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

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Cover Page Footnote

A word of thanks: The gift of spiritual friendship has been a deep and wonderful blessing of this experience. Through my work within the Jesuit network I have come to know and befriend a new generation of committed people striving to live an intentional life in the midst of all of the ups and downs of our times. Many have small children, bills to pay, student loans to worry about, and the ever changing and increasingly uncertain and unnerving state of our nation and world. But they continue to show up and are truly whole persons of solidarity for the real world. In a special way I am thankful for the friendship of Kat Brown, Patrick Furlong, and Dino Entac who have gone to great lengths to make me feel at home and among family at Loyola Marymount University.



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

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Abstract

International travel is a popular and widespread practice among higher education institutions, but the pedagogy and approach to these programs varies widely. The Center for Global Education and Experience at Augsburg University facilitates international immersion programs for U.S. students, faculty, and staff focused on social justice and solidarity; this approach is particularly attractive to Jesuit institutions and has led to fruitful collaborations. This article offers an experienced immersion facilitator's personal reflections on designing and implementing immersion programs and applies key themes of Ignatian spirituality and pedagogy to the experience of international immersion travel.

Introduction

I have always been an auditory learner with a knack for memorizing dialogue from movies, full poems I have heard recited, or powerful statements that seem to roll off the speaker's tongue and hit you in the gut with their truth and beauty. One clear example of this happened some sixteen years ago while I was studying liberation theology in El Salvador with the one-of-a-kind Sister Peggy O'Neill, S.C. A longtime peacemaker and activist in Central America, Sister Peggy filled her entire course with one memorable and moving story, anecdote, and poem after another.¹ But when she shared Fr. Walter Burghardt, S.J.'s description of prayer as "a long, loving look at the real,"² it truly landed in me. I loved that definition then, and I love the way that it has continued to deepen and ripen in my life.

Since 2006, I have had the immense pleasure of working as part of the Central American team at the Center for Global Education and Experience (CGEE) at [Augsburg University](http://www.augsburg.edu), leading experiential immersions trips in Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua—the last of which has now become my home.³ As a coordinator and facilitator with CGEE, I have led dozens of immersions with students, faculty, staff, and administrators from Jesuit universities from

across the United States. As I have grown and matured both in years and in my own vocation, Burghardt's articulation of contemplative prayer has come to express a profound definition of how I view spirituality as well as immersions. I have spent a lot of my time over the past years developing and implementing what might be called an experiential Ignatian approach to immersion work. What follows is a description of such an approach, how participation in this type of experience has helped me to grow and deepen my own understanding of vocation, and what meaning and impacts these types of experiences can have on participants personally and institutionally.

Encountering the Real: A Personal Testament

For much of my late teens and early adult years, I imagined that my future and my vocation would lie in vowed religious life. I was the product of a Franciscan upbringing that included a dynamic and inclusive parish life, and which led first to my decision to live in an intentional community with the

Franciscan Volunteer Ministry at the St. Francis Inn in Philadelphia as a gap year after high school, and then on to Siena College in New York State, where I studied Theology and Religious Studies. In many ways, I viewed these years as preparation for a vocation in Franciscan life; I planned to enter the Order of Friars Minor after graduation.

International immersion and study abroad would, however, significantly change the course of my life. After a week-long immersion focused on human rights in Guatemala, I was a new man. It changed the focus of everything I wanted to do. I would have been hard-pressed at the time to describe exactly what had happened to me, but I knew I was transformed and wanted more. I am eternally grateful to my dear friend and mentor, Br. Brian Belanger O.F.M., the Director of Study Abroad at Siena College, for encouraging my thirst for travel and for pushing me in the direction of Central America; it was through him that I learned about CGEE at Augsburg, and chose to study abroad for a semester in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

That semester studying abroad deepened my love for the region; my passion for the issues of social justice, solidarity, and liberation theology; and my desire for more time and experience in the region. I was, as the great Fr. Dean Brackley, S.J. said to countless U.S. citizens participating in immersion in El Salvador over the years, “ruined for life” by the impact of the experience.⁴ A few months before graduation from Siena College, I remained on track to enter the Franciscans that summer, but little by little I became aware that something did not feel right. About this same time, I was offered a position with the Center for Global Education and Experience in Central America, my dream job, and Brother Brian once again encouraged me to pursue the opportunity. That was in 2006, and what I expected to be a single year in Central America turned out to be my entire adult life. Like many before and after me, I continued to fall in love with the overwhelming generosity and hospitality of the Central American people, the rich cultural and natural beauty, and eventually the woman who is now my wife. I currently live full time in Nicaragua and have spent the last fifteen years coordinating and leading immersion trips in the region.

In my role with CGEE, I share the transformative experience of traveling and learning in Central America with visitors from U.S. schools: primarily undergraduate students, but also high school students, graduate students, faculty, and staff. When I am working with a delegation—engaged with the participants in all of their excitement, discomfort, hunger for knowledge, overflowing empathy and compassion, their desire to create change and see a better world—I feel that I am completely in my element: that I have found my purpose.

This experience is particularly powerful when with working with Jesuit institutions. In my experience, collaboration with Jesuit schools and colleges allows me to live out my vocation and operate from my deepest truth; in this way, my work becomes ministry. Accompanying students, faculty, and staff from Jesuit universities offers me the opportunity to take part in this process of educating and forming human beings for others. I believe this deep resonance between immersion work and Jesuit education is rooted in the principles of Ignatian spirituality and pedagogy.

