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## Encountering Grace: A Theological Framework for Faculty and Staff Immersion Programs

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### Abstract

Many international and domestic immersion programs for faculty and staff at Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States have in common the goal of promoting participants' solidarity with poor and marginalized populations. These programs often understand solidarity as a pedagogical instrument: direct contact with human suffering provokes a desire to think and act differently in order to redress various forms of social inequity. This essay proposes that immersions can and should also be opportunities for engaging faculty and staff at Jesuit institutions of higher education in conversations about, and even experiences of, social grace. The article offers an overview and definition of social grace understood theologically as the remedy to social sin, outlines the characteristics of the faculty/staff immersion programs that identify it as a site for encountering social grace, and argues for the immersion as a privileged opportunity for forming faculty and staff, including those who do not identify as Catholic or Christian.

### Introduction

The essays in this special issue of *Jesuit Higher Education* explore the individual and communal experiences of participants in Loyola Marymount University's (LMU) annual Faculty/Staff Immersion program, which since 2015 has made it possible for employees of LMU to "travel outside the United States with particular attention to the needs of the poor and to gain a heightened awareness of the international dimension of Jesuit higher education and the opportunities it affords for global solidarity."<sup>1</sup> Solidarity, which Pope Saint John Paul II defined as "not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far" but rather as "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,"<sup>2</sup> recurs as a rationale for immersion programs sponsored by Jesuit colleges and universities. Santa Clara University's program, for example, seeks to "[s]trengthen understanding of and solidarity with marginalized communities."<sup>3</sup> The Ignatian Colleagues Program, the national formation program for administrators and faculty at Jesuit colleges and universities, likewise includes an immersion experience as part of its curriculum

for the purpose of "foster[ing] a well-educated solidarity and an appreciation of the Jesuit commitment to a faith that does justice."<sup>4</sup>

For institutions and programs like these, the emphasis on promoting solidarity through pedagogies that center on direct encounters with persons on the margins has its immediate origins in the address delivered by former Superior General of the Society of Jesus Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J. to the inaugural conference on the commitment to justice in Jesuit higher education that took place at Santa Clara University in 2000. In his remarks to the conferees, Kolvenbach memorably challenged the faculty and staff of Jesuit universities in the United States to "raise our educational standards" by reorienting our shared emphasis on whole-person education away from the student as individual and toward an understanding of the student as inextricably woven into social networks that always include the poor and marginalized. Moreover, education for solidarity, as Kolvenbach



Loyola Marymount  
University

Solidarity and  
Global Citizenship  
Collection

Reilly & Brown,  
*LMU Solidarity and  
Global Citizenship  
Collection: Introduction  
and Overview*

Snyder, *In Students We  
Trust: The Solidarity  
Generation*

Brown & Reilly,  
*Mission and  
Mundialización:  
Solidarity and Global  
Citizenship through  
Immersion Experience*

Reilly & Brown, *Seeing  
with New Eyes: Costa  
Rican Pilgrimage as  
Transformation*

Sebastian, *Encountering  
Grace: A Theological  
Framework for Faculty  
and Staff Immersion  
Programs*

Connelly, *A Long,  
Loving Look at the Real:  
An Experiential  
Ignatian Approach to  
Immersion*

Brown & Reilly,  
*Solidarity and Global  
Citizenship: A Photo  
Essay*

describes it, requires contact with the marginalized: “When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change. Personal involvement with innocent suffering, with the injustice others suffer is the catalyst for solidarity which then gives rise to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection.”<sup>5</sup> The many international and domestic immersion experiences for students that have become staples of campus ministry and study abroad programs across Jesuit campuses in the United States often trace their inspiration, whether directly or indirectly, to Kolvenbach’s pedagogy of solidarity as framed in his remarks to the audience at Santa Clara. To be clear, Fr. Kolvenbach did not inaugurate immersion programs with his speech. Santa Clara launched its Casa de la Solidaridad program as a praxis-centered learning experience in El Salvador ten years after six Jesuits affiliated with the Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” in San Salvador along with their housekeeper and her daughter were assassinated in 1989 by government-backed forces as a consequence of their advocacy on behalf of that country’s vast population of impoverished and oppressed persons.<sup>6</sup> Kolvenbach’s speech did, however, catalyze growth in justice-centered initiatives across Jesuit campuses including, at LMU, the establishment of curriculum-development and research grants for faculty who design courses or pursue research projects that explore the nexus of faith and justice. One natural consequence of Jesuit universities’ increased investment in student programs that emphasize contact with those living on the margins has been the development of companion programs for faculty and staff.<sup>7</sup> If a goal of Jesuit education, in Kolvenbach’s words, is to form students for “well-educated” solidarity, then immersions are one means for forming the formators, that is, the primarily lay faculty and staff who are our students’ first point of contact with the mission of our universities.

