?”

Eleven years ago, the superior general of the Society of Jesus, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach issued a new imperative for Jesuit higher education. Without denying the importance of academic excellence, he argued that this alone was not enough in an age marked by increasing injustice. “We must therefore raise our Jesuit educational standard to ‘educate the whole person of solidarity for the real world,’” Fr.

Contact, not concepts

Kolvenbach announced. He went on to explain that “solidarity is learned through ‘contact’ rather than through ‘concepts,’... Students, in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering, and engage it constructively.”

In the years since Fr. Kolvenbach’s address, we have come to appreciate not only the wisdom of his words, but also the difficulty of implementing his challenge. Direct con-

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Mass at Spring Hill College's 100 year old St. Joseph Chapel.

tact with the “gritty reality” of human suffering is indeed an indispensable component of transformative education; yet, as the story of Julie reminds us, it is hardly sufficient. Experiences of extreme poverty and injustice frequently leave students feeling angry, confused, and disoriented. Well-meaning immersion trips and community service outings can serve simply to reinforce stereotypes or devolve into poverty tourism. If, as Kolvenbach hoped, our students’ contact with gritty reality is to serve as educative step on the path to a well-educated solidarity, then these moments of direct contact need to be processed in a way that leverages their transformative potential.

Yet how exactly is this to be done? What resources in the Ignatian tradition can be of help?

Last April in Mexico City, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, the new superior general of the Jesuits, gave a landmark address that shed new light on these questions. He reaffirmed Kolvenbach’s demand that we educate students to have a “well-educated solidarity,” and he concurred that the starting point must be direct contact with reality. But Nicolás wanted to emphasize an aspect of the Ignatian tradition that had often been overlooked: *the imagination*. According to Nicolás, the “Ignatian imagination is a creative process that goes to the depth of reality and begins recreating it.” He summarized this process as follows:

... depth of thought and imagination in the Ignatian tradition involves a profound engagement with the

real, a refusal to let go until one goes beneath the surface. It is a careful analysis (dismembering) for the sake of an integration (remembering) around what is deepest: God, Christ, the Gospel... And that encounter with what is deepest changes the person.

On this view, contact with reality is always only a starting point. Beginning with this experience, one uses the active, creative imagination to go deeper—to develop a “depth of thought and imagination” that ultimately leads to personal transformation.

Interestingly, the pedagogy that underlies this imaginative process originally comes not from academics, but from spirituality. Nicolás calls it, a “pedagogy of Ignatian contemplation.” To illustrate it, he invites us to imagine a giant jigsaw puzzle with our face in the middle. We then use the “active, creative imagination” to “DIS-member” the image, and then to “RE-member” it along with the scenes of the Gospel so that “at the end

Imagine a giant jigsaw puzzle

of the process – when the jigsaw puzzle is formed again – the face is no longer ours but the face of Christ... This process results in our personal transformation as the deepest reality of God’s love in Christ is encountered.” Those who have made the Spiritual Exercises will surely res-

onate with the power of Fr. Nicolás's image. However, those who have not may be left desiring more specifics about how this creative imagination works. For this reason, let me offer a real-life example that I was given permission to share.

Annie was a faculty member whom I had the pleasure of directing on an Ignatian retreat. Midway through the retreat she was drawn to contemplate the Visit of the Magi. She began by imagining herself watching as the three kings arrived at the humble home of Mary and Joseph. In her journal she wrote:

I notice that the kings feel superior, and somewhat surprised. 'How can a newborn *king* be *here?*,' they wonder. And they think to themselves, 'Won't these simple people be impressed and amazed by us, and that we have come all this way, seeking...' The kings are astonished by how warmly Mary greets them, and as they present their gifts, they feel foolish because they realize these gifts seem less important here than they did back home in the kings' palaces. Mary and Joseph know what is really important, and they make the kings feel that what matters is simply that they have come—their presence—and their desire to be with the baby.

As Annie watched all of this, her eyes filled with tears.

I encouraged her to repeat the contemplation, this time using her senses and creative imagination to enter more deeply into the scene. Once again Annie found herself watching as the kings arrived. She applied her

senses to “dis-member” and savor the different aspects of the visit. She could feel the dirt floor, smell the smoke from the fire, hear

the animals, see the kings' air of superiority turning to confusion. As she attended to each sensation, Annie began to realize that she had experienced this somewhere before. *It was like a home visit she had made with a faculty delegation in El Salvador.*

I have shared Annie's story in some detail in order to illustrate how a “pedagogy of contemplation” employs the imagination to penetrate more deeply into one's reality and call forth a transformation. From this example, we can glean several features of this “pedagogy” that can guide us in a university setting. First, Ignatian pedagogy is not a spectator sport. Students cannot sit back and passively listen or observe. Second, Ignatian pedagogy aims not only at objective understanding; it also promotes a subjective, “felt knowledge” that necessarily engages both the head and the heart. It is not enough

simply to *pensar y saber* (i.e., to think and know something objectively, the way we know a fact.) Third, Ignatian pedagogy promotes depth by engaging the creative imagination in a process of dis-membering (analysis), re-membering (integration), and repetition. This assists a person to appreciate more deeply how an experienced reality connects to his or her life. Fourth and finally, through this deepening appreciation of one's lived experience, Ignatian pedagogy calls forth a personal response.

What might this transformative education look like in a university setting? There is no single answer. A variety of approaches can be adopted that mutually support and reinforce one another. To illustrate this, let me return to the story of Julie. As Nicolás suggested, the heartbreak and confusion that she felt became a point of departure for deepening her thought and imagination. Working together these different venues afforded her repeated opportunities to reflect on her experience in a range of ways that drew on her intellect, imagination, and creativity. A weekly praxis-seminar gave Julie a regular place to take stock, and to share with peers how she was being influenced by her experiences in *San Ramon*. Other academic courses helped her to interpret the reality she was experiencing. Community gatherings, class projects, and spirituality nights invited her to explore in creative and prayerful ways how she was being called to respond. Spiritual direction in conjunction with one-on-one conversations with her professors and the *Casa* staff provided more personal spaces to pursue and deepen her insights.

Drawing on all these resources, Julie was able to examine (dis-member) the puzzle incident, and begin to understand why she had been moved so strongly. She spent time imagining in detail what her students experienced. “It seems so cruel to give a child a puzzle that can never be solved,” Julie said to me one day. The event seemed emblematic of so much other suffering that did not make sense to her: the poverty, the domestic abuse, the lack of opportunity, the gang violence, the homes torn apart by war and immigration. Remembering this parade of injustice crystallized a host of emotions, questions, and doubts that had been growing in Julie's mind and heart over the past few months. All these things now seemed to her like pieces of a puzzle that would never fit together. Suddenly she felt like her small students, struggling over and over to assemble something that could never completely be solved.

Ultimately, this event helped to focus and orient Julie as she headed into the final part of her semester. She let go of any expectation that she could completely make sense of the reality of El Salvador, or even fit together all her questions into a single frame. Instead, she allowed her experiences of suffering to draw her deeper in myriad ways. What united them all, in the end, was not a tidy intellectual resolution, but a growing desire to respond by the way she lived. ■