

GAUDIUM ET SPES AND POST-CONCILIAR
CATHOLIC SOCIAL PRACTICE:
SCRUTINIZING THE JESUIT EXPERIENCE
IN THE LIGHT OF THE ASCENSION

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Abstract

A distinctive feature of post-conciliar Catholic social thought and practice is the insight that the promotion of social justice is not simply as one ministry among many, but should be a constitutive dimension of the church's entire mission of evangelization, to use the terms of the 1971 synodal document, *Justice in the World*¹. Such changes in understanding the role of justice in faith also affect the understanding and practice of faith, that is, they produce new religious emphases and sensibilities. By examining how these changes have been expressed in the Society of Jesus –the religious order more commonly known as the Jesuits– I will show that post-conciliar Catholic social practice and thought manifests the session of the ascended Jesus at the right hand of the Father. It is highly unusual to analyze Christian social justice practice in terms of the ascension, yet I maintain that post-conciliar Catholic social practice, at least as exemplified in the Jesuit case, sheds light on this little invoked aspect of the paschal mystery, and in turn is much illuminated by being interpreted in such a framework. In this paper I will analyze contemporary Jesuit social thought and discernment as an example of contemporary post-conciliar Catholic social thought and practice and as a sign of the times that actually presupposes an implicit theology of the ascension. I will analyze two key aspects of the change in Jesuit social thought and practice since the council: one is the understanding of mission, the other is the practice of social discernment. I will point out correlations between these changes and some major themes of *Gaudium et Spes*. Then I will discuss how the more recent shifts in Jesuit social discernment use an implicit theology of the ascension of Jesus.

Many of the changes in discernment and thought are based on changes in practice, and all of them are based on experience, but I will not discuss changes in Jesuit social practice, for this would be a separate account. Suffice it to say for present purposes that since 1975 there has been a multiplication of Jesuit social centres involved in some combination of social analysis, advocacy and formation. Now there are presently over 300 such centres around the world, with the highest concentrations in South Asia and Latin America. This number exceeds the number of Jesuit universities around the world.

Furthermore, since 1975 over forty Jesuits have been killed in connection with work to promote social justice in the service of faith. My ultimate hope for this analysis is that it will help Catholic social practice to be construed more explicitly as religious experience and hence as witness to Christ's paschal mystery. Once we can do that, then it will be more obvious how the practice of justice and social transformation is a constitutive dimension of evangelization.

Post-Conciliar Jesuit Social Discernment and Consciousness

Mission

In 1975 the Society of Jesus re-expressed its mission from the more traditional "defense and propagation of the faith" to "the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement"². The older formulation was not discarded, and remained foundational and normative, but instead was interpreted in these new terms. The decision was made by a representative decision-making body called the 32nd General Congregation, which met in 1974-1975. This decision was principally expressed in a document called "Our Mission Today: The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice". A General Congregation is the highest legislative body of the Jesuits, is comprised of elected and appointed people who represent the whole Society of Jesus, and it meets only at need, usually to choose a new superior-general, sometimes to make important decisions about the Society's work and life that are beyond the scope of ordinary government. The 32nd General Congregation, or GC 32, was a meeting of the latter type.

Twenty years and almost forty martyrdoms later, in 1995, the 34th General Congregation met for similar reasons. It confirmed GC 32's re-expression of Jesuit mission and enriched it by widening the understanding of justice to include three constitutive dimensions: the social, the cultural and interreligious dialogue. This decision was expressed in four principal guiding documents about Jesuit mission, one for each dimension, with the first document "Servants of Christ's Mission" serving as the foundation and hermeneutical key for the other three. Furthermore these documents discussed justice not only in terms of pastoral need or theory, as did GC 32, but principally in terms of the Society's religious experience and how it had been religiously transformed through the previous twenty years of trying to promote justice in the service of faith.

Social justice work, or "the social apostolate" as it was and still is called, was nothing new in 1975. Indeed, it had existed in its modern form for the better part of a century, since shortly after Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. But up until then, the social apostolate was one apostolate among others. GC 32's innovation was to make social justice a constitutive and orienting dimension of all Jesuit ministries, as well as of lifestyle and spirituality. The decision itself was a surprise, even to the members of the Congregation who made it, but an account of this fascinating history is for another

paper. It is enough to say that the discernment behind this decision was motivated by a desire better to serve faith in the context of the unbelief and massive social injustices of the day. What is more relevant to the purposes of this paper is an analysis of the new kind of religious identity that was constructed by this decision about mission.

