

REFLEXION

Spirituality in Social Action

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The encounter with the world of the poor may give life or it may destroy. It transports us to a land where one suffers the harsh strokes of oppression and injustice, but at the same time one finds the most surprising life force. A person or institution's approach to the poor says a great deal about the quality of that person or that institution.¹

These words of Benjamín González Buelta, a Jesuit who has offered broad and deep reflections on encountering the poor, help us understand at the very outset the 'why' of this reflection on the "spirituality of social action." People who devote themselves honestly to social action in a professional way, going beyond usual simple routine acts, will have had contradictory and varied experiences, which may either give life or destroy it. And it is in that alternative that spirituality finds its place.

The radical alternative between "giving life and destroying it" is to be located not so much in one's personal interior life as in one's actions with others, especially if those others are weak and fragile. Interventions here call for delicate, precise and fine instruments as well as skilled hands. The weaker the person or reality in which we wish to intervene, the more care we need to apply and the better our tools must be. For if we err, or intervene ineffectually, we can cause much damage, and the more fragile the persons we are dealing with, the more irreparable the damage. For this reason, from both the human and evangelical points of view, only very fine persons should approach the poor.... The most decisive instrument in any social intervention is the person who intervenes; consequently, those doing social action must be of the highest personal quality.

Spirituality in the field of social action thus aims to help those who are involved in resolving the alternative between life and death positively, both in their inner lives and in their actions in the world of the poor. It offers them a key for reading, receiving, and managing the internal experience itself; it helps them recognise it and internalise its message, elaborating it so as to aid spiritual and human growth. Spirituality continuously transforms those who commit themselves to social action so that their dealings with others lead to humanisation, dignity and life.

In speaking of spirituality and social action, we must note another challenge. Not only does an appropriate spirituality transform and humanise social action, it is in itself an authentic spiritual experience. What is it that

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¹Benjamín González Buelta SJ. "Formar según San Ignacio en la escuela del pobre" in *Tradición ignaciana y solidaridad con los pobres, Colección Manresa 4* (Bilbao: Mensajero 1990), p. 143.

makes social action a true spiritual experience? What markers, what accents, what characteristics should we strengthen in ourselves to make social action itself “spiritual,” that is, what in us can make such social action the place where the Spirit is present and acts, a privileged space for the encounter with God and the experience of Life?

We are suggesting that social action not only helps the subject, but that the experience itself may be an authentic and true spiritual experience. This is not automatically the case: much depends on the hidden attitudes by which we access and live out the experience. But if the experience is truly spiritual, it is so in a privileged mode. If we can encounter God in all things, how can we not find God, and that too in an elevated mode, in the service of the poor with whom God has wished to identify Godself?

Analysing the personal experience of Ignatius of Loyola recounted in his autobiography, Josep Maria Rambla comments that the Ignatian experience of proximity to the poor was for him a spiritual experience:

The richness with which the help of the pilgrim to the poor manifests itself is born in his own heart. Beyond a human sentiment of compassion or an honourable fulfilment of Christian duty, but including both, the pilgrim lives his contact with the poor as a deep spiritual experience. This is because in his heart spring those motions that mark the actions of the Spirit of the Lord in the people who truly seek him.²

Two brief observations to conclude this introduction. Our attention in this reflection is centred on the subject engaged in social action and in the relations that he or she establishes; other aspects, such as the social tasks that demand spirituality based on the Good News of Jesus, are outside its scope. Secondly, our reflection stems from what may be called an “Ignatian spiritual sensitivity,” although what we suggest has wider validity. We identify below five elements or basic characteristics of spirituality that we propose as spirituality “in social action.”

1. Living the calling to social action as a gift

At the 28th Meeting of Bishops and Major Superiors of the Basque Country, in a much wider context, Patxi Alvarez said:

I understand that the spirituality of our time consists in giving an outlet to these gifts, that is to say, to harbour them, to help them grow and to express them. Spirituality, therefore, seen as life in the dynamic that the Spirit bestows on us.³

The quotation has immediate applicability for those who involve themselves in social action. Many who work in social action do so from a very personal response to an interior or external calling to this commitment. It may have led

²Josep Maria Rambla SJ. “El peregrino con los pobres” in *Tradición ignaciana*, op. cit., p. 23.

