Appropriating Ignatian Solidarity through Contact and Concepts

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Abstract

In the spring 2012 semester, Anna Faist, a senior at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio, participated in an independent study course directed by James Menkhaus. This course, Ignatian Solidarity in Guatemala, connected Anna’s immersion experiences at John Carroll with extensive readings on solidarity, Ignatian spirituality, and social justice. The primary goal of the course was to combine the learning of “concepts” with the experience of “contact” that fosters a sense of solidarity within students. This paper offers a window into some prevalent literature on solidarity, Anna’s reflections on Ignatian solidarity in light of her immersion experiences, and a reflection on the value and weaknesses of immersion programs for Jesuit higher education.

The 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, which concluded in March 2008, reaffirms the importance of teaching justice within the Jesuit educational apostolate. Following in the footsteps of former Superior General Fr. Pedro Arrupe’s Men and Women for Others speech in 1973 and the numerous Ignatian documents connecting faith and justice since that speech, GC 35 cites solidarity with the poor as a crucial element in its educational and pastoral ministries. The document states, “Volunteer work with and for the poor helps young people to live in solidarity with others and find meaning in and direction for their lives.” While working with the poor, those who are present can discover a way to bring a new meaning to their own lives or the uncovering of their vocation. GC 35 also states, “Our commitment to help establish right relationships invites us to see the world from the perspective of the poor and the marginalized, learning from them, acting with and for them.” In the footsteps of Fr. Arrupe, GC 35 challenges the Jesuit-educated to work for justice as part of the implicit calling of their faith.

This praxis article is a reflection on how Anna Faist, a senior at John Carroll University, experienced solidarity through an independent study course that contained an immersion trip to Guatemala. The course was designed to teach her about the importance of Ignatian solidarity through both study and action. Arrupe’s successor as Superior General of the Jesuits, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, claims in an address at Santa Clara University in 2001 that solidarity is best learned through contact, rather than concepts. While it is true that contact enhances solidarity and brings it life, concepts are also important for students to learn in order to begin the process of openness that is a starting point for solidarity. The first section of the paper will explain the rationale of the course and some of its content as one way to teach Ignatian solidarity in a classroom setting. The second part will be Anna’s reflection on her experiences in Guatemala,
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concurrently drawing upon her previous trips to San Juan and Reynosa, Mexico. The conclusion will highlight the importance and limitations of these experiences in teaching solidarity at Jesuit schools.

**Ignatian Solidarity as a Course**

In order to study Ignatian solidarity, Anna and I designed a course that had three content areas. These sections include: 1.) solidarity as an element of Catholic Social teaching, 2.) the experiences and vision of Fr. Pedro Arrupe that shifted the Jesuits towards a faith that does justice, and 3.) other Ignatian authors that contribute to explaining solidarity in light of the message of Fr. Arrupe. Anna’s readings, while far from exhaustive, offer a variety of approaches towards Ignatian solidarity, first grounding solidarity in Catholic tradition and then demonstrating its development over time; culminating in the current role of solidarity as a cornerstone to Jesuit education. These readings could then influence her reflection on her immersion experiences.

One of the most authoritative and recent discussions of solidarity by the Vatican is John Paul II’s *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, which was promulgated on December 30, 1987. Paragraph 38 begins discussing solidarity and the importance of seeing solidarity as a virtue. John Paul II writes, “This [Solidarity] then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” Simply feeling bad for someone is not enough; rather, people should commit to actions based on the common good. People are not only responsible for the good of others because of the connection of the human family, but because an injustice to one person harms the common good, the good of all people.

Similar to previous encyclicals that call for people to realize the dignity and worth of all people, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* holds that solidarity is impossible if people do not recognize others as persons. Prompting the rich to see the dignity and value of the poor, the Pope explains, “Those who are more influential, because they have a greater share of goods and common services, should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess.” But this does not mean the poor should be idle. They, too, play an important role in creating solidarity in the world as they should not adopt a passive attitude, but should claim their dignity while respecting the rights of others.

John Paul II explains that solidarity is a virtue because it goes beyond itself. He affirms, “One's neighbor is then not only a human being with his or her own rights and a fundamental equality with everyone else; but also becomes the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit.” This realization leads to loving the other person as the image of God, even if this person is an enemy. Understanding the commonality of all people in Christ changes the way one interprets the world. Instead of competition, people are inspired by self-sacrifice and a desire to lay down their own life for the other.

