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# Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

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The Ignatian charism, the University and  
Service-Learning

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*Texts extracted from Volume 3 of the Uniservitate Collection:*  
***Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning***

Uniservitate Collection

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Proofreading and editing of texts in Spanish: Licy Miranda

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Design of the collection and of this volume: Adrián Goldfrid

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*Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning / María Nieves Tapia ... [et al.] ; adaptado por Karina Marconi ; M. Alejandra Linares ; coordinación general de María Nieves Tapia ; M. Beatriz Isola ; Laura Gherlone. - 1a ed adaptada. - Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires : CLAYSS, 2022. Libro digital, PDF - (Uniservitate)*

Archivo Digital: [descarga](#)

Traducción de: Karina Marconi ; M. Alejandra Linares.

ISBN 978-987-4487-30-8

1. Trabajo Solidario. 2. Pedagogía. 3. Espiritualidad. I. Tapia, María Nieves II. Marconi, Karina, adapt. III. Linares, M. Alejandra, adapt. IV. Tapia, María Nieves, coord. V. Isola, M. Beatriz, coord. VI. Gherlone, Laura, coord. VII. Marconi, Karina, trad. VIII. Linares, M. Alejandra, trad.

CDD 370

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## 5. THE IGNATIAN CHARISM, THE UNIVERSITY AND SERVICE-LEARNING

Claudia Mora Motta

Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Cali

### Presentation

In recent months I have been challenged by Pope Francis's text *Let us Dream. The Path to a Better Future* (2020). His invitation to decenter and transcend pinpoints the position of the academy and of each of us in these times of crisis.

His proposal for moving from the comfort area in order to go out of oneself to meet the other implies—necessarily—"an exercise of opening doors, opening windows, going further" (p. 139); broadening the perspective to be in contact with reality, analyzing its different corners and taking the risk of changing ways of thinking and acting.

I find it impossible to abstract my reflection from the present moment. The health, social and political crisis we are experiencing has demonstrated the multiple fractures that our societies have generated: extreme poverty, inequity of health and educational systems, an unlimited desire for accumulation and the insatiable manner in which we relate to nature, our Common Home.

However, in this context: What new meanings should universities assume, regarding their social engagement? How should they implement experiential methodologies that will succeed in developing an attitude of co-responsibility and service? How can they achieve a pertinent and transformative education that touches the head, the heart and the hands?

I thank my colleagues and friends from the Latin American Center for Service-Learning in Solidarity (CLAYSS) for the invitation to share this reflection in my condition as a lay person, educator and supporter of service-learning at the Universidad Javeriana Cali for over a decade.

I have posed some key questions so that the reflections that follow may contribute to formulate possible answers, taking into consideration the perspective of the Ignatian charism and its relationship to service-learning.

## Justice and its Role in the University of the Society of Jesus

*In the universities of the Society of Jesus different key ideas can be established that are considered a call to the academy, so that they accomplish their mission of forming men and women for the service of others, God's greatest glory. Understood as the Magis, the search for the greatest good, the most universal in a perspective of excellence. In the university context, it implies the purpose of the intellectual apostolate, that is, its social commitment to put knowledge and science to the service of others.*

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the service of others.

This reflection on university social engagement is structured upon three ideas:

### ► The university inserted in reality

Around 1989, a group of Jesuit martyrs (Ignacio Ellacuría, Ignacio Martín Baró, Segundo Montes, Armando López, Juan Ramón Moreno) were in charge of the José Simeón Cañas University in El Salvador, promoting a university perspective of Christian and Ignatian inspiration, centered on the analysis of a social, economic and political reality in which all human beings are respected in their human dignity. Thus, the entire strength of the University, from its teaching, research and social outreach invigorated a movement of liberation, greater awareness and transformation (Sols, 2016).

The conception of a University embedded in the social dynamics of the country and the region marked a clear commitment of the academy in the definition of a political and cultural project in favor of the poorest.

### ► The relevance of the university

In his address at the Santa Clara University, in the United States, Father Kolvenbach (2000) urged the universities of the Society of Jesus to achieve a relevant education, articulated in the social, economic and cultural dynamics; and to develop critical thinking, capable of transforming the structures of injustice. His statement is expressed in the following paragraph: “I want to affirm that all the knowledge acquired at the university is valuable for its own sake, but it is also knowledge that should ask itself who and what it is in favor of” (p.9).

Furthermore, in his speech Kolvenbach updates a university perspective framed in times, places and people. Thus, he points out that, even though university education is subject to the pressure imposed by competition and individualism, which marks one way of understanding success, “the actual criterion of evaluation of our Jesuit universities lies in what our students become” (p.8). That is to say,

*...students throughout their formation must let the disturbing reality of this world into their lives so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and commit to it constructively. They should learn to perceive, think, judge, choose and act in favor of the rights of others, particularly the least privileged and the oppressed.” (p.8)*

*A pedagogical approach that involves the relevance of the educational proposal and the formation of the “whole person in solidarity” in which the direct experience, together with reflection and critical analysis, succeed in transforming the perspective of life, the professional exercise and the sense of collective construction, where the poor find a dignified place.*

In other words, Kolvenbach (2000) favors a pedagogical approach that involves the relevance of the educational proposal and the formation of the “whole person in solidarity” (p.8), in which the direct experience, together with reflection and critical analysis, succeed in transforming the perspective of life, the professional exercise and the sense

of collective construction, where the poor find a dignified place. In an inspiring manner, he reflects:

*When direct experience touches the heart, the mind may feel challenged to change. Personal involvement in innocent suffering, in the injustice suffered by others, is the catalyst for the solidarity that opens the path to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection. (p. 8)*

For its part, the pertinence of university belongs to a project of nation that pursues a dignified life for all. Remolina (2007) proposes it as the social responsibility of university, which integrates the entire academic work with the intentionality of integrally forming

men and women who will provide qualified service to society, founded on ethical principles. In addition, he mentions research capable of achieving a social transference of knowledge, which makes a better quality of life possible. From this standpoint, “the University must go to extremes in the search for and constitution of pertinent sciences and techniques, that is, sciences that touch the reality of the country in order to help transform it in an intelligent and efficient way”(p.164).