³Patxi Alvarez SJ. “Acoger el don, impulsar la misión” in *No tengo miedo al nuevo mundo que surge: proceedings of the Euskadi Conference of Bishops and Major Superiors* (Vitoria 2006), p.20.

them to choose one set of studies rather than another, to prioritise a job less paying or less valued socially compared with others; this is a commitment that can withstand the social pressure of making certain lifestyle choices.

It is therefore very important that this vocation and that response should be lived inwardly with a deep sense of gratitude, as a gift which is given to us. Gratitude is the fountain from which flows spontaneously and abundantly all that is crucial in dealing with people – generosity, joy, respect for others, gratuitous help, unconditional support, perseverance...

One of the dangers built into social action is that we may see ourselves as heroes, as having more merit or sensibility than others, as somehow 'exemplary' in a mediocre society which is without solidarity. We may be tempted (and I am resorting to caricature) to think: "How good and wonderful are we that we dedicate ourselves to the poor!" "How happy they must be that someone as valuable as myself works for their cause!" Obviously few are so foolish as to actually utter such expressions, but far too frequently does one find this underlying tenor in discussions that are apparently about external situations.

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Seeing ourselves this way is not only a problem of pride and personal vanity, but in the long run has very negative repercussions on our own social action. That stance makes us feel that others owe us something ("I can't believe that they should do this to me, after all that I've done for them!"). We feel justified in harbouring all sorts of reproaches and blame; we enter into a dynamic of asking for affective and effective compensation; we reserve the right to abandon or give up on account of our tiredness and convenience ("We have arrived thus far, no one can ask more of me!") etc, etc, etc... In short, we put ourselves first in making our decisions rather than what is of primary importance, namely the poverty, suffering and shattered dignity of those whom we want to help...

Our inner calling to work with the poor and the victimised in society is a gift that we have received. If we know how to sustain it, care for it and make it grow, it will become one of the greatest gifts that can be given to us in life. And the one thing we feel in receiving such a gift is a sense of being privileged, overwhelmed by the mystery of continuing to receive something so worthwhile daily without our doing anything to deserve it.

The discovery and the experience of the vocation to social action as a gift is, of course, the task of a lifetime and has to do with personal and spiritual maturity. At the outset feelings of heroism (unconfessed, not specified) are normally present when we compare ourselves with others and feel superior. This is especially the case if we enter the world of social action when we are still young, or in contexts where this commitment seems exciting or exceptional. With time we mature and enter more into the logic of the gift,

rather than the logic of personal heroism.... But we must examine ourselves to see if we are indeed advancing along that path. For even when we are mature, we will be surprised from time to time by the upsurge of attitudes that we thought we had overcome.

There is a significant act in the life of Ignatius de Loyola along these lines... After his many actions over the years in favour of the poor, he continued in the maturity of his spiritual life to beg "to be placed" alongside the Crucified

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Son. According to Ignatius one does not identify with the crucified unless one experiences to "be counted" among them. He tries to place himself near them and some day receive the grace of "being put," of "being accepted".... and that is the definitive grace. For that reason in the Exercises the identification with the poor and humble Christ is the greatest grace to ask for; we ask to be touched by that grace (Exercises no. 147).

Also, the sense of the gift of our social vocation grows in us as we observe all that we receive and discover when we are with the poor. This observing, if it is to be experiential and not merely an ideological catch phrase, requires time. What one learns to value goes much further than the day-to-day, beyond the immediate... Then we can realise the sincerity and heartfelt nature of such words as these:

In popular culture we find a solidarity that faces the emergencies of each day and allows survival. No one knows how discreetly aid walks about, respecting the wounded dignity of the one who has neither food nor medicine. Here we find many faces that have rescued their kindness and their tenderness from the blows they have received. A capacity for joy surprises us in the lives of the assaulted. Humour often penetrates the most extreme of situations. The blows of greed or nature devastate everything in minutes, but from the roots spring forth resistance and the capacity to begin anew. In the morning a cyclone devastates a crop. In the evening it is possible to begin preparing for seedtime again.⁴

But our social vocation is given a definite reach and depth, fortified and made solidly stable, when the vocation becomes a "mystical" experience. Obviously, I do not use the word mystical in its somewhat coarse and distorted sense to mean being transported to another world; I use it in its deepest and truest sense of "union." I

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refer to the union and communion between people who draw near each other on the basis of mutual coexistence, sensitivities, desires, and hearts. Social action becomes a mystical experience when faces of actual people enter our lives, inerasable and imperishable; when the concrete faces of people as people, not their role or social status, occupy a place in our hearts.