Following the discussion on *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Anna explored Fr. Pedro Arrupe’s life and writings on solidarity. While the readings were extensive, two important dimensions are apparent from studying Arrupe on solidarity. First, he learned solidarity through a variety of experiences throughout his life, from his encounters with hungry children while in medical school to aiding the victims of the bombing of Hiroshima. Just a few miles outside the city when the bomb was dropped on August 6, 1945, Arrupe and his fellow novices did not hesitate to offer aid. The trauma of watching people dying and not being able to help them left an indelible mark on Arrupe’s soul. He saw, first-hand, suffering on an immense scale and he suffered with them through his inability to cure people as they deteriorated from radiation.

It is impossible to divorce his later words as Superior General concerning the importance of being with the poor and suffering of the world from his life, especially his experience as one of the first people trained in medicine to save the lives of atomic bomb survivors. Nearly every person that Arrupe and his novices pulled from the blazing city survived and some were baptized.
by Arrupe months later. The perspective that one can grow closer to another through being present to their suffering is exemplified in Arrupe’s experiences in the wake of the atomic bomb.

A second way Arrupe learned solidarity was through inculturation with the Japanese. Arrupe sought to gain insight into Japanese cultures and customs, just as Francis Xavier and Matteo Ricci did in their work in the Far East. Explicating his approach in Japan, Arrupe reflects, “To sum up, I would say: If a man truly wishes to work with a people, he must understand the soul of that people.” To work with others, to enter into a relationship of solidarity, a person should work to understand the soul of the other. This does not mean that you truly become another race, religion or nationality. Arrupe did not become Japanese, but he honored and learned their customs and treasured them as his own. In this way he gained their trust and admiration and learned much for himself about life and Japanese etiquette from his teachers.

Just as Arrupe took on the way of life of the Japanese, he instructed other Jesuits to do the same. The culture shock of learning a new way of life, accepting it, and finding value in it are crucial to creating solidarity within a community. Becoming an agent of inculturation in this way can also benefit the one who is becoming more like the other. Arrupe reminded the Jesuits, “The experience of what is called insertion into another culture should free us from so much that keeps us shackled: class prejudice and narrow loyalties, cultural and racial discrimination, etc.” In the event of this mutual growth, both sides come to a new understanding of themselves.

In her final section of readings, Anna learned about solidarity from Fr. Kolvenbach and Fr. Howard Gray, who is currently the assistant to the President at Georgetown University. Kolvenbach’s speech at Santa Clara University is one of his most well known descriptions of the role of Jesuit education. He begins by recalling Pedro Arrupe’s speech in 1973 and the work of GC 32 in 1975 as foundational to the movement of the Society of Jesus towards issues of justice. Kolvenbach strongly asserts that Jesuit education should include a component of justice and an awareness of the poor in society. He specifically mentions that faculty at Jesuit schools are integral in forming students as “men and women for others.” Describing this encounter, Kolvenbach states, “When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change.” He concludes by recalling the words of GC 32 that justice and faith must be connected.

Anna’s other reading, Gray’s essay, “Soul Education: An Ignatian Priority,” describes Ignatian education as appropriation by looking at the social ramifications of learning and the way Ignatian education reconciles a plurality of experiences within the Catholic commitment. Gray explains that Ignatian education is a “soul education” because it attempts to allow the person to have an experience that can be described as a defining moment in a person’s life. Such an experience matches well with Kolvenbach’s connection between the mind and the heart. One way this is accomplished is to see God as active in a person’s life. Ignatian education does not indoctrinate, but invites a willingness to appropriate reality into a person’s life. Gray remarks that one discovers one’s soul only when one freely donates one’s life to something greater than one’s self. The Ignatian tradition tries to accomplish this task and invites people to find a way to bring the human and the divine together. Gray’s article speaks to solidarity because immersion programs are one of numerous ways students can freely donate themselves to something greater and experience the soul education Gray eloquently describes.

Anna’s readings and our discussions helped her understand the importance of solidarity as a dimension of Catholic Social Teaching and its importance in Jesuit education. Grounded in Arrupe’s experiences and reinforced by his predecessor, Fr. Kolvenbach, Ignatian solidarity plays an important role in Jesuit education. Gray’s reflections on Jesuit education as an education of the soul further reinforce the transformative power of Ignatian solidarity. The next section is Anna’s reflection, which is written in first person for the personal touch that is conveyed in her experiences.
**Ignatian Solidarity as an Experience**

Throughout my time at John Carroll, I was heavily involved in the immersion program, participating in a trip to Reynosa, Mexico, as well as leading two trips to San Juan la Laguna, Guatemala. I cherish the direct experience I received through my immersion trips and have found myself shaped and inspired as a result. Through direct experience, students are affected and feel the personal obligation to fight for justice in the world. Jesuit education fosters men and women of solidarity, compelling students to utilize their knowledge in ways that contribute to the good of humanity as they move on to their careers.

