
Critical Self-Reflection and Social Justice as Lasallian Mission

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Amidst all the myriad very real, pressing, and important challenges that face contemporary Lasallian higher education – including but not limited to questions of financial stability paired with our mission to serve the economically distressed, general shifts in the tone of higher education to a more professionalized model of education (which seems to bode ill for the liberal arts),² questions of “market saturation” that are threatening many smaller and mid-sized universities, and balancing our root Lasallian and Catholic identities with an embrace of pluralism – I’d like to offer something more vague, and potentially less approachable for consideration as a challenge or provocation (although I don’t assume that this is something new), possibly more salient in the face of what appears to be an increasingly dystopian political reality: that a pressing task of Lasallian educators is to convince our students that the world is actually much worse than they already think it is, without thereby plunging them into reflexive denial, abject despair, or nihilistic apathy – or at least not leave them there.

Our students, like ourselves, have been raised in cultures in which colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, bigotry, and greed (etc.) are default settings.³ As Judith Butler writes, we have all been socialized through forms of psychological violence that discipline us into certain ways of being in the world, which we naturally pass on to those around us – our children, our friends, our students:

We are at least partially formed through violence. We are given genders or social categories, against our will, and these categories confer intelligibility or recognizability, which means that they also communicate what the social risks of unintelligibility or partial intelligibility might be. But even if this is true, and I think it is, it should still be possible to claim that a certain crucial breakage can take place between the violence by which we are formed and the violence with which, once formed, we conduct ourselves. Indeed, it may be that precisely because one is formed through violence, the responsibility not to repeat the violence of one’s formation is all the more pressing and important. We may well be formed within a matrix of power, but that does not mean we need loyalty or automatically reconstitute that matrix throughout the course of our lives.⁴

Insofar as we do not actively push back against these forms of violence, we ourselves participate in them. We may even reinforce them while earnestly working to combat structures of injustice.⁵ As the philosopher George Yancy tells us, that we may be antiracists does not mean that we are nevertheless not ourselves also simultaneously racist.⁶ The pernicious side of the taken-for-grantedness of certain forms of subjectivity is the objectification and marginalization of others that are “deviant.” These norms have been baked into the DNA of our culture, and we have

internalized them by the simple fact that we exist – but we may still serve our communities by holding up a mirror to the myriad subtle permutations of oppression that seep throughout our culturally-accepted norms.

Hate crimes, mass incarceration, rape culture, xenophobic legislation and vigilantism, labor exploitation, persistent threats to indigenous sovereignty, loss of biodiversity, the consolidation of wealth in the hands of a few . . . all of this (and much more) occur under the gaze of an apocalyptic climate forecast that some have concluded is already irreparable – what the theologian Elizabeth Johnson has called the “wasting” of creation.⁷ In many ways, the world is much worse than we know. But, by and large, we are resilient people, and even following horrific incidences of violence, we quickly return to business as usual, more or less un-phased. Some of this might be a practical necessity just to retain the ability to function. However, perhaps we have become too adept at insulating ourselves from suffering, especially when we find ourselves removed from the frontlines, rendering engagement somewhat optional.

Three mechanisms for the project of cognitive dissonance management come to mind, which mitigate the confrontation between our aspirational reality and our actual conditions: ignorance, forgetting, and scapegoating. We unknowingly (perhaps because we are insufficiently curious) perpetuate inequality, reset and get back to “normal,” or isolate particularly “savage” exemplars of violence. This allows us to gloss over difficult questions of personal culpability. A blanket of denial insulates us against the daunting perils of real solidarity with suffering communities, with its attendant maximalist ethical demands, to collectively reinforce social apathy.⁸

An enduring obstacle in the fight for equality is that we have become so “well-adjusted to injustice” that it appears to us as morally neutral.⁹ The nature of structural sin is that it is largely invisible to our gaze – even if we may feel the brunt of a particular form of oppression – precisely because it has become too normalized. It is just the way things are.¹⁰ It may only be in particular events of intensification that the injustices that persist in the background of our everyday lives are surfaced in such a way that they draw sustained attention. Sadly, we are given too many opportunities of this sort. But we are durably buoyant people, and those points of intensification quickly seem to recede far into the background of our collective consciousness.

