

Talking to some young Jesuits about social justice and evangelization

While I was in Chicago for the Christmas break, I had a wonderful meeting with around thirty young Jesuits, all in their “pre-tertianship” period of formation. This means that these men had already passed through their lengthy education in philosophy and theology and had been involved for some time in a ministry of the Jesuit order. The group I addressed included high school teachers, university professors, journal editors, and doctoral students—and almost all of them were ordained priests. After a simple lunch of soup and sandwiches, we plunged into conversation. We were at it for well over an hour, but I enjoyed the exercise so much, it seemed like about fifteen minutes. They were massively impressive people: smart, articulate, passionate about their work, and dedicated to the Gospel.

They were very interested in my ministry of evangelizing through the social media, and so we spent a good amount of time talking about the “nones,” about the cultural challenges to proclaiming the faith today, about the new atheism, and about the pros and cons of the digital world. We also spoke a lot about prayer and the play between one’s interior life and one’s ministerial commitments. I especially enjoyed telling these young men about the Jesuits who have had an impact on my work: Bernard Lonergan, Henri de Lubac, Michael Buckley, Avery Dulles, the at least erstwhile Jesuit Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Michel Corbin, who was my doctoral director at the Institut Catholique in Paris.

Toward the end of our time together, one of the men posed a question that, he warned, would “put me on the spot.” He said, “We Jesuits have been criticized a good deal in recent years. Do you think any of these critiques are justified?” Now, I think it’s rather bad form to come into someone’s house and offer criticisms, but since I felt so comfortable with them, and since the question had been so directly asked, I responded, “Well, I think perhaps since the Council, many Jesuits have embraced the social justice agenda a bit too one-sidedly.” No one got up and left,

which was a good sign! In fact, the discussion became especially lively and illuminating. I'd like to share some of what I said to these young Jesuits in order to address a general issue that I consider to be of great importance in the life of the Church today.

At its 32nd General Congregation in 1975, under the leadership of the charismatic Pedro Arrupe, the Jesuit order committed itself to propagate the works of justice as an essential part of its mission. And since that time, Jesuits have become renowned for their dedication to this indispensable task. My concern, I told my interlocutors, is that an exaggerated stress on the fostering of justice in the political and economic arena can compromise the properly evangelizing mission of Christ's Church. Mind you, a commitment to doing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, to righting social wrongs, to serving the poor and needy necessarily follows from evangelization. One of the permanent achievements of Vatican II is to show that conversion to Christ entails not a flight from the world, but precisely a deeper love for the world and a desire to alleviate its suffering. There is simply no question about it: an evangelized person works for justice.

But when we squint at the issue from the other end, things get a bit more complicated. On the one hand, striving for justice can indeed be a door to evangelization. What attracted so many people in the first and second centuries to take a look at Christianity was none other than the Church's obvious care for the sick, the homeless, and the poor: "How these Christians love one another!" But on the other hand, the commitment to social justice, in itself and by itself alone, cannot be sufficient for evangelization, which is the sharing of the good news that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is risen from the dead. The reason for this is obvious: a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a secular humanist, even an atheist of good will can be an advocate of social justice. One can fully and enthusiastically embrace a program of caring for the poor and the hungry without, in any sense, espousing faith in Jesus Christ. Many statistical studies reveal that young people today understand (and applaud) that the Church advocates for justice, even as they profess little or no belief in God, Jesus, the Resurrection, the Bible as an inspired text, or life after death. I would argue that this disconnect is, at least in part, a result of the hyper-stress that we have placed on social justice in the years following the Council.

I told my young Jesuit conversation partners that they ought to follow the prompt of our Jesuit pope and go not just to the economic margins but to the “existential margins”—that is to say, to those who have lost the faith, lost any contact with God, who have not heard the Good News. Go, I told them, into your high schools, colleges, and universities and advocate for the faith, speak of God, tell the young people about Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Don’t for a minute, I continued, abandon your passion for justice, but let people see that it is grounded in Christ and his Gospel.