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A Beacon for Jesuit Colleges? A Flashlight for Saturday Night Live?

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TWO BROAD PROBLEMS, I THINK, AFFECT JESUIT UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES: (1) A LOSS OF DIRECTION IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION, AND (2) THE EFFECT OF POSTMODERNISM ON STUDENTS. IN BOTH CASES, SERVICE LEARNING MIGHT OFFER LIGHT AND HOPE.

I

Jesuit undergraduate education currently goes in, say, eighteen different directions: giving facts and information, clarifying and ordering minds, teaching students how to write, stimulating thought and questions, handing on culture and tradition, offering new experiences and perspectives, improving judgment and taste, changing values, training students for jobs and professions, promoting capitalism, critiquing society, creating leaders, serving the poor, integrating worldviews, deconstructing everything, deepening students' humanity, studying religious texts, offering a reach to God. Such variety is surely excessive—especially since neither faculty nor administrators agree on which changes to urge or which directions to prefer. Might service learning be a beacon to help prioritize goals?

In the Renaissance, after Jesuit secondary schools had won a stellar reputation, Ignatius Loyola began to plan for Jesuit universities, describing their purpose in 1553/54 as “improvement in learning and in living.” (Only then did he mention content, method, order, and structure.) For Ignatius, the very goal of Jesuit education was change—“improvement in learning and in living.”¹

If changing students be the goal, service learning seems one of the more effective—and better-reasoned—means. In its “combination of service praxis and academic reflection” (I quote Byrne) and its stress on “social service or social action,” it offers experiences *for change*. Positioning itself within Jesuit “intellectual and religious traditions,” it esteems “justice and love” and hopes to change “the hearts and minds of students” by “bringing about a change in their paradigms of justice and love.” Such purposes and methods seem quintessentially Ignatian and, in urging service, accommodate nicely with recent Jesuit calls to become “men and women for others” and to engage in “the service of faith through the promotion of justice.”

Does service learning create problems? Not necessarily. Such courses shouldn't—and won't—be the sum of a student's education; other professors will offer what Byrne calls “an academic curriculum” with “excellence in scholarship and higher learning.” Nor is advocacy outside the mainstream of American higher education; rather, professors today urge—even push—students towards change. The Modern Language Association, for example, is sponsoring a Pittsburgh conference on advocacy in the classroom; the Carnegie

¹ *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, tr. George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), p. 210; on the meaning of Ignatius' phrase, see n. 3, pp. 210-11.

Foundation's "Boyer Model" expands "scholarship" to applying, integrating, and teaching the new knowledge created by research; countless college professors propound feminism, genderism, New-Age thought, and politics of both wings. Even scientists find "objectivity" fragile, and I sometimes think of Wayne Booth's wonderful book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* which argues that every narrative has its "angle" of persuasion. Perhaps we professors should explicitate our own "Rhetoric of Teaching": "What rhetoric—what angle—do I propound in my course?" We might also discuss each person's—and each college's—operative "rhetoric of teaching" and its link—or discontinuity—with the Jesuit tradition.

Byrne's use of paradigm-change is also a valuable analytic tool; I wish I could so clearly explain how I want to change students. And his specific paradigms—justice and love—deeply embody both Christian and Jesuit traditions. Thus, service learning, with its push towards change, its stress on social service and action (especially for the neediest), and its desire for *metanoia* could well be a beacon for Jesuit undergraduate education, calling us back to the goal of change and to a clearer pursuit of the goals and paradigms of Jesuit education.

I recognize that part of the problem—in which Jesuits share—is devising an agreed-on definition of "Jesuit education." Here, a two-tiered statement might help: first, the essential elements (*e.g.*, organization, care for each student, seeing everything as a means to God, melding a divine purpose with practical details); second, other historically recurring—yet highly important—elements (*e.g.*, Renaissance humanism, philosophy and theology, rigorous thinking).

Firm hopes do exist: lay professors and administrators committed to the Jesuit tradition, burgeoning inter-institutional discussions (the "Gatherings" of the five Maryland-Province schools, the Midwest's "Heartland Conference" of nine universities, and the "Western Conversations" of six universities), and service learning itself. Its very ability to change students—particularly in their paradigms of "justice and love"—may be the best defense of service-learning in the Jesuit tradition and may make it a beacon for restoring focus.

II

Far more than professors realize, today's students are "post-modern." Can service learning, now twenty-five years old, help

Postmodernism is a worldview in which little fits together or makes sense; chance is its philosophy, entropy its physics, playfulness its tone, and parody its recurring theme in literature, film, art, and music. John Fowles' brilliant novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for example, parodies its own form, contradicts its content, and undercuts its narrator. Derek Jarman's film *Caravaggio* impossibly puts motorcycles and typewriters into a Renaissance world. Andy Warhol paints two-hundred Campbell's Soup cans, and Philip Johnson's A.T.&T. Building in New York looks like a monstrous Chippendale breakfront. In John Cage's "4'33"—"Four Minutes Thirty-three Seconds"—the pianist sits in silence while the audience listens to its own coughs and fidgets. MTV revels in nonsequential images, and in their rock album *Fish On* Primus performs the ridiculous "Sailing the Seas of Cheese" with absolute conviction. Is anything what it seems? Is anything stable? Can we believe any person—or even our own eyes? Is everything parodic? No wonder that one of my students wrote, "Postmodernism . . . is the calculated use of randomness; the effective placement of absurdity; the passionate adherence to the fact that nothing can be passionately adhered to." No wonder, too, that *Saturday Night Live*—laughing at almost everything and affirming almost nothing—has long been a college favorite.

Postmodernism—an adult movement that reflects our culture—has found a ready audience in students, changing their very ways of seeing, thinking, reacting, understanding, and trusting. Nothing, they've told me, can surprise them any more. Scholars have also probed this world; avoiding neo-unreadable literary theory, I randomly mention Mark C. Taylor's *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (1984), James Breech's *Jesus and Postmodernism* (1989), Jerome A. Miller's *In the Throe of Wonder: Intimations of the Sacred in a Post-Modern World* (1992) and Walter Brueggemann's *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts Under Negotiation* (1993).

Like postmodern culture, our students' postmodern worldviews need hope and healing. Can service learning, with its simple dedication and thoughtful analysis, offer light? Might it, like a flashlight, discover points of hope? Is this a new goal for service learning? And even for Jesuit undergraduate education?