

9-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Padberg, S.J., John W. (1999) "For Openers: Congregations and Consequences," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 16, Article 2.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol16/iss1/2>

Congregations and Consequences

JOHN W. PADBERG, S.J.

The most subversive thing a person can do is to think. The three essays in this issue of *Conversations* are examples of thought that produces ideas with consequences. The most frequent triggers of that subversive activity, thinking, are personal experience, imagination, and words and images. Any one of those alone or combinations thereof can stimulate the thought processes that produce ideas. And ideas have consequences, sometimes dangerous ones. Some of those consequences can be foreseen; some take the thinker and so many others by surprise and outrun any plans they might have.

The experiences that Jesuits had of social injustice in Central America and of religious pluralism in Kathmandu and of complicity in the dismissive treatment of women in the church and civil society contributed to a contemporary formulation of the mission of a Catholic university, to a re-envisioning of how to deal in the classroom with religious pluralism, to a response to the Jesuit statement on how to disengage from that complicity.

But behind those experiences and the activities they produced were even earlier ideas that contributed to how those who had the experiences interpreted them. The story of those ideas and of how they came about will some day in the future be told in full, but they ought at least to be recalled today. Each of the activities recorded in these *Conversations* articles originated at least in part with documents that the Society of Jesus produced over the last thirty-five years at its general congregations. (A general congregation, composed of elected and *ex officio* delegates from all over the world, is the ultimate governing body in the Society of Jesus. There have been thirty-four such congregations or meetings in the 460 year history of the Society.)

In 1965-66, the thirty-first congregation met near the end of and after the last session of the Second Vatican Council. The Council itself produced documents that arose out of the experiences of its participants and

out of the imaginative interaction of members from all over the world. They also arose out of books and articles written over the previous half-century by theologians and historians and liturgists and social scientists and philosophers and biblical scholars. Those written words opened the minds of members of the church, the council participants among them, to so many of the previously unknown riches of the church's past and to previously unthought of possibilities for the church's future.

In that exhilarating context of conciliar ferment and change, the thirty-first general congregation took place. At its conclusion it boldly said that it had "determined that the entire government of the Society must be adapted to modern necessities and ways of living; that our whole training in spirituality and in studies must be changed; that religious and apostolic life itself is to be renewed; that our ministries are to be weighed in relation to the pastoral spirit of the Council according to the criterion of the greater and more universal service of God in the modern world; and that the very spiritual heritage of our Institute, containing both new and old elements, is to be purified and enriched anew according to the necessities of our times" (Documents [1977] 74). This was a heady mix, especially when applied to centuries-old ways of living and carrying on the work of the Society.

Nine years later, in 1974-75, the thirty-second general congregation affirmed a continuity of purpose with its predecessor meeting and then boldly (some have said rashly) declared that "the mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement" (Documents [1977]

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411). It said much more in nuanced ways to try to make clear that the service of faith was primary, but the phrase, "faith and justice," became a source of hope to some and a cause of scandal to others. Much of the world-wide activity of Jesuits in the service of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized grew out of attempts to implement that statement. The University of Central America in El Salvador became a conspicuous example of such a change. Ten years ago this year some of the principal architects of that change paid for it with their lives. Father Pedro Arrupe, the Superior General of the Society at the time of the congregation, predicted that the Society would in imitation of the Lord pay by the martyrdom of some of its members for the stands it took at the congregation. He proved all too right, not only in El Salvador but in dozens of such instances throughout the world in the last quarter century.

In contrast to the notoriety of its ideas on faith and justice, the congregation's ideas on another subject seemed to attract no notice at all. A document so brief that it contained only two paragraphs and took up less than a page and a half is a striking example of how an idea, even a brief idea, once sown, will come slowly but surely to fruition in practice. That document on "the work of inculturation of the faith and promotion of Christian life" said simply that the congregation "judges that this work must be pursued with even greater determination in our own day and that it deserves the progressively greater concern and attention of the whole Society," and then it went on to recommend that Father General "further this work in and by the Society" (Documents [1977] 439-50).

Twenty years later, the thirty-fourth congregation linked the ideas of faith and justice and inculturation and interreligious dialogue so tightly together in four documents in expressing the contemporary mission of the Society that it maintained that "we can now say of our contemporary mission that the faith that does justice is, inseparably, the faith that engages other traditions in dialogue, and the faith that evangelizes culture" (Documents [1995] 38). That conviction extended through all the rest of the ideas that the congregation dealt with, including those on the intellectual dimension of Jesuit ministries and on Jesuits and university life. (Those two statements themselves bear reflection in and by the Jesuit college and university communities and perhaps also in a later issue of *Conversations*.)

The ideas of faith, justice, dialogue, culture, and the realities encompassed by those ideas, as well as the doc-

ument on cooperation with the laity in mission, immediately and obviously all entered into the consideration of the congregation statement on "Jesuits and the Situation of Women in Church and Civil Society." That topic was not even on the tentative agenda of the congregation. But in introducing the subject, one delegate remarked that we can hardly speak about justice and then not speak about the situation of women in the church and in the Society around us. In the course of producing the document, it became ever clearer that the first step in translating ideas into practice was dialogue and the first step toward dialogue was "to invite all Jesuits to listen carefully and courageously to the experience of women . . . there is no substitute for such listening." "Conversion . . . appreciation . . . and ways forward" could follow in the light of a faith "that the original plan of God was for a loving relationship of respect, mutuality, and equality between men and women, and we are called to fulfill this plan," however great the general or particular obstacles might be in the cultures in which we live (Documents [1995] 175, 173).

The position and activities of the University of Central America, the recognition and promotion of religious diversity and its implementation in a classroom in Kathmandu (or in Boston), and the practical implementations of the recommendations of the document on women and church may "well be perceived," in the words of Susan A. Ross, "as dangerous by those who fear change, but the potential rewards are worth the challenge."

To conclude with an example: The ideas of the internet and e-mail and their existence in practice made it possible for the members of the congregation who prepared the statement on women to send draft versions of it frequently to several dozen women around the world while it was in process and to receive back from them almost instantaneously their suggestions for its improvement. How is that for a perhaps dangerous and certainly fruitful consequence of an idea?

Works Cited

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