Mission Matters: What Do Jesuits Mean By Cura Personalis?

Anthony McGinn S.J.
Ivens sheds light on the intended meaning in the Exercises: “In the last analysis, consolation ‘consoles’ because whatever its form, whether unambiguous or implicit and discreet, it is a felt experience of God’s love building up the Christ-life in us. And what characterizes every form of spiritual desolation is a felt sense of dissonance which is the echo in consciousness of an influence tending of its nature to undermine the Christ-life, and hence in the case of a person who remains fundamentally Christ-oriented to contradict their most deep-seated inclinations.” (Ivens, 206)

Brackley also fleshes out the meaning of consolation and desolation. “Though pleasant, consolation is different from pleasure. Whereas pleasure passes with its stimulus, consolation produces abiding peace and joy.” (Brackley, 48) Consolation can feel like an intense high or it can be a subtle warmth. Brackley writes that consolation is definitely not equated with happiness, as it can also come in the form of “redemptive sorrow that heals and unites us to others – for example, when we are mourning the death of a friend and wish to be nowhere else but there, sharing that family’s loss.” (Brackley, 49) On the other hand, “Desolation drains us of energy. We are attracted to the gospel of self-satisfaction. We feel drawn backward into ourselves. Life feels burdensome, the thought of generous service repugnant, devotional practices boring and distasteful. God seems absent, God’s love unreal.” (Brackley, 49-50)

Language is fluid, which makes it both fascinating and frustrating. This is especially true of spiritual language, which needs to adapt to changing times while simultaneously maintaining aspects of the original intention of the author. In The Book Thief author Markus Zusak writes, “I have hated words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right.” I share this sentiment, and I think Ignatius would concur. If not, then, “Whatever!”.

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By Anthony McGinn, S.J.

When the Jesuits try to explain the background of their mission in education, they frequently point to the experience of their founder, Ignatius of Loyola, and his early companions. Their spiritual experiences provided the ground work for the educational system that quickly developed after the founding of the Society of Jesus in 1540.

Today the term Ignatian is used to describe all sorts of praiseworthy educational and formational developments; some, however, are only tangentially related to the experience of Ignatius and his companions.

Sometimes the use of Ignatian terms devolves into jargon. One of the most commonly misapplied Ignatian term is the Latin cura personalis, which means care for the individual person.

The personal care for students is hardly a unique Jesuit value. Claiming that cura personalis is distinctively Jesuit is tantamount to trying to copyright the alphabet. Perhaps there have been some cultures and schools where teachers were not expected to care about the students as persons. They are certainly the exception. The Jesuits have no monopoly on cura personalis, a quality one expects every teacher to have.

The first documented use of the term cura personalis in a Jesuit context appeared in a 1951 letter to provincial superiors by Jean-Baptiste Janssens, S.J., Superior General of the Jesuits. He urged the provincials to balance their concern for the welfare of Jesuit schools and other institutions with a care for individual Jesuits. Assignments of Jesuits should not be made solely for the benefit of the works; the provincial must also exercise cura personalis and consider the personal needs of the Jesuits.

Misunderstandings develop when one removes the Ignatian term from its original context. The term cura personalis was not widely used in Jesuit educational circles until about 30 years ago. For centuries, the Jesuits certainly practiced personal care for their students, but they did not write about it as if it were a constitutive part of the Society’s charism. Perhaps the contemporary concern for cura personalis reflects our own historically conditioned context rather than a value deeply rooted in the spiritual experience of Ignatius and the other early Jesuits.

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