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Educating for International Solidarity

Kevin Yonkers-Talz

Jesuit higher education is poised for leadership in globalizing solidarity and Casa de la Solidaridad, the study abroad opportunity in El Salvador, is one effort in this direction

Friendship with the Poor

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. They should learn to perceive, think, judge, choose, and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and oppressed.¹

Steve Hege, a Boston College graduate, is good friends with Maria Julia, a forty-two-year-old mother of four in El Salvador. Chris Wright, a Santa Clara University graduate, is friends with Loli Merino, a twenty-one year-old scholarship student at the University of Central America (UCA), the Jesuit university in El Salvador. Jessica Jenkins, a senior at Stanford University, has become friends with the women working at the soymilk project in San Ramon, just outside San Salvador. These students, all of whom participated in the Casa de la Solidaridad, will tell you that these friendships with poor Salvadorans, which they developed during their semester studying in El Salvador, have changed the way they see the world, themselves, and their roles in the world.

These friendships give them a chance to come into contact with their own deepest humanity. Encountering the marginalized, the victims in our world, challenges students both affectively and intellectually to think about life's important questions from a different perspective: that of the

poor. Who am I? What am I called to do with my life? What does my faith say to all of this? How can our world permit such suffering? Does it have to be this way? The way students perceive the world is altered once they begin to see the world from the point of view of their new friends: *desde abajo* (from below), as Latin American Theology has described it. Encountering the poor helps them develop a well-grounded conviction about the urgency of solidarity.

Writing about her experience at the Casa, Julie Hoying, a senior at John Carroll University, said, "After years of being comfortably ignorant, I was awakened and presented with the reality of how the majority of our world lives. I used to look at statistics and think, 'Oh, one billion people living in poverty, how sad' and turn the page. Now I have relationships with maybe twenty people to whom this poverty is a reality. It hurts to know that those twenty suffer; and all of a sudden, a billion people means something." Providing spaces for students to cultivate these types of relationships will increasingly be the responsibility of educators in Jesuit-run schools.

Jesuit Higher Education and International Solidarity

"We must therefore raise our Jesuit educational standard to educate the whole person of solidarity for the real world."²

Jesuit higher education is poised to take a more active role in promoting international solidarity. Our mission of striving for academic

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excellence in conversation with the "real world," of fostering students' development with an eye on promoting a "well-educated solidarity," and of promoting a faith which does justice practically demands that we become leaders in the movement to globalize solidarity. As Dean Brackley, S.J., theologian at the UCA suggests, "The response from those who hope to advance the cause of humanity can only be to globalize solidarity, that is, to globalize the practice of love."³ This, he says, is the only way to do battle for life in the twenty-first century.

Given the international nature and mission of the Jesuits and the infrastructure of the Jesuit university system throughout the world, we are in a privileged position to build bridges of learning between our schools in developed and developing nations. These connections will allow us to more fully immerse ourselves in the reality of other countries, to better know their people, to collaborate with faculty and staff from different parts of the globe in order to better inform our

scholarship, teaching and research, and to create academic opportunities for students to learn from those living realities quite different from their own. In short, these bridges will help us to be more fully human, to raise the Jesuit educational standard, and to become educators of the whole person for solidarity with the real world.

Casa de la Solidaridad

*"...students need close involvement with the poor and marginalized now, in order to learn about reality and become adults of solidarity in the future."*⁴

In the Spring 2001 issue of *Conversations*, David O'Brien, American historian from Holy Cross, was quoted as saying: "Jesuit universities are quite good at volunteerism, do fairly well at service learning, but haven't scratched the surface on education for justice."⁵ Scratching that surface is what the Casa de la Solidaridad is all about.

Casa de la Solidaridad is a collaborative academic initiative between the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU), the University of Central America (UCA), and Santa Clara University, whereby students from our Jesuit schools in the United States have the opportunity to study for a semester in El Salvador. The mission of Casa de la Solidaridad is quite simply the promotion of justice and solidarity through the creation of a meaningful learning experience which integrates direct immersion with the poor of El Salvador with rigorous academic study.