Within the context of immersion experiences, solidarity is itself a form a pedagogy, a tool for promoting learning through which we foster (1) understanding of worldviews different from those of many of our faculty and staff; (2) critical analysis of the mechanisms that enable social inequities to thrive; and (3) creative problem-solving aimed at remedying those inequities.

Faculty and staff who experience affective dissonance through direct encounters with human suffering may be provoked to seek out additional information, alter longstanding attitudes and opinions, or take action as a result. These outcomes align with the goals of the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm, which conceives of learning as movement through a dynamic cycle of five stages: context, experience, action, reflection, and evaluation. Within this framework, experience describes “any activity in which in addition to a cognitive grasp of the matter being considered, some sensation of an affective nature is registered by the student.”<sup>8</sup> The kinds of affective dissonance confronted by participants in immersions as they meet the realities of human suffering directly reflect this understanding of experience and in turn prompt action, defined within Ignatian pedagogy as both “interiorized choices,” such as when a person identifies the criteria according to which future decisions are to be made, and “choices externally manifested.”<sup>9</sup> Thus a participant in an immersion to Central America might return home having reevaluated longstanding opinions about U.S. immigration policy (interiorized choice) or decided to contact Congressional representatives to advocate on behalf of DACA recipients (choice externally manifested). Yet while solidarity is an effective pedagogical means of accomplishing the stated goals of immersion programs for faculty and staff at Jesuit institutions, I want to propose that immersions can also serve another purpose, namely, fostering discussions about, and perhaps even experiences of, social grace. Within Catholic teaching, grace, explained most simply as God’s gratuitous benevolence toward undeserving humankind, is treated as the counterpart to sin, the willful turning away from God by humans acting freely. For much of the history of Catholic theology, *individual* action and experience have been the arena for theorizing the workings of sin and grace, but it is now also commonplace to speak of sin and, to a lesser degree, grace as *social* phenomena. In what follows I provide an overview and definition of social grace understood theologically as the remedy to social sin before then delineating the characteristics of the faculty/staff immersion program that identify it as a site for encountering social grace. In doing so, I maintain that an immersion experience can serve as a privileged occasion for forming religiously

plural faculty and staff.<sup>10</sup> My goal is not to comment on the specific program at LMU—the other contributors to this issue will present plenty of material for reflection—but rather to provide a theological framing that highlights an underappreciated dimension of these programs and offers a lens for interpreting the experiences recounted in the journal.

### The Social Dimensions of Sin and Grace

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the unleashing of transformative forces and events that left Catholic theology forever changed in their wake as the Church—and indeed the world—came to understand in new ways the inescapable interdependence of persons, communities, and even nations. Among these changes, industrialization and the consequent degradation of working conditions; nationalism, with its awful culmination in the murder of six million Jews; and the rapid development of new technologies of mass destruction laid bare the insufficiency of traditional theologies of sin and grace limited in scope to the relationship between the individual Christian and God. Responding to the realities of the modern world, and borrowing the tools and methods of the social sciences then coming into their own, theologians began to argue that sin and grace could and should be defined and interpreted not only in their individual but also in their social dimensions. Most notably theologians of liberation embraced “reality” as the starting point for theological reflection on the nature of sin, which they not only located in the individual human response to freedom but also found embedded in social structures, systems, and institutions. The influence of this new theological emphasis within the realm of education is evident in an address from 1973 delivered by Pedro Arrupe, S.J., then Superior General of the Society of Jesus, to European alumni of Jesuit schools at a gathering in Valencia, Spain.<sup>11</sup> This speech is well known for bequeathing to Jesuit education the phrase “men for others,” which would go on to become the unofficial shorthand for describing graduates of Jesuit institutions. The tone of Arrupe’s address, however, was hardly uplifting. Straightaway, Arrupe lamented the failure of schools sponsored and operated by the Society of Jesus to educate their students for justice and proceeded to call for a revolution in Jesuit

education that would result in concrete social change. The context for Arrupe’s challenge to educators and students was his own reckoning with the undeniable reality of social sin. For Arrupe “the structures of this world—our customs; our social, economic, and political systems; our commercial relations; in general, the institutions we have created for ourselves—inssofar as they have injustice built into them, are all the concrete forms in which sin is objectified. They are the consequences of our sins throughout history, as well as the continuing stimulus and spur for further sin.”<sup>12</sup>

