

THE JUSTICE CIRCLE

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The fundamental proposition underlying Jesuit education is that faith, knowledge and service are intrinsically related. What does this mean? It means that faith, knowledge and service are not three separate and completely independent aspects of education, accidentally or arbitrarily juxtaposed alongside each other, but rather they form a triad in which each term is dynamically related to the others, and any one term is incomplete without the other two. And it is the integration of faith, knowledge and service that makes for true leadership.

The Society of Jesus has a long history of teaching and of forming leaders. But in a recent conference held at Santa Clara University, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach (the Superior General of the Society of Jesus) forcefully argued that the kind of training and leadership most needed in the world today is one that can address the expanding situation of injustice and inequality. He expressed his desire that students graduating from Jesuit colleges or universities would possess three qualities: an authentic sensitivity to the social suffering in the world today; a deep understanding of the causes and conditions that perpetuate that suffering; and a firm commitment to working for greater justice, preferably in and through one's own professional life.

The question is: can justice be taught? And how do we actually form this type of leader? Although books about leadership today abound, very few of these focus thoughtfully on the formation of leaders for justice. They deal more commonly with matters of business management than with issues of social change. Nevertheless, over the past decade or so, new pedagogies for justice have been tried and tested at nearly all of the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in this country. While still in the experimental stage, there seems to be a growing consensus on the kinds of pedagogical steps required to form true leaders who possess a spirit of solidarity that is affective, intelligent and practical.

First Step: Experience

The appeal to experience as the starting point for all knowledge is not a novelty. This appeal is found in Aristotle and it reappeared in a most powerful form during the period of the Enlightenment, especially in the writing of empiricists such as Hume. We also find a strong concern for experience in the development of American pragmatism as represented by

Pierce, James and Dewey. Although these thinkers spoke of experience in significantly different ways, they all agree that it is the touchstone for true knowledge.

In the area of justice, the turn (or return) to experience has a narrative quality. It suggests that commitment to justice does not begin with abstract concepts or theories but by means of real contact with those who suffer the effects of structural injustice. Stated briefly, the first step toward justice begins with respectful listening to real narratives of injustice. Of course, this contact can occur in a variety of ways: some students meet poverty-stricken mothers unable to obtain decent health-care for their children; others listen carefully to the frustration and discouragement of homeless persons who are unable to find low-income housing in the city; still others become friends of young teenagers who, in a blind attempt to find the recognition they never found at home, have fallen into a lifestyle of gangs, violence and drugs.

No one claims that every single word spoken in such encounters is a hundred percent accurate or that listening to these stories of injustice is the only thing required. To stop the process at this point would be to romanticize and oversimplify the suffering of the poor. But it is also true that without this personal contact, without these relationships, commitment to justice will never be adequately achieved. And the reason for this is probably quite simple: justice is, first of all, an affect, a basic moral sentiment, a matter of the heart. Primary justice is not so much a theoretical ideal but a basic feeling or sense of solidarity. Plato and Aristotle knew that the most important element in moral education is not the transmission of moralistic bromides but the careful cultivation of our emotions and of our friendships.

Second Step: Understanding

But it is not enough to empathize with victims of injustice; one needs to understand the causes and conditions that perpetuate their suffering, and this requires work. Only by engaging in serious and sustained social analysis can we begin to uncover the social systems that are operative, albeit invisibly, in people's lives. A person becomes aware of this need to get "behind the appearances" only when he or she realizes that no society is immediately transparent to itself. The challenge here is to look beyond surface indicators such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or the Dow Jones in order to achieve a deeper x-ray into how our nation and the world are really doing. But without a sustained "habitus" of reflection,

and without a well-informed social analysis, no one can expect to become a significant leader in the pursuit of justice, but only an ideologue, heavy on rhetoric but weak on wisdom.

Let us be clear: to engage in social analysis does not mean that everyone need become an expert sociologist, anthropologist or economist. "Social analysis" does not refer to a specialized, scientific understanding of social reality (what Aristotle refers to as "episteme"), but rather to the ordinary exercise whereby the educated adult remains critically attuned to what is happening in society in order to act more justly. Aristotle refers to this kind of knowledge as "phronesis" or practical wisdom.