In the following sections I will elaborate on the role that international immersion plays in the life of both students and employees at Jesuit institutions, as well as how these experiences serve as an ideal birthing ground for deep understanding of the Ignatian tradition and what it is calling each of us to be in the world. I argue that Jesuit institutions occupy a unique position to be at the forefront of this work, and that their tradition and heritage bring a language and clarity around their mission and values that particularly enriches the immersion experience. First, however, I will discuss the origins and philosophy of the Center for Global Education and Experience at Augsburg University and its approach to international immersion.

Community and Praxis: The Center for Global Education and Experience

In 2020, the Center for Global Education and Experience celebrated its fortieth birthday since its founding in 1980. While that sounds like ancient history to many of the undergraduate students I accompany, many faculty and staff members are able to personally recall the realities facing Latin

America in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and understand both the importance and the boldness of the decision to form a Center whose main function was to be exposing U.S. citizens to the lived realities on the ground in Mexico and Central America during those brutal years of state repression and violence. Oscar Romero was named Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, and the years between his rise to that position and his murder in 1980 witnessed a steady increase in governmental repression and the killing of thousands of students, union workers, and people of faith.

As testified by many of the speakers and communities we visit in the region, the early 1980s were a particularly violent period. In the case of Guatemala and El Salvador, 1983 was among the most violent and brutal years of the wars; in Nicaragua, now my home country, U.S.-funded Contra forces attacked the revolutionary process of the Sandinistas. In this context, and as a response to these exact conditions, the Center for Global Education and Experience was founded with the mandate and deep belief in the importance of U.S. citizens coming to see these realities with their own eyes. The mission of CGEE was to provide the opportunity for U.S. citizens to hear testimony directly from the affected people; to feel the ache, the despair, the stench of loss, and utter lack of control that the people felt in the face of such crushing poverty and violence—realities that are impossible to capture in a news report, much less a Congressional report, and which must be encountered directly and without mediation to be understood.

From the earliest years of its existence, CGEE's work has been rooted in the work of Brazilian educator and activist Paolo Freire, best known for his influential work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.⁵ The life and legacy of Freire have shaped CGEE's work in multiple ways, but three essential Freirean insights have had a direct impact on every group with which we work: first, that the best learning is done in community; second, that we are all teachers and learners; and third, the use of the circle of praxis as a methodological tool for immersion experience as well as in personal and collective life and work.⁶

The first two principles above are fairly commonplace in higher education today, but they were transformative in Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. This pedagogy and methodology can be seen, for example, in the communities of faith and of resistance that emerged throughout Latin America in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and the meeting of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia in 1968.⁷ The implementation of these principles had profound impact on Catholic priests, sisters, and missionaries in the region, as they realized that not only did each person have their own story to tell, but that each also could offer a particular understanding of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The practice of actively listening to peasants and the poor reflecting on scripture, of hearing what it meant in their lives and how they saw their reality reflected in it, and of understanding how the narratives of Exodus and the gospels serve as an inspiration for liberation and for community organizing all significantly impacted what it meant to minister in the region and what the local priorities of an order like the Society of Jesus ought to be.

Immersion is a unique and perhaps perfect space to integrate the focus on communal learning due to the inescapably collective nature of the experience. While moments of solitude are key to a good immersion experience, the majority of time will be spent communally by necessity: sharing meals, riding on the bus, daily check-ins and reflections, and perhaps most importantly, the common experience of visiting people, organizations, and communities to share stories and interactions. Accordingly, at the start of each trip, facilitators should be intentional about focusing on the community dynamic of the group.

As a facilitator, I begin by inviting each individual to share a bit about their background, their family, their interests and passions, and why they chose to come on this trip. As part of this process, I frequently open immersion experiences with two questions from poet Adrienne Rich: "With whom do you believe your lot is cast? From where does your strength come?"⁸ I can see participants young and old consider these questions in their heads and hearts as they begin to journal. This is an intentional step: from the start, immersion

participants are asking deep questions, not only about the country they are visiting but also about themselves. When we return to the circle and participants begin to share, we tend to be overwhelmed by the depth and richness of responses. We are excited to learn more about our fellow travelers, and also see clearly what should be obvious but often is not: we are all different, each bringing our own stories and experiences, pains and joys to the experience. Each visit, each speaker, each moment of community engagement will be experienced differently by each participant.

Naming our positionality is key to fully engaging in the communal experience. At the most basic level, we make a commitment to openness and to avoid making assumptions. Another takeaway, however, is the realization that our experience will be greatly *enriched* by the diverse perspectives of the participants; the community will contribute to our experience and our understanding of it in a way that is simply impossible to achieve were we to travel to the destination alone.

This experience of highlighting the subject and the importance of the individual in relationship to the community helps to emphasize Freire's point that we are all simultaneously teachers and learners.⁹ Yes, there are chaperones, guides, and student leaders who hold a certain level of authority and expertise, but inevitably, each one of us in a given immersion will learn from the other. This concept is particularly important to highlight at the program's start, because this sense of mutuality and solidarity must be extended not only to our fellow group members but to the community partners with whom we meet. And, while participants do meet with academics and formally-recognized experts with impressive curricula vitae, it is critical that we also acknowledge that the voices of those who lack formal education have equal value and potential to instruct. Indeed, my long experience has demonstrated that the most educational and transformative experiences frequently come from those with the least formal education.

