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REAL LIFE IN DAJABON

A Journey towards (self) Knowledge

By Thomas M. Kelly



Introduction

I had the distinct honor of hearing Fr. General Adolfo Nicolás speak in Mexico City this past April. He gave an extraordinary talk focused on the challenge of overcoming what he called the “globalization of superficiality.” According to Father General, the globalization of superficiality has three immediate consequences; first, it hurts critical thinking; second it results in superficial relationships; and third it diminishes communities as places of real dialogue. For Fr. Nicolás, depth of thought and imagination is contrary to the globalization of superficiality. Depth is also the first characteristic of what he referred to as the “Ignatian intellectual tradition.”

For Fr. Nicolás, “Jesuit education should change us and who our students are becoming.” The starting point for such education is “the real,” and the goal is personal transformation. In this approach, intellectual rigor and reflection engage lived reality. Second, there can be a rediscovery of universality where students and faculty begin to realize that we are a single humanity confronting similar challenges and problems. One sign of a good university, according to Nicolás, is being connected in some way “internationally” and educating for global citizenship. Fr. Nicolás even went so far as to say that “every university should become a social project.”

There is an approach to education here at Creighton which I have successfully used called a Faculty Led Program Abroad (FLPA). I believe that through this model; I have come closer to the educational ideals put forth by Fr. Nicolás.

This approach is a combination of rigorous traditional academic learning combined with community-based learning. It has added a richness and depth to student learning. Increasingly, faculty members from a variety of fields are taking opportunities to travel and immerse with students as one method to move deeper into the Jesuit intellectual tradition. Allow me to describe a personal experience of an immersion through a FLPA.

Ecclesiology in Context: The Church in the Dominican Republic

A few years ago, while serving as the Academic Director of *Encuentro Dominicano*, Creighton’s study abroad program in the Dominican Republic, my students had a unique experience of the local church. We had been immersed in a small mountain campo for 10 days and we were sitting in a small chapel waiting for the commencement of Sunday Mass. After some time, a dignified, older Dominican woman entered the chapel vested in a cassock and stole. She proceeded to begin the service in “the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Following the Gospel, which she

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Dajabon, Dominican Republic. Photo courtesy of Tom Kelly.

read, she gave an amazing homily in crisp, clear and forceful Spanish. My students were mesmerized. Following the homily, she distributed the consecrated hosts, made some announcements and gave the final blessing. As we were leaving the small chapel, one of my students sidled over and remarked, “I thought we were studying the Catholic Church here in the Dominican Republic!” I responded, “We are.”

It is one thing to study the church and its ministry in the Dominican Republic through documents and lectures; it is another to attend a liturgy presided over by a *presidente de asamblea* who is a female leader in a society characterized by machismo. While this anecdote is only one instance of the benefit of immersion education for achieving more depth of knowledge, it is characteristic of the type of learning my students experience throughout their three weeks.

Teaching Medellín on the Ground

One of the most important and challenging documents that any course on the church in Latin America must wrestle with is the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín (1968). This document is extraordinary for its vision, its depth, its breadth, and its humility. The final documents of Medellín show a church yearning to be constructively engaged with the reality in which it exists. Students quickly learn that while the church in Latin America,

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from the conquest to Vatican II, largely accepted the status quo—after Vatican II there was a decisive change.

In the travel class, we first read and analyze the documents of Medellín and the ecclesiology which grounds them. We then study the social analysis which forms the “see” section of each document and study how the tradition is utilized to “judge” the reality discovered. Finally, we analyze what action the church has taken to respond, concretely, to challenges in a particular context. We follow this academic inquiry with visits to organizations created by Medellín that continue to function today. And so, while in the Dominican Republic, we travel to the border with Haiti and witness a place called Dajabon.

Border Solidarity: The Jesuit Refugee Service

Some of the most informative moments of our travel course occur at the intersection of Latin American church documents and the work of the Jesuits. *Solidaridad Fronteriza* (Border Solidarity) is one such instance where a

Jesuit ministry works to promote the human rights of oppressed peoples—in this case Haitian migrants—through the implementation of the “see, judge, act” method. We begin this section of the course with a careful social analysis of the Haitian-Dominican dynamic in both history and contemporary society. Students learn that social indicators like race, gender, class, and language all play a critical role in a situation where Haitians, desperate for fresh food and other supplies, undergo humiliations to acquire what they need in order to survive.