Basically, GC 32 made social justice religiously comprehensive. The very expression “faith and justice” –a frequent shorthand expression for GC 32’s formulation– put together terms that in the modern context of religion normally belonged to two different worlds of discourse: faith belonged to the inner, religious world, and justice to the outer political and secular world. In the context of standard Catholic theology in many seminaries and theology faculties, issues of social life were derivative or an application, even more removed than moral theology was from the religious discourse about primary concern, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, grace, the church. In the context of modern understandings of religion in tension with the secular, GC 32’s re-expression of Jesuit mission took what was at best contextual or theologically derivative and at worst secular and political, social justice, and raised it to the level of primary religious discourse, the level of relationship to God, to salvation and to the spiritual in general. In one lapidary formulation, GC 32 turned modern Western presuppositions about religion inside out, making social justice religious and religious faith social. While this decision neither added to nor subtracted from the content of traditional religious belief and praxis, it nevertheless retransposed the latter in social terms.

The Jesuits were not the first to make such changes. Indeed, liberation theology in Latin America had already been doing so for five or six years, and since the early 1960’s Buddhism in Vietnam had also begun re-expressing traditional belief and practice in social terms in order to try to make peace between the parties at war there in those years. Indeed, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh invented the term “engaged Buddhism” which some scholars of religion have changed and appropriated as “engaged religion” in order to name precisely the kind of change that I have been pointing out. Within the Jesuits, this change spread rapidly, even if it was controversial and led to exaggerated expressions of both support and opposition. In effect, unintentionally, a new religious identity was being constructed: by raising the religious or theological status of social justice, the “traditional” heavily policed boundary between religious and secular that had defined religious identity since the Enlightenment was made almost irrelevant, at least for religious identity. While that boundary may not have disappeared entirely, it certainly became very porous, and religious identity needed to be defined not reactively and from without, but proactively, from within. Even though Pope Paul VI approved GC 32’s decrees, it is no wonder that the decision of “Our Mission Today” was initially controversial and divisive.

This kind of religious consciousness, with fewer internal boundaries between the ostensibly religious and the ostensibly secular, is more comprehensive or global than the form of consciousness that the Society used before in order to think about justice. This new form did not arise out of nothing. It had an important precedent in new ways of conceptualizing mission or apostolic outreach that arose in the 31st General Congregation, which met in two sessions, one during and the other immediately after the Council, that

is, in 1964 and 1965. Among its many innovations to adapt the Society to the spirit of Vatican II was to understand mission itself in a new, comprehensive way. Until then, the term “mission” had been used to refer to “the missions”, that is, to the evangelization of non-Christians³. GC 31 used the term to refer to all Jesuit ministries in one comprehensive term, “Jesuit mission”, that corresponded in an active way to Jesuit “charism”, its distinctive spiritual identity. This change in terminology enabled the Society to think of its ministry around the world in a global way and to apply criteria or priorities in a global or planetary way in order to guide local discernment and choices. GC 32 took this new comprehensive or global way of thinking about the Society and its work and applied it to social justice. I believe that this kind of comprehensive or global thinking was enabled by the spirit of Vatican II, and specifically by aspects of *Gaudium et Spes*. I will discuss this shortly, but before doing so, I wish to explain the second principal post-conciliar change in the Society’s social thought and practice, a change in social discernment.

Social Discernment in Common

GC 34 used the same kind of comprehensive thinking about mission and social justice as had GC 32. It enriched the earlier understanding of justice with more nuance and with a stronger grounding in the justice of the Kingdom of God. While the earlier understanding was also rooted in the justice of the Kingdom of God, it tended to be expressed more readily in socio-economic and political terms. GC 34 strengthened the grounding in eschatological justice in a very innovative way, one that still has received little comment: it expressed the Society’s work for social justice in terms of religious experience, and did so through a new use of Jesuit spirituality, a new use of what I call social discernment in common. This change is exemplified in an iconic way in two different uses of the same exercise from the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, one use in GC 32’s “Our Mission Today”, and another in GC 34’s “Servants of Christ’s Mission”.

Each decree comes to its decision by means of a discernment, that is, by reading the signs of the times, even though this terminology is not always used. They read the signs of the times by identifying historical phenomena or human aspirations where the meaning of life is at stake, either positively or negatively⁴, and that are recurrent and pervasive enough to characterize a historical period⁵, or that point out that and how God might be present in such phenomena. “Our Mission Today” looks at the world of its day and identifies the significant and characteristic human phenomena and events by means of frequently occurring expressions like “the needs and aspirations of the men and women of our time”, “needs of the time”, or “new challenges”. What it identifies as the most important signs are people’s desires and need for faith, and their aspirations for social justice. “Servants of Christ’s Mission”, instead, looks at the Society’s experience of trying to fulfill its mission in the world, and seeks to identify in that experience the configurations of Christ’s presence and activity in certain kinds of experience, especially where the Society has been transformed. Verbs of experience, learning or transformation are used to identify Christ present in the world: “we have learned”, “we have also become”, “we have come to see”. Among these signs, the most

important are how the Society has been transformed by becoming involved in what GC 32 had identified as signs of the times. The very first article is full of such indications:

...we have also become, in a resilient way, a community of “friends in the Lord”, supporting one another in the freedom which Christian love brings, deeply affected by the deaths of our Jesuit martyrs in this period. In these years, throughout the Society, we have been purified in the faith by which we live, and have grown in our understanding of our central mission. Our service, especially among the poor, has deepened our life of faith, both individually and as a body: our faith has become more paschal, more compassionate, more tender, more evangelical in its simplicity.

The kinds of “places” where the Society feels it has encountered Christ are especially in relationship with the poor and other victims of injustice, in the promotion of justice and faith, and in dialogue with other cultures and religions. The transformations are acknowledged as important because they are seen as the results of encounters with Christ⁶. In “Servants of Christ’s Mission” religious experience and especially the experience of being transformed play the role that people’s needs and aspirations play in “Our Mission Today”. That role is to explain, justify or confirm Jesuit mission as the service of faith and the promotion of justice.

It would be expected that comprehensive, mission-orienting decrees of a Jesuit General Congregation would invoke the *Spiritual Exercises*. Indeed, both decrees do. Each invokes explicitly the Contemplation on the Incarnation in order to discern or read the social signs of the times. The exercise is even more important than one would guess by reading only these two decrees. The 33rd General Congregation, in 1983, which elected a new superior-general, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, used the same exercise in a similar way. Furthermore some of the preparatory documents that were circulated to the whole Society before GC 34 both used and recommended the use of the same exercise, as did some of the earliest phases of GC 34 itself. So the invocation of this particular spiritual exercise in both texts is not simply a literary device to express an interpretation of the world, but an exercise that was actually performed—at least by those who took the recommendations seriously—in order to do the equivalent of reading the signs of the times.

Let us turn then to the texts themselves: the Contemplation as found in the *Exercises*, and its adaptations by “Our Mission Today” and “Servants of Christ’s Mission”. Let us begin with the Contemplation’s place and role within the *Exercises* themselves in order to understand it as a spiritual technique for personal spiritual discernment and transformation. With this understanding in place, we will better recognize how GC 32 and 34 use the exercise in new ways.

The Contemplation on the Incarnation⁷ opens the Second Week of *The Spiritual Exercises*. The Second Week is usually the longest phase of the *Exercises*. During this time the exercitant is invited to come to know Jesus more intimately and personally by using the imagination to participate in the mysteries or events of his earthly life and

public ministry. This period follows the First Week, when the exercitant is invited to come to know how God's loving forgiveness has operated precisely in his or her own life, to set her or him free to love as Jesus does. The Second Week, then, is an exploration of how Jesus loves. It is also the period in the *Exercises* when important decisions are normally discerned and made, while coming to know the criteria and values that Jesus himself used in making personal and apostolic decisions.

The Contemplation on the Incarnation initiates this phase by inviting the exercitant to enter into the origins of Jesus' career, that is, to come to know God's deep desires for the world. The content of the prayer deals with the Trinity's loving concern for the world, the world's need for salvation, the Trinity's decision to send the Second Person into the world to become human, and comparisons between what the Divine Persons do and what human persons on earth do, which includes the exchange between Gabriel and Mary in the heart of the world in order for the Second Person to become human. This exercise takes up paragraphs 101 to 109 of the *Exercises*, and is organized into: a preparatory prayer [n.101]; three preludes [nn.102-104], which prepare the exercitant to enter into the religious significance of the events; an explanatory note [105] for the director guiding the exercitant; three points [nn.106-108], which are the heart of the exercise, and a concluding "colloquy" [n.109] or conversation with the Persons of the Trinity, or the Incarnate Word, or Mary, as the exercitant wishes. The colloquy is a moment for the exercitant to explore and understand what happened during the prayer, and to apply it to one's own life. The three points invite the exercitant to see the divine and human persons [106], to hear what they say [107], and to consider what the persons do [108]. Each point progresses from the world to the Trinity to Mary and then to Gabriel at the heart of the world⁸.

