

AN IGNATIAN RETREAT AMID THE POVERTY OF ECUADOR

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IN 1973, PEDRO ARRUIPE, then Superior General of the Society of Jesus, spoke in Spain to the alumni of Jesuit schools from throughout Europe. This speech, one of Arrupe's most well-known addresses, challenged his audience to reflect on how their Jesuit education influenced their identity and whether it educated them to work for justice. Arrupe asserted, 'Just as we are never sure that we love God unless we love others, so we are never sure that we have love at all unless our love issues in works of justice'.¹ Opening a student's eyes to injustices around the world remains one of the primary missions of Jesuit education. In some cases, graduates decide to do a year or more of service as a way to live out this teaching. The largest Roman Catholic service programme is the Jesuit Volunteers, but another organization with similar goals and mission that attracts a number of Jesuit-educated women and men is Rostro de Cristo.²

Rostro de Cristo,

... is a Catholic program whose mission is to provide spiritual and educational opportunities for young people from the United States to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ together with the people of Ecuador.³

During their year in Ecuador, the volunteers teach in after-school programmes, work in parishes and visit the dying in hospitals. As members of a faith-based Roman Catholic organization, they attend Mass with

¹ Pedro Arrupe, 'Men and Women for Others', in *Pedro Arrupe: Essential Writings*, edited by Kevin Burke (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 179.

² *Rostro de Cristo* is Spanish for 'Face of Christ'. The international wing of the Jesuit Volunteers and Rostro de Cristo combine for a two-week orientation, which currently takes place the last two weeks of July at Boston College in the USA.

³ 'Mission and Vision', at <http://www.rostrodecristo.org/about-us/mission>.



St James Society Retreat House, Ayangue

their Ecuadorian community and focus on building ties through faith and service. Additionally, the volunteers are responsible for leading brief immersion experiences for approximately 25 high school and college groups from the United States. These experiences immerse students in the lives of Ecuadorians for ten days, educate them about structural injustices, and invite them to examine their own lives.

The volunteers themselves undergo four weekend retreats during the year to help them reflect on their time in Ecuador. These experiences occur every few months along the volunteers' journey and are designed to help them process their experience. At the beginning of their service commitment, such a retreat can help volunteers adapt to being away from home and living in a new environment. The retreat at the end of the experience allows them to reflect as they prepare to return home, having been changed by a year in Ecuador. While the format of the retreats varies, the length is usually three days and the location is away from the communities, offering the volunteers a chance to remove themselves from their work environment and focus on their relationships with each other and with God.

In spring 2011 I was offered the opportunity to design and lead the third retreat for the volunteers, from 29 April to 1 May 2011. The retreat location was the St James Society Retreat House in Ayangue, Ecuador. Ayangue is located on the west coast of Ecuador, approximately a three-hour car ride from Duran, the city where two of the three Rostro

de Cristo houses are located. The retreat centre overlooks the Pacific Ocean and a small secluded village, making for a beautiful, quiet place for reflection surrounded by God's creation.

The structure of the retreat was based on St Ignatius' comments in the *Constitutions*, III.1.4 [250]. Here, St Ignatius discusses the way in which young novices come to intuit God's presence in the world. The novices are taught to use their senses, to show respect and reverence to each one's state and thereby to grow in devotion to God. Fr Howard Gray's description of this process is synthesized as 'attention, reverence and devotion'.⁴ I broke down the retreat into these three concepts, trusting that the volunteers would benefit from paying attention to their reality, reverencing the encounter and discerning God's presence in the world through devotion.

This Ignatian prism for reflection aimed at allowing them to take time to see God's presence in the previous months, as well as to consider what would come after their year of service. What follows are adaptations of the three talks I gave to help unpack these themes.⁵ As an additional part of the retreat, the volunteers had daily exercises to help them explore the themes, some of which are alluded to in what follows. In conclusion, I will offer my own reflections on preparing and offering the retreat. I remain grateful to Dr Patrick and Mrs Helen Rombalski, who are on the Rostro de Cristo board of directors, for the opportunity to lead this retreat, and to the sixteen volunteers who thoughtfully and prayerfully underwent the experience, allowing me to see the *rostro de Cristo* in my short time in Ecuador.