Our first stop in Dajabon is the Jesuit Refugee Service. There we receive a two hour orientation on the current situation as well as the work that JRS is doing to respond to local problems. We learn about the concreteness of human rights work, of those who walk around on market day and document through pen, camera and video instances of rights abuses. We learn about the work of advocacy for this marginal group of people and why the Jesuits do this work. We emphasize that the Bishops at Medellín made a clear “preferential option for the poor,” and that this option is lived out through the work of JRS on the border with Haiti.

“Market day” is one of the most chaotic, nerve-wracking and eye-opening experiences students have during their immersion in the DR. We go to the bridge which separates the DR from Haiti and wait for the 15,000 Haitians who travel across the border twice a week to buy vital necessities, sell whatever manufactured goods they can, and return without being taxed too many times. The first thing my students see is the desperation, the frenetic movement to get across, in order to get what one needs and return to Haiti as soon as possible. Authorities on the Dominican side sometimes indiscriminately tax people coming across the border, often detaining Haitians and their possessions or accepting bribes in return for passage. Haitians who choose not to travel over the bridge swim or walk through the river separating the two countries, always paying a bribe to soldiers who patrol the banks on the Dominican side. Students experience the climate of fear and anxiety among the Haitians and the aggressive, at times belligerent, attitude of the Dominican border authorities. Students have witnessed physical abuse as well. In the swirling chaos of the market, with small streets crowded to overflowing with 15,000 visitors from Haiti, students have a greater appreciation for the human rights work done by JRS. They witness the fact that someone has made a concrete option to defend marginalized peoples. They actually see this option, experience this engagement, and understand them as an outgrowth of Vatican II which supports a strong church mission to the world, especially to those most vulnerable.

The evening following market day in Dajabon our class always has a reflection on the events of the day in light of what we have read and learned from books. Often the most powerful reflection during the trip occurs that evening. For the first time, students begin to understand that they live very privileged lives far from the problems which much of humanity endures on a daily basis. They begin to make connections, draw conclusions, and ask questions, all because they were put into contact with a reality that was not their own. What is church? How does it engage the world? Why is this church so different from my own? This is the power of immersion education.

Into the Campo

The final component of our travel course is a home stay in a rural village where we learn what life is like among the poor of the DR and what role the Church plays in that life. Our contact organization is the ILAC Mission, a Dominican Mission affiliated with Creighton which has served the rural poor of the DR for 40 years. We connect with “health collaborators” trained by the ILAC Mission who allow us to stay with their communities and learn about their role among their people.

Because the ILAC Mission serves over 100 villages, the point of contact with those communities, the Health Collaborator, is an important position. They function as a bridge between the needs of rural communities and the various services—spiritual, health, educational, agricultural—provided by the ILAC Mission. Health Collaborators have been essential to our encounter with some of the Dominican Republic’s poorest people. Without them, what we do would be impossible.

I hope what I have written thus far shows how our students experience personal transformation and rediscover universality. What about participating in learned ministry? The ministry that students are exposed to raises questions, “Who advocates for the rural poor of the Dominican Republic?” “What is the role of the church in this advocacy?” “How can we become persons of solidarity with the poor?” What students learn about the “church” through their immersion varies. In general, they see lay leadership exercised by those called by the community to serve others. Students are amazed that health collaborators do not receive money, and use their own personal time and resources to advocate for their fellow community members. They see the Gospel adapted to the needs and concerns of people in a completely different social, political and cultural context. As they learn about the relationship between faith and culture in the DR, they begin to ask questions about that relationship in the U.S. For many students the difference in liturgy, community meetings, ministry and ceremony are new experiences which expand their understandings of church, ministry and social justice.

Conclusion

There are many creative ways to promote the goals that Fr. Nicolás articulated in Mexico City for Jesuit Higher Education. I believe that travel courses encourage a consideration of the theoretical in light of lived reality. Because of the participatory element of the course, students learn with a new depth because so much more than one’s mind is engaged. Travel to another country and immersion in another reality pushes one to consider the consequences of globalization. Personal contact—not as tourists—but with *real* people breaks down boundaries and teaches that universal human problems exist which demand collaboration, solidarity—and yes, the use of one’s privilege for the benefit of others. Finally, witnessing how the church responds to the needs of the world in a totally different context drives students to a more learned approach to the issues they have studied. ■