One of the main components of both Jesuit education and Arrupe’s vision of solidarity is encouraging direct experience with the poor and suffering in the fight for justice to ensure students are personally influenced and inspired. Jesuit institutions “let the gritty reality of this world into [their students’] lives” so that they may be challenged to feel it, learn it, and respond. The comprehensiveness and depth of immersion programs offers students the opportunity not only to witness the injustices in the world, but also to be challenged to process the causes and possible solutions to these injustices. An immersion experience consisting only of a seven-to-ten-day trip does not provide the growth and change to which Kolvenbach refers; instead, education and reflection must be integrated into the experience.

Direct exposure forces students to look at suffering so they can no longer ignore its presence in other parts of the world. Within the direct encounter of immersion experiences, the suffering becomes real, raw, and something that can be felt. Kolvenbach states that this personal involvement is the catalyst for solidarity. After walking alongside those who are suffering, their stories become part of our story, and we are compelled to work towards fighting injustices in our world. General Congregation 34 states, “the promotion of justice requires, before all else, our own continuing personal conversion—finding Jesus Christ in the brokenness of the world, living in solidarity with the poor and outcast, so that we can take up their cause.”

Direct experience fosters this conversion; therefore, GC 34 tells us once again that “insertion into the world of the poor should therefore be a part of the life of every Jesuit” institution.

Throughout my life, I always knew that working with children was one of my passions. I found joy and excitement in their energy and ambition. Although I knew eventually I wanted to find a career working with children, I did not know exactly how to channel my passions and interests. After spending time in Guatemala, I found my passion in educational justice. Suddenly, my career path seemed so simple: finding a way to provide education and energy to children in impoverished areas. Arrupe tells us that personal conversion is necessary in order to fight for justice, and I found my personal conversion within the small, worn-down Christian School in San Juan named Nuevo Amanecer, or “New Dawn.”

During the course of my first ten-day stay in San Juan, we worked cleaning and preparing the school for the upcoming school year. Completely supported by sponsorships, the school could not afford to hire a maintenance staff. One morning, I spent my time cleaning out the second grade classroom. The desks were falling apart, and there were layers of dirt over everything. My mind flashed back to my own second grade classroom, full of color, clean chalkboards, working televisions, and stable desks. Every child deserves an education, an opportunity to find excitement in learning. The need for education for all is no longer something I simply read about; I witnessed the need for quality education in San Juan and was personally affected. I felt connected to the suffering of these children, and as a result, I am determined to work in the area of educational justice.

Direct experience, Arrupe pointed out, requires more than just merely being in a poor region; rather, solidarity requires us to share in the lives of the people and to learn from their community and culture. Serving others is not about imposing our ideas and cultures on those with whom we are immersed. Instead, Arrupe shows that solidarity involves a mutual relationship with those with whom we live—a relationship of both giving to and receiving from those suffering in which the service is always subordinate and humble. The true value of service is found in forming
relationships with the people we are sent to serve, united in equality. Without relationships, we risk serving others as objects that only need help rather than individuals connected to us in humanity. Establishing relationships with those we encounter on immersion experiences allow us to recognize the worth and dignity of the people we are serving, viewing them as our neighbors. Not only are we called to provide manual labor and funding, but it is imperative to visit the community and join in the culture of the town, walking beside the poor and the suffering.

On my first immersion trip in Mexico, I was determined to work as hard as I could for the orphanage; our group was working on putting in a tile floor in the cafeteria that was being built for the children. Throughout the process, I was one of the students in charge of laying grout in between the tiles. After days of scrubbing the rough grout away, my hands were scraped and hurting from arduously working non-stop. I wanted to finish these floors more than anything; to me, my opportunity to help this orphanage was simply through completing the grout. One morning, I noticed that most of the other John Carroll students were not at the work site. I was scrubbing the floors in solitude, and I was frustrated that no one was helping me. I heard laughter outside, and realized there was a game of soccer happening on the field. Most of the John Carroll students had joined the children during their recess break. The smiles and laughter of the children radiated through the property and my frustrations vanished. That is what solidarity is about: joining with the children at that orphanage and playing a game. The work was secondary to forming relationships with those children who need love and companionship more than anything.

