

KEYS



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# Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

M. Beatriz Isola  
Laura Gherlone  
Mauro Mantovani, SDB  
Carina Rossa  
Andrzej Wodka, C.Ss.R.  
Claudia Mora Motta  
Isabel Egaña  
Michael Valenzuela, FSC  
Daniel Horan, OFM  
Patrick M. Green  
James Arthur  
Tom Harrison  
Kevin Ahern

Arantzazu Martínez  
Ana Isabel Gómez Villalba  
Pbro. Ernesto Jesús Brotóns Tena  
Daniela Gargantini  
Federico Giraudo  
James Kielsmeier  
Priscilla A.S.  
Mercy Pushpalatha  
Xus Martín  
José Ivo Follmann, SJ  
María Nieves Tapia  
Andrés Peregalli

Conclusions: why complicate something so simple?

3.18

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*CLAYSS, Latin American Center for Service-Learning*





### María Nieves Tapia

*is the founder and director of the Latin American Center for Service-Learning (CLAYSS). Between 1997 and 2009, she initiated and coordinated the national service-learning programmes of the Argentine Ministry of Education, "School and Community" (1997-2001) and Solidarity Education (2003-2010), as well as the Solidarity Schools Programme of Buenos Aires City (2002-2003).*

*She has a degree in History, she is a founding member of the International Association for Research in Service-Learning (2005). She has been invited to lecture at universities and organisations on the five continents and has served on the juries of numerous national and international educational awards, including the Presidential*

*Award "Solidarity Schools" in Argentina and the MacJannet Global Prize for Global Citizenship. In 2019 she was appointed member of the Academy of Community Engagement Scholarship (ACES).*

*She is the author of numerous books and articles in Spanish, English, Portuguese and Italian, emphasizing *Aprendizaje y servicio solidario en el sistema educativo y las organizaciones juveniles* (2010) and *Social Engagement in the Higher Education Curriculum* (2019) among others.*

## 18. CONCLUSIONS: WHY COMPLICATE SOMETHING SO SIMPLE?

María Nieves Tapia

CLAYSS, Latin American Center For Service-Learning

*"At the end of our life, we shall all be judged by charity."*

Saint John of the Cross

"Why complicate something so simple?" (EG, 194) is one of the most challenging questions Pope Francis poses us in his exhortation on "The Joy of the Gospel."

To conclude this book, we would like to echo this question and go over this fragment of *Evangelii Gaudium* in which we are presented with a selection of biblical texts considering the love for our neighbour who suffers, and the urgent call of the Pope that our hermeneutical interpretations and our "conceptual tools" do not end up detracting or minimizing the Word of God:

*We incarnate the duty of hearing the cry of the poor when we are deeply moved by the suffering of others. Let us listen to what God's word teaches us about mercy, and allow that word to resound in the life of the Church. The Gospel tells us: "Blessed are the merciful, because they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5,7) ... "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy, yet mercy triumphs over judgment" (Jas 2,12-13) ... "Maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet 4,8). This truth greatly influenced the thinking of the Fathers of the Church and helped create a prophetic, counter-cultural resistance to the self-centred hedonism of paganism. (EG, 193)<sup>87</sup>*

*This message is so clear and direct, so simple and eloquent, that no ecclesial interpretation has the right to relativize it. The Church's reflection on these texts ought not to obscure or weaken their force, but urge us to accept their exhortations with courage and zeal. Why complicate something so simple? Conceptual tools exist to heighten contact with the realities they seek to explain, not to distance us from them. (EG, 194)<sup>88</sup>*

We know that the intellectual work typical of the academic context, necessarily rich in hermeneutics and conceptual devices, can—even with the best intentions—end up "complicating something so simple."

87 Emphasis added in bold by the author.

88 Emphasis added in bold by the author.

We have produced thousands of papers, studies and critiques on the identity and mission of the Catholic university. Yet, in the real world of our institutions, we often notice the deep gap between the tenets stated in our missions and our teaching and research practices. We witness the distances between our deep theological reflections and our institutions' daily practices, which are not always different from those of other non-denominational universities.

