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## Preferences, Practices, and Virtues: An Ethical Reflection on the Universal Apostolic Preferences

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### Abstract

The Society of Jesus has promulgated the Universal Apostolic Preferences (UAPs) for the decade 2019-29. We know what the UAPs are: to seek God, walk with the poor, accompany youth, and collaborate in the care of the earth. And we know what they are for: the ongoing conversion of persons and institutions in their commitment to the mission of reconciliation of justice. But what, exactly, is a “preference” anyhow? In this reflection, I draw on the moral tradition of virtue ethics to argue that the preferences are best understood as “practices” or, in other words, as the fundamental actions by which crucial virtues like mercy and justice are developed in persons and in institutions. I also argue that seeing the preferences as practices in the context of virtue ethics opens up fruitful possibilities for fostering engagement with the UAPs at Jesuit institutions of higher education.

### Introduction

So, what is a “preference” anyhow?

The Society of Jesus has promulgated the Universal Apostolic Preferences (UAPs) for the decade 2019-29. We know what the UAPs are: To show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment; to walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, and those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice; to accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future, and to collaborate in the care of our Common Home.<sup>1</sup>

We know what the UAPs are for. In his Letter of Promulgation, Jesuit Superior General Arturo Sosa said the UAPs are a means for “incarnating the mission of reconciliation and justice in all the apostolic services to which we, along with others, have been sent.”<sup>2</sup> Further, he emphasized that the UAPs are best understood as “orientations that go beyond ‘doing something’ and enable us to achieve our transformation as persons, as religious communities, and as apostolic works and institutions in which we collaborate with others.”<sup>3</sup>

Still we should ask: what specifically is a “preference”? In the context of the United States, this question arises in part because of culture. As a

matter of usage, the word “preference” in English is deployed in casual conversation to indicate something that would be better to choose than something else, but that is, nonetheless, not a requirement. This common usage suggests an attenuated sense of the UAPs: That they are good, but not necessary options in the life of Jesuit institutions of higher education. Yet, that way of putting things is not consistent with the obvious central importance given to them in Father Sosa’s Letter of Promulgation.

In the U.S. context, another problem of interpretation arises from the widespread academic and popular use of rational choice theory and its accompanying language of “preferences.” In the logic of that theory, each person is rendered as an economic actor who orders preferences in terms of rational egoism. Furthermore, this egoistic ordering applies whether one’s preferences are for profit-making or for altruism. In any case, the logic of preferences in rational choice theory is a far cry from the logic of preferences in Father Sosa’s Letter of Promulgation: In the former, preferences relentlessly direct us toward ourselves; in the latter, the UAPs direct us toward others for the sake of these others.<sup>4</sup>

After having given many presentations on the UAPs to students, staff, and faculty at Santa Clara University during the 2020-2021 academic year, I think it is essential to address such possible cultural misconceptions. Doing so clears the space for the reception of the UAPs. However, I think two more steps of identification are crucial. One is to note that the use of the word “preference” in the UAPs is immediately derived from the classic Jesuit process of discernment and its corresponding choice of the best means for responding to a challenge to the Gospel in a particular time and place. In that sense, in the face of the challenges facing the Society of Jesus from 2019 to 2029, these four preferences were chosen as the best means of response (i.e., they were the best “choices” or “preferences”) among many other options. Such a selection was undertaken in a fashion consistent with the emphasis on reconciliation and justice at the Jesuits’ 36<sup>th</sup> General Congregation in 2016.<sup>5</sup>

### **UAPs as Practices in the Context of an Ethics of Virtue**

A second step of identification is also important: Understanding the UAPs as practices in the context of what is called a virtue ethics or an ethics of virtue. To identify the UAPs in this way is not simply to make an ethical point. Instead, doing so can reveal possibilities for engagement with the UAPs at Jesuit institutions of higher education.