The easy thing to do during these flashpoints of violence is to distance ourselves from the perpetrators – framing them as anomalous acts of singular “evil” individuals, who seem strange to us, almost alien in their cruelty – unrecognizable, unintelligible, “senseless.”¹¹ Or the perpetrators become monstrous ambassadors of “cultures of death.”¹² Our horror reinforces our self-identity as “just,” positioning us in righteous opposition in a “clash of civilizations” narrative – a process that has become more deeply cemented in recent years. We deploy well-travelled conceptual armor that taps into longstanding recognizable essentializing binaries that distance from the horror we instinctively feel – repulsion – in the encounter with violence, concluding that “savage” subjects earn their own dehumanization because they have behaved inhumanely.

By dissociating ourselves from subjects of evil acts, we insulate ourselves from any serious consideration of how we might participate in structures of sin. But our reflexive aversion to these acts – which offer an opportunity for critical reflection on less cinematic, but more pervasive

injustices in which we all participate – often serve to mask the more banal forms of evil that often fly below our radar precisely because they are so ingrained into our daily lives, and implicate us in ways that scandalize our vision of ourselves as “just.”¹³

The Catholic social justice tradition, Alcoholics Anonymous, and any number of Christian revivalists concur with the screenwriting phenomenon Aaron Sorkin that the “first step in solving any problem is recognizing there is one.”¹⁴ Pope Francis’ “environmental” encyclical *Laudato Si* might be instructive here, as a framework of social repentance and radical transformation – taking its cue from the Passion narrative, which has long been a kind of melodic blueprint for Christian conversion. Francis follows this arc (as do the Ignatian Exercises that formed Francis), which serves as a helpful tool for the type of reflection that current events demand – with its sober (and daunting) recollection of the current environmental prognosis as the starting point for any consideration of a future that is more than a dystopian fantasy. Francis ends with hope for the future, but that hope is contingent upon a haunting reality check that fully experiences the desolation of despair.

Justice work need not be the sole purview of any one discipline, but rather might be [more] complexly woven throughout our curricula. There is no shortage of opportunities for “contrast experiences” which immerse our students in the realities of social and environmental inequality.¹⁵ When these moments arise, our natural inclination may be to rapidly pivot toward hope – but I think it is worth interrogating whether that instinct does our students a disservice, and conditions them against “tarrying” [a Yancy term] with the reality of suffering.¹⁶ Perhaps we do this out of personal discomfort, or a protective impulse – we may be worried that we are telling our privileged [in the context of whatever issue we are confronting] that they are “bad.” Perhaps we are ourselves implicated in the issue. But good intentions or personal morality do not trump the cultural substrata that undergird these issues, and gives them shape.¹⁷ Part of existing with privilege is the recognition that while we may not be individually responsible for building the systems of injustice in which we find ourselves entangled, we may nevertheless benefit from them, and thereby bear some responsibility. Although some personal guilt may be involved, broader cultural forces are at play.

Justice is not just about being polite, and not about thinking of ourselves as “good.” The presumption that we can examine violence without some hard self-examination misses an opportunity. This does not, of course, minimize the horror that we feel when tragedies occur, or when we study incidences of cruelty – but we err if we ignore the more difficult task: that we may not be as innocent as we like to think. Simply declaring ourselves to be antiracist does not thereby mean that we are, in fact, antiracist. The declaration does not necessarily enact what it is intended to signify. And even if we are ourselves directly impacted by racism, that does not mean that we have not also internalized it and been formed by it. Yancy notes that oftentimes our antiracism – this could be expanded to other fields of resistance – risks a kind of accidental narcissism, and may be more about confirming ourselves as the moral than about actually hearing and amplifying marginalized voices and interrogating our own behavior – and thereby instrumentalizing oppressed communities into our own project of self-affirmation and “colorblind” magical thinking, which, even if motivated by ostensibly well-intentioned sentiments, nevertheless betrays an insular self-centeredness.