The social aspect of sin eventually became commonplace in theological reflection for the liberationists as well as for theologians of other stripes. But while a corresponding concept of social grace is frequently averred as the counterpart to social sin, actual theological discussions of social grace are less frequent and less robust than descriptions of the doctrine of social sin.<sup>13</sup> The primary problem is not the unevenness of the treatment that these two topics receive from theologians, although that difference is significant in and of itself; rather, it is the utter failure of most doctrines of social grace to mount a viable challenge to social sin. Social sin’s awesome, destructive potential, whether in the form of racism, sexism, poverty, political oppression, or violence to name but a few of its guises, is palpable, and we need not look far to observe its capacity for warping both individual persons and humankind in general. Social grace, by contrast, seems, as it is typically articulated, to lack the corresponding potency to transform and uplift humanity such that it is fortified against the power of social sin.

As a starting point for seeking a persuasive and sufficient theology of social grace as a response to social sin, I look to the theologians Karl Rahner and Leonardo Boff, whose writings present a roadmap for charting the development of social grace in the latter half of the twentieth century. Rahner’s restoration of grace to the realm of human nature, from which it had been exiled by his medieval and neo-Scholastic forebears, hints at grace’s social potential. Building on Rahner’s insights, Boff then argues that grace not only can but *must* be social and proclaims grace’s purpose in uncovering the dynamics of oppression. The

writings of these theologians mark two significant milestones in the history of grace's evolution from a strictly individual concern to an ineluctably social one.

### **Karl Rahner: The Universal Offer of Grace**

No theologian since the Council of Trent has done more to revolutionize Catholic understanding of the theology of grace than Karl Rahner (1904-1984). The German Jesuit established a new paradigm for thinking about grace that departed from the Scholastic model that had dominated Catholic doctrine until the middle of the twentieth century. Inspired by the so-called "turn to the subject" in modern philosophy best exemplified by the writings of Kant, Rahner reversed, as it were, the Scholastic model going back to Aquinas's *Summa* that had placed theology before anthropology and that sharply defined the boundary separating God from God's creatures.<sup>14</sup> Rahner's insistence on anthropology as the starting point for theological reflection consequently demanded a wholesale reevaluation of traditional teaching about sin and grace.

Rahner's specific rejection of what he calls "the average textbook-conception of the relationship between nature and grace"<sup>15</sup> turns on his critique of the extrinsicism that undergirds such formulations and holds that grace, by virtue of being supernatural and belonging properly to God, exists outside of human nature and can therefore only be imposed upon that human nature. Carried to its logical conclusion, this position is both absurd and tragic in Rahner's estimation and prompts him to muse wryly in an early essay:

if man, just so far as he experiences himself existentially by himself, is really nothing but pure nature, he is always in danger of understanding himself merely as a nature and of behaving accordingly. And then he will find God's call to him out of this human plane merely a disturbance, which is trying to force something upon him (however elevated this may be in itself) for which he is not made....<sup>16</sup>

Because grace within this framework stands apart from nature it is also necessarily separate from human experience, a position that Rahner deems untenable.

Indeed, he argues that it is precisely in the realm of human experience that we encounter grace. Rahner's elevation of experience comes across strikingly in the brief essay called "Reflections on Nature and Grace."<sup>17</sup> Rahner commences his meditation there with a bit of rhetorical flair in the form of a sequence of questions intended to elicit our recognition of the overlooked presence of grace in the ordinary experiences of our daily lives as he wonders:

Have we ever kept quiet, even though we wanted to defend ourselves when we had been unfairly treated? Have we ever forgiven someone even though we got no thanks for it and our silent forgiveness was taken for granted? Have we ever obeyed, not because we had to and because otherwise things would have become unpleasant for us, but simply on account of that mysterious, silent, incomprehensible being we call God and his will?<sup>18</sup>

Rahner continues in this vein at some length and discovers in moments such as these what he calls "the experience of eternity," that is, the recognition that the meaning of our human being is not constrained by the limits of what has value according to the standards of the world. Rahner describes "the hour of his [i.e., the Holy Spirit's] grace" as "when everything takes on the taste of death and destruction, or when everything disappears as if in an inexpressible, as it were white, colourless, and intangible beatitude."<sup>19</sup> For Rahner, running up against "the seemingly uncanny, bottomless depth of our existence as experienced by us" signals the arrival of God's self-disclosing communication, that is, an encounter with grace that transports us beyond what is familiar and this-worldly.<sup>20</sup> As the other essays in this issue of *JHE* attest, immersions often facilitate for their participants these kinds of encounters with the uncanny, even for those who may not be disposed at first to identify these moments as "grace-filled," according to the terms of traditional Catholic theology.