⁴Benjamin González Buelta SJ. *Tradición ignaciana*, op. cit., p.148.

This is the experience of an Ignatius in love with the “poor and humble” Christ and, therefore, with his friends, the poor. We are now no longer caught in the logic of fulfilment or of the heroic, not even in the purest and clean logic of the gift: we have gone beyond. The mystical experience in social action occurs when the entrance of the poor in our life is so inward that it strips us and releases us to ourselves and from ourselves, and we no longer see with our eyes; neither do we reason with our logic, nor love only with the affections of the heart. The gift has become flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood; to paraphrase a phrase from Saint Paul, It is not I who lives, it is He, the “poor and humble,” and His friends “the poor” who live in me. The gift becomes the Eucharist.

2. To be contemplatives in action

The ultimate objective of Ignatian spirituality has been described by the formula “to be contemplative in action.” But while it has been widely, frequently and appropriately used, I believe it has carried a more limited and less vigorous significance than Ignatian texts allow. The expression “to contemplate” refers to a way of praying. Also, by extension, it speaks of a “contemplative life” in the case of people who dedicate the larger part of their life to prayer. But Ignatian intuition applies the adjective “contemplative” and the dynamics of “contemplating” not only to prayer but also to action, to activity, to working; to be “contemplative” in one’s behaviour. I mention this Ignatian phrase because I believe that it makes a lot of sense in the case of social action. Let us analyse, then, the basic characteristics of that “contemplative” behaviour applied to social action.

In prayer, contemplation places Jesus, the other, as the protagonist of the prayer. The matter of the supplication is not the thoughts, the needs nor the preoccupations of the one who prays, but the person of Jesus, an act of his life, just a few of his words, a gesture. To contemplate is, in the first instance, “to see,” “to hear,” “to watch” outside. The one who prays does not place himself in the centre of the scene, but is like a passionate spectator, interested but discreet. The centre of the contemplation is always another person and, very specially, Jesus.

To act contemplatively, to work contemplatively, is to place the other at the very centre of my sight, my interest and my action. To this end, one is required to observe, to look and to listen. ‘To pray and to act contemplatively’ means placing oneself discreetly on the fringes of another persons’ life, observing her so that she does not feel that her reality has been invaded and is spontaneous and free. To act contemplatively

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presupposes that I do not occupy the stage, much less centre stage, but that I stand so that the other person is the protagonist.

To contemplate is, secondly, an exercise of attention, and of attention to detail. Simone Weil said that “absolutely pure and undiffused attention is prayer.” It seems that such attention excludes distance and haste; it is difficult to capture detail in haste and from afar. And the one who loves is interested in precisely the details because the details are what lead to the heart and feed love.

Attention and attention to detail are essential in social action. Precisely because of the fragility of the people for whom one works, the slightest detail can elevate or sink, break or restore. Attention is the absence of haste and the exercise of patience; one does not capture detail at first glance. Often much attention is needed to find, in the middle of a destroyed existence, that particular detail of life that allows the process to be recovered and sustained; and much patience is also needed to observe even the slightest advance that opens up hope in the middle of frustration, failure and impotence.

To contemplate is to let oneself feel the impact of that which one contemplates. It is a certain type of passivity: to let that which I have before me strike me with its innate force in my conscience and in my heart, rather than projecting on to it schemes which I might have thought of previously. If, instead of letting myself be impacted by what is outside me, I project what I carry inside (and this happens so many times in life), I end up seeing not that which really is, but what I want to see, and hear not what really is being said but what I want to hear.

I believe that allowing ourselves be impacted is necessary if we are to help other people in what they really need, not in what we have thought or predetermined that they should need. How can I really serve if I do not let myself be struck by the needs of others? When I do not let this happen I am in danger of fulfilling, perhaps quite well, the rigorous requirements that my task demands, or of supposing that service is that which I believe I must do, or want to do, however costly or valuable in itself.