Now we turn to the texts. I will not quote the entire Contemplation, for this would be rather long. "Our Mission Today" explicitly cites the first Prelude [n.102] and the first Point [n.106], whereas "Servants of Christ's Mission" conflates the preludes and the points. I reproduce here the first prelude and all three points to give the reader a sufficiently full impression of the exercise in its own terms, so the reader may see how GC 32 and 34's uses are coherent with it yet adapt it. The Louis Puhl translation that I use is a close, technical rendering of the original and so reproduces the theological language and images of Ignatius's day, some of which are militaristic, hierarchical and patriarchal. While I reproduce the text as rendered by Puhl, it must also be said that these images often interfere with the purpose of the exercise in the spiritual experience of contemporary exercitants, yet in actual practice the images and language are readily and usually adapted. Thus, we read:

[102] First Prelude. This will consist in calling to mind the history of the subject I have to contemplate. Here it will be how the Three Divine Persons look down upon the whole expanse or circuit of all the earth, filled with human beings. Since They see that all are going down to hell, they decree in Their eternity that the Second Person should become man [sic] to save the human race. So when the fullness of time had come, They send the Angel Gabriel to our Lady.
[...]

[106] First Point. This will be to see the different persons:

First, those on the face of the earth, in such great diversity of dress and in manner of acting. Some are white, some black; some at peace, and some at war; some weeping, some laughing; some well, some sick; some coming into the world, some dying; etc.

Secondly, I will see and consider the Three Divine Persons seated on the royal dais or throne of the Divine majesty. They look down upon the whole surface of the earth, and behold all nations in great blindness, going down to death and descending into hell.

Thirdly, I will see our Lady and the angel saluting her.

I will reflect upon this to draw profit from what I see.

[107] Second Point. This will be to listen to what the persons on the face of the earth say, that is, how they speak to one another, swear and blaspheme, etc. I will also hear what the Divine Persons say, that is, "Let us work the redemption of the human race," etc. then I will listen to what the angel and our Lady say. Finally, I will reflect upon all I hear to draw profit from their words.

[108] Third Point. This will be to consider what the persons on the face of the earth do, for example, wound, kill, and go down to hell. Also what the Divine Persons do, namely, work the most holy Incarnation, etc. Likewise, what the Angel and our Lady do; how the Angel carries out his [sic] office of ambassador; and how our Lady humbles herself, and offers thanks to the Divine Majesty.

Then I shall reflect upon all to draw some fruit from each of these details.⁹

In GC 32's "Our Mission Today", we read:

St. Ignatius and his first companions, in the spiritual experiences of the Exercises, were moved to a searching consideration of the world of their own time in order to discover its needs. They contemplated "how the Three Divine Persons look down upon the whole expanse or circuit of the earth, filled with human beings" and decide "that the Second Person should become man to save the human race." Then they turned their eyes to where God's gaze was fixed, and saw for themselves the men and women of their time, one after another, "with such great diversity in dress and manners of acting. Some are white, some black; some at peace, some at war; some weeping, some laughing; some well, some sick; some coming into the world, some dying, etc." That was how they learned to respond to the call of Christ and to work for the establishment of His Kingdom 10.

In GC 34's "Servants of Christ's Mission" we read:

In the Spiritual exercises, we contemplate the mission of Christ as a response of the

Blessed Trinity to the sins which afflict the world. We contemplate the Incarnate Son born in poverty, laboring to bring the Kingdom through word and deed, and finally suffering and dying out of love for all men and women. In the

pedagogy of the Exercises, Jesus invites us to see in his earthly life the pattern of the mission of the Society; to preach in poverty, to be free from family ties, to be obedient to the will of God, to enter his struggle against sin with complete generosity of heart. As the Risen Lord, he is now present in all who suffer, all who are oppressed, all whose lives are broken by sin. As he is present, so we too want to be present, in solidarity and compassion, where the human family is most damaged. The Jesuit mission, as a service of the Crucified and Risen Lord, is always an entry into the saving work of the Cross in a world still marked by brutality and evil. [...]for Ignatius, although the Risen Christ is now in glory, through the Cross he is present in the suffering which continues in the world for which he died [...]¹¹

Both adaptations of the Contemplation on the Incarnation situate the world's neediness and their discernment in the context of Trinitarian love. Both replace the world by the world of the late twentieth century. Both adaptations involve the exercitant in the Trinity's own activity in Christ, highlighting the exercitant's personal relationship with Christ on mission¹². The most striking difference between the original text and the two adaptations is in the nature of the exercitant. The original text supposes that the exercitant is an individual person, as indicated by the use of the first person singular pronoun. In the place of the exercitant, the two adaptations place the entire Society of Jesus! This change, made entirely without comment, presupposes that the exercitant can also be a corporate subject, that Christ and the Holy Spirit can be present to a community as well as to an individual, and that a group or community can be the corporate subject of religious experience, identity and action.

