

Ignatian Spirituality: What are We Talking about and Why?

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JCU Staff Services Committee
Spring Open Meeting
May 1, 2002**

I would like to start with a story that some of you may have heard before. I like to use it because it remains one that is very dear to me and illustrative of what I want to say about spirituality.

The year after I was provincial of the Detroit Province-1989-1990-I worked as a consultant to the Jesuit provinces of East Asia. One of their major apostolic works was the Jesuit Refugee Service and especially that organization's role in caring for a high concentration of Cambodian refugees at the Thai/Cambodian border. In 1989-1990 there were about 200,000 Cambodian refugees, though the official records listed about 120,000 Cambodians. Remember that many refugees entered the camp at night, unknown to the Thai authorities. Those refugees who were already in the camp married and had children. All these factors probably swelled the official numbers.

As you may remember, Cambodia had been overrun by the Khmer Rouge, Cambodian Communists. A major part of their program was to take anyone who was educated or anyone who had some professional status-a doctor, engineer, dentist, teacher-- and put them on farms all throughout the countryside, separating them from their families. The relocation was to level off any opposition and also to create an agrarian society--people that basically identified themselves as peasants and not as professionals. So professionals were looked upon with great suspicion. As a result, most of the people in the camp were people who were doctors, teachers, dentists, and so on. Remember, to get into the camp also meant that you had to travel through mine fields. You had to carry your kids on your shoulders. You had to risk all kinds of things. So the people who finally made it to the camp, knew how to lie, knew how to steal, and knew how to kill. That's why they made it. So you're not talking about a group of saints. You're talking about a group of very highly educated people who had lost everything and had fought hard to come to some kind of security in Thailand at this base we called Site II.

Once they got to Site II, they were segregated from every other people. They simply became a group totally of refugees under the protection of the United Nations and whatever the Thai government would allow the United Nations to do. There were many non-government organizations; one of which was the Jesuit Refugee Service. The JRS ran schools, dispensaries, training centers, psychological centers and so on for the people. In a sense, these Cambodians were imprisoned. While these Cambodian refugees were well taken care of, they had no hope. They had no passport to get out of there. So whenever you met one of them they were always asking you, "Do you have rich friends? Can you get me to Australia, to New Zealand, to the U.K., to Germany, to Canada, and (especially) to the United States?" As a consequence, everyone in the

camp was kind of on "the make," looking for a way to get some money and to get some help.

I was only at Site II for six weeks as part of the JRS team to help the people in the Jesuit Refugee Service review their program, to see whether they were going to stay there, or to relocate in another place. We were going through a kind of discernment process. We had about 30 Jesuit Service workers from all over the World. Most of them were young women and men, very talented and dedicated but not particularly religious as a group. Given that type of background, I would work in the camp every day but Tuesday. Tuesday I would stay home and I would see people if they would like to see me for spiritual direction or any kind of advice. That Tuesday work got to be a more and more important part of my presence. But during the week, when I worked at the camp between 9:00 and 5:00, what I primarily did was teach English and give a couple talks in some areas about management and things of that sort. Cambodians would come up and they would ask, "Can you sneak out a letter? Can you get me some money? Do you know somebody that can help me?" And you expected that and the answer always had to be no because, if the Thai camp authorities found out, you'd be thrown out of the camp as a worker.

However, there was one young Cambodian man there who never asked for anything. He worked in our library and we gradually realized how intelligent and trustworthy he was. Consequently, he kept getting more and more things to do. He asked me if I would work with him every afternoon when most people would cut out for about 45 minutes to take a nap. This is the time that I would work with him every day on his English. In little dribs and drabs he said he wanted to become a doctor but he had no hope for that because of his early education being taken away from him through the Khmer Rouge invasion.

Near the end of the stay he asked me, "Will you come to my home and meet my wife and my children?" And I told him I'd be happy to do that. When the day came and we were walking over to his home, I said to him, "You know, Sambath, you have never said to me what you want. What do you want out of life?" "Oh Father", he answered, "What I want to do is teach my children not to hate because if my children hate then the enemy has won their soul. That's why it's so important for you to come to meet them. Every Caucasian whom they have met has been an authority. But you are just my friend."

