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# THE JESUIT UNIVERSITY AND THE SEARCH FOR TRANSCENDENCE

Paul Crowley, S. J.

*A distinguishing characteristic of Jesuit university life today is the search for a transcendence located precisely where students move into and through contemporary experiences of the Cross and confront reality head-on.*

In a recent book with the deliberately provocative title, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford University Press, 1997), George Marsden offers a scathing critique of the contemporary university: "Contemporary university culture is hollow at its core. Not only does it lack a spiritual center, but it is also without any real alternative. . ." Marsden, whose writings have fueled much of the current discussion about the religious identity of Catholic universities, is suggesting that academics take transcendence seriously. Even secular voices have said as much. Czech President Vaclav Havel has spoken of the need for a recovery of transcendence, perhaps of a non-religious transcendence, if society and culture are to survive beyond the primitive stages of market rivalries and their seductions: "Transcendence is the only real alternative to extinction." And American philosopher Parker Palmer has called for a recovery of transcendence at the heart of education: "An education in transcendence prepares us to see beyond appearances into the hidden realities of life -- beyond facts into truth, beyond self-interest into compassion, beyond our flagging energies and nagging despairs into the love required to renew the community of creation."

Perhaps the fundamental problem facing Jesuit education today, the one problem underlying all the others, is primarily a problem of spirituality, of a search for transcendence. Jesuit education in the United States, and in certain other parts of the world, has entered into the mainstream of academe and in some places has faced the complications and seductions of power, big money, and prestige. At the same time, Jesuit colleges and universities have attracted

increasing numbers of students who are interested in gaining a Jesuit education, not necessarily because of the religious foundations of the Jesuit educational tradition, but for the relative prestige of many Jesuit schools, a status that many of these schools have worked hard to earn. Correlative with these developments has been a drive for the recovery of the identity of the Jesuit educational tradition. In the United States Jesuit institutions have typically spent many resources and much time on trying to recover a certain elusive Jesuit "substance" in an effort to stave off what many recognize as the danger of a slippage in the tradition in the wake of secularizing tendencies, the possible loss of religious inspiration, or coherence of inspiring vision. Yet these efforts, important as they are, can also miss the point, which is that an educational tradition as rich as that of the Society of Jesus is animated not by an elusive Jesuit substantive, a Jesuit quiddity, but rather by a spirituality, an approach to transcendence. The recent controversy about crucifixes at Georgetown University is symptomatic of what is at issue, but it is a matter that runs far deeper than whether crucifixes hang on classroom walls.

The question arises, then: what kind of transcendence, and transcendence on what foundation? Ignatian spirituality, classically rooted in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, is an approach to transcendence rooted in a staunch incarnationalism, where wisdom begins in recognition of divine enmeshment with the world, and a correlative human love for the world, such that, following Terence, the Christian can say: "Nothing human is alien to me."

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But this very incarnationism, shot through with a certain optimism about the human project, is also soberly realistic about the human condition and its involvement in the harsh realities of sin and death. The spirituality of Ignatius finds this realism only in a person's keen identification with the Cross, in an acquaintance with the suffering and death that mark the end of every creaturely life.

In the *Spiritual Exercises* the meditation upon the Cross serves as the start of a process that is intended to lead to freedom from old patterns of spiritual disorder and the embracing of reality on new terms. If this spirituality were fully operative within Jesuit education, the inspiration of Jesuit education could only be **SHOT THROUGH WITH A CERTAIN OPTIMISM ABOUT THE HUMAN PROJECT, INCARNATIONISM IS ALSO SOBERLY REALISTIC ABOUT THE HUMAN CONDITION AND ITS INVOLVEMENT IN THE HARSH REALITIES OF SIN AND DEATH.** understood in relation to the Cross. Jesuit education would understand itself as taking place "under the sign of the Cross" and directing the gaze of the student toward life as it is, especially in its many forms of suffering. The radical realism of incarnationism necessarily entails the radical realism of the suffering and death of all human beings as mirrored in the Cross. In the tradition of Ignatian spirituality, transcendence is directly tied to a full-throttle encounter with the reality of life as it is, because this is the only authentic path to promise and hope. If the beginning of wisdom is "fear" of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7), then only when one is properly awe-struck by life as it is can education lead to wisdom and finally to transcendence.

But how do we get there? How do we incorporate this radical incarnationist realism into education without simply slapping onto the academic framework a few community service requirements? Or, to risk entering into the current fray alluded to earlier, how do we move beyond the symbolic issue of crucifixes in the classroom? In short, how can we elaborate this spiritual foundation of Jesuit education, one that leads

to transcendence through an unflinching encounter with the real? Perhaps a parable might help us to imagine a path.