This brush with the eternal and uncanny is the basis of Rahner's transcendental theology. Rahner concludes that God's grace does not exist apart from nature but rather permeates it such that grace *is* God's self-communication, that is, "a communication for the sake of knowing and possessing God in immediate vision and love,"<sup>21</sup> with human being serving as the "event" of that self-communication. These insights find expression in Rahner's coining of the term "supernatural existential" (*das übernatürliche Existential*) to describe the grace-filled encounter. Influenced by Heidegger, Rahner deploys the idea of the supernatural existential to indicate that grace has its origin in God (hence supernatural) and is available universally and without restriction (hence existential). He writes, "Such an existential does not become merited and in this sense 'natural' by the fact that it is present in *all* men as an existential of their concrete existence, and is present prior to their freedom, their self-understanding and their experience."<sup>22</sup> The supernatural existential signals the universality of the encounter with grace, leading theologian Miguel Díaz to describe "the experience of grace as a permanent characteristic of the human condition" so that whatever pertains to human being does so "under the *offer* of grace."<sup>23</sup> Or, as Stephen J. Duffy, S.J., puts it: "Life in all its dimensions stands inextricably within a world of grace, whose presence and offer render humanity wholly other than it might be."<sup>24</sup> Although Rahner does not explicitly address grace operating within social structures, his universalism, that is, his insistence on grace's existential character and its availability always to all human beings without restriction or exception does not rule out grace as a social phenomenon nor as an experience accessible to those who do not identify as believers. In fact, Rahner's rejection of extrinsicism and elevating of experience as a legitimate venue for encountering grace paved the way for a subsequent generation of liberation theologians who would seize upon Rahner's insights into grace's accessibility through human experience to begin to outline grace's workings within history.

### Leonardo Boff: Liberating Grace

The claim that grace operates in social structures is made explicit in the work of Leonardo Boff (b.

1938), the Brazilian theologian of liberation whose censure by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in 1985 for the ecclesiology contained in his book *Church, Charism and Power* started him down a path that ultimately led to his decision to leave the Franciscans, the order he had joined in his early 20s.<sup>25</sup> For Boff and his peers in the first generation of Latin American liberation theologians, the development of the social sciences as academic disciplines provided new tools for investigating sin's operation not just in individuals but in social structures as well. However, while naming and critiquing sinful social structures became the essential starting point for liberation theology, understood as theological reflection on praxis, few of these Latin American theologians extended their discussion to a correlative concept of social grace. Boff was the major exception and in 1979 published a book-length study entitled *Liberating Grace*.<sup>26</sup>

Like Rahner, Boff begins with a critique of the neo-Scholastic manual tradition that had dominated discussions of grace during the first half of the twentieth century and that posited grace as an accident in the medieval sense of something *added* to, and therefore not *belonging* to, human nature (extrinsicism). For Boff by contrast, as for Rahner before him, grace is accessed through experience. While Boff is only occasionally explicit in acknowledging his debts to Rahner, he seems tacitly to channel the Jesuit in an early passage in *Liberating Grace* when he poses a series of evocative questions:

Have we not had the experience of keeping silent when we were misunderstood and could have justified ourselves? Have we not had the experience of remaining silent when we were deeply and unfairly cut to the quick? Have we not had the experience of pardoning in all sincerity and gratuitousness? Have we not sometimes followed our conscience and maintained our purity of heart when we could have relented and won some personal advantage thereby?<sup>27</sup>

For Boff, such experiences of grace re-orient human beings away from the things of this world and toward the transcendent.

But Boff also goes one step further than Rahner by noting that traditional articulations of grace fail to satisfy because they do not account for its social dimension. He remarks that because “classical reflection on grace did not pay sufficient attention to the social aspect of sin, it did not discuss justification in social and structural terms,” consequently, by limiting sin to the individual, the doctrine of justification became “an ideological support for those in power and those responsible for oppression.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, a limited view of sin as the act of an individual in response to human freedom enables sin to operate unnoticed and unchecked at a structural level. In place of a conception of grace abstracted from the realm of experience, Boff proposes a dialectic of grace and dis-grace. He describes dis-grace as a “lack of encounter, refusal to dialogue, and closing in upon oneself”<sup>29</sup> playing out in history. In an exceptionally pessimistic passage early in *Liberating Grace*, Boff pronounces history itself “the history of dis-grace in the world,” yet he clings to the certainty that “[n]o historical situation is so bad that it is pure oppression and leaves no room for grace.”<sup>30</sup> Grace always exists as a possible response to dis-grace. Building on Rahner’s theology, Boff understands grace as universal and omnipresent and decries theologies that lead us to “think that grace becomes present and operative only where it is talked about.”<sup>31</sup> Grace is present in history and discoverable in relationships. Indeed, for Boff to be human is to be connected to others: “Thus the social dimension is a web of relationships that constitute the very being of a person.”<sup>32</sup> The experience of grace, then, is necessarily social and expresses itself as a desire for liberation from the oppression of dis-grace.