We are all – in our own specificity – simultaneously both subjects and objects of a swirling matrix of structural injustices. Our students have all experienced some degree of oppression in their lives, whether they are fully conscious of this or not, and at least one of our tasks is to honor those experiences, and attempt to think through how apparently discrete forms of injustice may be interwoven beneath their surface expressions. Recent debates about university “safe spaces” and “call out” culture acknowledged, the truth is that many of our students often do not feel safe in our classrooms or campuses.¹⁸ We do not have to travel to remote developing countries to find injustice. We do not – although we most certainly should – even need to leave campus. In order to have honest conversations about injustice in our world, we necessarily must confront those injustices in our local communities, on our campuses, in our classrooms – and this demands that we as educators expose some of our own vulnerability, and acknowledge our own personal responsibility for perpetuating violence. Our Lasallian traditions of association and siblinghood thankfully offer helpful resources for managing these challenging considerations responsibly that avoid infantilizing our students, and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own interior formation with a vision towards their own liberation and that of those most impacted by structures of injustice.¹⁹

The fact that our experience of privilege and marginalization are deeply intertwined – “everything is connected” is the constant refrain of *Laudato Si* – is more than an ecological proposition, but also holds some promise for the future. It is the ground for mutual identification, an expanded sense of kinship that may be expressed in solidaritous action with others. Analyses of structural privilege are not just about guilt and shame, but may be animating tools that encourage us to wield that privilege responsibly in a manner that chooses love for one another over love of self – or rather sees self-love as intrinsically bound together with the other. This employs a different form of discipline – not the violence that strips away individuality, but rather a kind of socially committed asceticism, which honors the demands of ongoing collective conversion to paths of liberation. In this sense, we are potential energy, yet to be fully actualized [at best]. Pope Francis consoles us:

Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom. No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts. I appeal to everyone throughout the world not to forget this dignity, which is ours. No one has the right to take it from us.²⁰

This reflection has focused on some rather grim propositions, but I hope it has taken seriously the gravity of the position we find ourselves in and the necessity for radical (and perpetual) personal and collective conversion as a pretext to any sort of optimism we might have about the future. Although our students are largely – in the balance of a lifespan – still quite young, they are adults (old enough to be conscripted into military service and executed in thirty-two states across the country – if not all old enough to legally purchase a six-pack of Budweiser [rebranded for this recent election season as “America”]). We do them and future generations no good service if they leave our schools with a bursting academic resume, a job offer or two in hand, and

little more than the belief that a life well-lived consists of being polite, voting, and occasionally volunteering for a good cause. These all rank in the “necessary-but-not-sufficient” category for a vision of the future that includes any measure of fidelity to creation’s flourishing. There is hope, but that hope rests on our capacity to gaze openly at the depths and vertigo-inducing complexity of the suffering that surrounds us, and act upon that, while remaining open to correction and adjustment. Rhetoric about social justice, “service,” and prayers for victims that abound in higher education (and our culture more broadly) are not necessarily hollow – but only ring true if they are supported by real commitments toward self-reflection that moves toward concrete action. This is a mammoth undertaking, but it seems that our tradition and a sober assessment of the socio-ecological context of our work obligate us toward this type of labor.

A final thought: These are not just abstractions, and it is not just a matter of curriculum – although I certainly think that is part of it. At our schools, there are more immediate steps we can take. Some of that has to do with pedagogical training for our teachers, which I realize is a daunting task; smaller classes and more flexible curricula that allow us to be creative, respond with greater agility to contemporary developments, and move away from reliance on “banking” models of education.²¹ But it also has to do with questions of hiring (both faculty and administrators), how we interact with our neighboring communities, how departmental funding is prioritized, and the environmental footprint of our campuses. Those who have been in the business longer than I (which is most people) will probably note that these are tectonic issues, so I’m not being flippant about the task at hand. But they seem to me to be important, urgent, issues that face us and also ones that sync nicely with my understanding of the Lasallian charism. In this spirit, I’d like to offer this reflection as food for thought, and appreciate your consideration and any responses or wisdom that might be shared at our seminar.

Questions for Consideration

1. How do we incorporate justice throughout the curricula at our institution?
2. What do we do at our institution to make students feel safe on campus and in the classroom? What else do we need to do?
3. What pedagogical training do faculty need to be creative, respond with greater agility to contemporary developments, and move away from reliance on “banking” models of education?
4. How do we interact with our neighboring communities? How is departmental funding prioritized? How are we addressing the environment footprint on our campus?

Endnotes

1. Jack Downey is an assistant professor in the religion and theology department of La Salle University. He earned a PhD degree at Fordham University.

2. Valerie Strauss, “Why kids – now more than ever – need to learn philosophy. Yes, philosophy.” *The Washington Post* (3 February 2016): [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/02/03/why-kids-now-more-than-ever-need-to-learn-philosophy-yes-philosophy/>].