Talk 1: Attention

Although our theme is attention, I would like to begin by discussing memory. My first point is that memory is crucial in creating our identity. In his novel *The Tree House Confessions*, James McConkey discusses the power of memory. Peter, a fifty-year-old man, has retreated to his son's tree house. As the narrative unfolds, the reader realises that it is not

⁴ For a discussion of Howard Gray's interpretation of attention, reverence and devotion see Howard Gray, 'Ignatian Spirituality', in *As Leaven in the World*, edited by Thomas M. Landy (Franklin: Sheed and Ward, 2001), 324–326. I am especially thankful to Fr Gray for his guidance over many years which led to the development of this retreat.

⁵ The actual talks were not recorded and I was working from notes. However, what is written highlights the essential ideas that I invited them to reflect upon during the three main sessions.

the death of his son nor arguments with his wife that have caused his flight from reality, but rather his mother's dying words.

On her deathbed his mother announced that she no longer held sacred those memories of his youth that the middle-aged man treasured. She no longer wished to be buried with her family, no longer reflected fondly upon those summers that Peter felt had formed the core of his being. For her, these memories were worthless as she approached death. Peter reflects, 'My mother renounced the past, she renounced place, she renounced her dead husband and her living son'.⁶ As Peter discovers, one of the most devastating acts one can commit is to deny the authenticity of happy times that someone else remembers. While the present always changes as people age and die, memory allows us to hold on to those pieces of the past in the only way we can, and an assault on our joyful memories may have disastrous consequences.

Just as, negatively, the destruction or uprooting of memory can be destructive of our identities, memory also forms us in positive ways. In the film *Cinema Paradiso*, the protagonist Toto looks back on his life and sees how working with Alfredo, the movie projectionist, helped to create his identity. From a young age he would gather films together and



Alfredo's funeral, from Cinema Paradiso

⁶ James McConkey, *The Tree House Confessions* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), 213.

help Alfredo show them to the town. As the film comes to a close, Toto arrives home for Alfredo's funeral to find the town transformed, no longer the place of his birth and adolescence. Even though shops had closed and people had aged, his memory of the past remained. In the final scene of the movie, Toto sits alone in the cinema and weeps as he watches film clips that the old man had prepared and left in a box for his eventual return home.

From these two examples, and from our own lives, we can appreciate how memory helps to create an identity. Who we are is, in part, a product of the impact of our memory and the way memory affects our present. Thus, my second point is that at the heart of our identity are our 'non-negotiables'. I would define non-negotiables as these elements of our personhood that lie at the core of our being. These are the aspects of our lives that we would not allow to be taken away because they contribute to our identity at the deepest level. That does not mean that they cannot change over time. Perhaps before you came to Ecuador you thought something was important, such as the way you dress or certain objects that you possess, but having spent nine months here, those things may no longer matter. Now what matters may be getting enough to eat or ensuring that a young child is able to have an education. This experience has probably altered or formed your non-negotiables in ways that were unforeseen nine months ago, and may last for the rest of your lives.

My third point is that one way to form your non-negotiables is to be attentive to the reality around you. As Howard Gray has said, 'For Ignatius God could be found in all things, but only if one first found "all things"'.⁷ An example of this would be that you cannot find God in the people of Ecuador until you find the people of Ecuador where they are at this moment. To do this, you must be attentive to who they are and to their struggles, sharing in their difficult experiences and taking part in their triumphs. This is really what you have been doing these past nine months, so I hope you can now spend time taking stock of the attention you have paid to these men and women with whom you work.

Finally, please take some time to reflect on the ways you have formed your identity and your non-negotiables. Reaching back into your memory, both before your arrival here and in the past months, what has helped

⁷ Howard Gray, 'Soul Education: An Ignatian Priority', in *A Jesuit Education Reader*, edited by George W. Traub (Chicago: Loyola, 2008), 205.

you decide who you want to be? Be attentive to those details, small encounters and moments of revelation. We will go on to give these experiences new words as invitations to relationship; for now allow these experiences to be just what they are: encounters to which you should be attentive as they help form your identity.

Talk 2: Reverence

We have just focused on ourselves, our identities. Now, as we discuss the theme of reverence, I would like to focus on relationship. We began with an Emmaus walk,⁸ spending time in conversation with a partner. Just as Jesus walked with the disciples after his death and brought consolation, so you too offered consolation to each other through conversation. Ignatius placed a heavy emphasis on communication, because God's will can be revealed through conversation. One of the first levels to relationship is conversation, the acknowledgement of another through speech or other communication, but this is only the beginning.

