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Ascetical Practice and Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability: Tools for Teaching Sustainable Living



Ignatian Pedagogy
for Sustainability

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Abstract

Inspired by *Laudato Si'*, we outline an application of the Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability for our course, Sustainable Practice: The Examined Life. We describe the development of the course in the context of a new undergraduate program in the College of Arts and Sciences at Creighton University. In the course, we draw from the notion of *ascetical practice*, an approach for students as they strive for incorporating more sustainable practices into their daily living. We concentrate on four domains of asceticism: attention, sustenance, materials, and energy. Additionally, we argue that mindfulness through meditation is a necessary activity for students pursuing sustainable practices and an examined life.

Introduction

Like many others inspired by *Laudato Si'*, we too have sought to create teaching opportunities that move students toward more intentional and sustainable ways of living.¹ Below, we outline the programmatic context within which our course and particular instruction approaches. We want to be transparent about the newness of the program for which the course and instruction methods were developed, the experimental interdisciplinary conversation between a communication scholar and a theologian that led to its development, the rapidly changing nature of the course as we rotate teaching it (now, for a total of four times), and the intersection of the course with the Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability (IPS) to which this praxis report responds.² Next, we focus on one small element of our teaching that has become the fundamental focus and most productive point of intersection for students as they strive for incorporating more sustainable practices into their daily living: ascetical practice. Finally, we articulate how our approach draws from the IPS published

in another article in this issue of *Jesuit Higher Education (JHE)*. Our aim is to apply the themes outlined in the pedagogy for practical use in the classroom.

Programmatic Context

The Sustainability Studies Program at Creighton University developed from a series of conversations and meetings among faculty who, in the summer of 2012, had affiliations with two existing undergraduate programs: Environmental Science and Energy Technology. The former is the flagship environmental program at Creighton with an over twenty-five year history and the latter was a newly emerging program focusing on design practices for technology based in the physical sciences. Across both programs and from several departments, courses were being taught in the humanities and social sciences to support the multidisciplinary goals of the two programs. In the end, it seemed possible and fruitful to develop these offerings further to offer a major and a minor focused on environmental issues from a

richly developed set of humanities and social science courses. With careful consideration, we tried to situate the program to augment, rather than replace, existing programs. The faculty in Environmental Science and Energy graciously embraced a vision of multiple programmatic offerings for students in environmental and sustainability areas. During the time that we were developing the program, Creighton University also began to focus on sustainability efforts on campus in a more systemic way, efforts that benefitted greatly from the publication of *Healing a Broken World* by the Jesuit Social Justice Secretariat in 2011 and of Pope Francis’s landmark encyclical letter *Laudato Si’* in the spring of 2015.³ In the fall of 2015, we opened the doors, so to speak, and started accepting majors and minors in Sustainability Studies.⁴

The original submission of the Sustainability Studies Program for curriculum review included what we called a “junior capstone.” This was an attempt to place the course in the student experience after exposure to a number of sustainability courses, but in time for students to modify their behavior, practices and way of thinking before they left Creighton. We called this course “Sustainable Practices: The Examined Life.” In addition to evoking the image of Socrates’ famous dictum, the title brought together our combined interests in communication and theology in an interdisciplinary study of sustainability issues. We have also located the course in the core curriculum of our College of Arts and Sciences which attracts a large percentage of students for whom this is their first and only course that addresses issues of the environment and sustainability.

The term *practice* has lately been experiencing a revival in the religious imagination of Americans. Many who self-identify as Buddhist refer frequently to their practice of meditation as a bell-weather of how well or how poorly they are living their religious identity. While St. Ignatius called his most famous book the *Spiritual Exercises*, he could just as easily have called it “the Spiritual Practices” because he was ultimately interested in how one can practice the art of discernment, that is, the art of paying attention to one’s inner life.⁵ One could argue that that goal of all religious practice is to

encounter God (or the numinous) by attending to one’s own interiority. When Socrates said “the unexamined life is not worth living,”⁶ he meant to push his students toward greater self-knowledge. Similarly, St. Ignatius believed that by engaging in the four-week program of the *Exercises*, his followers would come to deeper knowledge of themselves and, along the way, arrive at deeper knowledge of God.