A key element of Freire's community work is the "circle of praxis," which was an essential tool in the pastoral work in Central American Christian base communities and the liberation theology movement.¹⁰ This four-step process has also been

a key part of CGEE's work for forty years. The steps proceed as follows: 1) see, 2) judge, 3) act, and 4) celebrate. In other words, communities—or in our case the participants in an immersion—have a collective experience, then come together to reflect on that experience; finally, in light of their personal and collective reflection and analysis, participants take action steps in their lives. At each step in this process, our invitation is to take a long, loving look at the real, as we ask ourselves and one another, "What is the reality of what we have experienced?" In the context of international immersions, I tend to emphasize which concrete action steps participants may take upon returning to their home country and local communities.

The Jesuit Connection: Ignatian Spirituality and Immersion

In light of CGEE's founding mission and principles, it is not surprising that U.S. Jesuit universities would cross paths with the Center and its work; the mission, pedagogy, and methodology of each are aligned, and from CGEE's earliest programs the synergy with Jesuit education was evident. CGEE has received students from Jesuit schools and colleges all over the United States in its semester long programs. In 2007, then-President of the University of San Francisco Fr. Steve Privett, S.J. decided that if the senior leaders in his cabinet were truly to understand him and his vision, they needed to have an experience in the developing world. He and his team traveled to Nicaragua with CGEE and thus began a new chapter of collaboration with staff and faculty groups.¹¹ CGEE has hosted multiple cohorts of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities' Ignatian Colleagues Program in both El Salvador and Nicaragua, and has run short-term trips for students, faculty, and staff from Boston College, Fordham University, John Carroll University, Loyola Marymount University, Santa Clara University, Seattle University, St. Joseph's University, the University of San Francisco, and Xavier University.

The mission of Jesuit education and the type of immersion program CGEE offers resonate deeply with one another. In this section, I explore in more detail the alignment of Jesuit values, particularly as they are expressed in the tradition

of Ignatian spirituality, with the community- and praxis-based approach to international immersions that shapes my work and the programs of the CGEE. I also offer a few ideas and observations on how these principles might be incorporated into Jesuit institutions' immersion programs.

There are many connections between immersion programs, especially those that use praxis- and experientially-based approaches, and Ignatian principles. For example, delegations from Jesuit affiliated institutions could structure their programs around the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm.¹² In this discussion, however, I propose using the popular formulations of Ignatian spirituality offered by Fr. James Martin, S.J. in his book *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*.¹³

Martin's framework, and the book overall, is especially helpful in this context for two reasons. First, Martin's descriptions of the primary themes of Ignatian spirituality map neatly onto an immersion experience. Immersions provide clear and immediate examples of each of the four themes, and the categories can help participants process their experiences. Second, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything* is an engaging and easily-understood introduction to Jesuit identity and Ignatian spirituality. After I received a copy from a participant in a previous immersion group, the text has rarely left my book bag, and I refer to it frequently when engaging with groups from Jesuit institutions. My own Franciscan background meant I had limited familiarity with the Ignatian tradition, and some immersion participants have also not had much experience with Ignatian spirituality beforehand. Like me, many participants find Martin's approach to be helpful and informative, including students, faculty, and staff of different faith commitments (and none at all). Based on my experience, I encourage organizers of immersion programs from Jesuit institutions to consider using this book as reading to prepare participants, as a way of becoming more familiar with Ignatian concepts and providing a baseline level of knowledge across the group. The themes discussed below can also be a framework for organizing activities or reflections before, during, and after the trip.

In *The Jesuit Guide*, Martin describes four key characteristics of Jesuit identity or spirituality:

finding God in all things, being contemplatives in action, looking at the world in an incarnational way, and finally the search for freedom and detachment.¹⁴ I will discuss each characteristic in turn.

God in All Things

Simply reading or hearing the phrase "God in all things" has a liberative quality to it. It immediately challenges us to expand our vision, to liberate ourselves and our spirituality from being small and limited. It also invites us to consider a spirituality not of original sin, but rather of fundamental goodness. If God is good, seeing God in all things reminds us that all of creation and all of humanity hold that basic beautiful goodness and worth. As George Traub, S.J., drawing on Howard Gray, S.J., puts it:

Practice attentiveness to what is really there. Let that person or poem or social injustice or scientific experiment become for you as genuinely itself as it can be. Then reverence what you see and hear and feel; appreciate it in its uniqueness. Before you judge and or assess or respond, give yourself time to esteem and accept what is there in the other. If you learn to be attentive and reverent, then you will find devotion, the singularly moving way in God works in that situation, revealing goodness and fragility, beauty and truth, pain and anguish, wisdom and ingenuity.¹⁵

I find myself returning to this invitation frequently. (The passage above may be helpful to reflect upon with a group at the start of an immersion.)

My years of living in Central America have offered countless experiences of people living out these concepts and characteristics in the most organic ways. The *Misa Campesina Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Popular Mass) by Nicaraguan composer and singer Carlos Mejia Godoy, based in the gospel reflections of the Nicaraguan priest and poet Father Ernesto Cardenal, offers a wonderful depiction of this incarnational divinity embodied in the daily lives of the Nicaraguan people in "Vos

so el Dios de los pobres” (“You are the God of the poor”), the entrance song of the Mass:

You are the God of the poor,
the God who is human and humble,
the God who sweats in the street,
the God with a calloused face.
That’s why I speak to you, in the same
way I speak to my people –
For you are the God who labors, you are
Christ the worker.
I’ve seen you in a corner store, doing
business in a street vendor’s stand,
and I’ve seen you selling lottery tickets
full of pride and dignity.
I’ve seen you in the gas station checking
the tires of a truck,
and even asphaltting highways wearing
leather gloves and overalls.¹⁶

The profundity and beauty of the lyrics become even deeper and expand to include the entire Cosmos as the Mass arrives at the proclamation of faith, the *Credo*:

I firmly believe, Lord,
that from your lavish mind
this whole world was born,
that from your artistic hand
beauty blossomed:
the stars and the moon,
the little houses, the lagoons,
the boats sailing
over the river to the sea,
the immense coffee plantations,
white fields filled with cotton,
and the mutilated forests, destroyed
by the criminal axe.