We said that to let oneself be impacted is, in the most appropriate sense of the word, to let oneself be struck. We may be hurt and stunned, and the blows may fall very awkwardly when the one who strikes us is someone smaller or weaker than we ourselves. But we will not be impacted if we do not clearly know the role and the dignity of those whom we want to serve. Good companions and, if one works in an institution, a good institutional atmosphere, help ease painful, perhaps even shameful blows; they bring us back into the dynamics of true service.

To contemplate is, finally, to let different sensitivities make contact, to be affected by one another. It is simply to remain together for a long time, and remaining together over periods of time is never innocuous. Sensitivity to one

another determines the way in which we approach each other and say something that is really significant for others.

Often it turns out that the greatest distance between us and the people whom we wish to help is the distance between sensibilities. That distance moves us farther away from the people whom we wish to help, making it more difficult for us to empathise with each other and go beyond the differences of age, culture, and history. We would often like to jump over these distances and build the bridges which the heart desires but which our gestures and the words do not know how to construct. Powerlessness felt this way is an invitation “to contemplate” more, to spend more time together. It may seem to be time spent apparently uselessly, without objective or without result; it may mean overcoming many inner and outer discomforts. It may make us wish to rush things, but that desire only means that we want to escape from situations which we cannot control or in which we feel uncomfortable.

The desire to rush things is a desire to escape from that which we cannot control

3. Available to choose

Placing love of the other before self on a daily and concrete basis requires decisions based on deliberate choice. In the context of our reflection, to choose is to select, not between a good and a bad thing (obviously that is no alternative for an honest person) but rather between things good or, at the very least, neutral in themselves. In social action, as in life, living out a specific option from day to day is based on many small choices, and it is in these daily choices that the truth, coherence and effectiveness of our underlying option are at stake.

The field of choice is very wide: the what, the who, the how, the limits, the where and the when. The more we take a bird’s eye view of life, the more difficult choices become – not all is worthwhile, not everything helps or is acceptable. This is why it is occasionally so difficult to choose within social action: the overall bird’s eye view and limited frameworks conflict, or seem to conflict at the outset. Choice is then an ambiguous and uncertain affair. At this point, I am struck by the heap of tensions experienced by those who pursue the greatest possible personal and institutional honesty in social action: tension between the purity of intention and the ambiguity of mediations, between generous desires and limited possibilities, between the scope of proposals and restricted resources, between the means that clearly should be used and the price that has to be paid for using them, between the urgency of things and the slowness of actual rhythms... and so many others!

Spirituality in social action has to be, then, a spirituality that helps the subject to choose, enables choice, indeed makes him or her available to choose. To use the classic term, we would say that a spirituality of “discernment” is

very useful to one who is in social action. Social action needs a spirituality that makes us “available” to choose.

I use the word “available” in a triple sense. In the first place, the person available for making the choice is conscious that he has to do it and that he is ready to do it, that he has an active, involved, personal take on that which he is handling; that he is not frozen by the fact of making decisions, nor hopes that the work will be done for him; that he knows that formulas and recipes are both limited and transitory. But I also give the word “available” two other meanings: available in that he has the affective and effective capacity to choose. To put it plainly, “available” to choose means one who wants, can, and knows how to do it. In Ignatian terms, there is a “subject” to choose, and that “subject” has the “means” to choose, and knows how to handle the procedures, times, and dynamics of the choice. With these two last aspects of the “availability” to choose we shall stop. To carry them out is the task of the spirituality.

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“To choose” in the sense that we are giving it here is neither a banal nor an easy task and consequently what Ignatius called a “subject” must be a person with a basic capacity, the minimal personal and spiritual maturity to do it. So conscious is Saint Ignatius of this necessity that a large part of his Spiritual Exercises is devoted to enabling the subject to make a good choice.

If the subject is to choose suitably in a context with a multiplicity of offers and expositions and a strong sense of the relativity of each, she should have the basic options from which to choose rooted in her heart; she should also know the ultimate objectives to be reached, and have fully understood the basic criteria that limit the field of choice, which after all is not infinite. She can then choose effectively, uninfluenced by fashions, pressures or momentary conveniences. Nevertheless, even with the best intentions and theoretically clear objectives, one must be permanently vigilant about one’s own inner freedom in the process of deciding and choosing.