### **Toward a Contemporary Theology of Social Grace: A Constructive Argument**

Notwithstanding his explicit liberationist agenda, Boff’s theology of grace maintains much of the transcendental character of the Rahnerian model that lurks everywhere just beneath its surface. Boff does not look to grace’s instantiation in specific social systems, preferring to speak about grace’s capacity for liberating humanity from oppression only in general terms with the result that sin often seems to have the upper hand in the dialectic. In the United States today, not to mention other parts of the world, we need not look far to find

the degrading and very concrete effects of social sin. The evidence is everywhere around us: in the widening gap between the nation’s wealthiest and poorest in the world’s richest economy; in the persistent stain of racism that limits opportunity for black and brown persons, justifies locking migrant children in cages, and enables and indeed empowers agents of the state to murder innocent persons of color; or in the rampant sexism that consigns women to earning less pay than their male counterparts, excuses sexual violence as the behavior of “boys being boys,” and leads to higher than average rates of suicide and attempted suicide among transgender youth. We may therefore ask with Margaret Ellen Burke: if social grace does indeed permeate all aspects of being human, as Rahner and Boff both claim, then “how can this grace be activated? How does one go about raising the consciousness of the membership to their manner of collusion, and to their corporate responsibility to take effective action?”<sup>33</sup> I want to suggest that the immersion offers one possibility for activating that grace for those of us committed to forming faculty and staff in Jesuit colleges and universities. In doing so, I build on both Rahner’s transcendental method and Boff’s liberationist model but give them more concrete form by drawing on additional insights borrowed from scholars whose work is commonly treated under the heading of U.S. Latinx or Hispanic theology. Specifically, I argue that institutions, structures, and programs like immersions can be conduits of social grace when they are hopeful, liberating, and communal.

***Social grace must be hopeful.*** By this I mean that grace must be encountered in the present and not merely postponed to the future eternal. Both Rahner and Boff stress that grace must not be alien to what it means to be human. Rahner’s universalism, reflected in the concept of the “supernatural existential,” and Boff’s insistence on grace’s discovery in the unfolding of history ground not only individual but also social grace, which is encountered in and through human experience. It is important, however, that when speaking about social grace as a response to social sin that the former is not reduced merely to the redemptive power of suffering. Christianity, which holds as its central symbol the broken body of an innocent man put to death by corrupt agents of state power, is always at risk of over-valoring the

righteousness that redounds to those who suffer unjustly in this world while deferring justice to the next, when all shall be made right. For a theology of social grace to be meaningful, we must have a reasonable expectation of experiencing it in the unfolding of the present.

Nancy Pineda-Madrid takes just such a position in her study of femicide in Ciudad Juárez and of what the horrific violence done to girls and women along the U.S.-Mexico border can tell us about salvation. She enumerates the shortcomings of theologies of salvation grounded in the atonement theory that Anselm of Canterbury proposed a millennium ago and that continues to dominate Catholic soteriology despite the fact that, in her estimation, it places too much emphasis on the crucified Christ at the expense of the ministering Christ or the resurrected Christ.<sup>34</sup> Pineda-Madrid is quick to reject the connection between the brutal oppression of the disregarded victims of femicide and the redemptive suffering of Jesus on the cross and argues instead that the torture inflicted on the bodies of women should provoke action to improve conditions in the here and now instead of empty promises of a better deal in the next life. She has shown that as the women of Ciudad Juárez have for the last several decades engaged in public forms of resistance meant to challenge and transform the political, social, and economic forces that seek their oppression, their goal has been immediate salvation, not salvation deferred to the eschaton. The purpose of resistance enacted by the survivors and family members of victims of femicide—whether in the form of protests, marches, or the erection of the now-iconic pink crosses intended to commemorate the disappeared and discarded and also to draw attention to the complicity of state power—is to “point toward the insight that salvation cannot be understood as only a future reality that lies beyond this lifetime.”<sup>35</sup> They protest to bring attention not only to the suffering of local girls and women but also to what is at best the indifference and at worst the complicity of local authorities, all for the sake of authentic, liberating change. Hope that the world *can* change in the near term—and we along with it—is a sign of grace’s operation. Pineda-Madrid’s analysis of femicide finds a parallel with Boff’s citation of several instances of biblical couples who face the disappointment of infertility

only to be rewarded for their faith with the unexpected gift of children. Protracted suffering culminates in miraculous conception, which is experienced as a sign of God’s grace. For Boff, “if grace is to be experienced as grace, it must break in as the crowning culmination of some effort, some quest, some pain-filled hope.”<sup>36</sup>