I believe in you,
architect engineer,
craftsman carpenter
bricklayer and steel worker.
I believe in you,
thought builder, creator
of music and the wind,
of peace and love.¹⁷

This text has particular meaning for me. For many years I attended Mass with immersion participants in the historic Batahola neighborhood of Managua, where countless CGEE students have

experienced urban homestays. The Cultural Center of Batahola Norte and its Sunday celebration of Mass are among the few spaces that continue to sing this moving and truly revolutionary music on a weekly basis.¹⁸ There is no replacement or even approximation of the physical sensation one feels while listening and singing those powerful words, gazing from one side to the other and watching the scenes of the barrio that are visible from the open-air liturgical space and of the vibrant and living faith of the people.

Such an experience brings Freire’s concept of everyone and everything being teachers and learners into conversation with the Ignatian invitation to see even the most mundane experiences of an immersion as an opportunity to find the sacred in our midst, the divine in all of humanity and creation.¹⁹ It also invites us to expand our boundaries and bring a more loving and embracing voice to encounters on the immersion that might challenge our beliefs and ideas, or that make us uneasy or uncomfortable. If we are truly able to see God in all things, it becomes more difficult to write someone off or simply regard them as Other. Rather, it forces us to go deeper in our analysis and understanding of each person’s truth and context. This push to look past first impressions and seek to understand is central to the immersion experience.

Contemplatives in Action

The practice and ability to see God in all things is deepened through the practice of contemplative reflection that CGEE incorporates on our trips, and which leads us to Martin’s second characteristic of Jesuit identity: to be a contemplative in action.

The ancient ideas of “mindfulness” and “contemplative practice” have re-entered the cultural lexicon in recent years. I have been pleasantly surprised to hear these terms referenced by endurance athletes, CEOs, and of course people of faith and spiritual practitioners of many traditions. Faculty and institutions are also beginning to speak about the use of contemplative pedagogy.²⁰ In the midst of a world that has grown increasingly hectic and in which the borders between work and personal time are

blurred or obliterated, there is growing recognition of the need to slow down, disconnect, and go inward. This need has only become more obvious in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the idea of mindfulness may be one with which our younger students are familiar by cultural osmosis, I argue that Jesuit institutions are in a unique position to reclaim and re-emphasize contemplative practice as part of their rich history. Furthermore, international immersions are an ideal context to engage in this practice.

Over my years of facilitating immersions, I have the privilege of returning time and time again to the communities and places that make up the heart of our experiences. One of these places is the rural community of Longo Mai in Costa Rica.²¹ Longo Mai is home to a community of Salvadorans who were forced to leave their homes and country during the brutal civil war of the 1980s. They arrived in Costa Rica with nothing but the clothes on their backs, and little by little began to form a new life and to work the land. Today, Longo Mai is a thriving farming community whose natural beauty is only enhanced by the warmth and energy of its inhabitants. Each time I visit the community, I am honored to be housed in the home of community leader Edith Quijano. She is a pillar of the community, a dynamic figure, whose loud infectious laugh can be heard throughout the community. But when I awake each morning just before dawn, to the sound of roosters and the first rays of sunlight, I find Edith at work: quietly, meditatively making tortillas and pupusas by hand over an open fire. She is totally present to the work she is doing. This morning ritual, passed down to her from her mother and her grandmother before her, centers her and prepares her for the coming day. She does not rush or check her phone as she waits for the food to be ready. Rather, she invites me to come close, to have a cup of coffee as we stare into the fire and watch the day begin. The depth of attention that Edith brings to all of her activities, whether it be making tortillas by hand, tending to her plentiful flower and herb garden, or welcoming a group of U.S. college students into her home and to her dinner table, is perhaps the most vivid example I have seen of being both engaged and present—both in the more traditional contemplative sense and as a community activist and leader. She, like so many

community partners, is a model, an inspiration, and a reminder of how contemplation and action can be joined in the same life, should we dare to live it attentively and intentionally. As poet Mary Oliver reminds us, “Attention is the beginning of devotion.”²²

The immersion experience creates a unique space of intentionality to which few faculty members, student life professionals, or organizations will ever have access on their institution’s campus. In some cases, facilitators may even ask participants to leave their cell phones at home before travelling, or at least to restrict their use to very specific and limited times. In today’s world, that level of intentional digital disconnection is a deeply counter-cultural act. I have often witnessed students respond positively to this, frequently expressing a sense of relief or liberation that comes with “unplugging” from constant digital connection. There is also a deep sense of intentionality on the part of the students; they recognize that they are doing something unusual and unique. The act of getting on a plane and traveling to a “foreign land” shifts one’s mentality. In my experience, participants arrive with an energy that is dedicated to showing up to the experience: being present to their peers in the group, yes, but also to themselves in a way that may not be typical at home or on campus. I observe a hunger to fully participate and to be fully present to what they will experience.