I couldn't come this close to the dignity and the forgiveness and the sense of human worth of that man. He was a Buddhist. To me he lives continually in my heart as someone who gave me the privilege of trust, allowing me to enter into friendship and to meet his family. Everything had been taken away from him and he had every right to be bitter, to be angry, to engender in his children a hatred that would continue after him to get even for all the things the Khmer Rouge had done to him and to his family. But that's not the way he lived nor was it the way he spoke. This illustrates what I mean by spirituality. What was it that gave this Cambodian refugee the resiliency, the openness and expansiveness of heart, to continue to trust human experience and, especially, human affection after he had lost so much in life? What was it that fired his heart so that

all he wanted was to pass along to his children the ability to trust human friendship? Why did he risk being a bridge between generations and cultures and not a minefield? What was it that made him such a spouse and such a father? Whatever it was, it is what I mean by spirituality. His story is the narrative of spirituality. I do not have to add anything; I simply just witness its power.

When we talk about spirituality we really mean what are the forces for the energies or the relationships that you and I have in our life so that they define us especially in those moments in which we have no reason to be honest, or just, or kind, or thoughtful, or hard working except it's who I am and what I wish to be? Spirituality looks at that one part of me that is not negotiable. I don't fritter it away. It's the part of me I'm sometimes embarrassed to talk about because it's so close to the things that I hold dear, that are important to me. Sometimes what we treasure can be humorous. Some of you may remember a few years ago when I was asked to give a talk here on Ignatian spirituality I told the story of taking care of my grand nephew.

After watching this T.V. show for a while with him-he was about three at the time-he sat on my lap and he said, "Uncle Howard I love you so much." And I responded, "Chris, I love you too. You know what, when your mom and dad come home, I'm going to ask them if I can take you home with me." He said quietly, "Uncle Howard, I don't love you that much." Chris was growing in his spirituality wasn't he: his sense of who he is, of the people who are important in his life, of the boundaries of what he will negotiate with even with his uncle in order to keep who he is alive? Spirituality for all of us has started pretty much the way it has with Christopher--when we're old enough to realize that there are people who care about us, people who feed us, who clothe us and teach us; people who surround us with their care, their love, their affection; people who tell us stories so we can point out that's my grandfather, that's my grandmother, that's my uncle, that's my aunt, these are friends of the family's, people who give me courage to cross the street for the first time and I'm not scared to be run over by an automobile; people who tell me not to talk to strangers and who warn me that there are people who are not kind, or not good, or can do something to hurt me; people who, when I wake up in the middle of the night and I'm frightened and I cry out, come to comfort me, and turn on the light and assure me, "There are no ghosts here". With these memories of care and love we grow and these people cling to us as part of what we mean by spirituality. Spirituality is learning early in life, how to trust, how to love, how to risk, how to dream, how to dare. And this learning becomes an important part of the kind of person I am. These learning events stay with us as our values: the part of our life that we cherish, that we hold dear and that all of you want to hand on to your kids, that all of you want to share with your loved ones. Spirituality is about the things that draw us together and we feel, finally, they're worth working for. One of the great things we feel to be worth working for is a Catholic school system, the religiously centered school. Not to create a bunch of sectarian nuts that are going to go out and be pests to everyone else, but to create a group of people who will know where they are, understand their talents and their energies, and be able to leave an imprint for good on this world in which we walk only once.

St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, called this power we all have, the power to help people. Spirituality is something we grow with without even giving it a name, something that liberates our energies in life so we can help other people. It begins with our first breath and it ends with our last breath when we surrender our souls over into the hands of a loving God. Therefore, Ignatius called spirituality, a pilgrimage. For him, spirituality was a kind of journey through life in which I gradually learn how to cherish the world. Spirituality is also the ability to pass along to others those values that mark my life as the being important as a woman or a man. This is what I mean by the non-negotiables of who I want to be. Now let's give names to some of these non-negotiables.

One whole set of non-negotiables focus on what I believe in. When you say, "What do you believe in, Howard Gray?" I say I believe that Jesus Christ is the best person that walked this earth and I trust him. He is more important than the Church. He's more important than the Society of Jesus and that means a lot to me. I think he is more important than anything else because he's going to save me finally. I believe in his humanity and I believe in his tenderness, his compassion and his courage. I believe that he has modeled the way in which I want to live my life. But I also believe that there are other ways in which people can come to God. Their model might be Buddha or it might be some god I've never heard about before but somehow it crystallizes what brings together in their lives their dream of what it is to be a good person. And that model somehow gives energy and direction to their life I really want to honor too. Because my Jesus is not stingy or narrow or worried that somehow he's not going to be honored if someone else is honored. He lives continually through his Holy Spirit in order to give himself away. I believe that with all my heart. And, therefore, I want to be part of the operation of the spirituality that intensely believes in itself but believes also with the generosity of heart in many ways of coming to God, in many ways of moving in this pilgrimage of life and finding one's non-negotiables--what I will not barter away. And so we call part of that whole experience faith. Part of what spirituality involves is what I really believe in. Nobody else can tell you what that is. They can help you. They can frame it. They can invite it. But faith, finally, is neither a command nor a commercial. It's an invitation.