Ethics across time and cultures have classically affirmed three distinct kinds of moral reasoning: one based on principles and moral laws, another on consequences, and a third on virtues and vices. In the last few decades, there has been a huge resurgence of interest in virtue ethics.<sup>6</sup> The word “virtue” may sound prudish to many, however that resonance is a residue of a Victorian and modern appropriation of an ancient moral tradition. Indeed, the emphasis on virtues and vices as a way to think about the meaning of living a good life goes back to such figures as Aristotle in the fourth century BCE and St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

An ethics of virtue asks us to consider what it means in our time and place to be a person of good character, and thus asks us what virtues or

abiding traits of character ought to constitute such a person; what practices or habits inculcate such virtues; what kinds of communities promote the practices that develop virtues; and what stories or symbols provide the examples or inspiration that point us toward the good life. The return to virtue ethics has been driven in part by a sense that an ethics of principles or consequences alone tends to leave out the most important aspect of any ethics: actual human beings in all their embodied, affective, and communal capacities.

In his book *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*, the late moral theologian William Spohn argued that virtue ethics combined with spirituality is the best way to appropriate the moral vision of the New Testament (which, in any case, is the ultimate basis for the moral vision of Jesuit higher education).<sup>7</sup> To be sure, the New Testament includes ethics of principles and of consequences. Nevertheless, Jesus did not come teaching timeless and abstract truths, but instead proclaimed a dramatic new divine initiative that sought the heart and demanded love in action.<sup>8</sup> An ethics of virtue, Spohn argues, allows for both dimensions: The interior change of affection and the exterior manifestation of action. Moreover, combining an ethics of virtue with spirituality allows for the pre-eminent role of grace in the moral life. In Christian terms, living out an ethics of virtue is not a process of self-mastery but instead a pilgrim journey of imperfection, always waiting on the transformative possibilities of what Spohn calls the “patient grace of God.”<sup>9</sup>

The wording of the UAPs refers explicitly or implicitly to many virtues, including reverence, humility, prudence, justice, mercy, accompaniment, hope, creativity, care for the earth, and collaboration. When we say that someone has such virtues, we are referring to more than a one-off action of, for instance, justice or mercy. Instead, we are referring to an abiding interior disposition of a person to be just or merciful—a disposition that in turn is consistently reflected in the exterior actions—the just and merciful practices—of that person. Virtue ethics assumes that we are free and responsible and constitute ourselves by the practices we pursue (in a Christian sense, such constituting occurs in interaction with divine grace).<sup>10</sup> Who we are and what we do are inseparably connected. This

language of the union of interiority and exteriority is frequently present in Father Sosa's writing on the UAPs.

In *Go and Do Likewise*, Spohn correlates Gospel virtues like forgiveness, compassion, and justice with an array of practices that loom large in the stories of Jesus: his table fellowship with sinners; his healing the sick; his feeding the hungry. Other examples abound. Disciples of Jesus, Spohn argues, have a template before them. They can see the virtues that distinguish a follower of Jesus and they can see the practices—and imagine analogous practices—by which to foster such virtues.

Moreover, they can turn to the stories of the Gospels to point the way: The meaning of the virtue of love is not conveyed by a theory but in the account of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).<sup>11</sup> In turn, the virtues, practices, and stories are sustained by a community of disciples. We can draw important inferences from this for thinking about the UAPs in terms of the virtues, practices, stories, and communities that constitute Jesuit higher education.

It is important to note one other key factor about practices that is relevant to the UAPs. For practices to foster the development of virtues, Spohn argues, they must be done with a right intention.<sup>12</sup> Here, he especially has in mind how practices can slide easily into becoming instrumental techniques aimed at self-interested perfectionism.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, he says, practices will not be transformative if they are aimed at personal transformation. Instead, practices become transformative when they are done for the sake of the practice itself and for the disinterested sake of another. Thus, for instance, the third UAP—to accompany youth in the creation of a hope-filled future—isn't simply about producing hopeful youth at institutions of Jesuit higher education. Instead, it's about approaching the practice of accompaniment as something worthy and enjoyable in itself. Moreover, it's also about the disinterested intention of accompaniment: How can we be present to the youth at Jesuit institutions of higher education in ways that foster their creativity, which is surely the key to a future of hope? The goal of graduating more hope-filled students cannot be separated from the intentions by which we go about practices.