3. Chris Crass, *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategies* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013), 15-16.

4. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 167.

5. bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 243-244.

Without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination – imperialism, sexism, racism, classism. . . . Critically examining these blind spots, I conclude that many of us are motivated to move against domination solely when we feel our self-interest directly threatened. Often, then, the longing is not for a collective transformation of society, an end to politics of dominations, but rather simply for an end to what we feel is hurting us. This is why we desperately need an ethic of love to intervene in our self-centered longing for change. Fundamentally, if we are only committed to an improvement in that politic of domination that we feel leads directly to our individual exploitation or oppression, we not only remain attached to the status quo but act in complicity with it, nurturing and maintaining those very systems of domination. Until we are all able to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle.

The ability to acknowledge blind spots can emerge only as we expand our concern about politics of domination and our capacity to care about the oppression and exploitation of others.

. . . A culture of domination is anti-love. It requires violence to sustain itself. To choose love is to go against the prevailing values of the culture. Many people feel unable to love either themselves or others because they do not know what love is.

6. George Yancy, *Look, a White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 175.

7. Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 5.

8. Indigenous Action Media Collective, “Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex” (May 4, 2014): <http://www.indigenouaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/>.

9. Cornel West, public talk (Phoenix, AZ: October 2, 2010): <https://youtu.be/-QwqaEMFNTU>.

10. I’m thinking here of Franz Fanon and Paulo Freire’s discussions of the “colonization of the mind.”

11. Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 90-91.

12. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 3-25.

13. Cf. Hannah Arendt, “Eichmann in Jerusalem—I,” *The New Yorker* (February 16, 1963): <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1963/02/16/eichmann-in-jerusalem-i>.

14. Aaron Sorkin, *The Newsroom*, Episode 1.

15. Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx, Volume 3: God, the Future of Man*, translated by ND Smith (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 92-93.

In our present society moral imperatives and historical decisions spring, moreover, particularly from the experience of a collective evil, such as the too low income of certain sections of society, colonial exploitation, racial discrimination and other injustices. When we analyze these contrast experiences insofar as they may lead to new ethical imperatives, we find that these negative experiences imply an awareness of values that is veiled, positive, though not yet articulate; that they stir the conscience which begins to protest. Here the absence of “what ought to be” is experienced initially, and this leads to a perhaps vague, yet real, perception of “what should be done here and now.” This experience is of course but the preliminary stage leading to the proper reflection of both a scientific analysis of the situation and of a new assessment of principles gained from experiences in the past. Yet, without this initial experience, which evokes a prophetic protest, neither the sciences nor philosophy or theology would have been stirred into action. . . . Through these experiences man begins to realize that he is living at a level below that of his basic potential and that he is kept at this low level precisely by the pressure of existing social structures to which he is subject.

16. George Yancy, *Look, a White!*, 174.

It is important that whites tarry under the weight of this analysis. The process of tarrying, in this case, is not meant to encourage them in an abstract flirtation with some species of philosophical nihilism . . . perhaps eventually throwing their hands up in theatrical gestures of ultimate failure, or to engage in some form of disinterested cynicism or to

treat the analysis that I have provided a philosophical puzzle, a kind of Rubik's Cube of white racism. Part of my objective is to have white to tarry with the question *How does it feel to be a problem?* The goal, though, is not to guilt white people or, more specifically, my white students.

17. Cf. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Good, Racist People," *The New York Times* (March 7, 2013): <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/07/opinion/coates-the-good-racist-people.html>.

18. Cf. Ngọc Loan Trần, "Calling IN: A Less Disposable Way of Holding Each Other Accountable," *Black Girl Dangerous* (December 18, 2013): <http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/2013/12/calling-less-disposable-way-holding-accountable/>.

19. John Crawford, FSC, "Evangelization and Catechesis: 'How to Meet Christ,'" *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (June 2016): <http://axis.smumn.edu/index.php/axis/article/view/171/272>. Ernest J. Miller, Jr., FSC, "Let Us Bear Witness to the Reign of God: Reimagining Lasallian Education and Evangelization in the Name of Justice," doctoral dissertation, The Catholic Theological Union at Chicago, Chicago, May 2015.

20. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* (May 24, 2015), para. 205: http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf.

21. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 71ff.