El Salvador

In many respects, El Salvador is the perfect place to have a program like Casa de la Solidaridad. It has the inspiring and precious memory of the lives of the martyrs -- catechists, campesinos, students, and labor organizers. It has the memory of the four U.S. Churchwomen, the six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter. And, of course, it has the memory of



Photo Courtesy of Kevin Yonkers-Talz

Archbishop Oscar Romero. These individuals committed themselves to a faith which promoted working for justice and solidarity. Although these commitments cost them their lives, their spirits live on and continue to inspire the Salvadorans and all people dedicated to a faith that does justice.

In addition to the martyrs, the national reality of El Salvador is a microcosm of our global reality, which makes it an ideal place to expose our students to the "real world." The government has taken an open economy approach in order to attract foreign investors (e.g. maquilas), more than half of all Salvadorans live in poverty, and the country has some of the highest inequality levels in the world.⁶ Overall, as it is for the majority of global citizens, it is a daily struggle for most Salvadorans simply to survive.

Direct Immersion with the Poor - Praxis Course

Casa de la Solidaridad is an opportunity for students to immerse themselves in *la realidad* (the reality) of El Salvador. This immersion takes place on many levels, from visiting marginal Salvadoran communities on the weekend to meeting with national leaders dedicated to working for justice and solidarity within the country. These experiences serve as the springboards towards integrating direct experience with the poor and rigorous academic study.

The primary point of entry into the Salvadoran reality is the Praxis course, which integrates praxis in local communities, social analysis and personal reflection. Based on academic background, personal interests, and professional goals, students are paired up with a fellow classmate and assigned a praxis site in a poor Salvadoran community. These communities serve as the "classrooms" for our students to learn about the national reality. This concept is well understood by the Salvadorans who view

themselves as the educators of our students. Their job, for which the community is paid, is to educate our students about their lives. Students work two full days a week within these communities over the course of the entire semester. In addition, they spend at least two long weekends living with families in their community in order to gain a better understanding about life's daily rhythm. This learning environment cultivates an awareness of and sensitivity to the realities of people who are struggling to end social injustices while working to promote human dignity.

Zoila Benavides

Zoila is a sixty-four-year-old Salvadoran woman who lives and works in La Chacra, one of the poorest communities located on the edge of San



Photo Courtesy of Kevin Yonkers-Talz

Salvador. Zoila's job is to make sure that over 350 poor children receive medical care offered through the parish, Maria Madre de los Pobres. In a very real sense, Zoila is like a saint. She works with the poorest of the poor in one of the most marginal communities in El Salvador. She loves her people and her people love her. Her life has been filled with challenges. She grew up amidst extreme poverty and then during the twelve-year civil war, the National Guard executed her son because they felt he was sympathetic to the FMLN, the leftist guerrilla movement. Through it all, Zoila has maintained a generous spirit and is still committed to working to improve the lives of her people. Zoila is one of the "professors" of the Casa de la Solidaridad. Two students go with Zoila two days a week into the homes of her kids in order to learn about the harsh reality of being a child in La Chacra. Students are deeply touched by being with

inspiring people like Zoila. These kinds of experiences often invite students to think about those larger human questions mentioned earlier (Who am I? Why is Zoila smiling? How can our global community permit such suffering?) These experiences have the capacity to ignite within our students the desire to learn more about the roots of poverty, injustice and oppression.

There is a seminar component to the praxis course which requires students to conduct a social analysis of their Salvadoran community. Using Holland and Henriot's *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*,⁷ students are invited to explore and analyze the deeper questions which lie behind the poverty they see in their communities. Our students question Zoila about the roots of the reality. *What was life like before, during and after the civil war? What is happening economically in the community (i.e. employment, investment)? What are some of the current trends facing the people?* This research proves to be very meaningful to both the students as well as the communities in which they work. Students learn the value and necessity of careful, accurate social analysis as a necessary step towards working for justice.

