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# Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

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Integral ecology and spirituality for Service-Learning

3.17

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## 17. INTEGRAL ECOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY FOR SERVICE-LEARNING

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### Abstract

This essay is framed in the current context of injustices, in which strong human, social and environmental degradation is taking place. Special attention is paid to the current pandemic and the deterioration it represents in the process of human degradation, which has been going on for centuries. In this context, two global initiatives in search of solutions stand out, such as the “Sustainable Development Goals” and the “Global Compact on Education.” The importance of the 500 years of Ignatian spirituality is also mentioned. The main focus is on the role of education and universities. This essay is basically meant to be a ‘concrete dialogue’ driven by an operational conception of justice which includes the spirituality of care and is supported by the paradigm of integral ecology, as a key issue in the social teachings of Pope Francis. The conceptions of knowledge and action processes inherent in that conceptual horizon are dealt with in this text. It is also mentioned, succinctly and for reference, how the social teaching of the Church, in its most current expressions, works operationally within the “orientation framework for the promotion of socio-environmental justice” in the *Província dos Jesuítas do Brasil*. It also reflects visible aspects of the way in which learning is acquired and spirituality is reached in line with this conceptual horizon. Our aim is to identify the cultivated spirituality inherent in the promotion of justice and care—within the practices of service-learning in communities—and how this is implemented through social initiatives in the university context. At the end of this essay, its main argument is supported by narrative extracts which help guide practices of service-learning and spirituality, inherent in these initiatives. The accounts were taken from a Jesuit university in southern Brazil, and they show how the main dimensions of the operational conception of justice are contemplated within the framework of integral ecology.

### Introduction

The Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (Pope Francis, 2015, LS) had a huge impact on public opinion all over the world. Although some people made a hasty reading of the encyclical, since they were absorbed by the dramatic environmental crisis that the planet is facing,

it gradually became evident that it comprised a much more profound proposal, which challenged humanity to take a position within a new paradigm summarized in the expression “integral ecology,” in which educational processes, the production of knowledge and technological, socio-cultural and human practices are involved. According to the encyclical, the deterioration of nature or the environment must be considered in profound interrelationship with human and social deterioration:

*The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together, and we cannot adequately address environmental degradation without paying attention to the causes of human and social degradation (Pope Francis, 2015, LS, 48).*

In the encyclical letter, it is stated that everything is intimately interrelated and that our current problems require a closer examination of all aspects of the global crisis. In this sense, the proposal is that there is a need for “an integral ecology which reflects clear understanding of human and social dimensions” (Pope Francis, 2015, LS, 137). This is clearly observed in the following passage:

*There are no two separate crises: an environmental crisis and a social crisis; but a single socio-environmental crisis which is really complex. Solution guidelines must include a comprehensive approach to combat poverty, restore dignity to the excluded and, at the same time, take care of nature (Pope Francis, 2015, LS, 139).*

*Human fraternity and the protection of Creation constitute the only path towards integral development and peace. It is important to highlight that Pope Francis does not speak about “two paths,” but “one path.” Undoubtedly, there is a clear message behind those carefully chosen words in connection with the proposal in the Encyclical LS, in which the need for an integral ecology is highlighted.*

In 2020, Pope Francis had a new encyclical published, the Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti (FT), in which human and social dimensions are explained, and it is practically a great new chapter completing reflections included in Encyclical LS. When presenting this new encyclical at Saint Peter’s Square on October 8, 2020, Pope Francis said: “Human fraternity and the protection of Cre-

ation constitute the only path towards integral development and peace” (Pope Francis, 2020b). It is important to highlight that Pope Francis does not speak about “two paths,” but “one path.” Undoubtedly, there is a clear message behind those carefully chosen words in connection with the proposal in the Encyclical LS, in which the need for an integral ecology is highlighted. The Pope seems to indicate that the content of

the Encyclical FT should be considered in greater depth in connection to the content of the Encyclical LS. No doubt both encyclical letters together summarize the current social teachings of the Catholic Church.

The idea of an integral ecology is not really a new concept. In different fields of science there are thinkers who, especially in the last fifty years, have shown similar serious concerns. For instance, in an essential piece of writing, Félix Guattari worked on “ecosophy” and developed the idea of “the three ecologies” (Guattari, 1990). Alfonso Murad (2020) developed a detailed and enlightening analysis on “deep ecology,” reflecting on the work done by a number of authors, in particular that carried out by the Norwegian philosopher and ecologist Arne Naess (2007, 2017).