***Social grace must be liberating.*** This feature of social grace is related to hopefulness. Social grace, to be grace, must be operative in institutions and structures that have liberation as their aim. Liberation in this sense can take place in the realm both of consciousness and of action. For an example of the former, we can look to how our colleges and universities endeavor to form our graduates for an orientation toward social justice. Curricula that emphasize the interconnectedness of all persons in a globalized world, that teach analytical skills that enable the disclosing of the dynamics of oppression, and that require students to interrogate the sources of their own political, cultural, social, and religious values and assumptions can convey grace when they elevate students’ consciousness of social sin and prompt conversion toward attitudes and mindsets that value liberation. Social grace also manifests in structures that promote social transformation through action. The Black Lives Matter movement in the United States exemplifies the kind of institutionalized social grace that conscientizes society about the history and present-day oppressive dynamics of racism embedded deep in the social, economic, and political structures that inhere within the fabric of a nation, whose oldest institution involved the enslavement of kidnapped native Africans and their descendants for the purpose of dismantling those very structures once and for all. In other words, social grace is recognizable in institutions that, in addition to alleviating suffering in the present, seek actively to forestall future suffering by continuously striving to disrupt unjust systems designed to guarantee that the cycle of suffering always begins anew. Thus, Boff opines, “If a theology is to be meaningful to people today, particularly in Latin America, then it must indicate how grace is revealed in its social, liberative dimension and how it criticizes and un.masks those in power.”<sup>37</sup>

***Finally, social grace is communal.*** U.S. Hispanic theology marks out the community as a



privileged locus for the workings of grace to such a degree that “neither the reality of grace nor its recipient are conceived in individualistic terms....”<sup>38</sup> Miguel Díaz has observed that the drive toward community as the site of grace’s activity begins with Rahner, whose anthropology, by restoring grace to the realm of the human, eventually if perhaps unintentionally gives rise to so-called “contextual theologies” that take “very seriously that God can only reveal what particular and historical humanity can perceive.”<sup>39</sup> But such theologies also look beyond Rahner’s universalism to the particularities of human experience as mediated through community and what Díaz calls “created reality.”<sup>40</sup> This focus on particularity, context, and reality leads Díaz to the conclusion that “while both Rahnerian and U.S. Hispanic anthropological visions correlate personal and communal dimensions of human reality, Rahner stresses the individual, whereas U.S. Hispanic theology give priority to community.”<sup>41</sup> The implications of a theology that finds grace in community extend, moreover, beyond anthropology to ecclesiology. Natalia M. Imperatori-Lee thus argues that the insights gleaned from U.S. Hispanic theology disrupt the very notion of the unity of the Church by gesturing toward the variety of Catholicisms woven together to form the complex tapestry of the U.S. Church.<sup>42</sup> While not addressing grace specifically, Imperatori-Lee’s dictum that “the contents of theology cannot be determined from preestablished discourses but only from the lived and reflected historical expressions of the faith of the people” nevertheless implies that grace finds its expression within community.<sup>43</sup>

Social sin and social grace are no mere constructs. They are not simply the product of academic debate unmoored from human reality. On the contrary, their ebb and flow of sorrow and joy play out each day in an endless progression. We witness the effects of social sin in the form of oppression, suffering, and the denaturing of human being itself everywhere around us. To be legitimate, any corresponding theology of social grace must be able to go toe to toe with social sin, to meet its degradations of the human body and spirit by ennobling the human body and spirit, to replace bondage with love as the connective tissue uniting humans one to another and the human family as a whole to God not as Lord but as Love.

Grace seeks transformation now. For grace to be social, it must therefore be hopeful, liberating, and communal.

### **Conclusion: Social Grace and the Faculty/Staff Immersion**

I noted earlier the relative paucity of compelling theological articulations of social grace that seemed up to the task of answering to the destructive power of social sin evident in structures and systems like racism, sexism, poverty, political violence, and ideological oppression. Two classic twentieth-century accounts of the inherently social character of grace, one grounded in theological transcendentalism and the other rooted in the theology of liberation, provided a framework for sketching a theology of social grace appropriate for today. Influenced by U.S. Hispanic theology of the new millennium, I then put forward three requirements for social grace. Social grace is (1) hoped for in the present and not merely expected at some distant and deferred moment of redemption, (2) aimed always at liberation through the unmasking of sin, and (3) rooted in the experience and expression of communities. Structures, institutions, systems, and movements that meet these criteria, I maintain, hold out the possibility of renewal for society. Grace must break into our world here and now to uncover and disrupt the operations of sin so that we may begin the slow work of bringing about the Kingdom of God.