Now let us look at the difference between "Our Mission Today" and "Servants of Christ's Mission". In GC 32's "Our Mission Today", the Society of Jesus, together with the Persons of the Trinity, gazes at the world in order to discern its needs and hopes in the light of the love that God directs toward the world. The text itself confirms this point of view later on when it says: "we must 'contemplate' our world as Ignatius did his, that we may hear anew the call of Christ dying and rising in the anguish and aspirations of men and women"¹³. In GC 34's "Servants of Christ's Mission" instead, the Society directs its attention not toward the world but toward the Word being sent into the world, and then toward the Incarnate Word actively on mission in the world. The difference is in the point of view: in order to discern social reality for God's action and will, GC 32 looks at the world, at human needs and aspirations, and GC 34 looks at Christ in the world, at what he is doing. Of course, GC 32 looks at the world in order to find and respond to Christ in the world, so the difference between the points of view is small. Small though it may be, it is important, for the difference of GC 34 from GC 32 carries twenty years of development.

In the history of the use of this exercise in documents of General Congregations since GC 32, this difference appears only in "Servants of Christ's Mission". All the others, including GC 34's preparatory documents, used the exercise in the same way as did "Our Mission Today". Furthermore, in "Servants of Christ's Mission", this point of view operates everywhere: what the Society is looking for and looking at, what the Society is discerning, is not described in terms of the needs and aspirations of humankind

today, but in terms of what the crucified and risen Christ is doing today, with whom and for whom. Thus GC 32 emphasizes the historical phenomena that are the matter for discernment, and GC 34 emphasizes the divine presence and activity that make the matter into “discernable” theological signs.

The two emphases are complementary, and are necessary for a complete social discernment. The complementarity can be seen in how the two texts use authoritative religious sources to control or verify the meanings generated by their discernments. I will simply point out how this control is exercised without demonstrating it in the texts, for I am more interested in analyzing GC 34’s new point of view. “Our Mission Today” uses scripture, Church teaching and the Jesuit charism to explain how human aspirations for faith and for justice may be read as signs of the times, in order to justify interpreting Jesuit mission as the service of faith and the promotion of justice. “Servants of Christ’s Mission”, points out instead that because of engagement in these signs, the Society has learned fresh things about these same sources, things that are consistent with the Christian tradition, which confirms the authenticity of the earlier reading. In other words, the conclusion of the earlier reading, the service of faith and the promotion of justice, was an authentic interpretation of Jesuit mission because through it the Society has encountered and been transformed by the crucified and risen Christ on mission in the world today. Thus “Servants of Christ’s Mission” completes the discernment of social reality in “Our Mission Today” by showing how the discerners have been positively transformed by becoming engaged in those same social realities.

Having pointed out the complementarity of the two points of view, I direct my attention now toward the distinctiveness of the more recent one. Its significance, and that of the development that produced it, lies not so much in the nature of the phenomena being discerned, for the human desires for faith and justice were more or less the same as before, nor in the particular exercise that was used, for that was the same too, but in the point of view of the discernment, that is, in the role and nature of the discerners. How this came about will eventually lead us to the role of the ascended Jesus.

A changed point of view is a new way of seeing, and suggests a transformation in the one whose point of view it is. “Our Mission Today” explains and justifies the constitutive importance of justice for faith in terms of a spiritual reading of the social needs and hopes of the day. “Servants of Christ’s Mission” confirms that conclusion by witnessing to the Society’s consequent encounter with the crucified and risen Christ on mission in those needs and hopes, and how the Society has been transformed by that encounter. To analyze the new point of view, let us look more closely at the central focus of its attention: not the social phenomena that were the objects of discernment, nor the apostolic conclusion to the faith that does justice, but the discovery of the presence and activity of the crucified and risen Christ in the world.

The text of “Servants of Christ’s Mission” frequently speaks of Christ as the central object of the Society’s religious experience of its mission, especially since GC 32. This is not just a generic Christ. The experience has a definite and consistent configuration. It is not simply Christ present in heaven or in some post-mortem world,

but also in this world, here and now, in history and in people's activities, hopes, needs. Moreover Christ is not simply present, but is active, busy, at work, labouring –to use the text's terms of reference, Christ is "on mission". Furthermore, he is on mission here and now not in self-sufficient isolation but inviting others to join with him on this mission. This Christ is also frequently characterized as the crucified and resurrected Christ¹⁴ -this is the kind of actor he is. Thus the theme of intentional action or agency is central to the religious experience presented in the text, first the intentional religious agency of Christ, then that of the Jesuits and of others working for the Kingdom.

