

The Classroom as Holy Ground

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Every semester begins the same way. I walk to the door of the classroom and catch my breath. Like an actor walking on stage, the nervousness of a teacher on the first day – or any day – is natural. It is the same now that I am teaching college as it was when I taught high school before joining the Jesuits. The more I teach, however, the more I realize that it is not just nervousness I feel on the first day. Along with that anxiety is awe, because I am beginning to appreciate how the classroom is holy ground, a place where I can encounter God.

St Ignatius Loyola would have it no other way. His spirituality is based on the conviction that deep within each of us are bold, holy desires. And the classroom is one place where those desires can be unleashed and harnessed in a profound way. In Jesuit education, teaching is not just about disseminating information and teaching career skills. In the vision of Ignatius and other religious educators, teaching is a vocation, a mission and a labor of love. In the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, Ignatius instructs his teachers to “make it their special aim, both in their lectures when occasion is offered and outside of them too, to inspire the students to the love and service of God our Lord, and to a love of the virtues by which they will please him.”¹ This love is not any saccharine, Hallmark-type sentimentality. It is a love born of deep respect for the person and lived out in the nitty-gritty of everyday life.

That love reveals itself primarily in the relationship between teacher and student. During his own life, Ignatius experienced God not as distant or removed, but as a teacher personally involved in his life, eliciting from him new hopes and desires and gently instructing him in the ways of prayer.² From his own religious experience, Ignatius also believed in the promise of each person as created in the image of God. This is the starting point of his *Spiritual Exercises*, a retreat that Ignatius fashioned after his own religious conversion. Along with the works of other great educators and spiritual writers, the *Spiritual Exercises* offer wise counsel to today's teacher.

Ignatius was convinced that God speaks with each of us in a unique and personal way. This is no one-sided conversation, but a mutual exchange that goes straight to the heart. And this relationship is so intimate, so unconditional, that it persists even as we acknowledge our own brokenness and sinfulness. Gently and persistently, God labors in and through us. If God works with each of us so tenderly, patiently and lovingly, then teachers must aspire to emulate these same qualities in their relationship with students. This is what Jesuit educators mean by *cura personalis*: caring for each particular student in mind, body and spirit.

Any relationship takes time and work to develop, and begins by first knowing the other. In the *Exercises*, Ignatius counsels the retreatant to beg for the following grace: “to ask for an interior knowledge of Our Lord, who became human for me, that I may love him more

¹ St Ignatius Loyola, *Constitutions* n.486

² St Ignatius Loyola, *Autobiography* n.27

intensely and follow him more closely.” The ordering of this grace is as instructive for the teacher as it is for a retreatant. We cannot truly love and serve someone – whether Christ, a friend, or a student – unless we first know them. Accordingly, to care for the whole person means that we must try to know our students beyond what a transcript can tell us. As teachers, we strive to know their life history, discover their strengths and limitations, and understand their struggles and hopes. Only then can we serve them best. Only within a personal, trusting relationship will students feel free to be themselves, to ask questions that matter, to make mistakes and to grow in the person God calls them to be.

Central to building any relationship is conversation. This may sound easy, but for Ignatius conversation was an art that required some natural aptitude and plenty of practice. In fact, conversational prayer is so integral to praying through the *Exercises* that Ignatius suggests ending a period of prayer with a *colloquy* with Mary, Christ and God the Father.³ This conversation may be more formal, but may also be as “one friend speaks to another.”⁴ The classroom is also a place where meaningful conversation, both formal and informal, can thrive.

Ignatius looked for any opportunity to come to know people and to speak with them about God. He did this as easily on street corners as in churches. Ignatius’ example sets the bar high for teachers. Jerome Nadal, one of Ignatius’ early companions, wrote of him: “His burning zeal for souls and his gift of discernment and divine tact enabled him with a few winning words to endear himself to everyone he met. He got to know men so well that he worked wonders with them. It was as if he could peer into a man’s soul; and when he spoke men had to admit that he knew them better than they knew themselves.”⁵ Before we work wonders in our classroom, we must be zealous about touching the souls entrusted to our care. So we

must be ready to converse with our students wherever we find them.

Essential to the art of conversation is the ability to listen attentively. While Ignatius expected his Jesuits to be active apostles in the world, he also insisted that they balance action with contemplation. Teachers, who are paid to talk, must at other times be silent, so as to listen to what the student is saying. Many of us may be uncomfortable with silence and may try to fill the silence with words. But as teachers, we must allow silence to become part of individual conversation and classroom instruction. Silence can be an invitation for the student to speak, or for both teacher and student to ponder what has already been said. Such a contemplative attitude can make teachers more sensitive to those unexpected ‘teachable moments’ before they quickly pass and more aware of the passing glimpses of God during a busy day.

Conversation also requires openness to and charity towards the other. At the beginning of the *Exercises*, Ignatius lays down a fundamental ground rule: both the retreatant and his or her spiritual director must put a positive interpretation on the other’s statements, and if that is not possible, then “one should correct the person with love.”⁶ For the teacher, this means suspending judgment while listening to what the student has to say. Any correction must be done out of love, not anger. Love sometimes requires holding students accountable for their words and actions. Love asks the teacher to be patient and to discern carefully when and how to offer correction. However frustrating a student may prove, if we believe in a God who is intimately involved in our lives, then we also must believe that God brought us together for a reason. The two of us are somehow part of each other’s salvation history. With God, nothing — no moment, no word, no conversation, no frustration — is wasted.