Following the walk, I asked you to write down the names of those people you encountered during your time in Ecuador and something about their struggle. Then we read those names, prayerfully asking God to help those individuals and to be with them through their troubles. We read nearly one hundred names, and it was a difficult and moving exercise. However, it is important to name your pain, because the power to name is a power to control. In Genesis, God offers the man and woman the chance to name the animals of the world, thus symbolically giving them a stewardship over these creatures. However, in Exodus, Moses approaches the burning bush and asks God for God's name. God is beyond name and replies that 'I am who am' should be God's reference. Thus, Moses has no power over God to give God a name.

You named these feelings as we prayed, asking God for strength and asserting your own power over your pain through your presence here in Ecuador. The women and men who will not have a chance to attend school, who are homeless, who have lost a spouse or who are suffering from abuse have all entered your lives in a profound way. You are there for them, present to them. Sometimes this seems ineffective

⁸ This exercise is based on the passage from Luke 24:13–35. The volunteers are divided into pairs and given questions to discuss on an hour-long walk. The goal is for them to intuit the Spirit 'burning within them' during their conversation and to find Christ in the consolation of their partners.

because you want to go beyond ‘simply’ being present, hoping to create structural change. However, Stanley Hauerwas, an ethicist at Duke University, describes in his book *Suffering Presence* how sometimes this is all we can do.⁹ And, after naming the pain, just knowing that someone else is present may be enough to provide help. By naming the pain that you have encountered and experienced among the Ecuadorians, you can see the power your presence has already had and the strength you gain by naming this pain as you move forward.

I experienced this about five years ago when a friend’s father had a stroke. I arrived at his home about the same time as he had returned from overseas. The prognosis for his father was not good: he was in a coma which the doctors feared was irreversible. I walked to my friend and hugged him, but there was nothing I could say. I sat next to him on his bed, and we exchanged only a few sentences in the hour or so that we sat there, contemplating our lives and the fragility of existence. We then stood up, hugged again, and shared dinner. Although there were few words that could offer consolation, he knew that my presence indicated my care for him and his family. I had been a ‘suffering presence’.

So, too, have all of you been a suffering presence. You have given yourselves to the people of Ecuador, and in many cases, they have given themselves back to you. Being there during a difficult time is one way to reverence these encounters. To reverence something, in an Ignatian sense, is to appreciate its uniqueness. You have taken the time to accept what is there in the other, without moving to judgment first. You have sat with people and listened to their stories instead of immediately telling them how to fix their problems or suggesting ways to do things that will yield better results. That is what it means to reverence your encounters.

These encounters are ideally mutual donations, as all strong relationships should be. Marriage ought to be an example of ‘mutual donation’. Many sociologists and theologians are asking why there is such a high divorce rate. I think one of the issues is that people focus too much on the ‘do’ of ‘I do’ within the marriage vows. The ‘do’ is what the couple will do—where they will live, will they have enough money, are they in love? Few people focus on the ‘I’. Who am I, independent

⁹ See Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence* (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame P, 1986).

of this other person? What are my gifts and talents? What are my non-negotiables? This is why we started with the self. We need to be comfortable with ourselves, at least to some extent, before we can give ourselves away in mutual donation. Of course this is a process that continues throughout our lives. However, these questions must be asked. Who am 'I' that I can give myself to this person, this reality, this experience? Ignatian reflection invites us to ask these questions.

And so, once we have reflected on these issues, we ask ourselves *how* we can reverence the encounter with the other. Thomas Merton's notion of the true self and the false self helps with this question. So often we hide our true selves and put up a façade, not wanting to let people beyond the walls we build for protection. But we need to tear down these walls, Merton instructs, to allow our true self to break out into the world for the sake of our relationships.¹⁰

During your personal reflection time, ask yourself how you can bring your true self before those in your community, those in Ecuador and, finally, God. We will focus next on that last relationship, with the God who called you here to spend a year of your life among the poor of Ecuador.

Talk 3: Devotion

I would like to begin by reflecting on the story of Luke 15, the Prodigal Son. Up to this point, we have focused on the past and ourselves, and on the present and our relationships with others. Now we will look to the future and our relationship with God. The story of the Prodigal Son reveals an insight into the love and care that God has for all people. In Luke 15, before the parable, Jesus is found eating with sinners and tax collectors. The Pharisees scoff at Jesus' behaviour, but his response is a series of parables that challenge their notion of God's love. Instead of being earned, the love is an unmerited gift, offered to the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son. According to the text, the father runs to the son, embraces him, puts a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. These responses would have been more foreign to Jesus' audience than they are to us. Why is the lost son being treated with such compassion? It makes no sense in this world, but in the

¹⁰ See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Boston, Ms: Shambhala, 2003).