Many of our students, however, have no awareness of their own interiority and they find the piety expressed in ancient religious systems to be off-putting, confusing, and, in some cases, threatening. Yet, it was our conviction in designing this course that we had to find some means to draw students into deeper self-awareness because this is the only path toward making the kind of life changes that are needed to enact the moral transformation that the Pope calls for.⁷

The term practice, however, is not limited to religious discourse but can also be found in many social science disciplines. For instance, in the class we reference a particular notion developed in communication studies, where practice is defined as “a coherent set of activities that are commonly engaged in, and meaningful in particular ways, among people familiar within a certain culture.”⁸ To focus on practice means to focus on behaviors reflectively by paying attention to enacted patterns and shared meanings within particular cultures. From a communication perspective, it also means noticing accompanying discourses about those behaviors. For example, our concern centers not just on the physical behaviors of eating and preparing foods as a vegetarian, but also the talk by and about people who self-identify as a vegetarian. Such an approach opens up discovery of and reflection about buying practices, socio-economic factors in eating, food culture(s), food systems, and so on. As a guiding term, *practice* becomes a tool for students to engage in inquiry, reading, discussion and, eventually, their own practices. That the word “practice” is nimble enough to evoke an image of spiritual conversion and tease out insight from secular academic study helped us build a bridge across which we could begin to lead our students into deeper self-awareness.

Thus, Sustainable Practice: The Examined Life was designed to engage students through their own embodied experiences in order to have them reflect and alter taken-for-granted ways that they are not living as sustainably as they could. This happened by helping them to take the time to turn their gaze toward their own inner life and to begin to see the disconnections between that world and the outer world of their daily experience. What we have learned from teaching the course is the way that such intensive reflection through practice opens up discovery to the ways in which the students are embedded in religious, political, socio-economic, and cultural systems that enable and constrain individual action.

Course Structure

Our impulse in developing the course could be summed up in the following way: *We wanted students to experience more sustainable living and, then, be able to make choices about what to permanently incorporate into their daily living.* Our first task was to come to terms with how to bring interior awareness to aspects of daily living. In the years leading up to developing the course, one of us had been part of designing and convening dialogue forums, and the other had attended one of the forums, that focused on five areas of concentration for Nebraska communities to consider for living more sustainability. These foci were food, water, energy, materials, and land.⁹ In addition, we had both been reading about some of the negative influences of digital technology, such as the potential degradation of social relationships, as well as the ways in which such technology competes for control of our attention.¹⁰ Finally, and related to attention, one of us had developed a consistent daily practice of meditation, and we were both interested in experimenting with meditation as an instructional method.

Taking these influences together, we decided that we would have our students engage in instructional modules on the topics of attention, sustenance, materials, and energy. Each of the four topics leaks into the others but the domains of each can be articulated with a series of example questions students explore first through reading and reflection, then through practice.

Ascetical Practice 1: Attention¹¹

Perhaps the most fundamental obstacle to living an examined life and, by extension, a more sustainable life, is the lack of any capacity to pay attention. Learning how to pay attention to the stirrings of the spirit of God is the key to the successful navigation of the *Spiritual Exercises*, and it is at the root of the spiritual paths outlined in other traditions as well. Many people in the modern world experience a diminished capacity for paying attention that has only been exacerbated by the distraction of electronic devices. How many distractions do we experience? How many times does a digital or electronic device take our attention away from something we are doing? How does the modern world decrease our capacity to pay attention in a deep and meaningful way?

Ascetical Practice 2: Sustenance

There are many ways to open this domain of inquiry. We start with the basic notion that as living beings, we need to fuel our bodies. That many of our students are studying in the health sciences, biology, and ecology is a benefit because the questions we ask often center on pure physiological necessity. What do we eat? How is it made or grown? Where is it made or grown? How did it get to us? How is it stored and prepared? What is the waste produced by our eating this food? Who else eats this food? What is its economic cost? What is its environmental impact? What if everyone ate the way we do? What if no one did?

Ascetical Practice 3: Materials

This domain focuses attention toward the life-cycle of all materials from lumber to textiles to metals to chemicals, and on how these materials are crafted into products like homes, clothes, cars, and electronics. In the class, students both marvel at human ingenuity and lament the waste that often (always?) accompanies the industries and markets that develop in the production, distribution, and disposal of human-made things. What things do we have? What are they made of? Where did those materials come from? How are they produced? How durable are they? How necessary are they? What is the life-cycle of the

things that we own? Do we have to own everything that we use? What environmental degradations occur in the making, using, or disposing of our things?