Without reintroducing the details of the process of the evolution of knowledge present in the previously mentioned epistemological studies and debates, this essay is completely based on the broad horizon of integral ecology offered by the current social doctrine of the Catholic Church. This work is divided into three parts:

1. A brief outline of the human, social and environmental disasters degrading humanity today, and the great challenges manifested particularly in two global solution-seeking movements, whose objectives are reflected in the “Sustainable Development Goals” (2015-2030) and the “Global Compact on Education” (Klein, 2021; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2020), as well as in the spirituality inherent in these programs;
2. A proposal to operationalize the concept of social and environmental justice, as designed by the *Província dos Jesuitas do Brasil* in its “guiding framework for the promotion of social and environmental justice” (*Companhia de Jesus - Jesuítas do Brasil*, 2020) and the spirituality present in this framework;
3. A narrative summary—within the scope of the debate on the social function of universities—of aspects of service-learning practices present in some community-based university projects and the spirituality expressed through those initiatives.

## A Universe in Turmoil: Questions and Perspectives

These days, the degradation of civilization is visible in human society. There are several reflections made on this current phenomenon. But there are also several studies and statements of all kinds centered on the growing symptoms of the serious state of such decline.

Has humanity lost its sense of humanity? Have we been taken hostage by superficialities and lost values which have always been fundamental, such as the value of human dignity? The syndrome of self-sufficient arrogance of a few, vilely disguised from all, seems to take visibly shameless forms. The complete disregard for the human being present in many political, economic and social situations assumes shapes of extreme, calculated and perverse irresponsibility. This is mainly seen in the massive accumulation of wealth and in the exclusion, isolation and death of the people who suffer the most. Racism, xenophobia and discriminatory prejudice of all kind have become evident and intimidating in several places.

Lack of care for life in all senses, especially with respect to Mother Earth, seems to be an unhealable wound. Despite all efforts made to find the cure for this ill, ambition and profit at any cost seem to be still reigning. After so much civilizational construction, humanity's huge efforts and achievements are threatened by today's world. Unfortunately, the projected image appears to be that of a profound acceleration of degradation in all senses.

It is vital that decline be replaced by awareness. It is vital for humanity to recover balanced educational processes in order to retake the reins of the human condition. It is vital that humanity's soul be restored.

### **Will the Pandemic Lead to Awareness Recovery?**

Humanity's shock at today's pandemic<sup>74</sup> poses challenges which cannot be ignored. While this situation presents enormous challenges, it is encouraging to see that all over the world there is every indication that a new world is possible and necessary. New thinking methods are being developed at both individual and collective levels. Their scope and strength are still unmeasurable. However, they clearly indicate the need for and the urgency of a radical transformation.

We are still racked by the pandemic. We do not know when we will be able to see a sign of the new reality some people call 'post-pandemic.' In our minds and hearts, we find it difficult to design this future reality. Some ideas are recurrent. I remember two of them: (1) The pandemic came to launch—once and for all—what has been called, for a long time, a change of era. (2) With the pandemic, 20th century security has crumbled and the 21st century has definitely begun.

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74 The COVID-19 pandemic broke out all over the world in early 2020 and it is still affecting people in mid-2021, at the time this essay is being written, causing devastating consequences in various contexts.

According to Cardinal José Tolentino Mendonça (2020), the current pandemic is making us start a new historical era. The pandemic will come to an end. But when that happens, we will be part of another era in cultural, civilizational and spiritual terms: a spiritually different era.

As a Jesuit, by choice of religious consecration within the Catholic Church, I cannot fail to mention the important moment that the *Companhia de Jesus* is going through as a religious order, since it is celebrating the 500th anniversary of St. Ignatius Loyola's conversion, i.e. 500 years of Ignatian spirituality (1521-2021). He was a personality who starred in radical ruptures in his own career. He inaugurated a transforming spirituality, radically defying the dominant logic, both in his own family and in the social and cultural contexts of his time. He shook the base structures which supported him. His spiritual change gave life a new meaning. He started to view people and things from a completely different perspective. He changed from "a degrading and depraved view" to "a view of recognition and dignity." He started to "find God in all things," adopting a completely new behavior.<sup>75</sup> As to our current situation, the pandemic has also affected us a great deal. It made our logic confusing. It made us question base structures and the certainties which sustain us. All over the world, it revived the search for and the attention to the different voices filled with human wisdom in history. These voices have always been there. Unfortunately, humanity ignores them.

*For those of us who belong to the Christian tradition, the previously mentioned idea of that which is 'completely new'—an idea also discussed by Ignatius of Loyola—makes us enter the great and unfathomable mystery of the love in Jesus Christ's "regenerating cry." And in that cry, the three original questions come back and resound: "Where are you?" "Where is your brother?" "What is the state of the Creation?"—questions made at the beginning of the Sacred Scriptures of our tradition.*

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cred Scriptures of our tradition.<sup>76</sup>

75 In this essay, the use of the term "spirituality" is directly related to the "Ignatian mysticism" of "finding God in all things" (Loyola, 2015).