By the time I went on my next immersion experience, this time to an Indigenous Mayan town in Guatemala, my intentions were different. I felt that the work we were doing cleaning up the Christian school was an excuse to get to know the people of the town. I wanted to experience everything about San Juan, Guatemala: the church, the faith, the children, the schools, the language, the food, and the work. Finding my energy in people, I found the service to be more fulfilling. The maintenance at the school was still completed successfully, but the relationships formed during this time enabled us to be a part of the town of San Juan. We were not only visitors offering money and a fresh coat of paint, we were people who participated in an exchange of love and companionship. By truly being present in the lives and culture of the people of San Juan, I learned that forming relationships with people is a way of serving God. One day, when we were all working in various areas of the school, a group of local mothers and children were passing by the school. Noticing us at the school, the group entered the schoolyard to welcome us. Immediately, our entire group stopped our projects and joined the women and children; in a matter of moments, we were playing one big game of duck-duck-goose, mixing the children, mothers, and John Carroll students together in one, unified game. In a simple game of duck-duck-goose, we found solidarity.

Love for God, Arrupe believed, cannot be conceived without including the love for the least of our neighbors. Jesus identifies himself with the poor and the powerless, with all who are hungry and miserable; as a result, whatever is done for these people is done for Christ. Arrupe stresses the importance of loving God through loving our neighbors in his understanding of solidarity. During our time in Guatemala, one man in particular embodied Jesus’ message that love of others is unable to be separated from love of God. The principal of the school, Francisco, stopped us at our worksites often to start a conversation. Even though he knew no English and we knew limited Spanish, his attention towards each of us and attempts at conversations taught me the importance of recognizing each person as a neighbor, a true brother and sister of Christ.

Towards the end of the week, he called me “Hermanita,” or little sister. Francisco welcomed us as his brothers and sisters, telling us we were all children of God. Francisco showed me solidarity through his commitment to forming relationships with our John Carroll group. Through Francisco’s genuine embrace of each of us visitors from the United States, I saw the unified love of neighbor and love of God.

During my most recent trip to San Juan, which was my second visit, I felt the overwhelming and unifying power of Christ’s love. On Saturday
night, there was a Mass for the graduating youth of the town to celebrate their accomplishments. Our John Carroll group attended the Mass, understanding nothing since the mass was said in the indigenous language of Tz’utujil. At first, I felt very distant from the people of San Juan during Mass. In the homily, the priest addressed the group of young people with vigor and enthusiasm. Sporadically, the congregation burst into laughter and smiles were exchanged. Even though I did not know what the priest was saying, I felt amazed at the energy and the love of God that was present in that church; the energy was infectious, and I soon found myself laughing and smiling with the rest of the people of San Juan. When we reached the Our Father, our English version integrated into the same prayer spoken in Tz’utujil by the rest of the people in the church. Immediately, I felt connected to the people in that church through God’s unifying love. Even though our culture, language, and customs were dramatically different from the people of San Juan, we were bound together through our worship of God and praying the prayer that Jesus taught all of us.

Although it is natural to want to help and improve the situation of those suffering, sometimes, there are simply no words or actions that can ease a situation. Arrupe found himself completely helpless multiple times during his life, such as after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Arrupe’s vision of solidarity does not involve knowing all of the answers or performing miraculous deeds; instead, solidarity calls us to accept that evil surrounds us and to be present with those suffering in experience and prayer. Arrupe wrote of the heartbeat that is often inevitable when in the presence of such suffering. We are all connected, and “if one part [of humanity] is hurt, all parts are hurt with it.”

Witnessing the pain and suffering of the malnourished children on the streets of San Juan broke my heart each time their wide eyes met mine. I had learned about the poverty rates during the trip preparation; we found that the poverty rates of indigenous populations were the most extreme. However, until we saw the heartbreaking hunger and poverty, the hungry were merely people that resided in magazines and on the Internet. With direct experience, the hungry of the world are given faces, faces painted with dirt and decorated with toothless smiles and sparkling eyes that we met on the streets of San Juan. When I think of the hungry, I don’t think of people far away that I see on infomercials late at night; instead I think of my friend Santiago, who wore the same shirt each day he came to play with us in the town plaza because it was all he owned. I think of our friend Belinda, who pulled up her donated pants that were two sizes too large in between laughing spells while she was being spun in the air. The hungry are no longer just ideas or something that occurs somewhere else. The hungry are my friends; they are children that touched my heart. I wanted to fix the problems in the town, to feed all the hungry children and to make sure all of the children were able to attend school. However, as Arrupe notes, sometimes we cannot fix the suffering. Instead, we have to accept the hungry, the poverty, and the suffering and let it touch us. I felt connected to these children through feeling their pain and suffering. When they hurt, I hurt too. Sometimes, it is when our hearts are broken that we are inspired to act.