Curriculum

The curriculum of Casa de la Solidaridad orients students' learning in an integrated and interdisciplinary fashion towards the social, political, and economic reality of the people of El Salvador. The academic curriculum incorporates traditional classroom activities, participative research, and interaction with the local community.

Drawing from some of the finest faculty at the UCA, students take five courses: Salvadoran society (economics, history, cross cultural psychology, and human rights), political science, Spanish, Latin American theology, and the praxis course. Students' Praxis placements are intentionally linked to their other academic

courses, and both students and professors are encouraged to bring their community-based learning into dialogue with classroom-based coursework. This educational approach proves meaningful to students as Evan Hughes, a senior at Santa Clara University, tells us:

"The Casa was so meaningful because every single aspect of the learning was related to my life. The ivory tower was gone, and we weren't delving into a subject matter for the sake of delving into a subject matter. We were delving into a reality in order to be transformed personally and with the hope to transform the world every day of our lives. An education that is grounded in reality, like the Casa is, is such a powerful experience. Relationships are often seen as secondary to education, and that notion couldn't be further from the truth. The Casa is an education that humanizes the world and, really, it humanizes the student. It gives the student life in all of its suffering and joy."

Campo

Another aspect of the Casa which brings students into direct contact with the poor is through their Campo experience. Students travel to the northern part of the country in the department of Chalatenango to a town called Arcatao. Fr. Donald Bahlinger, the Jesuit priest in Arcatao who coordinates the experience, matches our students up with families who live in the mountains close to the border of Honduras. This experience is always one of the most meaningful for the students for two reasons: they are struck by both the immense generosity of the people and by the extent of the poverty in which they live. The campesinos (rural farmers) open their homes to our students for the entire week -- unconditionally. They share the little they have and do so lovingly, without expecting anything in return. Most of the communities lack electricity, adequate sanitation, and running water. Common health problems, such as diarrhea, present high risks to the campesinos -- especially

to the children. Given that they are subsistence farmers, when there are droughts, as there have been over the last two years, often times people suffer malnutrition. Since half of the Salvadoran population lives in the campo and that same half does not see many of the benefits of globalization, it is vital that our students experience this reality.

UCA Scholarship Students

Casa de la Solidaridad collaborates closely with a group of about thirty scholarship students through the Monseñor Romero Pastoral Center at the UCA. These students come from marginal communities around San Salvador and receive a scholarship through the Pastoral Center. Without this assistance, they would not be able to continue with their higher education. The scholarship students are very aware of the harshness of the reality in which they and their families live. They are also aware that they have a great deal to teach our students about the global reality. Although many of them have heartbreaking stories of the hardships they have endured throughout their lives, they are full of life and hopeful for the future. They are excellent

companions for our students.

Two of the scholarship students, Paty Montalvo and Gris Reyes, live in community with our students at the Casa de la Solidaridad. Their presence in the community makes a significant difference in the learning experience of our students. Often times, as we all know, peer relationships can be one of the strongest influences in students' lives. They listen attentively when Paty shares how her family struggles when there isn't enough rain to water her father's crops and how they have no safety net. Students pay close attention to Gris when she shares her feelings that the process of globalization is absorbing her culture and when she expresses her frustration that the rich are getting richer while her people get poorer. It is quite possible that the scholarship students are the most influential educators of solidarity for our



Photo Courtesy of Kevin Yonkers-Talz

students at the Casa de la Solidaridad.

Faculty & Immersions

An unexpected yet interesting development of the Casa de la Solidaridad program has been the demand to coordinate faculty and staff immersion experiences. For the last three years, Santa Clara University has sent a delegation of faculty and staff to San Salvador in order to gain a better appreciation about the reality of the people. Recently, the administration has systematized this process and is accompanying faculty and staff once they return to campus in order to facilitate ways in which the experience can be better integrated into their scholarship,

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teaching, research and practice. Fordham University has also requested a similar experience for some of its faculty next summer. These demands reflect a growing desire on the part of faculty and administration to be more aware of the reality of the poor and a willingness to bring their academic disciplines into conversation with this reality.