76 "Where are you?" That is the way God addressed Adan (Genesis 3.9). "Where is your brother?" That is the way God addressed Cain (Genesis 4.9). "What is the state of the creation?" That is the way God addressed humanity,

In a reading I did in the early 2019 from a little book by the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff (2018), a passage particularly caught my attention: “We will develop awareness, learn to be wise and prolong the human project, which will be purified by the large crisis that is likely to assail us.” The author of this book referred to two delicious passages from the Sacred Scriptures in which God is presented as “a passionate lover of life” (Wisdom 11, 24) and issues a radical call to us: “Choose life so that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30, 28). In Leonardo Boff’s words, “Let us walk fast, since we do not have much time to waste” (Boff, 2018).

The pandemic made us acquire a more profound understanding of this statement. Now I hope that the pandemic will really make us stop running in the wrong direction (that of death) and make us take quicker steps in the right direction (that of life). This is the spirituality we need the most.

### Other Specific Questions

As I have already mentioned, we seem to be living an era in which there is a rapid acceleration in degradation in all senses. This is a global issue, particularly affecting people in the most exploited, deteriorated and impoverished contexts. The wider the gap of social inequality gets, the greater the damage to the environment becomes.

Sometimes I become shocked at the images that come to my mind. Here are two accounts related to expressions in people’s eyes which may be considered paradigmatic:<sup>77</sup>

1. A black boy’s look, representing millions of children who have to survive in the midst of the outrageous housing deficit of the huge urban peripheries. They are children who grow up in a degraded and inhuman underworld. This is a look which, in its expression of innocence and charm, claims justice. This is a look which represents that of millions of adults who are no longer innocent but feel humiliated, uncomfortable, annoyed or desperately resigned to the pain and anguish of an unfair ‘fate,’ daily questioning the world of luxuries, squandering and indifference<sup>78</sup> which crushes them. This is a question which

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not letting it forget His mandate to take care of everything (Genesis 1, 26-31; 2, 15). With respect to Genesis 2.15 and, especially Genesis 1, 26-31, in theological terms, Lúcio Flávio Cirne (Cirne, 2013, pp. 82-89) addresses “the human being in the Creation” in a detailed and profound way.

<sup>77</sup> I succinctly reintroduce what I mentioned in a conference prepared for the Third Seminar on Contemporary Spirituality, Religious Pluralism and Dialogue at the Catholic University of Pernambuco - UNICAP, 4/22-24/2020. This event was canceled due to the pandemic, but the conference presentations were electronically published by the sponsoring institution (cf. Follmann, 2020).

<sup>78</sup> What the poor black boy living on the periphery feels is a global mark in today’s human society. That is the wound caused by the indifference condemned by Pope Francis in Lampedusa in 2013, when he spoke about the “globalization of indifference” (cf. Ihu On-Line, 2013). Recovered from

comes from the world of trash, hunger and the craving for attention and recognition.

2. The sad look of an indigenous leader filled with disillusionment when confronted with one of the many monstrous companies which is devastating his habitat, a person experiencing a mixture of sadness and desperation for the hundreds of indigenous peoples who have been victims of genocidal processes in the history of Latin America and of its colonized peoples in general. This depicts the sad genocidal mark of the colonization process which is still present in our minds and in our existence—a mark which affects even our spirituality. This is a look which questions us with force and is both fascinating and deeply disturbing. A look accompanied by the desperate cry of indigenous peoples whose rights are daily infringed in their own territories.

Paraphrasing Boaventura de Sousa Santos's thoughts (2019), we can say that the histories and structures of our societies are deeply marked by capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. This triple 'heritage' is still present in today's extractive economies and economies deeply rooted in financial economics, which generate outrageous social inequalities; in structural racism which shows its pervasiveness in a new way; and in the conscious awareness of the slowness with which progress is made on equality in all social spheres.

Education is also aimed at deconstructing inhuman depravities inherent in the abovementioned triple heritage of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy (Santos, 2019).<sup>79</sup> In addition, there are spiritual movements which help recover African and indigenous ancestral wisdom in Brazil.

## Notes on Sustainable Development Goals

According to Victor Martin-Fiorino (2020), one of the salient aspects of the early 21st century was the issuing of a United Nations (UN) declaration in which eight important Millennium Goals were included and whose assessment was expected by 2015. In this declaration, goal 7—on environmental sustainability—was the highlighted objective. The results of the assessment of the four aims in this goal, apart from the aims of the other goals, were considered to be positive in 2015, despite the

<http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/noticias/521786-qadao-onde-estas-caim-onde-esta-o-teu-irmao-o-discurso-de-francisco-em-lampedusa>

79 A really promising example is that of Laws 10639/2003 and 11645/2008, which revise and clarify the Guidelines and Fundamentals of National Education Act (LDB - Law 9394/96) in sections 26A y 79B, establishing compulsory education on ethnic-racial relations as well as in African, Afro-Brazilian and indigenous history and culture in the Brazilian educational system (Brasil, 2009).

low level of commitment displayed by States, companies and other social actors (Martin-Fiorino 2020, p. 153).