The Retreat House chapel at Ayangue

world of God's love there is no outcast; no one is turned away; all can be forgiven.

In an excellent essay, Lavina Byrne states that prayer should be an encounter and not a performance.¹¹ The father in Luke 15 treats his reunion with his younger son as an encounter, an authentic interaction based on love. Byrne challenges readers to move beyond doing something for the sake of repetition or going through the motions simply because it is what people are taught. You are here, in Ecuador, because you believe that God has called you to something more: an encounter with the people of Ecuador rather than a performance, doing something that you did not feel called to do. This past year is likely to have been one of encounter that has revealed the face of Christ to you in the people of Duran.

As a graduate student at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, I was a teaching assistant for a course on marriage. The instructor told his class the following true story. A man in his early thirties had been married to his wife for a few years and began to see that the marriage was failing. In order to rekindle the relationship, he decided to take her on a second honeymoon to Hawaii, the location of their original

¹¹ 'Prayer—An Encounter and not a Performance', in *Traditions of Spiritual Guidance*, edited by Lavina Byrne (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991).

honeymoon, a time of love and happiness. On the first evening, he began to embrace her, hoping for a mutual and loving sexual response. However, instead of responding with love she said bluntly, ‘take what you want, and when you are done, we can go to sleep’. At that moment, the man knew his marriage was over. Love was no longer a mutual gift, but a mechanical action. Using Byrne’s terms, marriage and making love were no longer an encounter, but a performance. The meaning of the act—the experience—did not go beyond the surface—the performance. In a true relationship of encounter, whether between two persons or a person and God, there must be a mutual offer of the true self, not the false self of performance.

The idea of devotion in our Ignatian framework is that once you are attentive to the reality around you, and once you reverence this encounter, you will come to see the way in which God is working in a situation. Devotion reveals the presence of God and the direction of God. This notion of devotion is tightly linked to encounter, but also to Ignatian discernment. How has God revealed God’s self to you during these past nine months? Where is God calling you after this year of service? Ignatius asked questions just like yours as he recovered at his castle following his wound at Pamplona. Undergoing what he would later term a discernment of spirits, Ignatius came to see how God was calling him—to a life dedicated to spiritual matters instead of romance novels. You discerned over a year ago that God was calling you to go to Ecuador when you accepted this position, and now you need to discern again. What is next? And how has this year transformed your relationship with God?

I invite you to spend some time in prayer asking for an open heart to allow God to nudge you towards your next goal. At the same time, realise that you need to continue being present to this reality for the next three months. Do not look past your final months in Ecuador, but invite God’s presence into your life during this time. We will end by praying out loud for each other. Please take some time to decide what you most need to bring before God in this final stage of your volunteer experience.

Who We Become

I only spent five days in Ecuador, staying in Duran the day before and the day after the retreat in the community at Antonio Jose de Sucre. The experience of being in Duran for that short time gave me a glimpse

into the daily reality of where the Rostro de Cristo volunteers live and work. Through many of their reflections, the volunteers shared feelings of powerlessness before the injustices and poverty that they faced. They also continually reaffirmed the love that they experienced from many in the community. I left this retreat experience, and the country of Ecuador, inspired by my time among the volunteers. Their energy, passion and desire to serve the poor demonstrate a concrete way to put the gospel into action. Given that many of them were educated at Jesuit schools this further affirms the Jesuit mission of educating students to work for justice. I was reminded of the former Jesuit Superior General Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach's statement at Santa Clara in 2000, 'The real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who our students become'.¹² The Jesuit-educated volunteers who choose to spend a year in Ecuador with Rostro de Cristo have applied their Jesuit education well and can be sure that 'our love issues in works of justice'.¹³

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¹² Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, 'The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice', in *A Jesuit Education Reader*, 155.

¹³ Aside from Patrick and Helen Rombalski, I would also like to thank Megan Radek, the director of RDC in Duran, for her help implementing the retreat and the 2010–2011 volunteers who work for justice and inspire those they encounter: Caitlin Long, Tasha Davis, Becky Davies, Jeff Wallace, Christina Mellace, Brendan Bradford, Mark Perlite, Celso Perez, Tierney Monahan, Jessie Eiseman, Jon Cali, Jenn Zocco, Aaron Pierre, Marita Vievering, Beth Awalt and Kipp Gallagher.