My immersion experiences at John Carroll have shaped me into the woman I am today. Attending a Jesuit institution has provided me with countless opportunities to participate in service, both locally and globally. Until recently, I dreaded graduation in fear that the commitment to service during my years as an undergraduate would fade as I enter into my career-driven life. However, I feel that my involvement in immersion programs truly has allowed me to develop the value of solidarity and that my commitment to service will not end. Rather, it has become something that is integrated into my very being. Aware of my connection to the rest of humanity, I am compelled to continue to find ways to walk with those who are suffering, offering to help carry their burdens. Gray summarizes that the goal of Ignatian education is to “help people become fully alive…soul education….exploring how people can become as fully present to their humanity as possible.”

Through my involvement in immersion experiences to both Mexico and Guatemala, I have found that my soul is alive and energized in service. As a graduating senior, I am confident I have developed the virtue of solidarity that was fostered through direct experience.
Conclusion: The Importance and Limitation of Immersion Solidarity

Immersion programs are highlighted at Jesuit institutions as a way of coming into contact with people around the world and growing in solidarity with them. Anna’s experiences in Guatemala and Mexico illustrate how powerful these programs can be. While it is important to learn the historical, sociological, and psychological factors that lead to injustice and oppression, it is in-depth study and interaction with the oppressed that concretizes the words and theories. If a Jesuit university is to remain true to Arrupe’s vision for Jesuit education, then immersion programs should continue to play a significant role in this development and movement towards solidarity.

Specifically, John Carroll University’s immersion program includes intensive trip preparations as well as post-trip meetings to synthesize the experience. The immersion program is centered on five pillars that encourage student growth and development: education, social justice, spirituality, community, and service. In the months prior to the immersion trip, students research the social injustices the region they are visiting are facing, as well as the culture and beliefs of the region. After numerous group meetings, students are able to enter the region as educated individuals with greater respect for the people and conditions they will encounter. The direct experience of the trip itself offers students an experience to feel, observe, and live with the people suffering. Without this direct contact received through immersion experiences, the suffering and the hungry in this world are merely ideas and theories. After the trip, students return to campus and participate in follow-up reflection experiences focusing on questions such as: “How was I changed? What can I do now?” The success in an immersion experience does not lie in the experience while on the trip; rather, it lies in how the students are inspired to change as a result.

Despite the many positive dimensions of immersion experiences in teaching solidarity, these trips also have weaknesses. It is foolish to think that after ten days in a country, living somewhat like the countries’ inhabitants, one is suddenly in solidarity with them. The key distinction is that a student can and will return home. Even volunteers that spend a year or more in service, such as those in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, may only be a few steps closer in solidarity than those who spend a week. They, like those students who come for a short time, can and will most likely return home. To present these experiences as more than that is dishonest to the system and to those that people encounter.

Ignatian solidarity and Jesuit education are not meant to make students Guatemalan or Mexican or anything that they are not. When Arrupe spent 27 years in Japan before becoming superior general, he attempted to learn as much about being Japanese as he could, but he always remained a Spaniard. Immersion experiences are about breaking the heart and creating a new understanding of the world, complete with injustices towards the marginalized. Immersion experiences do not teach students to become poor in order to be like those they encounter, nor to feel guilty about living in a more affluent country. As Arrupe replied, when asked about the purpose of immersion experiences for Jesuits, “They enable us, at least for a time, to get away from a world in which we feel secure, perhaps even comfortable, and experience in our own flesh something of the insecurity, oppression and misery that is the lot of so many people today.” The feeling of uncertainty that causes a student to be shaken from her or his comfortable perspective creates solidarity in the brief feeling of fear and helplessness. Students may never actually be as poor or oppressed as those they meet on immersions, but hopefully they will walk away from the experience with a new understanding and their hearts will be restless every time they see a child going hungry or a homeless person on the street.

Immersion programs strive to teach students about the world and those who face a different lifestyle, often one of poverty and oppression. Building on the concepts learned in the classroom, contact can help create a closer solidarity with the marginalized. While they are not without their weaknesses, immersion experiences help accomplish the goal of teaching Ignatian solidarity. As Gray states concerning an education of the soul, “The Ignatian instinct is to help people become fully alive.” The appropriation of Ignatian solidarity through contact and concepts is
one important step towards a soul education, an education of the heart, which leads to a greater respect for life and love for all people, especially the poor, oppressed and marginalized. 

Notes


2 “The 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus,” decree 3, #71.


4 Pope John Paul II. Sollicitudo rei socialis: On Social Concern (December 30, 1987), #38.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid, #40.


12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.


15 Ibid.


17 Ibid., 312.


21 Arrupe, S.J. “Exposure to and Insertion Among the Poor,” 309.


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