Now we turn from the object of the point of view to the viewer, which is the Society, the exercitant in the Contemplation and discerner. While a religious experience is always an experience of something, it is also always an experience of something else, of whatever mediated the experience. The "media" of the Society's encounters with the crucified and risen Christ are, first of all, the Society's ecclesial nature as part of the Church, the attempts to understand cultures and other religions, but in a special way the relationships with victims of injustice and with advocates for justice, and the activities of promoting the justice of the Kingdom of God. The text associates each of these with some transformation of the Society, which then is used as the indicator or verification of an authentic encounter with Christ. So the medium of the encounter is then verified as having been authentically discerned, that is, that there was something to be discerned in the medium. Earlier in the paper we looked at some of the text's indications of such transformations. It is good to recall them now, such as "our faith has become more paschal, more compassionate, more tender, more evangelical in its simplicity" (n.1), or "We understand more clearly that the sinfulness of the world, which Christ came to heal, reaches in our time a pitch of intensity through social structures which include the poor-the majority of the world's population..." (n.9). Indeed, each of GC 34's three other mission decrees uses various forms of the Society's experience and transformations in recent years as warrants for the discovery of the presence and action of God in some kind of apostolic activity that flowed from GC 32's commitments and reading of the signs of the times.

But there is more in the text about the Society's transformation than the text alludes to explicitly. The recurring discussion of experience and allusion to transformation are new. Earlier documents of General Congregations, especially in GC 33¹⁵, do discuss experience, but in limited ways. Furthermore, earlier General Congregation documents tend to be prescriptive where GC 34's mission documents tend to be experiential and heuristic, that is, rather than prescribing, the latter use the positive fruits of experience and transformation to recommend similar experiences and transformations in the Society. The careful attention to the nuances of experience, its objects and media, its transformative effects, and the focus on agency, all suggest a high degree of self-reflection and heightened self-awareness, in other words, forms of intentional, reflective attention to the subjectivity of the subject of religious experience and action, which in this case is the Society as a corporate subject of experience and agency.

This is a significant change. I will not claim that heightened self-awareness or

interiority applies to every Jesuit, but it certainly applies to those who wrote “Servants of Christ’s Mission”, and probably also to those who approved it. Since the decree now stands as a reference point for the Society, then one can hope that the change embodied there is affecting the Society in various ways. Furthermore, this change reflects the characteristic of Ignatian spirituality that distinguishes it from other Christian spiritualities, namely, deliberate attention to the quality of one’s presence and engagement in contemplation and the role of discernment and action to affect the quality of that presence¹⁶. In “Servants of Christ’s Mission” the evaluative self-awareness promoted by a set of spiritual techniques for personal transformation –the *Exercises*– has been expressed in the Jesuit context as heightened emphasis on corporate experience, action and agency and a heightened corporate self-awareness.

The new point of view holds together in one single gaze the Society’s inner experiences, transformations and heightened self-awareness on the one hand, with the needs and aspirations of the world on the other, engagement with which has produced that heightened self-awareness. The later point of view includes and completes the former one. Compared to GC 32’s great emphasis on the world’s needs and aspirations, or contextualized Jesuit mission, the point of view in “Servants of Christ’s Mission” exhibits a much-expanded horizon of explanation and meaning, a horizon expanded by the inclusion of nuanced self-awareness. This expansion suggests that some important boundaries have been transformed, perhaps dissolved.

Indeed, two kinds of boundaries have been transformed. The first set consists of those between the religious and the secular, the religious and political, the theological core and the context. “Our Mission Today” translated social justice from a secular, “contextual” or derivatively religious level to a primary religious level. By making social justice into a religious principle, and by making faith inherently social, GC 32 transformed the boundary that had separated the religious from the secular throughout the period of modernity. Indeed, that strong boundary helped define the modern period and the modern world. With such a change, the strong difference that had existed between “secular” and “religious” was no longer important for the expression or construction of religious identity. Such a change generated a more “open” religious identity, one that did not depend on being different from something else –even if it was– yet whose openness did not make it weak or vague. Its strength came not from being different but from within; it was engaged, able to withstand persecution, and was even occasionally blessed by martyrdom.

The second transformation of boundaries occurred with GC 34, and had to do with the increased corporate self-awareness exhibited in the text. In response to its reading of the signs of the times, GC 32 had understood clearly that the service of faith and the promotion of justice had to be integrated into one synthetic understanding and practice. However it did not have the benefit of twenty years of experience that GC 34 would have, and so its way of explaining the insight worked slightly against the insight itself. “Our Mission Today” placed great emphasis on the meaning of people’s needs and aspirations in order to move the Society into engagement with those “signs of the times”. This was an outward focus intended to provoke an outward movement of faith, which it

did, by and large. Nevertheless, in hindsight, the strength of the outward focus and the goal of outward movement suggested a tension or polarity between needs “out there” and the response from “in here”, from which the Society understood itself. This created a soteriological weakness in the argument for faith and justice –but not in the insight that the argument meant to explain– unintentionally and indirectly suggesting that the constitutively religious role of justice depended more on the needs of the day than on the nature of Christian revelation and faith.