In 2015, the UN established the well-known “Sustainable Development Goals” — SDG 2015-2030 (United Nations, 2015). Although all objectives related to environmental sustainability are important within the scope of this work, we have decided to highlight goal 4: “Quality education: This goal aims to ensure inclusive, equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015). This goal is necessarily linked with the other objectives which address the most urgent matters to be dealt with in order to achieve effective sustainable development.<sup>80</sup>

*To enable these real men and women to escape from extreme poverty, we must allow them to be dignified agents of their own destiny. Integral human development and the full exercise of human dignity cannot be imposed. Education conceived this way is the basis for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and for reclaiming the environment.*

In his speech at the UN’s 70th anniversary on September 25, 2015, at the time these SDGs were published, Pope Francis—after broadly outlining the greatest challenges for humanity today—reintroduced many topics expressed in the Encyclical *LS* and issued the following call:

*To enable these real men and women to escape from extreme*

*poverty, we must allow them to be dignified agents of their own destiny. Integral human development and the full exercise of human dignity cannot be imposed. They must be built up and allowed to unfold for each individual, for every family, in communion with others, and in a fair relationship with people in all the contexts in which human social life develops –friends, communities, towns and cities, schools, businesses and labor unions, provinces, nations. This presupposes and requires the right to education —also for girls, who are excluded in certain places—which is ensured first and foremost by respecting and reinforcing the primary right of families to educate their children, as well as the right of churches and social groups to support and assist families in the education of their children. Education conceived this way is the basis for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and for reclaiming the environment. (Pope Francis, 2015)*

80 The 17 SDGs are: 1. No poverty; 2. Sustainable farming; 3. Good Health and well-being; 4. Quality education; 5. Gender Equality; 6. Clean water and sanitation; 7. Affordable and clean energy; 8. Decent work and economic growth; 9. Industry innovation and infrastructure; 10. Reduced inequalities; 11. Sustainable cities and communities; 12. Responsible consumption and production; 13. Global climate action; 14. Life below water; 15. Life on land; 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions; 17. Partnerships for the goals. Goal titles clearly show how broad the scope of “sustainable development” is. Summarized from: <https://www.pactoglobal.org.br/ods>

Pope Francis' speech clearly focuses on the importance of providing everyone with the following: "In practice, this absolute minimum has three names: lodging, labor, and land; and one spiritual name: spiritual freedom, including religious freedom, the right to education and all other civil rights" (Pope Francis, 2015). In other words, human dignity requires access to lodging, decent and duly paid work, a balanced diet and drinking water, as well as religious freedom, spiritual freedom in a general sense, and education.

According to Pope Francis, "a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach which must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (Pope Francis, 2015, LS, 49). In this respect, integral ecology involves the integrated job of "combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded and protecting nature" (Pope Francis, 2015, LS, 139).

According to Martin-Fiorino, when our main concern is integral ecology, our attention centers on both scientific concepts and the fact that the ecosphere is our Common Home, thus integrating scientific and engagement-related issues concerning all forms of life:

- ▶ In the reconciliation with a form of living which allows us to transcend ourselves, rejecting self-centeredness and from a perspective of care for others and the environment (Pope Francis, 2015, LS, 208).
- ▶ Implementing reciprocity or mutual help and care among human beings; i.e. in solidarity with others, overcoming the throwaway culture (Pope Francis, 2015, LS, 156).
- ▶ Sharing life with all living creatures, both human and non-human beings, considering the universal principle of the destination of goods and beginning from the most fragile (Pope Francis, 2015, LS, 158).<sup>81</sup>

### Proposal for the Global Compact on Education

In his message on September 12, 2019, the day on which the Global Compact on Education was launched, Pope Francis' words centered on the following:

*All changes require education processes if they are to produce a paradigm shift which can respond to the challenges and problems of the current world, be useful to understand and find solutions to the needs of every generation, and contribute to the flourishing of humanity now and in the future (Pope Francis, 2019).*

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Martin-Fiorino (2020, pp. 155-156).

Pope Francis has always been interested in education. While on some occasions he has spoken directly to educational institutions at all levels, his attention has usually centered on education as a social process inherent in society, which is meaningful and harmoniously related to the past, the present and the future of humanity. His view of education comprises a wide variety of life and learning experiences, which allows young people to develop their personality both at individual and collective levels.