## **UAPs as Practices in an Ethics of Virtue: Practical Implications**

I have noted that it is clarifying to understand the UAPs as practices within the framework of an ethics of virtue oriented toward the Ignatian mission of justice and mercy. What are practical implications of such a claim? How might Jesuit institutions of higher education promote engagement with the UAPs among students, staff, and faculty?

### *UAPs Are Not One-Offs and Neither are Virtues*

It is no doubt tempting to organize a talk on the UAPs or to fund a study on them or to check a box and do something in a one-off way related to each of the preferences. We must resist this temptation. If we think of the UAPs as practices in the context of an ethics of virtue, we can see that we have to think more long-term. We are not going to develop the virtues of mercy and justice overnight. Virtues take time and repeated practice and we need to settle in for the long haul of intentional, ongoing transformation.

### *First Practices, Then Priorities*

Father Sosa has said that the UAPs are not to be understood as strategic priorities. Still, it cannot be the case that Jesuit institutions of higher education would not establish strategic priorities. Instead, I think the UAPs are meant to ensure that strategic priorities arise from an authentic practice of mission. Jesuit moral theologian James Keenan has said we come to understand more deeply the demands of the virtue of justice through our practice of justice.<sup>14</sup> So it goes for identifying the strategic priorities of our shared mission of reconciliation and justice: We will strategically align our priorities with this mission if we actually practice mercy and justice.

### *Virtues, Practices, and Many Traditions*

Virtues and practices emerge from moral and religious traditions. Of course, the UAPs are practices aimed at fostering virtues that emerge out of the Jesuit and Catholic moral and religious traditions. There are many points of comparison between the understanding of virtues like mercy and justice in the Catholic tradition and the

understanding of these virtues in such traditions as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other faiths. Jesuit institutions of higher education welcome students, staff, and faculty of many different backgrounds. It could be fruitful to engage in conversations about the UAPs with students, staff, and faculty from many different traditions. What in the virtues in their traditions remind us of the virtues pointed to in the UAPs? What practices in their traditions are reminiscent of our invitations to seek God and practice discernment; or to walk with the dispossessed?

*Virtues, Practices, and Stories*

As Spohn notes, we learn about virtues primarily from stories. By thinking of the UAPs as practices in the context of an ethics of virtue, we are also invited to consider a wide range of stories that contain such practices and reveal related virtues. What stories from our students' lives reveal practices like accompanying the poor? What stories from our colleagues' lives include the practices of seeking God and discernment? Identifying such stories across many traditions could be an excellent way to foster formation in the spirit of the UAPs.

**Conclusion**

In this reflection, I have argued that the UAPs can be accurately and helpfully understood as practices within the context of an ethics of virtue. By seeing the UAPs in such a light, we can understand better what they are asking of all those in Jesuit higher education. Furthermore, we can come to think more creatively about how to foster engagement with the UAPs in the many different contexts faced by our campuses and communities. 

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> “Letter of Promulgation: Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, 2019-2029,” Arturo Sosa, S.J., February 19, 2019, [https://www.jesuits.global/sj\\_files/2020/05/2019-06\\_19feb19\\_eng.pdf](https://www.jesuits.global/sj_files/2020/05/2019-06_19feb19_eng.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> “Letter of Promulgation.”

<sup>3</sup> “Letter of Promulgation.”

<sup>4</sup> For an insightful discussion of the way that the self-interest of rational choice theory has become a cultural mainstay in the United States, see Jason Blakely, *We Built Reality: How Social Science Infiltrated Culture, Politics, and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 24-43.

<sup>5</sup> “Letter of Promulgation.”

<sup>6</sup> A classic in this resurgence is Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 27.

<sup>8</sup> Spohn, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Spohn, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Spohn, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Spohn, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Spohn, 38.

<sup>13</sup> Spohn, 42.

<sup>14</sup> James F. Keenan, S.J., *Virtues for Ordinary Christians* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 69.