Within this framework, one can readily appreciate the importance, indeed the real need, for research. Although we tend to reduce social justice to activism, such a reductionism is shortsighted and doesn't really serve the cause of justice. When action for justice is based on a "thin" or superficial description of social reality, it can often do more harm than good. Moreover, many of the major social issues facing the world community today are impervious to simple solutions. Problems such as global warming, the foreign debt, our chaotic health-care system, etc. require more than volunteerism for their solution. They require the kind of deep understanding that sound research can provide.

Third Step: Imagination

As important as it is to understand the different social problems we are facing, our grasp of social reality would be sorely inadequate were it to stop there. Reality always consists of much more than a series of problems and needs; reality must also be viewed in dynamic terms of possibility. Martin Heidegger speaks about the "ontological priority" of possibility. Possibility is the secret heart of reality. There is nothing inevitable about an unjust situation; there are always new options and avenues available to us, however latent these may be. The exercise of imagination is not about developing grand utopian schemes; it means bringing to fruition those new seeds of justice already inchoately present in reality.

Though utterly essential to leadership for justice, the role of the imagination has been grossly underestimated. The imagination became stigmatized because it was considered to be of a lower order than reason; the imagination was associated with flights of fantasy, perhaps useful for a novelist or science fiction writer, but not for someone seriously concerned with

matters of social justice. Gradually, however, we came to realize the terrible inadequacy of this outlook. We have learned that, without social imagination, justice will never flourish. When imagination is absent, social structures tend to appear more permanent and over-determined than they in effect are.

It might be appropriate at this juncture to say a word about the relationship between faith and the imagination. Faith is not so much a set of doctrines as it is a way of perceiving newness at work in history. Faith heals our moral near-sightedness and reveals the threads of grace that are present in the world. Faith enables us to perceive morally relevant features of a given situation which would otherwise go unnoticed. Faith perceives how the “mustard seed”, the “good news”, is already alive and active in our midst.

Fourth Step: Action

All the understanding and imagination in the world, however, would mean very little if it did not finally translate into new forms of communication and action. And not any action counts for justice. Justice calls for actions that empower and transform, that liberate and heal. And it is at this juncture when we are most in need of profiles of justice, that is, persons whom we can emulate or whose commitment to justice we can somehow imitate or reproduce.

Few of us would risk a new course of action in the area of justice were it not for the example of some well-known witnesses to justice who have preceded us. People like Mahatma Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hanh, Dorothy Day, Abraham Heschel, Robert Kennedy, Mother Teresa and Oscar Romero, each in their own true way, remind us that justice is possible and that, no matter how desperate a situation may at first appear, there is always room for creativity and transformation. Each of these moral models was unafraid to challenge the world as it is. By so doing, each inspires a new vision, helps shape us morally, and spurs us on to purposeful action. Perhaps most worthy of note, they first embrace the new path themselves.

But it is also the case that each of these leaders knew how to bring others along with them. Each of these leaders came to learn how important it was to form a group or community, because all effective action is co-action. And, while all sorts of manuals can be written about how such community organization is to happen, in the end, it all comes down to

relationships. The effective leader is one who has taken the time to develop authentic relationships with others. And this brings us back to the main issue we are discussing: justice. Justice is a “heavy-sounding” word. For most people, the very word conjures about images of courts, juries and judges. The concept has been reduced to what is criminal justice. No wonder that, for most people, justice is something distant and specialized.

Justice is best defined as fidelity to the claims of our relationships. And this quickly becomes a new question. But what are our key relationships? Most of us think that we enjoy a relative degree of clarity about what we owe to those with whom we live (say, to our parents, towards our children or with reference to our siblings). But as soon as we venture outside the walls of our home, things become somewhat blurry. What responsibilities do we have towards friends, neighbors, co-workers, fellow-citizens and even strangers? Our individualistic culture tries to instill the idea that we owe nothing to those beyond our walls. But this is not the view of what it means to be human that flows from our tradition. If justice is to be taught, instilled or fostered today, we need to return to justice as a question about relationships, about how we are to live together in society.