On February 7, 2020, in his address to participants at the seminar on “Education: The Global Compact,” organized by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Pope Francis insisted that it is necessary to restore an integral education process. And he added that it is important for new generations to understand and embrace their own traditions and cultures, which is essential for the creation of bonds between different cultures. Moreover, he stated that it is vital to develop self-understanding while respecting cultural diversity and change. And he emphasized:

*This will enable the promotion of a culture of dialogue, a culture of peaceful encounter and mutual understanding, in a spirit of respect and tolerance; an education that enables young people to identify and foster true human values from an intercultural and interreligious perspective.*

*(...) By encouraging the training of heads, hearts and hands, intellectual and socio-emotional education, the transmission of individual and societal values and virtues, the teaching of committed citizenship concerned for justice, and the transmission of abilities and knowledge that can prepare young people for the world of work and society, families, schools and institutions become essential vehicles for the empowerment of future generations. This way, we will no longer speak of a broken educational compact. This is the real compact! (Pope Francis, 2020a)*

We will not explain the “Global Compact on Education” in this work. However, it is important to highlight that this compact is characterized by the placement of the human being at the center of all educational processes and by the reintroduction of the family as the first and indispensable educator. In the seven commitments of this compact, a lot of attention is paid to children, adolescents and young people, especially to girls in certain contexts; all efforts made with the human being at the center of the educational process. It also focuses on the most vulnerable and the poorest, and highlights the need to find other ways to understand the economy, politics, growth and progress; with a view to an integral ecology and to protecting and improving our common home.<sup>82</sup>

82 On-line magazine IHU, on the Global Compact on Education, 10/16/2020:

<http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/78-noticias/603808-educacao-papa-lanca-pacto-global-com-sete-compromissos-por-um-mundo-diferente>

## The Operational Concept of Socio-Environmental Justice and the Hypothesis of Approach to Sustainable Development and Integral Education

### Prolegomena

A possible shortcut used to respond to calls present in Pope Francis' social encyclicals, in the UN's "Sustainable Development Goals" and, above all, in the "Global Compact on Education" is that which we define as the "promotion of socio-environmental justice." The explicit interest which the *Companhia de Jesus* has had in integrating the commitment with social justice and environmental issues since the late 20th century is clearly expressed in the Guidance Framework for Social and Environmental Justice of the *Província dos Jesuítas do Brasil* (Província dos Jesuítas do Brasil, 2020). As I have already mentioned at the beginning of this essay, this commitment was intensely reaffirmed by the statement of the paradigm of integral ecology in Pope Francis' social encyclicals.

### Thematic Vectors for the Promotion of Social and Environmental Justice

With the coordination of the *Observatório Nacional de Justiça Socioambiental Luciano Mendes de Almeida – OLMA*,<sup>83</sup> which is the entity that facilitates actions for the promotion of justice, the constant search for the culture of care is focused on three main vectors: care of human dignity in the treatment given to ourselves and others, care of the gifts of Creation and its diversity, and care of socio-economic and public policy planning with the aim of reducing social inequality.

- ▶ *Care of Human Dignity in the Treatment of Ourselves and Others*

This is the dimension or thematic vector of the care of human dignity, which involves self-recognition and the recognition of others. In practice, this dimension is related to the relationship with ourselves—in our self-understanding and self-awareness—and with different people—in relationships based on ethnicity, race, religion, gender, generation, national origin, and views of the world—always seeking ways to foster communication, the value of plurality and the inclusion of all.

- ▶ *Care of the Gifts of Creation, Life and Ecosystems*

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83 Important notes: The Observatório Nacional de Justiça Socioambiental Luciano Mendes de Almeida—OLMA for its acronym in Portuguese—will be mentioned throughout this chapter. This is an observatory network in the Província do Brasil, Companhia de Jesús, with headquarters in Brasília, Federal District. [www.olma.org.br](http://www.olma.org.br)

This is the dimension or thematic vector which is related to the care of the gifts of Creation. It involves conserving, protecting and adequately using natural gifts in order to take care of ecosystems and life and guarantee the future of planet earth and its inhabitants, and to pay attention to our personality, the way we live and work, and life diversity in the different biomes of each region.

▶ *Care of Politics, Society and Economy to Reduce Social Inequality*

This is the dimension or thematic vector which has to do with the care of the socio-economic and public policy order. In this third dimension, the aim is to reduce inequality, social exclusion and poverty; in the search for access to the universal right to work, social assistance, social security, health, lodging, education, food and nationality.

### 2.3. Strategies for the Promotion of Social and Environmental Justice

With a view to working hard on the promotion of justice and basing our commitment on the previously mentioned social and environmental perspective, some operational shortcuts are being taken. In this regard, three levels or strategies are distinguished in connection with the promotion of justice or socio-environmental justice. In other words, we may influence justice-related practices at the level of knowledge production and of direct dialogue with groups, organizations and movements which are involved in decision-taking and—above all—at the level of everyday life in connection with our way of being, living and behaving.

The previously described actions, which take into account the three dimensions or thematic vectors explained, start to have operational force when they are studied in these three strategic positions or cross-sectional levels. This triple and complex cross-section, which is simplified here, may be a productive way of achieving sustainable development and integral education.