*We believe that the service-learning proposal can help us "not complicate something so simple" and to strengthen, in our Catholic educational institutions, the Christian love that should be at the centre of our identity and mission.*

From this perspective, we believe that the service-learning proposal can help us "not complicate something so simple" and to strengthen, in our Catholic educational institutions, the Christian love that should be at the centre of our identity and mission.

In several papers in this volume, there has been an attempt to underline that what is most "the identity" of a Catholic University should be, precisely, the simplest and most central part of our faith: we believe that "God is Love" (1 John 4,8), that "whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." (1 John 4,20), and that the new and more "appropriate" commandment left to us by the Master is that of mutual love (John 13,34).

Paraphrasing St. Paul's words (1 Cor. 13): if our students can speak in the tongues of Cambridge, Paris and Beijing, but did not learn to love their neighbour, what's the point of attending a Catholic university? If our Catholic universities dominate all the sciences and are at the top of all the rankings, but do not contribute to building a more fraternal world, we run the risk of being nothing more than a "clanging cymbal." Even if we make the most generous donations or promote multiple voluntary services and activism, "but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13, 2).

For all those reasons, we understand that developing a spirituality of service, based on authentic Christian love, should be essential for the CHEIs to avoid "complicating something so simple."

As this book surveys, service-learning projects help us focus on the essentials because they allow our students to learn to truly love others in deed and truth. They also allow them to use their knowledge and skills serving the needs of others, the commu-

nities and the planet, to bring theory and practice together, and join head, heart and hands.

Accompanying these practices with a spiritual reflection allows us to acknowledge the God we cannot see in the brothers we see. This approach to faith has an impact on the lives and projects of our students, much more than so many lessons in morality and theology that can remain at the level of the purely theoretical.

A spirituality based on the practice of fraternal service can help our students discover and cultivate the Love that is patient and merciful and never gets tired of giving (1 Cor., 13), even in cultural contexts that privilege hedonic consumption and ruthless competition. It can allow the new generations to find in the donation of themselves and the construction of a more just and fraternal world, a transcendent meaning of life, even if regarding themselves as agnostics or atheists.

The specific SL projects allow students who define themselves as Catholic, others who profess different religions and agnostics or atheists to work together in the service of others.

Unlike campus ministry masses, missionary groups and other activities that require the profession of the Catholic faith as a prerequisite, service-learning projects can be an open way of welcoming and proclaiming the Good News to those who a priori are not interested in religion.

Similarly, and especially in contexts where Catholics are a minority compared to those who profess other creeds, service-learning projects can become a fruitful space for dialogue and ecumenical and interreligious spiritual reflection, regarding the "golden rule" common to the great religions (Pushpalatha, 2020; Tapia, 2020).

*The practice of caring for others allows us to work and reflect together in an ecumenical, interreligious dialogue and also with so many who—without professing a religious faith—are committed to justice, solidarity and care for people and the planet.*

As noted in this book, the practice of caring for others allows us to work and reflect together in an ecumenical, interreligious dialogue and also with so many who—without professing a religious faith—are committed to justice, solidarity and care for people and the planet.

For this reason, service-learning projects are among the most "Catholic" and identity-based things we can offer, both in the sense of adherence to the most essential aspects of our faith and the teaching of the Catholic Church and at the same time, in the original "universal" sense of the term Catholic.

On the last day, the Master will examine us all, university students or illiterate, professors or laymen, Catholic or not, and will ask us if we have loved him concretely in our suffering brothers and sisters (Mt. 25, 31-46). If we teach our students to use their knowledge at the service of others through service-learning proposals, if they learn to love others in deeds and in truth, we will have prepared them to pass the most important exam of all.

In addition, evidencing our identity and mission as Catholic institutions will become less complicated.

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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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*Uniservitate is an initiative led by Porticus, with the general coordination of the Latin American Center for Service-learning (CLAYSS)*

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