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Beth Ford McNamee

Saint Joseph's University, emcnamee@sju.edu

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Companions on an Ignatian Journey: A Reflection on the Universal Apostolic Preferences

Beth Ford McNamee
Assistant Director of Campus Ministry
St. Joseph's University
emcnamee@sju.edu

The Universal Apostolic Preferences focus my sense of mission and vocation in Jesuit higher education.¹ I offer these personal and professional reflections as a fellow pilgrim and companion on the journey. I am a lay woman striving to embody the Jesuit, Catholic mission of Saint Joseph's University (SJU). All Jesuit university students, staff, and faculty are also colleagues in this common mission. Together we are invited to prayer, accompaniment, discernment, conversion of heart, and action in light of these preferences.

Preference 1: To show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment

I often call the Spiritual Exercises the best kept secret of the Ignatian charism. Some students and colleagues say they love the Jesuits but have never heard of the Spiritual Exercises. I am grateful that a campus minister invited me to the Spiritual Exercises when I was an undergraduate student at SJU. Since that time, I have often returned to the Principle and Foundation and to the graces of the various weeks of the Exercises: feeling intimately and tenderly loved by God, savoring a depth of gratitude, nurturing a relationship with Christ, and discovering spiritual freedom to follow Christ's call. After graduating from SJU, this call led me to Tanzania, East Africa as a Jesuit Volunteer. Next, I followed a call to study theology and ministry. I continued to savor my gratitude for Jesuit education and formation, and I discerned a position in campus ministry at my alma mater where I have been serving since that time. I savored gratitude for a loving relationship and discerned a call to marry my spouse. Now I am brought to my knees in gratitude and mystery daily as we parent our five-year-old son who loves space, fossils, bees, and asks me why jazz is so beautiful. One of the fruits of the Spiritual Exercises is seeing the sacredness of my everyday life. Because Ignatius encourages personal reflection to integrate all aspects of our lives, I

have included both personal and professional examples to continue to explore the Universal Apostolic Preferences.

Discernment is a gift of Ignatius. Students are aching and thirsty for guidance in decision-making. They often are overwhelmed when choosing a major, internship, career direction, and life path. I was accidentally eavesdropping one day when I heard a student say to a friend, "Whatever, I'll just flip a coin," regarding a major decision. My heart dropped. Ignatius offers guidance for discernment. He asks us to pay attention to our deepest desires. He asks us to bring our most authentic selves, created in love for love, to collaborate and co-create with God communities of love, justice, and peace. This is more than a mere coin flip.

Discernment can also be communal. Our university mission statement was developed through a process of communal discernment. SJU community members were invited to participate in listening to, reflecting upon, contributing to, and discerning which words reflect the essence and aspirations of our university. Communal discernment was utilized in the development of the Universal Apostolic Preferences. Communal discernment is a commitment to listening, conversion, humility, and renewal to move into a new future. How can we as one Ignatian family commit ourselves to communal discernment regarding racial justice, economic justice, and other urgent needs of our current condition of time and place?

Preference 2: To walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice

My neighbors and friends in the Mabibo neighborhood of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania taught me accompaniment as I served with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. Global poverty had been an abstract concept until I saw my friend cooking a meal for me and watched her search for coins to buy the rice. Global health had existed only in graphs and charts until I sat by the bedside of my colleague dying of AIDS. But in my Mabibo neighborhood, poverty and death do not have the last word. My neighbors and friends taught me deep joy. We danced and laughed at weddings, birthdays, and other rites of passage. Church was my neighbors singing in Kiswahili with a rhythm and joy that did not translate to English. I could not change or control the sorrows and joys around me, but I could humbly witness and walk with my neighbors and friends. I could observe the softening, the breaking, and the enlivening of my heart.

Pope Francis invites the community to create a culture of encounter with people who are on the margins of society, because to encounter those on the margins is to encounter Christ. Greg Boyle, S.J., founder of the gang-intervention and rehabilitation program Homeboy Industries, challenges one to go to these margins. He invites one to imagine “a circle of compassion. Then we imagine no one standing outside of that circle, moving ourselves closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased.”² Participating in such a culture of encounter necessitates leaving spaces of comfort and walking with community members in compassion and humility.

COVID-19 has laid bare the fragility of life and the visceral, physical ways we are connected to one another. Our collective griefs and anxieties are tied together globally and locally. Disproportionate COVID-19 infection rates for black and brown bodies underscore persistent gaps in justice.³ Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Walter Wallace, Jr. and so many others call our Jesuit universities to ongoing, resourced, and persistent work for racial justice on our own campuses and in our surrounding

communities. We are called to accompany and to listen deeply to those who have experienced oppression, discrimination, and exclusion. The urgency of our current reality calls us to see, to reflect, to discern, and to act for justice and solidarity.

There are many ways in which SJU engages in this critical invitation to accompaniment and solidarity with surrounding communities. Students are serving weekly in Philadelphia and in Camden through extracurricular service and through academic service-learning. Countless student organizations, athletic teams, and residence halls participate in community service initiatives. Students, faculty, staff, and alumni participate and lead immersion programs to walk with communities in Appalachia, El Paso, El Salvador, Mexico, Ecuador, Bolivia, and many other cities and countries. On our own campus we have held town halls, listening sessions, and educational forums to address incidents of racial bias and hate on our own campus. Without such encounters—listening, accompaniment, reflection, and action—community learning and human dignity are impoverished.