## The Social Role of Universities, Service-Learning and Spirituality

### Impact on Universities and Society

The prophetic call and the concern expressed by the theologian Leonardo Boff, which were previously mentioned, are not new. However, they make the multiple and ancient cries of humanity's soul resound and reverberate in a new and vigorous way.

This is mainly related to an ethical question, echoed by many voices in the last decades. This is also a question addressed to academic institutions in their main role as knowledge producers and educators of future professionals in all areas of knowledge.

There is still a wide gap between societal demands and real academic contributions. But many efforts are being made to overcome this gap. A great number of intellectuals and other social actors should be thanked for their varied contributions to this effect.

This essay allows us to resume this debate, which fills us with hope just like all topics related to integral ecology. However, we should not leave some issues unmentioned, namely the complexity theory (Morin, 2005), the transdisciplinary theory and practice (Nicolescu, 2000), the debates on the ecology of knowledge (Santos, 2010) and on environmental rationale (Leff, 2006, 2016), as some of the various ways of bringing together the academic world and the world outside universities. In all these debates, important clues are given for the revalorization of knowledge—knowledge which has been trampled on and set aside by academic minds and their vitiated and segmented logic.

Despite important technological advances, or frequently due to them and how they were made, human society is far from having resolved its own internal problems. The same must be stated about conflicts arisen from the relationship between human beings and natural resources. Some of our internal problems and some of the conflicts in our relationship with nature have worsened. The academic world is taking too long or experiencing alienation when it comes to performing its function.

*The world is in crisis, not because it is going through a creative process, but because it is a world in a process of degradation, struggling to survive. Universities will survive if they manage to help humanity and the world to survive. Universities make sense only if they generate creative processes in humanity.*

The complex socio-environmental crisis has been unleashed in an agitated world where contradictions between current and past problems form the fabric which needs to be analyzed in order to understand the problems and conflicts the academic world must face. The world is in crisis, not because it is going

through a creative process, but because it is a world in a process of degradation, struggling to survive. Universities will survive if they manage to help humanity and the world to survive. Universities make sense only if they generate creative processes in humanity.

The 'recovery of awareness' caused by the pandemic shock may be just another superficial and inconsistent movement if humanity remains inert and does not draw on its experience to make amends with its past within each cultural context. 'Making amends with the past' requires a profound transformation both at the level of education and in what we call spirituality or the soul of humanity.

### **The Role of Universities**

When we think about the care of human dignity, the care of society and the care of the environment, we are faced with important relational logic present in a complex way in society; and the academic world has not always been able to construct a coherent dialogue. Conversely, the academic world has usually become isolated, building its own world.

How can this dialogue be facilitated? How can the academic world's isolation and self-referentiality be fought against? Three questions or basic issues should be always considered: (1) in university life, the first question must always be the following: What kind of society do we want? (2) Naturally, the second question will be: What kind of subjects should be educated for the society we want? And (3) consequently, our look will turn to universities: What kind of education do we need? And, as part of this question: What kinds of universities are necessary, considering the education required for individuals and the society we want to have? (cf. Follmann, 2008, p. 322).<sup>84</sup> Our dream is to move in the direction of a sustainable society, i.e. towards technological innovation in keeping with international advances and the establishment of social and environmental sustainability assurance, with a view to the balanced survival of society and the environment both at present and in the future. That is why citizens and professionals in society should go through an appropriate education process driven by the system in which this process is developed. Undoubtedly, the best guidelines to achieve these goals are stated in the above-mentioned Global Compact on Education.

### **Social Initiatives and Spirituality for Service-Learning**

The university chosen for this study is a Jesuit university located in the south of Brazil. In this university there is a center known as Center for Citizenship and Social Ser-

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84 These three questions arise from the first Strategic Plan 2001-2005 of the Association of Universities trusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America and the Caribbean [AUSJAL, for its Spanish acronym].

vices, [CCIAS, for its Spanish acronym],<sup>85</sup> which runs the social initiatives of the institution. Among the eighteen projects carried out as an interface between the university and the community, five initiatives were selected for this work:

**1.** The initiative known as *Horta Mãe-da-Terra* is a collective production project aimed at the cultivation of vegetables and unconventional food plants, which is run by university students, primary and high school students and teachers, as well as teachers, educators, academic interns and local actors from a municipal school in a working-class neighborhood.