Sometimes we can also call that movement towards our non-negotiables hope. There are many things we will not see fulfilled but we believe they will happen. Most of us are going to die realizing that there are many people whom we love whom we will not see grow old with us. I love my grand nephew Christopher very much, but I'm not going to see him see his grandchildren. At least I hope I'm not. There comes a time when we have to pass on. But what trust to be completed beyond our time is also part of spirituality. We believe especially that the works we do of justice, the works we do of education, the works we do caring for other people are not going to die if they really are seen as worthwhile. Other generations will pick them up and complete them. We really believe that 25 years from now and 35 years from now and 50 years from now and 100 years from now somebody at John Carroll will be teaching kids: teaching them how to love a poem, how to dissect a novel, how to work in a lab, how to analyze a sociological problem, how to look at economics and to be able to understand the machinery of

business, how to be able to speak in other languages. We want that experience to go on. We believe that it will go on and that's called hope. And so hope has genuinely a sense of performing before God but trusting also in the goodness and the beneficence and the endurance of God's love that the good things in life will go on because other good people will come after me. And the power we have to give that hope to our kids, to our students, to our colleagues, is so important in the work that you do. You are the major support system of hope at John Carroll. Your kindness and your honesty, your integrity and your willingness to be here day after day and let other people be stars gives great hope that this type of institution can continue. Hope is also part of your spirituality.

And thirdly, sometimes we call this spirituality love. Spirituality is not only the things we believe in and not only the thing we hope will continue to endure and come to fullness but it is also the times and places in which we have given our heart and the people we have cared for. None of us could take a breath if someone had not loved us. Not being loved shrinks you. Not being appreciated makes you feel self-conscious and clumsy in the human experience. Not being loved can make you doubt that you have anything to give. When love comes into your life, you walk more quickly, you see more brightly, you feel more deeply, and you do a lot of crazy things. As we get older, we learn how to control that. Kids on campus don't. But every once in a while they remind us of what we are missing.

But we don't love God with a different kind of love. All the affections of our life, all the times in which we have been loved, all the times we feel we missed out on that love are also times in which we come to some understanding of how much God loves us. We've layered over this love of God with all kinds of pieties, which sometimes make it hard for us to understand what it really means. And we've taken some wonderful revelations of this love of God like Luke 15 and we made them so full of a piety that they no longer have the power to touch us the way they originally did. And yet, every once in a while, we stop to think about what Jesus said. He said, "What shepherd having 99 sheep would not let the 99 go in search for that lost sheep?" We say, "Oh, that's a beautiful story." But it's a dumb story really. What are the 99 sheep going to do? They're going to jump over the hill. What kind of shepherd is it that rejoices in one lost sheep? "I found my sheep." Yeah, but buddy you lost 99. What Jesus says makes no sense. But he says that's the point; that's how much God loves you. Or Jesus tells us another crazy story about a woman who loses a single coin, searches her house all day long, finds the dime, and organizes a neighborhood block party! Mrs. O'Malley loses a dime, she finally finds a dime after a whole day's search, she calls the whole neighborhood and says, "Pizza and beer at my place." They say, "Helen O'Malley, that's going to cost you 200 bucks." She says, "It's worth it, I found my dime." -senior moment. These two small stories from Luke 15 prepare us for the big story of Luke 15, that of the Prodigal son. God loves us to total foolishness. And yet we can sometimes say, "I don't know if God loves me." God does love us. And that's a very important third ingredient in spirituality.

So love and spirituality and not far from us. From the beginning of our life we have the power to believe and to hope and to love. And that's all we're talking about. How do we journey that way of faith, of hope, of love?