For many of the immersions I facilitate, I lead daily or every-other-day reflection sessions. I begin with a few moments of silence to ground ourselves in the present moment, followed by a reflective reminder of what we did and experienced over the course of the day. I then invite the participants to spend time journaling about the experiences, how they felt and what they learned, and how that experience is landing in their heads and hearts. The daily schedule of the immersion sets aside time for this long, loving, contemplative look at the real. It is not rushed. We bring our open hearts as well as our empathy and compassion to the experience, knowing that a look at the real will mean staring into the face of suffering and pain, as well as joy and hope. While not explicitly based on the Ignatian Examen, it is a very similar process of reflection and can easily be

adapted to more deliberately follow the Examen framework.²³

Probably the most common (and most generic) observation I hear from individuals on immersions is that they want to be “pushed out of [their] comfort zone.” The truth is that, in general, we don’t *actually* want this, and will do everything we can to avoid it. While a new culture, different foods, a language one does not speak are all things that might be unfamiliar to a student, the questions that emerge in reflection sessions about what they are seeing, what they are feeling, and the contradictions of their reality back home are oftentimes the most challenging experiences that they will face during their immersion. In other words, the experience of being pushed out of one’s comfort zone usually comes during the process of *reflection*. The questions that emerge often involve facing fears, blind spots, biases, and internalized and systemic racism. However, if participants are able to identify and address these challenging shadows in a space that is loving, the community can embrace both brokenness and beauty.

The passion with which participants engage in these exercises is powerful. The activity of reflection offers an opportunity to carry not only the insights gained from this practice, but the practice itself, back to participants’ campus of origin. If an international immersion helps a traveler to view all of life as a classroom, as a space for engagement and possible transformation—if they have a heightened sense of the ability to find God in all things—this has enormous implications for the work and learning that goes on in the classroom, in research, in student organizations, or with local community partners.

An Incarnational Worldview

The theology of the incarnation, and a way of life or spirituality that springs from it, is not always intuitive for the participants with whom I work. In particular, my sense from undergraduate students, even those who have grown up with next to no religious education or practice, is that what has been not-so-subtly-expressed to them through a cultural understanding of Christianity is that humans are sinners, the body and “the world” is a

place of evil, and salvation and redemption will come in the afterlife. An emphasis on the Incarnation—the conviction that God opted to enter into history in human form, that creation is good, and that we essentially live in a “Christ-soaked world,” as Richard Rohr puts it²⁴—has a huge impact on how we see ourselves and all of humanity. Students who have grown up with English as a first language may find the term “incarnation” to be unfamiliar or intimidating, perhaps associated with reincarnation and the metaphysical. In my experience, however, native speakers of Spanish will immediately hear the word *carne* within the term: “flesh.” This represents a radical departure from a view of the body as corrupt or evil. An incarnational worldview calls us to wake up to the reality that the sacred is *here*, present now in our lives and our bodies with all of their imperfections. No matter how much consumer culture tells us we are not good or wealthy enough, we can begin to wake up to the truth that the divine is present in us and in every single living being on the planet, each a unique incarnational expression of the creator.

In the colonial city of Granada in Nicaragua, I often accompany immersion participants to Café Sonrisas. “Smiles Coffee Shop” is a restaurant, coffee shop, and hammock shop at which all of the staff members live with some form of physical or developmental disability. In the restaurant, the majority of the serving staff are deaf, and in the hammock shop several of the workers are blind. Upon arrival, visiting groups are welcomed warmly by the staff, invited to sit down together and to feast on the amazing food that quickly appears on our table. As we dine, guests are taught several phrases of sign language by the serving staff, who then invite us to share words of gratitude or to ask for any additional items using our newly-learned signs. While waiting for dessert, each participant is handed a small envelope which reads *Bienvenidos a mi mundo*: “Welcome to my world.” Once everyone has received an envelope, we open them and find inside a set of ear plugs. Our hosts invite us to share in their experience of being deaf during the course of dessert, urging us to refrain from conversation and to be truly present to the experience. When dessert ends, we remove our ear plugs, and are assured by our hosts that the intention of this exercise is not to provoke guilt or shame, but rather to invite us to

enter into and share their reality, even just for a few minutes. The restaurant founder, known as Tío Antonio, tells us that he is convinced that visitors learn more in those three minutes of embodied experience than they would if he were to lecture us on the topic for an hour or more.

At the café, we are invited into our bodies, to sign, to weave the hammock. We are asked not to turn away from what in other moments might make us uncomfortable, but rather to be present, to experience it through all our senses, to see the beauty within it. Activities like this call us to slow down, to really pay attention, to be active contemplatives witnessing the sacred in each signed greeting and in each woven design of the hammock. We may not have the space or means to learn about all people living with disabilities and their experiences, but over the course of two hours, we can be present to several individuals and gain insight into their lived realities, struggles and joys, by living in a deeply incarnational way.

The invitation to live an incarnational spirituality is also an opportunity and a challenge for facilitators of immersion programs to avoid the temptation to stay in our heads or make the experience too cerebral or purely intellectual. We are called to be creative in our methodology, looking for practices that incorporate our breath, our body in movement, and an attentiveness to the “this-ness” of all beings. For example, grassroots organizations and popular educators in Central America are known for their use of “dinámicas,” or interactive and educational games.²⁵ They are similar to what in the U.S. might be referred to as ice-breakers, but are typically more physical and movement-oriented than the U.S. equivalent. As an introvert, I find these activities of play and bodily movement to be challenging and even uncomfortable. But I am always amazed by how much immersion participants adore them, how quickly they loosen up, how eager they are to be in movement, and how the laughter that envelops the group in these moments of play makes space for a sense of calm and trust that leads, in turn, to deep connection and sharing. The invitation to playfulness and body movement brings spontaneity, or perhaps a true openness to the Spirit. In spite of my own tendencies toward perfectionism and control, these experiences teach me about our next theme, disordered attachments.