“Servants of Christ’s Mission” and GC 34’s other mission decrees do not have this polarity between need and response to need. There are two reasons for this, one intellectual and one theological. The theological reason is that Christ is already present and at work everywhere, in the Society, in the Church, in the world, in history, in nature, etc., so in terms of the divine presence and activity, there is no “inside” or “outside”. GC 32 would not have disputed this theological position, but it did not have the apostolic and religious experience to back up the insight. The intellectual change is the Society’s heightened self-awareness, expressed in critical, deliberate attention to: the qualities of its own experience and transformation, the relations between the Society’s various activities for mission and what makes them typically Jesuit, and the good and bad qualities of its own engagement in its experience and transformation.

This change is a transformation of the typical boundaries between inside and outside, between subject and object, because the horizon of meaning and explanation now explicitly includes the subject. The subject does not see itself as inside looking out –to a world in need. This does not mean that action has been replaced by introspection –not at all. “Servants of Christ’s Mission” is all about agency and about the quality of agency and engagement, because it is all about mission. Mission is the context or horizon of explanation, so mission action is not understood in terms of movement from inside the horizon to outside. Mission can be an all-inclusive horizon because the primary mission being considered is Christ’s, which embraces all things. Then, in Christ’s agency and mission, the Society’s mission and agency are considered.

Now I would like to sum up the above comparative analysis of GC 34’s method of discernment and form of thought. First of all both GC 32 and GC 34 represent forms of engaged religion, since both are transpositions of traditional religious thought and practice in social terms. This is exemplified in some detail in their respective uses of the Contemplation on the Incarnation from the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. Normally this is a technique for personal transformation to be used by individuals. In the hands of GC 32 and GC 34, the subject or exercitant is a community, so it is a form of communal discernment, or as is sometimes said in Ignatian circles, discernment in common. Secondly, since the matter being discerned is social –social, political, economic, cultural etc. phenomena- the discernment may be called social, hence communal social discernment or social discernment in common. Thirdly since the goal is better practice for the Society, and more justice and deeper faith in the world, this religious technique for personal transformation has been used as a religious technique for social change. With some precision then, we have seen a case of engaged religion in all of these transformations. This was a transformation of religious identity. Now let us look at the

transformation of consciousness.

Both GC 32 and GC 34 were comprehensive, global or unifying forms of consciousness, ways of perceiving and understanding Jesuit mission and ministries. What shifted from GC 32 to GC 34 was the principle of globality or comprehensiveness. GC 32's form of consciousness may be characterized as contextualized mission or a turning toward the needy world, where the needy world was seen not as "out there" but as everywhere, for need, especially need for social justice, may be found anywhere. The change was produced from within by the "elevation" of social justice to a religious principle, to a way of relating to God, where religious and universal need for justice relativized the old boundaries between church and world, between sacred and profane. GC 34 was turning toward Christ in the world and toward awareness of communal religious experience. GC 34's principle of unification or of comprehensiveness was a double one: the universality of Christ actively on mission, and interiority, or the Society's articulated awareness of its own experience, of the means and media of that experience, and of how it had been transformed. The increased self-awareness is fundamentally linked with an increased awareness of Christ on mission in the world. Since this active Christ is experienced both in the world and in the heart of the Society's experience of the world, the universal presence of Christ on mission acts as a unifying theological point of view, while the heightened interiority acts as a unifying intellectual point of view. While the intellectual point of view merits extensive treatment¹⁷, for the remainder of this paper I will analyze only the theological point of view. First, though, I would like to show what themes of *Gaudium et Spes* are exemplified in these GC 32's and GC 34's forms of consciousness and discernment.

Gaudium et Spes and Jesuit Social Discernment

These changes in the Society of Jesus's social practice, thought and discernment would have been impossible without the changes that Vatican II worked in the church. I believe there are at least three conciliar themes at work grounding the above transformations: "reading the signs of the times" from *Gaudium et Spes* n. 4, the principle of solidarity expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*'s opening sentence (n.1), and the liturgical principle of "fully conscious, and active participation" of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n.14.