What's the curve ball that Ignatius puts on all of this experience of love? The curve ball is simply what I mentioned earlier, a little phrase, to help people. In his own life he went through a very ditzzy period. He decided he wanted to reorient the way he lived. He decided that no longer was he going to be a courtier. No longer was he going to be someone "on the make" in order to get ahead socially and economically. And having made that decision, he moved to the point where he disbelieved and distrusted everything about his earlier life. And he tried to run away from it. And so he hid himself for about a year in a little town and tried to work this through on his own. He did a lot of dumb things. Like what? Like letting his hair grow. He didn't cut his hair. He didn't cut his nails. Didn't wash because he believed somehow or another he had to work against all the fastidiousness that marked his earlier life. He ate poorly. He treated his body harshly. He became more and more peculiar. He drove himself to that point where he contemplated suicide. And gradually something snapped. And Ignatius realized this craziness was not from God. But when he began to look at where God was truly nudging him, God was nudging him not towards withdrawal but towards engagement. Not towards suspicion but to trust. Not towards an unloving removal from human life but a love of human life. Gradually what came into Ignatius' mind was that everything God does comes as a helping presence. Everything that is not from God comes as a destructive presence. So when I move away from love or life, God's not there. But when I move towards love or life, God is there. Ignatius called this movement discernment of spirits. Discernment was a way of sifting through the movements in his heart. Gradually what he felt drawn to was this wonderful expression, "to help people." He didn't know what it meant in the beginning. He was awkward about what it meant-how he understood it. It took him a number of years of study and trial and error to finally say what most helps people are about 5 or 6 things and he put those on the list of his spirituality--of his way of believing and hoping and of loving.

Ignatius said, first of all, people have to know that God is love and I want to preach that. Secondly, people have to learn how love can enter into their lives as a basic way of being human. Thirdly, most people that come to talk with me have a part of their life in which something is screwed up. They need to be reconciled. They're mad at some relative. They're unhappy about where their life has gone. Or they just feel that somehow or another they're not as good as they could be. And so they need some kind of reconciliation, some way of being at home with who they are in the world in which they live. Finally, Ignatius realized that people need education. He didn't think of schools at the beginning. The schools came gradually. But he did think of how important it was to educate both the mind and the heart. And we call that whole connection of educating mind and heart, the ministry of the word: the way in which the word of God can come to life in people through preaching, teaching, through personal counseling and conversation.

When we talk about Ignatian spirituality, we talk about that tradition at John Carroll. We're talking about a tradition that builds on a very human experience. If I were in Taiwan I'd be talking about it the same way. If I'm in the Philippines, I talk about it the same way. If I'm in Rome, I talk about it the same way. Spirituality knows no nationality because it is based on human experience. It's what you do every day. The only Ignatian twist is to help people.

I want to say one more thing before we move on to give you a chance for some questions and answers. Because the very practical question you all have is, "I hear that and I've heard some of this before. But what I'd like to know is how do I purchase it?" How can I move in to make this part of the way I want to live too? I'm going to suggest some ways to you.

We all have some dead time. What do you mean by dead time? When everyone else is in bed and you can't sleep, instead of watching Jay Leno take some time once and awhile and do one of these three things. Look back on your life and ask what are the defining moments of my life? When I look back, what are the three or four things that I would finally say taught me how to love, or taught me to believe, or taught me how to hope? I can give you mine. I was 7 years old, and I began to notice-my parents were good about things-but I began to notice that when women were going to have babies, their stomach got big. And I remember asking my mother's mother one day while she was doing something else and she was taking care of me, "Grandma, what is it like to have a baby?" She said, "Why are you asking that question?" I said because I want to know. And she stopped what she was doing and she bent over and was present to me. And she said, "When you're having that baby it's next to death; but when they put that dear little thing in your arms, you would do it again and again and again. Now that's all I'm going to tell you", she said. I'm 71. Why do I still remember that? Why do I say that's a defining moment? Because she treated me like a person. I wasn't just a 7-year-old kid. She didn't say, "Ask me some other time." Because I wanted to know now. And I cherish that moment, because it was one of the moments in which I realized I was so loved by this adult world that it put everything else aside to answer my question. It didn't tell me I shouldn't ask it. It didn't tell me I had to wait. It told me the answer that came out of their own life. That's very important. You don't meet many people who give you time, who meet you where you are, who talk from their heart. And I was only 7. We've all got moments like that. And our spiritual life is a story in which we celebrate the people who have taken the time to be with us that way. And we are thankful for that. They may be teacher, they may be spouse, they may be our own kids, they might just be a very good friend who tells you the truth. But it's a moment-that for you is a defining moment.

The second way is to look at the people of your life who are defining people. The incident I told you was not only one in which I was present, there was a person present to me. You, too, have people that you know in some way or other believed in you, cared about what happened to you, accompanied you, kept in confidence when you told them something that was very embarrassing and tender in your life and they let you leave the room with dignity. When you meet a person like that, you call them defining people.