We are all familiar with self-deception and the stories we tell ourselves when we are caught in the dynamics of narcissism and selfish satisfaction. We are then able to justify the unjustifiable. We see this better in others than in ourselves, but there is nothing that makes us immune to placing our own interests above everything else. It is written into our being human, and, if you will bear with my saying so, these self-seeking mechanisms multiply as the difficulty of our social action increases, or when recognition and gratitude for work done is not forthcoming.

Further, we know through personal experience that the human heart tends to settle on things and people, to find security in them and consequently to absolutise them, making them unquestionable or untouchable. What is in fact happening in such cases is that the human heart imprisons itself in realities

that are limited and secondary, and in the process loses its freedom. Freedom is required if I am to choose purely between that which will help me more or which will help others more. To choose freely presupposes choosing without preconditions, with a readiness to leave what has to be abandoned, however useful it might have been at a given point. This may sometimes demand renouncing securities, acquired goods, even certain affections... and that is not easy to do. It is easier then to “cheat” in the choices that one makes.

And to choose is often to risk, to bet, to confront, enter into conflict, question the established, to leave the habitual or the socially correct. That always produces discomfort and even fear; and fear can take away freedom and paralyse decision-making.

Really to be available, to be affectively and effectively available to choose, demands a free subject. This freedom achieves consistency and stability through a heart cemented in love, which puts itself at the periphery and centres instead on those it wants to serve, strong in the face of threats and dangers. All this is not improvised or ad hoc; it takes time for it to work within, to form a pedagogy and a therapy of freedom. This is one of the basic tasks for any spirituality, and most certainly the spirituality of those committed to social action.

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Once that first and decisive element is assured, that is, forming and maintaining a subject capable of the freedom to choose, then spirituality can also aid in devising, as far as possible, instruments, tactics, methods that can ease the subject's task.

The Ignatian methodology of the Exercises offers diverse materials as aids to discernment. We find there the rules of discernment as such; then another set of rules which shows how to apply the rules for discernment to concrete situations in daily life; and, finally, a set of materials that helps the daily and/or regular practice of discernment, what Ignacio calls *examens*. This is not the place to provide a detailed commentary on all that, neither does this article claim to be the best or the only one to aid choice or discernment today. But I do want to note briefly two important intuitions that underlie this exposition.

In our daily life the feelings and inner movements that we experience are multiple, and the impact that “outer” events produce in us also very varied. To learn to read, interpret and handle all that material and its meaning is basic to our discernment, and a basic element of the process. My second observation is this: to practice daily forms of discernment, simple but constant, is indispensable to maintaining ourselves agile and trained in the face of more complicated processes of discernment. We will thereby acquire a dexterity and ability that make of our choosing not a cabalistic process, but the natural movement of one who wants to translate into a concrete and everyday form the great ideals to which we aspire in our social commitment.

4. With a Spirit of Strength

Strength, one of the most necessary conditions in the “spirit,” in the “animus” of one who is committed to social action is also one of the gifts most characteristic of the Holy Spirit in Catholic theology. I have a double reason for preferring to use the word “strength” rather than “resistance,” favoured by other colleagues who reflect on spirituality in social action. The first reason is

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that “strength” seems to me a more global concept that allows inclusion, along with “resistance,” of a whole set of other important attitudes. Secondly, I wish to avoid some of the contemporary connotations that the concepts of resistance and “resistance identities” have acquired, for example, those associated with fanaticism and fundamentalism or attitudes of intolerance. They suggest a poor capacity for listening and dialogue

with other points of view, for finding one’s place in life.⁵

The difficulties that beset the person who is thoroughly committed to social action are many. Some are obviously difficulties inherent in all efforts to act with coherence and responsibility. Others, however, have a special virulence; they occur more often and more aggressively in the lives of people working in the field of social action.

The origins and nature of these difficulties are diverse. Some have to do with external factors: resistance from one’s own social reality in the face of initiatives for change; or the powerful interests of those who benefit from situations of injustice and the suffering of others; or limits and deficiencies in people whose humanity and dignity have been hurt; or complex mechanisms that seem impossible to remove; or the lack of alternatives, or a social climate that opposes our efforts. Other difficulties, and these are particularly hurtful, come from the surroundings of the individual: lack of understanding; lack of support in difficult moments; competition and rivalry sometimes open, sometimes buried; abandonment of esteemed colleagues; the calling into question or clear devaluation of what we do or attempt. Finally, there are internal experiences of impotence, downheartedness, failure after a concerted effort, feelings of irrelevance and contempt. These affect us quite as much as difficulties of an external kind.