Learning takes place “as a result of an integral education aimed at developing personal dimensions through reflections and experiences addressing social, political, emotional, cultural, mystical and environmental issues.” Project leaders comment that “when these issues are addressed in a practical way, it is possible to shape citizens with critical, emancipating, political, transforming, social and proactive thinking; who are capable of analyzing and dealing with complex situations involving natural and social processes both at school and in the community.” As to the learning gained by educators and interns, project leaders state that “educators and interns have the opportunity to work with a community in which there is a high rate of social vulnerability. This is a transforming experience” (*Projeto Horta Mãe da Terra*, in OLMA, 2021).<sup>86</sup>

**2.** The initiative called *Programa Esporte Integral* is a group of community-based collective activities held at the university sports facilities and other centers used for citizenship education, democratic participation experiences and the exercise of the right to leisure-time sports.

This effort, true to its main goal, i.e. citizenship education, favors service-learning in various democratic participation experiences, especially those related to the exercise of the right to leisure time through the practice of team sports and the participation in free time activities. In these events—whenever possible and feasible—all participants, together with team members, professionals, interns and specialists are involved in activity planning, information search and assessment.

**3.** The initiative known as *Programa de Atenção Ampliada à Saúde* is undertaken in an easily accessible building near the town hall and it is an interdisciplinary healthcare ‘school-service’ program, focused on the institutional school service of the undergradu-

85 Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos—UNISINOS, São Leopoldo, RS, Brazil. See Center for Citizenship and Social Services [CCIAS, for its Spanish acronym]: <http://unisinobr.org.br/cidadania/ccias-centro-de-cidadania-e-acao-social-unisinobr/>

86 References in this paper constitute part of the author’s research for an online publication at OLMA - [www.olma.org.br](http://www.olma.org.br): OLMA (2021). Meaningful Experiences of Socio-Environmental Justice (in progress).

ate course in Psychology, among others. Its objective is to encourage healthcare practices, taking into account the constitutive requirements of human and social development processes and with a view to improving quality of life. In this program, all professionals, teachers, specialists, interns and students become involved in various learning and service activities which are supplemented by systematic theoretical seminars, weekly supervision, monthly case studies, apart from the permanent learning and training engagement in various areas and topics. Learning programs for participants or program target groups are centered on psychoeducation, eating habits, hygiene, and healthy habits, apart from other issues dealt with in individual and/or group consultations. All this makes their work in the program turn into meaningful service-learning experiences.

4. *Vida-com-Arte* is a musical education and family-tie-strengthening program whose goal is to deal with socially vulnerable children and teenagers in municipal schools, and give participants the opportunity to live in a healthy environment and be able to develop their musical and human skills.

During the 2010s, diverse service-learning activities took place three times a week, and in these initiatives professional musicians, interns, workshop attendees and young trainees from the most vulnerable neighborhoods in town had the opportunity to exchange experiences with others while singing and playing musical instruments, such as the violin, the viola, the violoncello, the double bass, the flute, and the drums. The interactions between workshop attendees at the university orchestra rehearsals have always been important learning moments. Similarly, public appearances have always marked a climax in learning processes and citizenship education programs.

5. The initiative known as *Grupo de Cidadania e Cultura Religiosa Afro* was formed on campus by the *Núcleo de Estudos Afrobrasileiros e Indígenas* [NEABI, for its acronym in Portuguese] and its meetings, organized for Afro-descendants who live in town and its surroundings, are weekly held. Kids, young people and adults get together in this group in order to have cultural interactions, engage in inter-religious dialogue, gain learning collectively, acquire information on their reality and get closer to the academic world. Activities are especially aimed at gaining respect for religious diversity among participants and at helping the black population go through historical and identity processes. Learning processes have always taken place collectively, especially through conversations with all teachers, professionals, students and participants of all ages. The method used in the analysis of life stories of the local black population was that known as “collective hermeneutics.”

Its main feature has always been oral communication, through the narration of life stories and the exchange of experiences which affect us all. *Cidadania* is considered a collec-

tive learning environment in which there are affirmative actions that lead to the inclusion of the Afro population in the academic world.

Therefore, these five initiatives involving the university and the community foster diversity and encourage practices which may be considered service-learning activities.

When we try to identify spiritual aspects in these social initiatives, very interesting horizons open up:

The team leading the initiative *Horta Mãe da Terra* informed us that they understand and practice “spirituality through the vegetable garden project as a tool to promote life care and good quality of life” and through the way this effort is viewed: earth as our “great mother,” *the Pachamama*” of indigenous peoples and the “magna mater” of almost all traditions of humanity, thus assuring a dignified life. “Land care and cultivation lead to spirituality” (*Projeto Horta Mãe da Terra*, in OLMA, 2021).

The initiative *Programa Esporte Integral* also offers spiritually enriching activities: “Dialogue strategies, group dynamics, visits to other institutions and other group-building activities are undertaken upon participants’ requests.” These efforts were characterized as “reflection-encouraging events for the collective building of values” (*Projeto Esporte Integral*, in OLMA, 2021).