Our university communities are called to deeply reflect and respond to the call to reconciliation and justice. The work of direct service is urgent, raw, and real. Forming relationships can be immediately gratifying. And yet systemic injustices remain. Some of our Philadelphia and Camden neighbors, our brothers and sisters, cry out from exclusion, racial injustice, fear of deportation, environmental racism, poverty, mass incarceration, educational inequities, and inadequate access to quality healthcare. Those in our own campus community experience some of these injustices.

How do we uncover our own roles and responsibilities in structures of injustice? How do we walk with, accompany, support, organize with, and advocate with communities on the margins already working toward their own liberation? As the Universal Apostolic Preferences urge us, how do we improve our “studies, our analysis, and our reflection in order to understand in depth the economic, political, and social processes that generate such great injustice?”⁴ How do we help contribute to “alternative models”⁵ and prophetic

imagination of how life could be instead? The urgent cry of the oppressed compels us to take social justice proclamations down from our flags and brochures until we can humbly, boldly, and collaboratively work for social justice on our own campuses, cities, and wider communities.

Preference 3: To accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future

I brought my five-year-old son with me to a Black Lives Matter march planned by SJU students after George Floyd's murder. My son is learning to read. He saw one of the signs and asked me "Mama, that says 'I can't ... what is that last word, Mama?" "Breathe," I answered, heartbroken for the precious life that was lost, heartbroken for countless other lives lost, heartbroken trying to explain to a five-year-old our complicity in systems of racial injustice. As we knelt for 8 minutes and 46 seconds I reflected on the witness of our students for racial justice, on the ways I want to educate my white son, and how I want to better educate, pray, and act for racial justice.

I listened to a student who had returned from an immigration justice conference facilitated by the Ignatian Solidarity Network. She was overflowing with excitement about the community of student leaders that had formed. She was excited to realize a connection among her faith values, her study major, and the work for immigration justice. Inspired by the conference, she and her peers planned an immigration-related education and advocacy event entitled "Undocumented Limbo" at SJU.

Fr. Sosa's letter states, "It is the young who, from their perspective, can help us to understand better the epochal change that we are living and its hope-filled newness. They light the path toward justice, reconciliation, and peace."⁶ Our students help light my own path toward justice, reconciliation, and peace. God told Moses, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."⁷ Our work with students is sacred. How do we as a campus community encounter the holy ground of our students' deep passions and questions as they challenge us to change and renewal? How do we accompany them, listen to their deep questions, discern with

them—and how are we ready to change with them?

Preference 4: To collaborate in the care of our common home

In Tanzania, I was constantly confronted with what I threw away. I had to bury or burn trash in our backyard. Burning trash created thick clouds of smoke that filled our house and our neighbors' houses. Rusted aerosol cans used by past volunteers still littered our backyard, unburnable. I began to think twice before I choosing to use or buy anything disposable. Our volunteer trash pit, in contrast to the overwhelming natural beauty of Tanzania, remains a lasting memory of the part I played in degrading the environment and my own need to change.

Some of our students who come back from immersion programs take shorter showers after experiencing the preciousness and scarcity of clean water. My colleague gave up plastic for Lent. These small behavioral changes are important, and institutional and systemic change attuned to environmental racism are urgent. As Pope Francis notes in *Laudato Si'*, marginalized communities often bear the disproportionate burden of environmental degradation.⁸ This year our students wrote letters with our community service partners in Philadelphia to oppose the construction of a polluting power plant in their neighborhood. The Mission Priority Examen recently conducted at SJU identified environmental justice and sustainability as mission priorities for the future. How can we individually, communally, and systematically work to bring about the radical reorientation needed to address environmental justice?

An ongoing, prophetic challenge

Fr. Sosa's letter ends by emphasizing a need to deepen processes of personal, communal, and institutional conversion. Change is hard. Changing individual habits and hearts is hard. Changing systems is harder. Change can be a messy and a graced space. Change can be a liminal place, the space between what was and what aches to come into being. Because of COVID-19 and the pressing cries for racial justice, we must change. Can we see the signs of these times as an

opportunity to change, to radical conversion, to prophetic imagination?

What might be our communal response to the Universal Apostolic Preferences? Can we continue to discern our call together as companions on this journey in Jesuit higher education? How might we act together as Jesuit institutions of higher

education to co-labor toward God's dream of true reconciliation, justice, and peace with God, ourselves, our neighbors, and all of creation? HJE

This reflection article is adapted and updated from a public reflection offered at Saint Joseph's University on the Feast of St. Ignatius, July 31, 2019.

Notes

¹ Society of Jesus, *Universal Apostolic Preferences*, <https://www.jesuits.global/uap/>

² Greg Boyle, S.J., *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 190.

³ Centers for Disease Control and Protection, "Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups," (July 24, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>.

⁴ Society of Jesus, *Universal Apostolic Preferences*.

⁵ Society of Jesus, *Universal Apostolic Preferences*.

⁶ Father Arturo Sosa, "Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, 2019-2029," letter to the Whole Society, February 19, 2019, https://www.jesuits.global/sj_files/2020/05/2019-06_19feb19_eng.pdf.

⁷ Exodus 3:5, NRSV

⁸ See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical Letter (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, no. 25.