With all these difficulties, a spirit of strength is important – a spirit that makes itself present in very special ways when there is union between companions. Union, indeed, is strength; the sense of being a team or a group gives strength. Communication and cooperation between those who pursue identical aims can then balance and compensate for the personal difficulties. I now want, briefly, to underline aspects of this strength that is so necessary.

⁵Patxi Alvarez SJ. Euskadi Conference, op. cit., pp.8 and 12-14.

And the first word that I associate with strength is patience. Patience is much more than passively holding on or hoping that the heavy showers will pass; it implies patience with the people we want to help, patience with the processes and rhythms of transformation, patience also with ourselves as companions and promoters of those processes. We cannot let our anxiety to obtain results, or our frustrations at not obtaining them, or not obtaining them as quickly as we had hoped, make us downcast. Patience is not to be forgotten when we make judgments and evaluations: so often we are mistaken in our precipitous judgments! And we also err in evaluating our own action: when we are too satisfied because we have helped more, or very dissatisfied because we have helped less. Patience, in the words of Dolores Aleixandre, is

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... to familiarise us with the "law of the long period" of the gospel that counts on slowness while the leaven is fermenting the dough or while the seed breaks through the soil.⁶

Strength is also the desire (and I mean desire) and the capacity to share, or better, "co-bear" the ensemble "cortege is the Ignatian word," of the most diverse afflictions (physical, economical, social, moral...) that affect the people whom we want to help. This desire to share their suffering is explained not by masochism but by the truth of our proximity and commitment to them. Saint Ignatius formulates it in the Exercises with a very expressive phrase when he asks for: "pain with the Christ in pain, brokenness with the broken Christ" (Spiritual Exercise 203). This is not the plea of the masochist or kamikaze, but of the one who loves those who suffer, and for that reason wants to accompany them wherever possible. We cannot follow untouched those who endure violence, nor serve the dispossessed to the bitter end without suffering loss ourselves.

To remain, to persevere, to not abandon, are verbs to be conjugated in the field of 'strength.' And, once again, that permanence and authenticity come not from a wish to prove something to ourselves or boast before others, but because we prioritise those whom we serve before ourselves, because we take their pain, the injustice they suffer, and their dignity seriously. This weighs more with us than the temptation to surrender, or our fatigue, or our desire for a different atmosphere.

The words of Dolores Aleixandre seem to me very suggestive when, in a reflection on "resistance," she remembers that part of the task of resistance is to make the person resistant and strong, to take care of the self in all ways, to avoid not the fatigue (that is inevitable) but the burnout, being melted down.

⁶Dolores Aleixandre rscj. "Espiritualidad solidaridad con los pobres," in *Tradición ignaciana*, op. cit., p.141.

In that preservation of self many elements enter, including those that Dolores mentions with common sense and a certain wise humour:

Resistance adds the sapiential disposition to the prophetic impetus. It reminds us that "in order that the subject may not be corrupted" we need to care for it with sensible doses of humour, common sense, the support of friends, and attentive reading of the history of yesterday so as not to take too tragically that of today.⁷

We have spoken of patience, of compassion (sharing passion or suffering), of permanence and perseverance, of taking care of the subject... And obviously one must add to strength the buttress of hope: that radical trust in the promise of God and in the victory of Christ who opens human history to a just future which our daily struggle anticipates and approaches.

I still want, before I conclude this section, to make a last reflection. The spiritual strength of which we have spoken is not obtained through fistfights, or strenuous volunteerism, or gymnastics in our daily work. No – this spiritual strength is also a gift, part of the gift that is given to us with our call and our vocation. It is a gift that we feed when we live with gratitude, when we sincerely wish to serve, when we find ourselves face to face with brother or sister, when we open our hearts to the life of the poor, when we try to be as honest as possible. And also, above all, if in the process we let ourselves be accompanied, if we are capable of letting ourselves be helped by others, and make collaboration our way of life – that too is a gift. It is a gift that is received freely, strengthened in the exercise of love and cooperation and asked for with conviction and trust in the Lord who promises and gives us his Spirit (cf Luke 11,13).