Globalization: We perceive from where we stand.

While I was studying at Fairfield University, a Jesuit friend, Paul Carrier, SJ, Director of Campus Ministry, always used to say during Monday night mass, "We perceive from where we stand." This seems to be accurate when we look at the different perspectives on the nature and impact of the process of globalization. The very word "globalization" conjures strong feelings these days. On one side we have the World Bank, the IMF, and the World Trade Organization, who suggest it is only a matter of time before poor countries (and thus poor citizens) become better "integrated" into the world economy and thus receive the benefits of globalization. On the other side we have the poor, and many who stand with them, who are frustrated and skeptical about a neoliberal economic model which, they say, is creating an even greater gap between those with resources and those without. They don't see the results; in fact, many see their situation getting worse -- like our friend Paty and her family.

According to the recent *U.N. 2002 Human Development Report*, "Globalization is forging greater interdependence, yet the world seems more fragmented -- between rich and poor, between the powerful and the powerless, and between those who welcome the new global economy and those who demand a different course."⁸ The current process of globalization is integrating not only the economy but also

culture, technology and governance. This process seems to be benefiting some and excluding others, namely, the poor. Despite all the wealth, technology, and creativity which exist in the world, we still have 2.8 billion people living on less than two dollars a day. One percent of the world's people receive as much income each year as the poorest fifty-seven percent.⁹ In addition, inequality between countries has also increased. The income gap between the fifth of the world's people living in the richest countries and the fifth in the poorest was seventy-four to one in 1997, up from sixty to one in 1990 and thirty to one in 1960.¹⁰ For the majority of our global citizens, it is still a daily struggle simply to survive.

So where will we "stand" as we engage our real world regarding questions like the nature and impact of globalization? How will we develop the capacity to be educators of solidarity? Fr. Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Jesuits, suggests a point of departure: We should be standing with the poor. In his address entitled "The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education" at Santa Clara University, Fr. Kolvenbach suggested:

"By preference, by option, our Jesuit point of view is that of the poor... A legitimate question, even if it doesn't sound academic, is for each professor to ask, 'When researching and teaching, where and with whom is my heart?' To expect our professors to make such an explicit option and speak about it is obviously not easy; it entails risks. But I do believe that this is what Jesuit educators have publicly stated, in Church and in society, to be our defining commitment."¹¹

Some argue that the process of globalization helps the poor, others that it hurts them. We know that there remains fertile soil for serious research on

the nature and impact of globalization on the world's people. Hopefully there will be some who will conduct their research while "standing" with the poor. The Casa de la Solidaridad encourages students to do just that.

Conclusion

As educators at our Jesuit colleges and universities, we have a responsibility to respond, each in our own way, to our urgent global situation. Given the international scope of our Jesuit Institutions and our mission, we are poised to become leaders in the effort to globalize solidarity -- to globalize the practice of love. As we move in this direction, we will continue to discover new aspects of our own humanity and in turn become better equipped to educate for solidarity in the real world.

ENDNOTES

¹Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., "The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education," October 6, 2000. *Conversations* #19, Spring, 2001.

²Ibid.

³Dean Brackley, S.J., "Higher Standards for Higher Education: The Christian University and Solidarity," *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture*. Winter, 2002.

⁴Ibid.

⁵William Spohn, "The University that Does Justice," *Conversations*. Spring 2001, p. 5.

⁶Human Development Programme, "Report on Human Development in El Salvador 2001."

⁷Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, S.J., *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*. Obris Press, 1998.

⁸United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report, "Deepening democracy in a fragmented world," July, 2002.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report, "Globalization with a human face," July, 1999.

¹¹Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., "The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education," October 6, 2000. *Conversations* #19, Spring, 2001.