In his relentlessly penetrating phenomenology of the suffering human spirit entitled *The Way of Suffering: A Geography of Crisis* (Georgetown, 1988), Jerome A. Miller begins with a shocking image: that moment when a father walks into the bedroom of his teenage son and discovers to his horror and disbelief that his son has hanged himself from the ceiling. The father learns that, unbeknownst to him, his son was gay. Later he learns that his son had been unable, indeed terrified, to share this fact even with a father who was, by all measures, loving and generous. The discovery of his dead son precipitates a crisis in the father, a forcing of the question of whether he will face the horrific reality of what has happened and the truth that it harbors, or whether he will turn away from it in fear. He recognizes, however, that there is a dreadful gravity to this reality that he cannot finally avoid, and that its bearing down upon him will require a certain existential obedience to the fact of his son's death and to the life and circumstances that gave rise to it. He recognizes that this fact has forced upon him a question of his openness to a world that will inevitably shatter his old one, and that this very openness will lead to further suffering. But he also knows that only through suffering can he reach the new world of wisdom that is, in this tragedy, his destination and newly-discovered vocation:

The only real alternative to all these avoidances is to let crisis uproot one's life, to obey its unsettling summons with no reservations. To do this requires that one allow suffering's unpredictable and pitiless demands to impinge on one's life at every moment. One promises to follow dread

where it leads, even if this costs not less than everything. But in doing so, one converts one's exile, one's homelessness, into a pilgrimage on behalf of dread's dark and elusive truths; one becomes the pupil of its harrowing lessons. (p. 71)

Extrapolating from Miller's own brilliant treatment of this subject matter, we can conclude the following: in the course of his pilgrimage into the truth, the father learns three harrowing lessons.

First, he is up against a transcendent "Other" that meets him in the awesome force of this tragic reversal. For our purposes here, let us call this "Other" the Sacred. He has managed until the time of this event to avoid facing what always threatened to disrupt his orderly and even exemplary life: the Sacred. He realizes that refusing the Sacred entry into his life now would be refusing the Sacred altogether. Although he has fancied himself to be quite open to the Sacred, whom he has worshiped as God, he now recognizes that "...we retract our gesture of welcome at the very moment when we realize we have offered it to a reality that has the capacity to wound us mortally," and that his life up to this moment, including his life of faith, has been a massive exercise in evading the truth to be gleaned from the reality of life.

Second, he learns that genuine openness to this transcendent Other, the Sacred, comes through a frank surrender to the darkness that has enveloped him in his grief. Yet grief changes the face of God. God turns out not to be as familiar as he had thought, as religious institutions and their rituals had made God out to be. The divine powers now threaten him with an overwhelming claim that commands his dread of their inescapableness. After all, they have the "capacity to wound us mortally." A growing sense of awe before God begins to make sense of Aeschylus's immortal words in the First Choral Ode of the *Agamemnon*: "The gods enthroned in their holy place/Use violence, methinks, to give man grace." Transcendence now receives a new shade of meaning: it comes not only from facing evil in

suffering and death; it is also the divine visitation that comes through acquaintance with grief, and the changed face of God.

Third, the acquaintance with grief leads finally to a merciless confrontation with the father's own self. He must face the threat of the dissolution of his old self, his old world, and his sense of bearing within it. Horror in the face of the evil of suffering and death takes on a moral character, forcing upon him a consideration of what he has unwittingly wrought. The father in this parable is forced to look not only at the fact that he has become a stranger to himself, but also at the collapsed world that he and his family and his son have created and inhabited for so many years. In this moment of transcendence the father finally admits that although the meaning of his life is unfathomable, out of his confusion he finds a new degree of freedom to respond to the Sacred within a newly constituted reality. His former self is dead, and a new self has emerged, risen from the dead, as it were.

From the standpoint of faith, the father in this parable has all along been engaged in an encounter with the Cross in his life. This encounter has involved the wound of tragic reversal, a radical re-imagining of God, and the stripping away of old self and old world that are required for a new vision to take shape. The pattern of the Cross is kenotic, self-dispossessing. It leads into a pattern of life that entails familiarity with suffering, even without comprehending it, and ultimately, the courage to look into the faces of others in their full human reality and not to turn away.

Miracle on Central Mall (Christmas celebration)



Photo Courtesy of Marquette University Office of Public Affairs

As Ignatius saw when he advised in the Third Week of his *Spiritual Exercises* to consider how the divinity hides itself in the cruelty of the sufferings of Christ on the Cross, the Cross thus introduces a wholly new and radically real horizon into the view of human consciousness. Rather than standing only as an obvious symbol of divine suffering, a point well made by such theologians as Jürgen Moltmann, Jon Sobrino, and others, it also stands as a statement that God is actually encountered, in hidden ways, in the sufferings of human life. The danger in overlooking the Cross and what it stands for lies in the possible eclipse of a transcendent horizon which, were it recognized, could alter the social and cultural patterns that govern much of life, even including the patterns of Jesuit education.

