In Response: Justice and Jesuit Higher Education: Another Perspective

Martin Tripole, S.J.

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol23/iss1/10
More than promoting justice, Jesuit higher education needs to meet the challenges of our time by inculcating the transforming power of Christ's presence.

Whether or not justice is being promoted in Jesuit higher education seems recently to have become a matter for serious investigation at university conferences (at Santa Clara in 2000 and again in 2002) and in journals ("After Justice," Conversations 19 [Spring 2001]). The perception seems to be that Jesuit higher education is not adequately committing itself to the pursuit of justice, and mission statements and curricular offerings must be revised to meet the justice standard. In short, if your institution is not promoting "justice," it's not Jesuit.

But many educators question this symbiosis of justice and Jesuit education: is the purpose of Jesuit education to promote justice? Is it possible to fashion Jesuit education according to a justice model? Doesn't a liberal education in the Jesuit tradition have dimensions far deeper and more important?

The conjunction of justice and Jesuit education has its foundation in the thirty-second General Congregation of the Society of Jesus held in Rome in 1975, which decreed that the Jesuit mission was "the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement." But General Congregation thirty-four (GC34), convened in 1995, enlarged the Jesuit mission to include all that promotes "the justice of God's Kingdom."

Jesuits are called "to promote the Kingdom in all its aspects," including destroying the "structures of sin" and fulfilling the universal "desire to find God" and to "live by his Gospel in all its implications" (2:11). The congregation, recognizing that the roots of injustice are not simply found in "economic structures" but also in "cultural attitudes," states that justice will "flourish" in society only when a deeper cultural transformation is achieved (2:17). Social justice is seen in a sense as a by-product of the transforming power of "Christ's explicitly liberating presence" within history (Decree 4: "Our Mission and Culture" 8). Through inculturation, the "liberating power of the Gospel" (4:3) is incarnated at the heart of every society by touching its "structural, cultural and religious aspects with its light" (2:18). By shifting its focus to the need to transform cultures, and integrating that effort into the Church's total evangelizing mission, GC34 found a more adequate way to correct society's problems than by focusing on the promotion of justice alone.

Jesus' own mission agenda was broader than the promotion of justice. He made repentance for

Martin R. Tripole, S.J., is Associate Professor of Theology at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
sin and faith in his teaching the appropriate response to the coming of the Kingdom (Mk 1:15). He stressed the saving power of faith (Mt 9:22) and of baptism (Mk 16:14), and taught the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30), all without alluding to justice. And can we not proclaim the need for discipleship of Christ (Mk 1:16-20), or the soteriological significance of Jesus' healing actions (cf. Mk 2:1-12; 3:7-12), without mentioning justice?

According to GC34, a Jesuit university "must be outstanding in its human, social, spiritual, and moral formation" of students (Decree 17: "Jesuits and University Life" 11). The congregation recalled that the early Jesuits "linked Christian catechesis to an education in classical humanism, art and theatre, to make their students versed both in faith and in culture"(4:10), and noted that in the educational apostolate, Jesuits "have a special role to play in linking Christian faith" to contemporary culture (4:28). The justice mission is not broad enough to handle these goals.

Rather than promoting the Christian faith, emphasis upon justice may in fact do more to promote a secular humanism that ignores the Christian faith. The favorite jargon for what a Jesuit product should be -- a "person for others" -- would be an ideal product for any secular university (are there institutions in favor of self-centered graduates who want to promote injustice?). Support for the modern secularization process may have unwittingly come from identifying the Jesuit mission with a promotion of justice that can be carried out even when faith is absent.

Nor is the promotion of justice standard equivalent to St. Ignatius' goals. Ignatius certainly held that education in Jesuit schools should lead to positions of influence for the good of society, including administrative positions to promote civic justice, but graduates were always ultimately to be motivated by "God's greater service" and that of "Christ, our eternal salvation." 3

Perhaps the most serious question to be asked of advocates of justice education is whether it meets the challenges of our time, in view of the events of September 11, 2001 and the gravity of the priest sex-abuse scandal.

The roots of what brought about the horrendous actions of the Middle East terrorists may be found on many levels -- economic, social, cultural, and religious -- but the response that we
must make is not whether to promote justice (who is in favor of being unjust?), but in discerning and implementing the practical methods that will satisfy the universal call for justice. Faith does not fulfill its role by endowing Christian educators with the ability to discern these methods, but by providing a motive for action rooted in fidelity to the mission of Christ. It is naive and platitudinous to think that Christian education can satisfy the challenges created by that day by calling for the promotion of justice. The world has a right to expect more from people of faith.

The sex scandal among clergy calls for a major rethinking of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. If those who have been singled out by the Church to be model artisans of a new humanity have instead become instruments of dehumanization, more is demanded to correct the situation than a call for justice.

To respond to the demands of our day, Christians are called to a fundamental reformation of their lives. This demands a re-centering of their lives in Christ, who revealed that renouncing oneself and the values of the world for the sake of God and the coming of his Kingdom is the only way that leads humanity to life. Christians must become persons who are themselves transformed, so that they are no longer motivated by secular and material drives, but by the drive to create cultures that live by the new standard of what it means to be human: a life that is totally committed to God and to the service of his human family. Such is the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross that culminates in his resurrection. What other contribution should Christians be expected to make than to show the life contained in the way that leads to Jesus’ death?

ENDNOTES