Ascetical Practice 4: Energy

As much as possible, we lean on our physical and natural science students to help the class understand the fundamental characteristics of energy. Inevitably, our discussions turn to the big questions of heating, cooling, lighting, and mobility made possible, primarily, by the burning of fossil fuels or through renewable energy technologies. While we try to remain open to a wider range of discussion topics, generally we spend most of our time examining two: buildings and transit. What are the sources of energy necessary for our daily living? How much energy is needed to store and prepare our foods? How much energy is needed to move us from place to place and to heat and cool our homes? Where does this energy come from? How is it delivered to us through a service or a publicly accessible system?

Revealing Systems and Structures, Modifying Practice

Before outlining the application of the IPS to these domains, it is important to articulate one additional core dimension of our approach. We wanted our students to understand the sustainable practices we were inviting them to try not just as practices, but as *ascetical* practices. All of the great religious traditions of the world teach that asceticism, in some form, is necessary for those who are serious about the spiritual path. There is simply no way to move to a deeper interiority without passing through the crucible of discipline and suffering. For Catholics, the “discipline of Lent,” ritually and materially, tries to lead the practitioner toward the resurrection of Easter and the prospect of illumination. Similarly, the meditator who dutifully reports for Zazen and submits to the discipline of the master hopes to be enlightened by the ascetical discipline.

As faculty members at a Jesuit university, spiritual questions are never far from our mind. This awareness is certainly enhanced by the fact that one of us is a theologian. Still, following upon our

statements above about the disposition of our students and our secular age, the idea of seeing sustainable living as religious response to the needs of the world needs to be introduced with some care. Thus, we also draw from ideas about the value of purpose of asceticism that are one step removed from overt religious practice. For example, Richard Valantasis, writing from a Religious Studies rather than a theological perspective, explains that asceticism is necessary for both revealing power and developing a reconfiguration of one's life in response to structures of power.¹² Valantasis describes three topics that outline what he calls the “formative aspect” of the ascetical discipline: subjectivity, social relations, and symbolic systems. These ideas can help grease the skids for students who might be less receptive to religious language.

According to Valantasis, asceticism “involves the articulation and construction of a particular subjectivity that defines the sort of agency and identity toward which the ascetic moves and away from which the ascetic withdraws.”¹³ Valantasis describes this notion of agency as a distinction between the current cultural subjectivity and a new alternative subjectivity. Second, asceticism involves “the delimitation and restructuring of social relations both in the sense that the ascetic develops a restricted field of potential social arrangements, relationship, and encounters, and in the sense that these restrictions construct a particular (usually negative) attitude, modality, toward other social groups and people.”¹⁴ In short, the ascetic locates and constructs new social relationships that were not available in previous social arrangements prior to the asceticism. Finally, “the ascetic validates the work to create a personal and social alternative by consciously developing an alternative symbolic universe.”¹⁵ Referring back to the notion of practice introduced above, the ascetic engages in and, ideally, personally identifies with a new discourse that enables and supports the behavioral components of the new practice. In summary, the asceticism reveals new potential practices through the discovery of a new identity, new social relationships, and new forms of communication. All three are necessary for altering behavior, for moving away from old ways into more sustainable ones.

Valantasis himself is a student of ancient Christian monasticism and his social analysis derives from that. However, his ability to explain the social function of ascetism helps us to lead the students into an awareness of how they might, through their own ecological asceticism, a series of ascetical practices, set out to upend the power structure of our civilization that continue to oppress the earth and limit their own capacity for more sustainable living. In this way, we might also lead the students indirectly toward a greater sympathy for the value of religious ascetical practices, such as those that are at the heart of the Jesuit mission.

Application of Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability: Scaffolding for Teaching Ascetical Practice

In a practical application, what does this look like in the classroom? How do we translate theoretical ambitions outlined above into the concrete realities of the class? How does this work within the expectation of Ignatian pedagogy? These are the questions we will address in the closing section.

The first step is to teach students various forms of mindfulness practice that they can work on outside of class. We are convinced that regular sessions of meditation, learning how to be silent when working, and taking walks where the only purpose is to notice and pay attention are critical to developing the capacity of the student to engage fruitfully in the sustainable ascetical practices that form the backbone of the course. We do this differently, following our own level of comfort with meditation. Thus, “the meditator” among us leads student through five minutes of seated mediation before each class and asks students to journal about their meditation practice outside of class. The other will often participate with the students by selecting guided reflections from an app or a website that has been previewed to fit the work of the class for that session. The most important thing here, however, is not the particular form of mindfulness, but that students are invited into mindfulness, perhaps for the first time in their lives. Students often report this is their favorite dimension of the class and express appreciation to quiet their minds, not just for our benefit but for overall improved mental health.