### ► The formation of the whole person

Since its constitution, Jesuit education has promoted integral formation, educating “the whole person”, the “complete person”,

intellectually and professionally, psychologically, morally and spiritually. But in this emerging, globalized world, with its immense possibilities and profound contradictions, the “whole person” is understood differently from the way it was understood during the Counter Reformation, the Industrial Revolution or the 20th Century. And tomorrow’s “whole person” cannot be “whole” without an educated awareness of society and culture, with which to contribute, generously, in the real world. Tomorrow’s “whole person” must have, in short, a well-educated solidarity. (Kolvenbach, 2000, p.8)

Following this line, Adolfo Nicolás S.J. (2008), former General of the Society of Jesus, pointed out that “in fact, the humanist spirit creates persons who are conscious, competent, compassionate and committed” (p.10) to their personal growth, which integrates a solid reflection for transcendence and knowledge at the service of others to build just societies.

The three key ideas presented above have a common denominator in the statement of the mission of the Society of Jesus, identified as the service of faith and the promotion of justice, for, as it says, “the mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice constitutes an absolute requirement” (Society of Jesus, 1974, General Congregation XXXII, d.4.n.2). As can be established, there is a clear relationship with Pope Francis’s approach (2020), when he makes a call to decenter oneself and transcend to find the place of action for others.

In the following General Congregations (the last one was N° XXXVI), the sense of this statement was confirmed and deepened, emphasizing that

...the justice mentioned is a justice rooted in the Gospel and lived within the Ignatian tradition...the need to modify socio-cultural structures... Today, the promotion of justice includes the commitment to take care of creation...defend the excluded, stand alongside

the marginalized and challenge the unjust social structures. (Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat, 2014, pp. 11 - 12n. 1.2)

## Service-Learning and Ignatian Charism

Finding God in all things is a way of placing God in the center of life. In the Ignatian charism, the own, deep quality is the experience that God is love. In a secular and contemporary perspective, this means integrating the spiritual dimension in everyday, ordinary tasks, according to a living God, present in every living being on a daily basis. That is, (...) “to ask for an inner knowledge of so much good received, so that I, fully recognizing it, may serve his Divine Majesty” (St. Ignatius of Loyola, EE 230-233). However, integrating this perspective in the university world and, specifically, in terms of the integral formation of students, of the whole person, leads us to identify a series of possibilities of active and experiential teaching that motivate faculty and young university students to go out of themselves to meet the other in an exchange of knowledge, experiences and opportunities.

From Ignatian pedagogy, the formative process is articulated around five moments: context, experience, reflective involvement, action and evaluation. This is why it may be related to the methodological proposal of service-learning, which is founded on experiential education and achieves the articulation of curricular learning objectives with challenges of the context that are re-signified in a systematic and intentional reflection process.

In this sense, in reference to students' integral formation, Mora and Torres (2018) focus on several coincidences between the purpose of the Educational Project of the Universidad Javeriana and the ways of fulfilling service-learning:

...the importance that university formation should contribute to increase the awareness of freedom and social responsibility that allows students to become political subjects, advocates of justice and agents of the improvement of the quality of life for all...the recognition that the different knowledge, arranged in curricular proposals, must facilitate, for both faculty and students, the acknowledgment of the reality of the country and its connection to processes that seek to solve concrete problems. (p.48)

Moreover, Mora and Torres continue (2018),

...The transition from pedagogical models centered on contents and on the active presence of the professor to other models in which the dialogue of knowledge with the realities of the context is fundamental, and in which the active presence of students in their own formative process is a long-term task... (p.49)

*The key elements of the Ignatian pedagogy and the methodology of service-learning coincide, particularly because their spirit results in inter-subjective relationships, in the acknowledgment of the other, in the transformation of the person in all their dimensions based on the critical analysis of reality, in educating for a greater good, to help and promote justice, peace and other values.*

Thus, the key elements of the Ignatian pedagogy and the methodology of service-learning coincide, particularly because their spirit results in inter-subjective relationships, in the acknowledgment of the other, in the transformation of the person in all their dimensions based on the critical analysis of reality, in educating for a greater good, to help and

promote justice, peace and other values.

In this context, university has a great potential to contribute to what students become in that perspective of decentering, acting and transcending. Additionally, it is capable of creating new ways of interaction, from its teaching, research and extension, with the different social partners, to advance towards an adequate and decisive social and political commitment.

In conclusion, there are multiple aspects of the Ignatian charism and service-learning that are interwoven in the university environment: direct and real experience, the formation of the whole person, the preferential option for the poor, the critical interpretation of the context, the possibility of allowing oneself to be affected, the discernment and action in favor of others in order to influence the transformation of the structures of injustice and inequity in society. For, as St. Ignatius points out, “love should be put more in deeds than in words” (E.E. 230).

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In support of the Global Compact on Education

*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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ISBN 978-987-4487-30-8



9 789874 448730

Published in June 2022

ISBN 978-987-4487-28-5