They taught you what it is to be a mensch, what it is to be a real person. There are other people who have not done that. There are people who have hurt us and betrayed trust. There are people who have taken the confidence which we have shared with them and made it a subject of gossip. There are people who have talked about us with no evidence and put us in certain categories. We've all had that. And then we can only do one thing. They're still important in our life because they've hurt us. How do you forgive? We're grateful and we learn to forgive and that's part of the way we've come to understand our own spirituality too.

Thirdly, from this reflection about defining moments and defining people comes a sense of defining horizons. The term, defining horizons, sounds a little much, but we are stuck with the expression. What the term represents is the coming together of all the realities I treasure as being of unique importance to me. Only a fool would stand in front of you and say that we want John Carroll to be your defining horizon. Get a better horizon! Love your garden and the passion for seeing life grow. Love books and the power they offer to walk through an engaging mind and expansive heart. Love going on trips and the excitement of meeting new people and seeing new places. Love watching your grandchildren become distinctive personalities and making their own way in this world. Give them all the happy indulgence that only a grandparent can give. Let your daughter or son be the disciplinarian. Every kid needs someone to spoil him or her.

The point I want to make is that defining horizons are your defining horizons-the vision and dreams that come out of your life and your heart and your education. Your defining horizon is something that only you can define and only you should define. The defining moments are those dreams and ambitions that give you joy. Some people like to journal as a way of discovering their emerging horizons. Writing out what you know gets you out of bed on a vacation will tell you a great deal about your defining horizon.

When people say, "I don't think that I have a spiritual life. That's what monks and nuns are for!" You should tell them, "Everyone has a spiritual life!" That is the point I want to make this afternoon. You are your spiritual life!

When people ask, "What is this 'Ignatian thing' that Jesuits invite us to understand?" Tell them it is just one more human experience of life's non-negotiables but channeled in ways that help other people. Here at Carroll we are especially concerned about helping the generations yet to come. We want to help young people choose well. We want to help them not to make disastrous mistakes that will cripple them for life. We want to help them to know how they can get along with one another and begin to make friends in an adult way. We want to help them to be able to monitor one another so that they can see talents in one another and allow them to flower and to expand and grow. We all want to be about helping one another.

Where we began, let us end. Let us all learn together how to celebrate spirituality at John Carroll. I hope that our office can offer opportunities to make the Ignatian tradition accessible and helpful. But I want to emphasize that this will always be an invitation not

a command performance, that it is a chance to enrich what you already possess not a sneaky way to make you think different or pray different.

Last year I had an occasion to visit a former Jesuit friend, his wife and their family. The occasion for the visit was the baptism of their new baby and the First Communion of their seven-year old son. My friend had become a marvelous woodcarver. Yet only one of his six sons shows any interest in the craft-the one who was to receive his First Communion. While I was in his studio, he showed me the gift that this seven-year old had given him for Father's Day. It was the silhouette of a father and a son, standing hand-in-hand. Underneath the little boy had carved the words, "You and Me forever, Dad."

Last year, I was to deliver the baccalaureate homily at Boston College. The day before the ceremony the father of one of the graduates dropped dead. I knew the graduate very well. He was a sensitive, gifted young man. The sudden death of his dad on the eve of the graduation celebrations shook the class. But the young man and his family decided to stay for the ceremonies, believing that was what their father and spouse would have wanted. I used that story of the master woodworker and his son in my homily. I said that no matter how much we want that father and son to stand there forever in love, they each must move on. The little boy has to grow and the father has to age. This is a stern rhythm within our human existence. The little boy is going to fall in love and he will have to let his dad's hands fall so that he can hold another's hand and voice another kind of forever. The little boy will walk his own way. He has to. It is the wise and loving parent who knows that forever means until I find something better to do. And you let that little boy or little girl grow up and move on.

Spirituality is like that. It is about knowing how to love in ways that give support and freedom. Spirituality is accepting that only in God does forever really mean forever. God does not take our human love away from us. God blesses it into forever. What we try to do in our John Carroll community is to live and to love as authentically as any human can and to create a climate that makes others see this as the best way to live. We want to be part of the defining moments of others; we want to be defining people for others; and we want to teach others how to discover and follow their defining horizons. If we do it well, we can only hope others will see it as valuable and graced and try to do it even better than we have. That's all we can hope for and that hope is the test of every spirituality.