With mindfulness as the foundation, the core of the course revolves around the execution of sustainable, ascetical practices linked to four course modules noted above: attention, sustenance, materials, and energy. Thus, during the “attention” module, students might embrace the asceticism of a social media fast. Students often opt to turn off notifications on all devices and limit access to devices for purposes not related to school to 30 minutes per day. We encourage and assign lengthy periods of silence, asking students to resist the temptation to multi-task, have music playing during periods of work, or study with a video playing. During the “sustenance” module, students might become locavores in the winter or a vegetarian as more local produce is in season. Meat-eaters may try to source meat from local, organic producers. All students inevitably cook more, eat more whole foods, and purchase less processed and packaged foods. In practicing awareness of “materials,” students often renounce buying anything they do not need to survive. Students reference Jacobsen, Weis, and Schneider’s “consumption challenge”¹⁶ to support their efforts. In one semester, students took an inventory of their clothing and engaged in a clothes-swap with each other in an effort to upcycle unused clothing. Students are also encouraged to identify a broken item in their possession and attempt to fix it themselves.¹⁷ Finally, during the “energy” module students try to radically reduce their dependence on non-renewable energy by walking, biking, turning down the heating and cooling, and limiting uses of hot water. Each of these modules, and the ascetical practices associated with them, lasts approximately two weeks. While these practices are valuable in themselves, we are convinced that when undertaken within the structure of Ignatian Pedagogy, they become more valuable, and more likely to become “sticky” and durable in the life of the students once the semester ends.

For this reason, the students work through a five-step process for each of the four modules, inspired by the Ignatian Pedagogy Paradigm and modified to include the principles of IPS.¹⁸ First, students make an honest self-assessment at the beginning. Second, they outline the ascetical practice(s) they will undertake during the module. We have found that the ascetism needs to be an individual and creative endeavor because students

in the class begin the processes from radically different starting points. In the context of “sustenance,” for instance, if a student is already a meat-eater, renunciation of meat is an appropriate choice. If a student is a vegan, perhaps questioning the impact of veganism might lead to eating local chicken as opposed to fruit from South America. Because these choices are personal, we try to maintain a supportive class culture so that each student is comfortable to explore new practices without reservation. Third, students reflect on the differences between their prior behaviors and those the ascetism inspired. Fourth, students then evaluate how they did. Was it simply too hard not to buy anything?¹⁹ Do they get more consolation than they want to admit from a trip to the Apple Store? It is during this phase that students come to terms with what the ascetism revealed to them including, as was mentioned above, the systems, roles, relationships, and discourses that enabled and constrained their new practices. Fifth, students close the IP circle by making a commitment to change in some way. From now on, for example, I will take the bus rather than drive when I have the choice. At the end of a semester the goal is for students to explore new ways of living their daily lives in these four domains and to commit to a set of more sustainable practices across them.

In more concrete instructional terms, students begin each module by reading scholarly, popular, and theological statements on the extant conditions related to the module.²⁰ For each, we select passages from *Laudato Si'*, from social science and ecology scholarship, and from popular books to ground our discussions in some truth about the topic. Students discuss and write about the content to explore terminology, understand limits or boundaries of the system, and to examine its political, economic, and socio-cultural characteristics. Based on reading and discussion, students craft their own ascetical practice that are a meaningful and intentional set of behavioral changes designed to make salient additional dimensions of conflict, possibility and understanding. Again, students discover that the ascetical practice has to do with where one begins.

Students then write a one single-spaced page paper that provides an honest accounting of the practice as they understand it and, next, they write

a statement of commitment about what they will do over the period of time we designate. In the execution of the asceticism, students are asked to pay attention to and document what is revealed to them. This is mostly achieved through daily logs, but students have experimented with blogs, vlogs, and social media pages (not allowed in the attention assignments) to document their ascetical practices. Finally, students write a single-spaced page that describes their vision of a change in their practices going forward, and the commitments they will make to themselves, to others, and in response to the planetary emergency. Along the way, we build in regular sessions of meditation, silent times for work, and walks where the only purpose is to notice and pay attention. In other words, we try to provide the resources necessary for reflection by boosting energy, relieving stress, and clearing our minds which is a direct application of the third theme of the IPS: time, concentration, and imagination.

Conclusion

Our course was developed at a time when we were mutually influenced by the development of the IPS. Our experiences shaped our conversations with the IPS group and, at the same time, we found ourselves adopting aspects of the IPS before it was fully formed. We began assigning drafts of the IPS for class reading (and still do) because that document provides an honest and transparent statement about our perspective as instructors and, to some degree, articulates the kind of relationship we want to have with our students in the class. It demonstrates that we are trying to respond to the humanity of students as they wrestle with their future in a looming planetary emergency.