Team leaders of the initiative *Programa de Atenção Ampliada à Saúde* clearly stated: “We have no specific moments devoted to spirituality”; however, “when it comes to adopting a stance and taking decisions, our team is led by our ethics, always attempting to obtain the best results for participants, interns and the community with which we are engaged.” In another passage it is also stated that “we are an integrated team and we work collectively every day. Our work is the result of the dialogue we get engaged in and it is always aimed at seeking the best for our community.” Team leaders also comment on the collective work done to come up with solutions, as a spirituality practice or a way to avoid isolation: “We seek to reach agreements with partners in order to form work alliances and look for more solutions to the large number of problems and challenges faced” (*Programa Atenção Ampliada à Saúde*, in OLMA, 2021).

Leaders of the initiative known as *Projeto Vida-com-Arte* highlight that “this project has an impact on many adolescents and young people and it is in itself an expression of a constant spiritual practice, a fight against social injustice and a way to share feelings and knowledge” (*Projeto Vida-com-Arte*, in OLMA, 2021).

The group called *Grupo de Cidadania e Cultura Religiosa Afro* was motivated by the desire of various religious leaders to learn more about African culture and history and Afro-descendants. Therefore, spirituality is clearly present. Since the foundation of the group “there has been significant openness and promotion of varied spiritual practices, as well as reflections on Ignatian spirituality. We always begin activities by having a moment’s reflection, from the perspective of either Catholic spirituality or any other religious creed.” The spirituality in this project has always been “expressed in terms of the rights to active equality, dignity and fraternity, in terms of confidence and knowledge, and in terms of justice and peace among all peoples, cultures and religions.” Its leaders state that “respect for religious diversity guides, in this way, the search for the basis of peaceful coexistence between multiple forms which lead to the Almighty and to overcome weaknesses and behaviors that divide humanity.” And they add that “Life without presence and stigma, related to value judgment about people who are different from us, leads to diversity appreciation, religious complementarianism and social equality” (*Grupo Cidadania e Cultura Religiosa Afro*, in OLMA, 2021).

Thus, despite taking different creative ways, the five initiatives discussed in this essay deal with perceptions and specific practices geared to the same spirituality, which is based on the concept of socio-environmental justice and common pedagogical practices. This spirituality is mainly rooted in the ‘mysticism’ which is awoken and cultivated through full recognition of our own dignity and the dignity of others, through the suffering and indignation at outrageous and unacceptable inequalities and at the inhuman hardships suffered by many brothers and sisters, and through the care of life and the gifts of Creation, encouraged by the love for present and future life on this planet.

### **A Spirituality of Care - Conclusion**

Humanity urgently needs to focus on ‘the culture of care’ and get rid of ‘the culture of indifference’. Attention needs to be paid to the relational dimension and to the interconnection of all things in human coexistence, in interpersonal relationships, in society and in our relation with the gifts of nature.

We need to pay special attention to fairness in all complex human coexistence. This special attention is, in conclusion, what we can call ‘spirituality of care’. This seems to be the most appropriate name, since it centers on the permanent care of human dignity and life in all forms.

*In other words, this is a spirituality which is present in the care of human dignity, the care of the gifts of Creation and the care of the social and economic values of inclusion and equality. We do need to cultivate that triple mysticism of care. Care needs to be taken not only in decision-taking and the production of knowledge, but also in the way we are, live and behave in our daily lives. To put it simply, we need an integral spirituality which is always part of our lives and actions.*

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We need a spirituality which radically changes our practices, which makes us go back to the true path of justice and which provides human wisdom with a regenerating force. According to theologian Leonardo Boff, “we are going to reconsider our practices and learn to be wise and prolong the human project, which will be purified by the serious crisis that is likely to make us stronger” (Boff, 2018, p. 158). According to this theologian, it is necessary for us to walk quickly towards this end, since we do not have much time to waste (p. 159).

The spirituality needed today is related to the willingness in our hearts to search for the best ways of building sustainable and life-generating societies. One of the most effective ways to achieve this goal, which may be pursued in various forms, is that devised following the new learning practices focused on service-learning.

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*Uniservitate* is a global programme for the promotion of service-learning in Catholic Higher Education. Its objective is to generate a systemic change in Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) through the institutionalisation of service-learning (SL) as a tool to achieve its mission of offering an integral education and training of agents of change committed to their community.

***“We will not change the world, if we do not change education”***

*Pope Francis*

### **3** Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

A research topic that is increasingly attracting the attention of the academic world is the link between teaching and spirituality, understood in its broadest sense. This will be the focus of the volume that we present to our readers today. The aim is to provide, both for Catholic Institutions of Higher Education and universities at large, a space for reflection in their itinerary of discernment about their identity and specific mission.

This book, the third of the Uniservitate collection, explores these topics, bringing together research and experiences of international scope, from the Catholic university world as well as of other creeds and non-religious convictions, which delve into service-learning from the ethics of care and fraternity.

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