They push me to trust the process and remember a key part of an immersion experience is letting go of our expectations or ideas of what the experience should be, and instead living into the experience that emerges.

Freedom from Disordered Attachments

While our globalized society continues to be deeply consumerist, I have observed an increasing conviction among immersion participants that, in the end, true and lasting freedom will not be found in the accumulation of money and goods. An immersion experience, with its focus on others’ lived realities, close encounters with injustice, and structural oppression, exposes more privileged participants to a different reality as well as a more critical perspective on local and global inequities.

This is a space where there is considerable resonance between the Jesuit tradition, with its emphasis on spiritual detachment and interior freedom, and insights of the Buddhist tradition on freedom. St. Ignatius, like the Buddha, offered insight into the ways in which humans create suffering or desolation through what he called disordered affections or disordered attachments,²⁶ and our need to cultivate healthy habits of detachment. Similarly, Buddhism notes the reality of suffering and that a good deal of suffering is caused by attachments or obsession with being in control. Years ago, I had the wonderful privilege of talking to a group of Buddhist nuns and monks from Plum Village, France, the home of Thich Nhat Hanh. The group was travelling throughout Latin America teaching mindfulness practice, and I was asked to speak to them about the history and contemporary realities of Nicaragua. Towards the end of my talk, I shared with them that I thought that Nicaragua could be a ripe ground for the planting of the *dharmā* because so much of the population was already deeply in touch with the realities of suffering, the harsh fact of not being in control of so many aspects of their lives, and a clear understanding of what really matters in life. This type of detachment need not lead to resignation or despair, or seeing injustice and oppression as something they should just accept. Rather it may become a tool for being able to see what really matters, to reorder and focus our attention and

energy on the struggles for justice, and the realization that true freedom comes by being at the service of others.

Solidarity and Witness

In recent years, Jesuit institutions have been at the forefront of a move away from a traditional model of “service trips,” which often serve to reinforce colonial power dynamics and stereotypes, and toward an “immersion model” that encourages community engagement, accompaniment, and solidarity. My experience is that undergraduate students have a deep desire to act and engage, but when thinking about travel to the developing world, it is often the case that the only term they have been given for this type of engagement is “service” or even “mission trips.” Nevertheless, the students I have accompanied have shown that they deeply desire meaningful engagement and relationship building, and if spaces are created to facilitate this, they are more than happy to let go of the urge to “do service.” A lens of *solidarity*, in contrast to *service*, encourages participants to strive for relationships characterized by equality, reciprocity, and respect.

A lens of solidarity during the immersion itself does not mean there is no call to service of any kind. Rather, participants recognize that this type of action will take place once they return home, within their own local and national contexts. The action step is a quintessential element of praxis, without which the circle is broken; if it is missing, the experience was just a vacation. At CGEE, programs are oriented toward the hope that participants’ action steps are born out of new insight, depth, and transformation.

Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., rector of the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) at the time of his assassination by U.S.-trained paramilitary in 1989, was not only a spiritual leader but an academic and intellectual who spoke clearly and prophetically about the role of a Jesuit university, both in El Salvador and around the globe. His 1982 commencement address at Santa Clara University is a powerful articulation of his views. I offer a brief excerpt below, though the address is worth reading in full by any interested in immersions and transformative education:

There are two aspects to every university. The first and most evident is that it deals with culture, with knowledge, the use of the intellect. The second, and not so evident, is that it must be concerned with the social reality—precisely because a university is inescapably a social force: it must transform and enlighten the society in which it lives. But how does it do that? How does a university transform the social reality of which it is so much a part? . . .

What then does a university do, immersed in this reality? Transform it? Yes. Do everything possible so that liberty is victorious over oppression, justice over injustice, love over hate? Yes. Without this overall commitment, we would not be a university, and even less so would we be a Catholic university. . . . The university must carry out this general commitment with the means uniquely at its disposal: we as an intellectual community must analyze causes; use imagination and creativity together to discover the remedies to our problems; communicate to our constituencies a consciousness that inspires the freedom of self-determination; educate professionals with a conscience, who will be the immediate instruments of such a transformation; and constantly hone an educational institution that is both academically excellent and ethically oriented.²⁷

The Jesuit university’s stance for social transformation oriented toward justice will not go unopposed, any more than an individual’s stance for justice will. “In a world where injustice reigns, a university that fights for justice must necessarily be persecuted,” Ellacuría continues, after referencing Romero’s recent assassination. His words foreshadowed, or perhaps prophesied, his own future and that of his brother Jesuits at UCA. Though Ellacuría’s address was rooted in his own context, his words continue to challenge us. For those of us at universities today, what should our witness look like? What will the consequences of our commitment be?

For many years now, the go-to word in the immersion world has been “solidarity,” a term that I myself continue to use consistently. But there is potential danger in overusing the term and thus losing touch with its more challenging and subversive connotations. In a recent online immersion I facilitated during the COVID-19 pandemic, the student participants independently began to question what was meant by their use of the term “solidarity,” and what solidarity looks like in each of their lives. Students acknowledged these questions arising, shared them openly with their peers, engaged in deep reflection about it, and slowly formed and lived into their own answers.