In terms of the specific themes of the IPS, we have constructed the four modules such that they provide the scaffolding for course organization but are also guiding principles available for revisiting whenever the student discussions take us in those directions. For instance, in the sustenance module, students quickly discover the social justice dimensions of food production and availability. It is hard to eat in a principled way but it is much easier when one has financial resources, accessibility to markets, and relationships with growers that socio-economic stability affords.

Students discover their own privilege and, often, commit to further political action and community organizing on issues related to food. Thus, they enact the fourth theme of the IPS, action, by locating their connections and obligations to a particular community through service. Additionally, students become more aware of their own place in nature, often through the assignments focused on silence, but also through a discovery of the environmental impacts of their daily behaviors.

There are many more things we could say about this course. In a fairly short time it has become one of our favorites and we find ourselves competing with each other for the chance to teach it. The embodied nature of the learning experience contributes to extremely satisfying and engaging in-class discussion. At times, especially during the “attention” module, we have witnessed the revival

of students walking down the stairs without pulling out their phones, still talking about course content. At the end of one semester, one of our students said, “I took this as a requirement, now I’m a different person. I can’t imagine ever living my life in the same way.”

We do not know what the long-term impact of this experiment in ecological asceticism will be (perhaps in a few years we will send out a survey), but we are convinced that we are giving these students an opportunity to live a more sustainable life built upon the firm foundation of a life characterized by greater self-awareness. The IPS has become a significant guiding force in our thinking about teaching and we hope to have demonstrated, here, one productive approach for incorporating the pedagogy that others in higher education will find useful. HJE

Notes

¹ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, *Encyclical Letter* (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), accessed March 15, 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_ enciclica-laudato-si.html

² James Leighter and Kathleen Smythe. “Ignatian Pedagogy for Sustainability: An Overview,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 8, no.1 (2019).

³ Task Force on Ecology, “Healing a Broken World,” ed. Patxi Alvarez, SJ, special report, *Promotio Iustitiae* 106, no 2. (2011).

⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si'*.

⁵ For a good translation of the *Exercises*, see *Ignatius of Loyola Spiritual Exercise and Selected Works*, trans. and ed. George E. Ganss, SJ (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist, 1991).

⁶ This quotation appears in Plato, *Apology* 38a5-6.

⁷ See Francis, *Laudato Si'*, sec. 217 where Pope Francis cites Pope Benedict writing “‘The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.’ For this reason the ecological crisis is also a summons to interior conversion.”

⁸ Robert T. Craig, “Communication as Practice,” in *Communication As... Perspectives on Theory*, ed. Gregory J. Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphos (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), 38.

⁹ See reporting on the conferences at <http://joslyninstitute.org/initiatives/ccnes/>.

¹⁰ See Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Farrar,

Straus and Giroux, 2015), and Douglas Rushkoff, *Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commandments for a Digital Age* (New York: OR Books, 2010).

¹¹ This inclination was also a major factor in the development of the third theme of the IPS which was also under development at the time. Because the questions and problems of sustainability are complex, how are we as individuals or communities going to be able to address them if we cannot control our own attention.

¹² Richard Valantasis, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 4 (December, 1995): 775-821.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 795.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 796.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 796.

¹⁶ Susan Jacobsen, Bill Weis, and Abigail B. Schneider, “*Laudato Si'* and the Consumption Challenge: Giving Students a Visceral Exercise in Saving Our Planet,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 6, no. 1 (2017): 87-96.

¹⁷ Here we are inspired by a second book by Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

¹⁸ The Jesuit Institute, “Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach, 1993,” accessed January 15, 2019, [http://jesuitinstitute.org/Resources/Ignatian%20Pedagogy%20\(I%20Edition%202013\).pdf](http://jesuitinstitute.org/Resources/Ignatian%20Pedagogy%20(I%20Edition%202013).pdf). Leighter and Smythe, *Ignatian Pedagogy*.

¹⁹ We are aware that our process is a slight modification of the Ignatian Pedagogy Paradigm and IPS, putting evaluation before action. For practical purposes, we ask students to

evaluate the asceticism done in class while also making them aware that their work is not done at the end of the semester. Ideally, they would return to action and evaluation after some time has passed having learned the tools for “an examined life” beyond the course.

²⁰ In addition to other texts mentioned above, we have also assigned Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon Schuster, 2014), and Jeff Speck, *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time* (New York: North Point Press, 2012).