Measured according to these standards, immersion programs can lead participants not only to solidarity, to a sense of compassionate identification and camaraderie with those on the margins, but to the grace that stands over and against sin’s manifold expression in concrete social structures. Given the religious pluralism of our campuses, however, is it realistic to foreground an encounter with grace as a selling point for immersion experiences aimed at faculty and staff for whom grace may be an unfamiliar and even potentially alienating idea? By way of conclusion I would argue that the immersion is an ideal occasion for inviting faculty and staff of differing faith traditions and of no faith tradition at all to become curious about our schools’ Catholic identity. Karl Rahner and Leonardo Boff

both insist that God places no limits on who can experience grace, which is available everywhere and at all times to all persons. (Recall that Boff specifically calls in for criticism those theologians who believe that grace can only operate where it is talked about.) Unlike undergraduate students who participate in immersions and will typically have had some introduction to Catholicism through required courses in theology and other disciplines that occupy privileged places in our core curricula, the immersion may be the first and only occasion for engaging faculty in conversations about Catholic theology, not for the purpose of proselytizing but for the sake of deepening their appreciation of the Catholic tradition so that they may serve as collaborators in preserving and transmitting that tradition to the future generations of students. Taking a page from Rahner and Boff, we might then ask of our faculty and staff, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, both during and following their immersion experiences: have we ever marveled at the profound and unflappable faith in the goodness of God on the part of people who have every reason to curse God's name on account of the unspeakable injuries that they have suffered? Have we ever had the experience of moving toward the margins only to realize that when we do so the margins begin to disappear?<sup>44</sup> Have we ever had a conversation with a stranger that somehow manages to make our own lives feel suddenly alien to us? If we have, then we may just have intuited what theologians have struggled to articulate: the sense of being broken and remade in an encounter we might describe as uncanny, mysterious, or perhaps even grace-filled. HJE

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Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Loyola Marymount University, “Faculty/Staff Immersion,” accessed December 20, 2020, <https://mission.lmu.edu/programsandevents/facultystaffimmersion/>.
- <sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, Encyclical Letter* (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987), accessed December 20, 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html).
- <sup>3</sup> Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, “Faculty/Staff Immersions,” accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/immersions/facultystaff-immersions/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Ignatian Colleagues Program, “International Immersion,” accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.ignatiancolleagues.org/immersion-experience>.
- <sup>5</sup> Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education,” 2000, accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-worldview/kolvenbach/>.
- <sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the solidarity- and praxis-centered pedagogy pioneered at the Casa, see Kevin Yonkers-Talz, “Casa de la Solidaridad: A Pedagogy of Solidarity” (Ph.D. diss., University of San Francisco, 2013). The Casa de la Mateada sponsored by Loyola Marymount University and the University of San Francisco’s Casa Bayanihan replicated the Casa de la Solidaridad’s praxis-based pedagogy in Argentina and the Philippines, respectively. Sadly, none of the three Casa programs remain in operation today.
- <sup>7</sup> While many of the observations contained in this essay can also be applied to immersion programs designed for students, my focus throughout is on the immersion as a tool for faculty and staff formation.
- <sup>8</sup> International Center for Jesuit Education, “Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach,” 1993, accessed December 20, 2020, <http://jesuitinstitute.org/Pages/IgnatianPedagogy.htm>, para. 42.
- <sup>9</sup> “Ignatian Pedagogy,” para. 62a-b.
- <sup>10</sup> And it is here that I must acknowledge my own shortcomings: I am not a trained theologian, although I have studied theology within the academy at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. My expertise, such as it is, in offering these reflections comes from my experience as a mission officer at two Jesuit universities for the last six years and as someone whose own experience participating in an immersion with other faculty and staff from Jesuit universities had a profound impact on my sense of vocation and enabled my own experience of God’s grace. I am also grateful to Dr.

Karen Enriquez, who *is* a trained theologian at Loyola Marymount University, for serving as an invaluable conversation partner as I worked through some of the arguments about social grace articulated in this essay.