The crisis of the pandemic and its accompanying uncertainty has been an unfamiliar and dramatic experience of powerlessness for many U.S. college students, particularly those who have historically lived with privilege. In a world of uncertainty and instability, solidarity is a commitment to the real: a commitment to being present to people in their struggle, lending an ear and a shoulder, and then using one’s voice and privilege to share those stories and to struggle for change. In 2020, the world experienced the powerlessness that the poor and marginalized live daily, as the flaws and weakest links in our systems were exposed. Solidarity in this context will mean resisting the temptation to go back to our “normal,” comfortable lives, and will necessitate deep commitments of attention and struggle on behalf of those who still need liberation. Such solidarity requires compassion, not simply in the form of empathy, but a profound form of accompanying those who suffer. As expressed by Donald McNeill, Douglas Morrison, and Henri Nouwen:

The word compassion is derived from the Latin words *pati* and *cum*, which together means to suffer with. Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion into the condition of being human.²⁸

Authentic solidarity requires this sense of compassion, of suffering-with. The experience of global pandemic has provided an opportunity to foster this kind of compassion, and I encourage immersion participants and facilitators to reflect on how to deepen compassion and solidarity during immersions and beyond.

Social and Personal Transformation: Return and Action

Upon returning from immersion, participants often express the desire for help in identifying ways to connect in meaningful ways to enact solidarity on a local level. In my view, the most important impacts of any immersion program will be the ways that participants engage with those around them, especially those that are suffering and those at the margins of society. As groups on my immersions prepare to re-enter university life, I ask them to consider their relationship to the support staff on their campus: dining hall staff, cleaning crews in their dorms, groundskeepers. Do they see these individuals as brothers and sisters, or as nameless faces who are there to attend to basic needs, often without a simple greeting let alone a word of thanks? Extending humanity to those individuals, getting to know them, and learning their stories would be a concrete first step on the path of re-entry. As we challenge immersion participants to continue to look for God in all things and to live an engaged incarnational spirituality on campus or at work, it will inevitably be more challenging to apply the insights to those familiar settings—but it is all the more important.

Perhaps the most common request that community partners make of participants as they prepare to travel home is that they carry the stories they have heard with them, that they share what they have learned, that they keep those stories alive. In recent years, I have sensed a heightened awareness among our community partners that because there is so much turmoil, injustice, and work to be done in the United States, they hope that their own testimonies will serve as an example of what is possible—as an inspiration for finding one’s own calling to local community engagement. The rise of global social media use has also allowed participants to connect and continue to engage with community partners

post-trip, and to maintain a relationship of kinship across borders as now-friends share the struggles and successes of their activism in their respective communities. In this way, border-crossing communication and encouragement from afar can further foster solidarity and compassion, even when feeling discouraged and overwhelmed.

While CGEE's programs are designed with the hope that participants' experience abroad will help them see similarities and commonalities in their local contexts, it is possible that upon returning home they will struggle to connect what they have seen and heard to their own environments.

Confusion and spiritual dryness are common upon re-entry, but facilitators and other mentors can offer gentle encouragement to look for simple and concrete ways to accompany others and validate their humanity and worth. Returning to the four Ignatian themes discussed above and asking how participants are experiencing them in their current contexts can be helpful. For example, a heightened sense of awareness that sees the world and all of humanity in an incarnational way will lead us to take interest in the realities of all peoples, including those in our home communities, and avoid the trap of talking *about* the marginalized but not talking *to* the marginalized, long after returning home from international travel. Lawyer, activist, and author Bryan Stevenson, expresses this sentiment in a profound way:

When you're trying to do justice work, when you're trying to make a difference, when you're trying to change the world, the thing you need to do is get close enough to people who are falling down, get close enough to people who are suffering, close enough to people who are in pain, who've been discarded and disfavored—to get close enough to wrap your arms around them and affirm their humanity and their dignity. And that's why, whether you graduate from Harvard Law School, you graduate from college, whether you're a social worker or a teacher, you should not underestimate the power you have to affirm the humanity and dignity of the people who are around you. And when you do that, they will teach you something about what you need

to learn about human dignity, but also what you can do to be a change agent.²⁹

The events of 2020—the realities of global pandemic, a reckoning with racial injustice, and a tumultuous and violent U.S. election and aftermath—have brought new clarity to our national reality and the level of division that exists. How do we affirm humanity and dignity in this context? How can we advocate for unity and community, while also taking a firm stand on social issues that matter and be a public voice of outrage against social and structural sin?

Immersion experiences are a powerful and irreplaceable means of affirming human dignity, fostering awareness of injustice, and transforming individuals and institutions for justice. As we begin to imagine academic life on the other side of the COVID-19 pandemic, I encourage all universities, and especially Jesuit universities, to prioritize these programs to the extent possible. The traditions of Jesuit education and Ignatian spirituality and pedagogy offer a unique capacity to bring values like solidarity, social justice, and prophetic witness to the arena of higher education. How do we instill in students, faculty, and staff the habit of taking a long loving look at the real, rooted in the Ignatian way? Immersion programs are among the most powerful methods of doing so.

I close with the words of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., whose bold statement that we should be teaching our students to make “no significant decision without first thinking of how it would impact the least of society”³⁰ continues to echo in my ears and motivate my work. In his well-known 2000 Santa Clara address, Kolvenbach tells us:

We must therefore raise our Jesuit educational standard to “educate the whole person of solidarity for the real world.” Solidarity is learned through “contact” rather than through “concepts”. . . . 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.

Students, in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering, and engage it constructively. They should learn to perceive, think, judge, choose, and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed.³¹

Contact and direct experience, Kolvenbach reminds us, are what leads to a genuine sense of solidarity.