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5. Gratuity

"Your faith has saved you; go in peace." This phrase, which Jesus repeatedly uses after many of his acts and signs of healing and liberation, is a perfect synthesis of the gratuity that is a marked characteristic of social action that wants, truly, to build up humanity. The two parts comprising this phrase point to two basic aspects of this gratuity: with respect to Jesus, the utter absence of any type of condition or return for his aid; with respect to the person healed, the empowering and highlighting of her deepest possibilities, in short, the affirmation of her dignity.

It is important to examine in greater depth the dimensions of the gratuity that dignifies social action and gives it an authentic human character.

⁷Dolores Aleixandre rscj, *ibid.*

We primarily think gratuity means not to charge or expect anything in return from the one whom we helped. (It is quite another thing to accept fees for our work from those who hire us). Obviously when we say 'expect nothing' we do not mean charging for our help in money, but there are other less "material" forms of gratification - basically, compensations of the affective type. One tries to not charge, when things turn out well, in the form of dependencies, fidelities, adhesions, silences; and when things turn out poorly, we try not to charge through reproaches, undervaluing, disqualifications, rancour or resentment. The word gratuity applies to situations in which our action is not conditioned by the answer that we receive but by the need that we detect.

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Apart from that primary sense of not charging either affectively or effectively, gratuity contains shades of greater refinement. It consists also in not seeking benefits or personal yields from my social action in the form of prestige, image, or merit that I award to myself. Gratuity means never to treat people as "my property": "my poor," "my people," "my group," assigning myself an exclusivity that nobody has given me and that could easily lead me to prevent or boycott other actions which might well be, who knows, more beneficial than mine. It is about never exchanging dignity for help; the goal of clean social action is to help without reducing, instead, enhancing and harnessing, the dignity of those who are aided. Nothing we give can have value if, in giving it we take away the dignity of the receiver; it will, on the contrary, be perverse and harmful.

Gratuity, besides being concerned with the greatest possible dignity, is to make an effort to emphasise all the good and positive qualities of people, even if they are not very visible; and to always start off with that attitude in our action. Gratuity emphasises possibilities, opens up horizons, and favours people, no matter how indigent; it is all that harnesses their progressive autonomy; gratuity means giving effective agency to the receiver and lessening dependency as much as possible.

Jose Ignacio González Faus, starting with a small anecdote from the life of Saint Ignatius, makes a suggestive reflection:

"... as soon as he arrived, he decided to teach Christian doctrine every day to the children; but his brother was much against it, assuring him that nobody would attend. He responded that, for him, one was enough (Autobiography 88)." The one [i.e. St Ignatius] who is content here with "just one" is the very one who was to write and proclaim in a thousand ways about the universal good: "the more universal it is, the more divine it is." He also wished that of all the poor, not a single one should remain in that state. But the sense of efficacy in the 'material' is not

wholly at odds with the seemingly inefficient overtone of gratuity in the 'spiritual,' even if, as happens often enough, we don't ourselves know how to put the two together nor which might be the right moment for each.⁸

Gratuity has to do with freedom: the freedom that we have with regard to ourselves and the freedom that we are able to generate in those who approach us. We have come to the conclusion of our reflection on spirituality in social action. I refer to what I said at the beginning: we have focused on the subject and the relations established in social action; we have not considered the tasks required by the evangelical spirituality that, in the light of the world situation today, is needed as much at the immediate level as at the global level.⁹

It seems to me important to say, before closing, that everything that we have remembered, suggested and proposed in this reflection is not something "added" to our social action. It is not as if there is something that must be done "in addition" "from outside" to validate it or give it sense. Absolutely not. What we have proposed is none other than a way (perhaps the only way?) to be and to act in social action so that it leads to the fullness of humanity in all those involved.

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⁸José Ignacio González Faus SJ. "De la pobreza a los pobres" in *Tradición ignaciana*, op. cit., p.51.

⁹See, for example, Esteban Velázquez Guerra SJ, "Espiritualidad y compromiso social. Las comunidades espirituales y religiosas ante los grandes problemas que aquejan a la humanidad", paper presented at the Spiritual Forum of Estella (Spain) in June 2006.

http://www.foroespiritual.org/portal/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=109&Itemid=73