What difference, then, would the Cross imply if we take it into account in imagining Jesuit education? It could certainly suggest that Jesuit education move the student toward a *pietas* which is attained only by confronting and embracing human misery, in others and even in herself. The human spirit is liberated to the degree that it invites into itself the various forms that evil assumes, thus rendering itself open to the Sacred. As we have suggested, this occurs through a radical incarnationalism that entails a bold facing of reality. For such an encounter with the Sacred can only occur through an acquaintance with the suffering experienced in the those horrifying encounters with human misery that lead to dread and to a sense of the awesome mystery of God's own fierce love. Such an encounter with the Sacred requires that learning not be seen as an end in itself, nor as a stepping stone to the cultivation of one's own selfish goals. As the noted literary critic René Girard puts it, the person who takes the Cross seriously thus becomes a kind of "subversive" who shows that ". . . our narcissistic culture . . . is a deviation and a caricature of the Christian person, not its fulfillment."

Concretely, such a spirituality of education could undergird those "experiential" approaches to education that are especially prized in Jesuit education today, where students enter directly into the precincts of suffering, learn from the experience, and enter into a radically incarnated encounter with transcendence that can come only of direct contact with the human

condition as it is. Such experiential approaches would have to be carefully crafted, not as service requirement tack-ons or exercises in educational theory, but as expressions of the heart of the Ignatian spirituality that move the student toward a deeper lived experience of radically incarnational transcendence.

IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY  
SHOULD MOVE THE STUDENT  
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RADICALLY INCARNATIONAL  
TRANSCENDENCE.



Photo Courtesy of John Carroll University

In the area of broader curriculum, Jesuit theologians Michael Buckley and David Hollenbach have both written about the implications of such an encounter with human misery. For Buckley, it would be reflected in a curriculum which, rooted in the humanistic foundations of Jesuit education, drives toward the focus of that humanism, the human condition itself, including especially its manifestations in the vulnerability of suffering. In many of his writings, Buckley cites such hallmarks of Jesuit education as theology, the arts, literature, and history as disclosive of the truth of human reality. These liberal and fine arts develop a sensitivity to the human condition and inculcate habitual insights into it, thereby evoking from students both the skills and the taste to attend to human suffering. For Hollenbach, the Cross, although a distinctively Christian symbol, nevertheless can, when properly understood, open the contemporary university to the universality of human misery beyond Christian-inspired cultures. Hollenbach cites the example of Ghandi, who, under the influence of the Christian understanding of the Cross, read the *Bhagavad Gita* as a parable of nonviolence, and of American philosopher Richard Rorty, who sees the role of the Cross as a source of secular wisdom. For both Buckley and Hollenbach, these encounters with the Sacred in human misery issue in a sense of responsibility toward other people, and, like the Crucified, in a desire to enter into the incomprehensibility of the other's lack of responsibility toward me, even frankly acknowledging their own injustice toward me. As Emmanuel Levinas has put it: "To be oneself . . . to be dis-interested, is to bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me." The heart of Jesuit education, that is the transcendence to which it should lead, comes through acquaintance with life's own harsh lessons.

This insight into the transcendent dimension of Jesuit education found in the Cross was not lost on the martyred Jesuit educators at the University of Central

America in El Salvador. It was clear to these men that the mission of a university of Christian inspiration was to hold before itself the reality of the world in which it was situated, to address that reality, and to become involved with it in a way proper to a university in order to make that world less violent and less unjust, especially toward those on the margins. But this would require as well a sometimes painful and risky transformation of some of the core values driving a modern university, even if the cost was high. As Ignacio Ellacuría, the Rector of the University and one of those slain, put it:

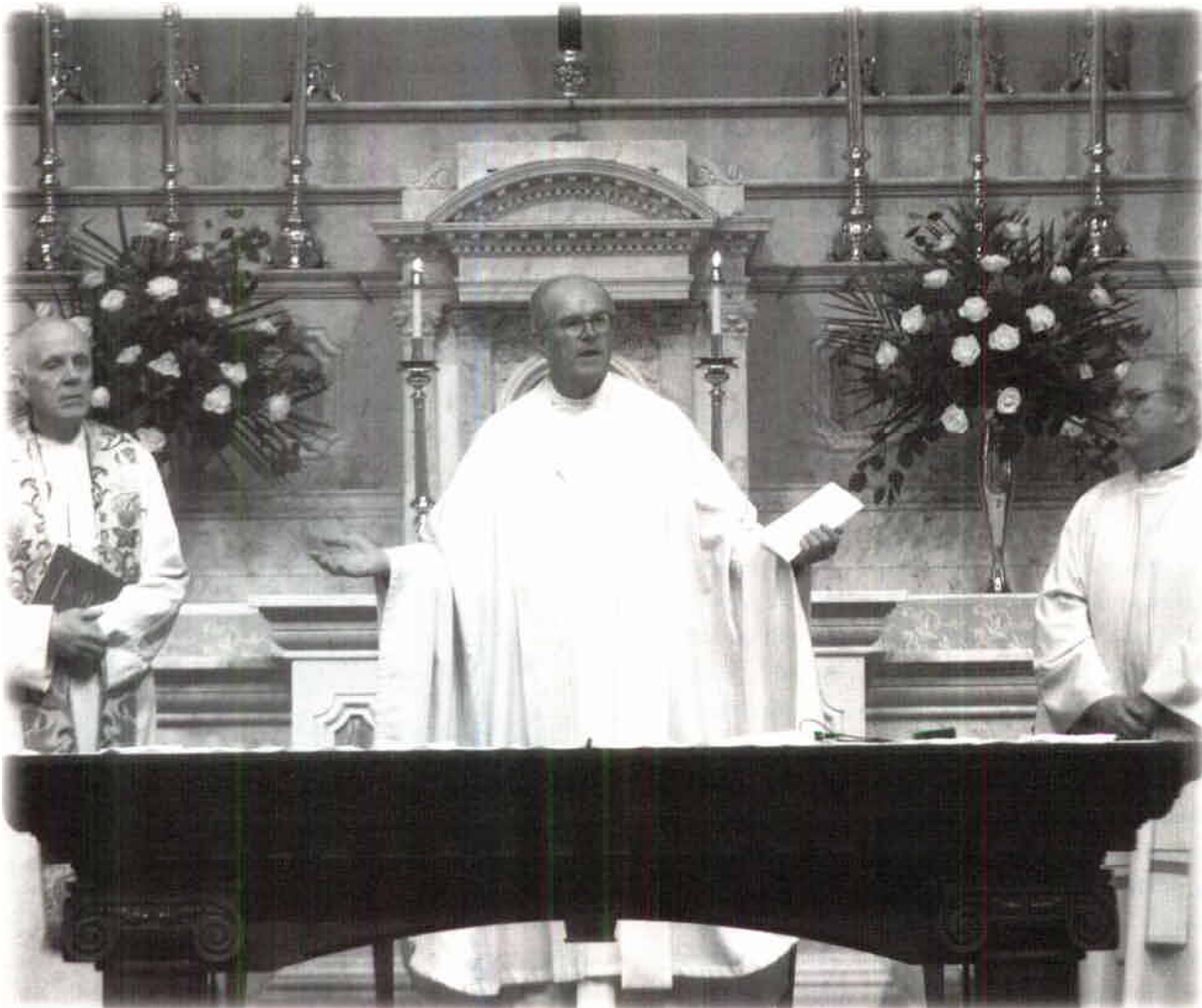
Certainly as a university it shares in a certain power, but that is the power of hope, of affirmation in the future, and of struggle against evil. The university of Christian inspiration is not a place of security, selfish interests, honor or profit, and worldly splendor, but a place of sacrifice, personal commitment, and renunciation. (*Towards a Society That Serves Its People* [Georgetown, 1991], p. 206).

It is in dedication to this kind of transcendence that the Cross can become a reality in Jesuit education and a sign of hope.

THE UNIVERSITY  
OF  
CHRISTIAN INSPIRATION IS  
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The North Portal of Chartres cathedral is a telling emblem of this insight. There the Logos-Son is depicted in his princely role in creation ("through him there was nothing that was not made" [John 1:3]), both forming and caressing the newly-formed Adam, gazing upon him with love, much as Jesus the healer would later gaze into the faces of the lepers and the dispossessed. What makes this carving so poignant is

that we know the ultimate outcome. The descendants of Adam would eventually bring about unending waves of suffering and death. Yet Christ, seemingly knowing this, embraces his first "disciple" in a loving gesture that disguises but does not preclude the Cross. Jesuit education would have every student so embraced. This is the final goal of an education inspired by the wisdom of the Cross.



150th Anniversary Mass

Photo Courtesy of Loyola College of Maryland

As part of Loyola College in Maryland's year-long 150th Anniversary Celebration, College President Harold Ridley, S.J., celebrated a Sesquicentennial Mass at St. Ignatius Church, which stands at the downtown site that was home to Loyola from 1855 until 1921. The Reverend Tim Brown, S.J., (right) delivered the homily, and The Reverend William Watters, S.J. (left), rector of St. Ignatius, assisted with the Mass which was held on April 12, the anniversary of Loyola's chartering by the Maryland General Assembly.