Immersion programs, whether international or domestic, are an ideal space in which to taste the grittiness, complexity, and beauty that Kolvenbach calls each one of us to be attentive to; the grittiness, complexity, and beauty that touch the heart in profound ways. I hope that the invitation to take a long, loving look at the real, informed by Ignatian values of openness, curiosity, and freedom, will motivate continued engagement with the reality of the world we share. As we navigate a new reality post-pandemic, a period of great uncertainty and great opportunity, I hope that our future will be one of more travel, of more social togetherness, of acknowledgment over dehumanization: a future that values solidarity as key to our shared survival. HJE

Notes

¹ For more about Sister Peggy O’Neill’s life and work, see “Sr. Peggy O’Neill, S.C.,” Ignatian Solidarity Network website, accessed October 18, 2021, <https://ignatiansolidarity.net/iftj/sr-peggy-oneill/>.

² Walter Burghardt, S.J., “Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real,” *Church* No. 5 (Winter 1989): 14-17.

³ “Center for Global and Education and Experience,” Augsburg University website, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://www.augsburg.edu/global/>.

⁴ Fr. Brackley used this phrase in addressing groups often, and it has become an informal slogan of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. For more on Fr. Brackley, see Pat Marrin, “Jesuit Who Replaced Slain Salvadoran Priests Dies,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 17, 2011, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/jesuit-who-replaced-slain-salvadoran-priests-dies>.

⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 50th Anniversary Edition* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 54-55, 61, 63.

⁷ See, for example, Marcello de C. Azevedo, S.J., “Basic Ecclesial Communities: A Meeting of Ecclesiologies,” *Theological Studies* 46 (1985): 601-620. For an overview of the legacy of Medellín and subsequent bishops’ conferences in Latin America, see John Allen, Jr., “CELAM Update: The Lasting Legacy of Liberation Theology,” *National Catholic Reporter*, May 24, 2007, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/celam-update-lasting-legacy-liberation-theology>.

⁸ Adrienne Rich, *Your Native Land, Your Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986), 6.

⁹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 65.

¹⁰ See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation, 15th ed.* (Ossining, NY: Orbis Books, 2012).

¹¹ Privett later reflected on this experience in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. See Stephen Privett, S.J., “Travel Abroad Is as Eye-Opening for Administrators as It Is for Students,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 28, 2009, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Travel-Abroad-Is-as/44418>.

¹² For example, for further discussion of the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm as a structure for mission-driven immersions, see Audrey Hudgins, Hillary Sturgeon, Felicia Islas, Tammy Liddell, Paul Milan, Alexa Montenegro, and Ernesto Aguilar S., “Using Head, Heart and Hands to (De)construct Community Development in Tijuana, Mexico,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 8, no. 2 (2019), <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol8/iss2/6>, as well as

the accompanying article in this collection, Katherine Brown and Elizabeth C. Reilly, “Mission and *Mundialización*: Solidarity and Global Citizenship through Immersion Experiences,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 10, no. 2 (2021): 110-119.

¹³ James Martin, S.J., *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010).

¹⁴ Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, 5-10.

¹⁵ George Traub, S.J., ed., *Do You Speak Ignatian?* (Cincinnati, OH: Xavier University, 2010), 4.

¹⁶ Carlos Mejía Godoy, *Misa Campesina Nicaragüense*, translated by the author.

¹⁷ Mejía Godoy, *Misa Campesina Nicaragüense*, translated by the author.

¹⁸ For more about the Cultural Center of Batahola Norte, see “Cultural Center,” Friends of Batahola website, accessed June 12, 2021, <https://friendsofbatahola.org/cultural-center-fob/>.

¹⁹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 69.

²⁰ See, for example, Tracy Wenger Sadd, “Putting the Student at the Center: Contemplative Practices as Classroom Pedagogy,” in *Learning from Each Other: Refining the Practice of Teaching in Higher Education*, ed. Michele Lee Kozimor-King and Jeffrey King (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 228-240, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv3znxq0>.

²¹ In 2019, I accompanied a group of Loyola Marymount University faculty and staff to Longo Mai. Reflections on this trip are included in two accompanying articles in this collection, Elizabeth C. Reilly and Katherine Brown, “Seeing With New Eyes: Costa Rican Pilgrimage as Transformation,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 10, no. 2 (2021): 42-56, and Katherine Brown and Elizabeth C. Reilly, “Solidarity and Global Citizenship: A Photo Essay,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 10, no. 2 (2021): 15-21.

²² Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2016), 8.

²³ For discussion of the Examen and adaptations, see Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, 86-102.

²⁴ See Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ* (New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2019).

²⁵ Examples of *dinámicas* can be found in Laura Vargas Vargas and Graciela Bustillos de Nunez, *Técnicas Participativas Para La Educación Popular*, 8th ed. (San José, Costa Rica: ALFORJA, Programa Coordinado de Educación Popular, 1999).

²⁶ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary by George E. Ganss, S.J.* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 1992), §21. See also 146-152 for commentary.

²⁷ Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., “Commencement Address,” Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA (June 1982), <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-worldview/ellacuria/>.

²⁸ Donald. P McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York, Doubleday, 1982), 4.

²⁹ Bryan Stevenson, “Love Is the Motive,” interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, December 3, 2020, podcast transcript, <https://onbeing.org/programs/bryan-stevenson-love-is-the-motive/>.

³⁰ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., “Address at Assembly ‘89: Jesuit Ministry in Higher Education,” Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. (1989), §74, <https://kolvenbach.jesuitgeneral.org/en/archive?view=archive&id=6>.

³¹ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., “The Service and Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education,” Address at Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA (2000), <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-worldview/kolvenbach/>.