In the Ignatian tradition, flexibility is also essential. Having experienced God working so personally with him, Ignatius structured his

³ St Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* n.63

⁴ *Spiritual Exercises* n.54

⁵ Jerónimo Nadal SJ (1507-80)

⁶ *Spiritual Exercises* n.22

Exercises so that they could be adapted to the circumstances of each person. Ignatius' own flexibility could be seen in the way he approached his own ministries. He did not plan to open schools, but he did so because schools were greatly needed in his time. Like other educators, Ignatius required the teaching of virtue in his schools, but he left teachers some discretion about how to instill good moral habits. In the *Constitutions*, Ignatius stipulates that some students could be required, for example, to go to confession and Mass "when this can be done easily." Others, he continued, "should be persuaded gently and not be forced to it nor expelled from the classes for not complying."⁷

In the same way, today's teacher must work with students where they are, not just where the teacher wants them to be. We must be ready to adapt teaching methods and requirements to meet our students' particular needs. This means considering the students' own academic interests and learning styles, accounting for any learning disabilities and understanding the competing demands made on students today, particularly those who must work many hours after school to pay tuition. We must also learn about the culture in which students were raised: the television, music and movies that define their generation; the communities and families in which their character was formed; and their fears, doubts and questions, particularly after the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001, and the recent church scandals.

In short, we teachers must ensure that our agendas and objectives don't get in the way of learning. Structure is necessary, but we cannot become slaves to the syllabus. In the *Exercises*, Ignatius warns the spiritual director not to intrude too much in the retreat, leaving enough room for God to work with the retreatant directly. Similarly, we must leave room for grace to operate in the classroom.

Creativity is another hallmark of Jesuit education. In what he called his 'spiritual

conversations', Ignatius was always looking for ways to turn the subject to Christ and virtuous living, but he first talked of things that interested the other. "After thus gaining his confidence," Ignatius surmised, "we shall have better success. In this sense we go in with him his way but come out our own."

In *The Conversational Word of God*, the historian Thomas Clancy SJ, recounts two episodes that demonstrate Ignatius' legendary creativity. To get the attention of a student whom he was unable to convince to change his promiscuous behavior, Ignatius jumped into an icy brook and shouted pious exhortations as the man passed on the way to see his lover. On another occasion, after failing to persuade a theology professor to make the month-long version of the *Exercises*, Ignatius offered, as a last resort, to play a game of billiards with him. If Ignatius won, as he did, the man would give up a month of his life to make the *Exercises*.

The early Jesuits missioned by Ignatius to teach imitated their founder's creativity. In *The First Jesuits*, John O'Malley SJ, recalls how some Jesuits began setting the catechism to music, leading children through the streets while singing tunes about Christian doctrine. In Gandía, Spain, the catechetical tunes became so popular that they would be sung day and night by adults and children alike.

Today's teachers must be creative in their own, perhaps less dramatic, ways. We must vary our pedagogical style, ranging from formal lectures to facilitating small group work, classroom discussion and student presentations. Our assignments can be crafted to elicit both insight and emotion from our students, as we help them discover what they are most passionate about. Finally, we must use a variety of multimedia tools to reach today's students, who were raised on MTV, Nintendo, the Internet and e-mail.⁸ Though we must be careful not to let technology replace effective teaching, we need also take the time and effort

⁷ *Constitutions* n.481-82

⁸ This article was written in 2003. Today we would add social media as a powerful and ubiquitous influence on young people.

to learn how media can help the teacher teach and the student learn.

classroom door and ready myself to greet those whom I will meet on this holy ground.

Peter Faber, one of the first Jesuits, wrote “It is most pleasing to Christ and the heavenly court to leave behind a trail of godly conversations through whatever part of the world we happen to pass. Everywhere we must build, plant, and reap the harvest.”⁹ ‘Everywhere’ includes the classroom — the vineyard to which we teachers are called. There we build and plant, trusting that the harvest will be bountiful one day,¹⁰ even if we are not around to see it. Teaching is a great act of hope. As Henry Adams observed, “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”¹¹

Such seeds are sown with every conversation. Our challenge as teachers in the Ignatian tradition is to make the classroom a place where godly conversations take place. We do not always need to be talking about God for that to happen. We encounter grace anytime students stretch their minds to realize their God-given potential, wonder about new ideas, marvel at the intricate beauty of the world, strive for a more just and gentle world, and grow in love for themselves and others. This is what makes desks like altars, and all of us like sacraments pointing to the divine.

I have taken as my patron saint for the first days of school each semester St Alphonsus Rodriguez¹², who was the doorkeeper at the Jesuit College on the island of Majorca, off the Spanish coast, in the 16th century. His simple kindness, the gentleness with which he did ordinary things, his holiness and his ease with spiritual conversation had a profound effect on students. In his memoirs, he relates how every time the doorbell rang, he looked at the door and imagined that it was God on the other side. As he approached the door, he would say, always with a smile, “I’m coming, Lord!” This prayer I say with Alphonsus as I approach the

⁹ St Pierre Favre SJ (1506-46)

¹⁰ cf. Luke 10:2

¹¹ Henry Brooks Adams (1838 -1918), *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907) Chapter 20

¹² St Alphonsus Rodriguez SJ (1532-1617)


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