- <sup>11</sup> Pedro Arrupe, S.J., “Men for Others,” 1973, accessed December 20, 2020, [https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1973\\_arrupemenforothers/](https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1973_arrupemenforothers/).
- <sup>12</sup> Arrupe, “Men for Others.”
- <sup>13</sup> Tellingly, the section on social grace in Roger Haight’s essay on sin and grace in a major textbook on systematic theology includes noticeably fewer references to existing literature than the corresponding section on social sin. See Roger Haight, “Sin and Grace,” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 418-25. More recently, however, U.S. Hispanic theologians, including Miguel Díaz, Nancy Pineda-Madrid, and Cecilia González-Andrieu have increasingly turned to social grace as a response to oppression. I draw on several of their contributions below.
- <sup>14</sup> Karl Rahner, “Theology and Anthropology,” in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Graham Harrison, vol. 9 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), 28-45.
- <sup>15</sup> Karl Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,” in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Cornelius Ernst vol. 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 298.
- <sup>16</sup> Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,” 300. Miguel Díaz observes that the context for Rahner’s critique of extrinsicism is, in fact, the secularism that had come to define Rahner’s own present and that Díaz defines as “the alienation of God from everyday experience, whether individually or communally conceived.” Miguel H. Díaz, *On Being Human: U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 118. From the perspective of modern secularism, theological extrinsicism risks widening the gap between God and ordinary experience.
- <sup>17</sup> Karl Rahner, “Reflections on the Experience of Grace,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, trans. Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967).
- <sup>18</sup> Rahner, “Reflections,” 87.
- <sup>19</sup> Rahner, “Reflections,” 89.
- <sup>20</sup> Rahner, “Reflections,” 89.
- <sup>21</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 117-118.
- <sup>22</sup> Rahner, *Foundations*, 127. For a discussion of *das übernatürliche Existential*, see also Stephen J. Duffy, S.J., “Experience of Grace,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl*

Rahner, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 46.

<sup>23</sup> Díaz, *On Being Human*, 88 (emphasis original).

<sup>24</sup> Duffy, “Experience of Grace,” 51.

<sup>25</sup> See Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. John W. Dierckxmeier (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1985). The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under the leadership of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger took aim in part at the very premise of Boff’s method, namely, that reflection on the nature of the Church ought to start from concrete reality, in Boff’s case the reality of the Church in Brazil. For Ratzinger, Boff’s emphasis on the particular (the Brazilian Church as *locus theologicus*) undermines the stature of the Church universal: “The universal Church develops and lives in the particular Churches, and these form a Church, while remaining expressions and realizations of the universal Church in a determined time and place so that the universal Church grows and progresses in the growth and development of the particular Churches; whereas the particular Church would diminish and decay if unity diminished. Therefore true theological reasoning ought never to be content only to interpret and animate the reality of a particular Church, but rather should try to penetrate the contents of the sacred deposit of God’s word entrusted to the Church and authentically interpreted by the Magisterium.” Of praxis, another hallmark of the liberationist method, Ratzinger observes that it “neither replaces nor produces the truth, but remains at the service of the truth consigned to us by the Lord.” See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Notification on the Book “Church: Charism and Power” by Father Leonardo Boff O.F.M.,” March 11, 1985, accessed June 29, 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19850311\\_notif-boff\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19850311_notif-boff_en.html). See also Harvey Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff: The Vatican and the Future of World Christianity* (Oak Park: Meyer-Stone Books, 1988).

<sup>26</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*, trans. John Drury (New York: Orbis Books, 1979).

<sup>27</sup> Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 90. As with the corresponding passage in Rahner, Boff’s litany of questions continues for some time. Boff only passingly addresses the Rahnerian “supernatural existential” (13).

<sup>28</sup> Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 14, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 4, 83.

<sup>31</sup> Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 142.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret Ellen Burke, “Social Sin and Social Grace,” *The Way Supplement* (January 1996), 41.

<sup>34</sup> Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 121.

<sup>36</sup> Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 94.

<sup>37</sup> Boff *Liberating Grace*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> Díaz, *On Being Human*, 113.

<sup>39</sup> Díaz, *On Being Human*, 108.

<sup>40</sup> Díaz, *On Being Human*, 123.

<sup>41</sup> Díaz, *On Being Human*, 129.

<sup>42</sup> Natalia M. Imperatori-Lee, “Unsettled Accounts: Latino/a Theology and the Church in the Third Millennium,” in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015). And here we might recall Ratzinger’s condemnation of Boff on precisely the grounds that Boff’s liberationist method threatened to undermine the unity of the universal Church by taking the local Church as its *locus theologicus*.

<sup>43</sup> Imperatori-Lee, “Unsettled Accounts,” 58.

<sup>44</sup> For the image of moving toward the margins until the margins are erased, see Greg Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 190.