This kind of concern for and involvement with the world depends on a principle of solidarity, where boundaries between church and world are not placed in an a priori way between people. Such a principle is expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*'s opening line: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." (n.1). People invite our attention because they are people and because we recognize in them the image of God, and because God in Christ is interested in them. When this is deeply felt, then the principle of solidarity and the affective resonance it implies has a universalizing effect on awareness and point of view, as have all the phenomena discussed above. This is an inclusive and including principle. This is the same kind of opening up to the world as was effected by

GC 32's transformation of social justice into a religious principle that shaped all Jesuit ministries by shaping the very goal of Jesuit mission, the service of faith. This change probably opened up the Society to the modern world much more than the incorporation of modern scholarly methods into Jesuit formation and research. But the reasons for this opening up was not to fit in or to be modern, but were religious reasons, proactive since they came from within, that is, the universality of God's saving action in the world.

A corollary of this principle of solidarity is "reading the signs of the times", explained briefly in *Gaudium et Spes* n. 4. Indeed, reading the signs of the times as a spiritual practice or technique becomes an application of the principle of solidarity with which the pastoral constitution opens. This is also an act of social discernment. It seeks to "read" social and historical phenomena and transformations for the presence or absence of God's will, and to recognize and respond to that will. This presupposes that God is present and at work in the world, not only in the church. While scripture, tradition and the magisterium must be used to shape and verify that reading, for the same Spirit of God is at work in these sources as in the world, nevertheless this also presupposes that something may be learned about God and God's saving will through being engaged in the world, which is what *Gaudium et Spes* called for, and which the Society of Jesus did, in its own Jesuit manner. The practice of reading the signs of the times, of social discernment, has the same opening-up effect on mission as did the universality of God's saving will on understandings of salvation and the church. Because of the "universality" of God's saving activity, then, mission should be understood as a response to the presence of God and not a response to the absence of God, where one brings something that was not already there. This relativizes boundaries and opens up mentalities. The social discernment practiced by the Society of Jesus both to begin its new form of social practice and to renew it was certainly a form of reading the signs of the times.

Finally, both solidarity and reading the signs of the times require conscious and active engagement, which is the principle that *Sacrosanctum Concilium* proposes for liturgical reform. It can be objected that this is a liturgical principle, not a principle for social transformation. But why should it not be? The purpose of active and conscious participation is not simply to have good liturgy, but to engage with Christ, who is always the primary liturgical actor and celebrant. If reading the signs of the times and practicing solidarity mean seeking and finding Christ at work in the world, then is not full, conscious and active participation also a requirement for discernment and engagement as well of liturgical practice? And are not both acts of worship, even if the liturgy is a privileged one that helps complete all the other, more implicit ones?

While the changes in the Society of Jesus are only one example or case of post-conciliar changes made possible by *Gaudium et Spes* and its spirit, they do shed light on what the document and its spirit mean. I would now like to complete my analysis by analyzing how GC 34's completion of GC 32's transformations bring the ascension of Jesus into unexpected relief.

In the Light of the Ascension

The longest and most vigorous debate during the plenary sessions of GC 34 was whether the key document “Servants of Christ’s Mission” should stress the crucified Christ or the risen Christ. Many, especially from parts of the Third World, wanted to stress the crucified Christ because this would help their men and the marginalized and suffering people they worked with identify with Christ. Others, especially from parts of the first world, wanted to stress the risen Christ because this would give energy to their men and the people they worked with. The drafters of the document balanced these two interests by balancing both references and adding further references to the crucified and risen Christ. Through the various revisions, however, one other quality of the many references to Christ was much stronger than these and remained constant or increased during all the revisions: whether characterized as crucified or risen or both, it was always Christ present, and active, pursuing his mission in the world, and especially “encounterable” in the poor and those victimized in any way, in those trying to do something about it and in the Society’s attempts to pursue justice in the service of faith, in the deep aspects of cultures and the effort to understand and appreciate them, and in the deep insights of religions and in the effort to understand, appreciate and work with them. The constant emphasis on the Christ actively and purposefully present in the world, here and now, was matched by a similarly constant awareness of how the Society had encountered this Christ and been transformed by him and by the particular media in which he was encountered. This Christ, present and active in an ongoing way through the power of the Holy Spirit can only be the ascended Christ, present and acting from the right hand of God, as demonstrated by the many signs and effects of the Spirit. While GC 34’s mission documents never explicitly adverted to the ascended Christ, nevertheless, he was the theological or soteriological backbone that supported all of the many references to religious experience and to transformative encounters with Christ in various media. So how does the ascension of Jesus Christ shed light on the transformations analyzed here, and what light do they shed on the ascension? A theology of the ascension suggests a pneumatology and an ecclesiology, but I will restrict myself to the ascension.

As the Society of Jesus has interpreted its experience of working for social justice, it feels that it has found –or been found by- Christ actively at work today. This presupposes that, while he may no longer be straightforwardly visible except through the eyes of faith, he is still with his people now, and a different way than when he was on earth either before or immediately after his crucifixion and resurrection. The transformations of the Society that GC 34’s mission documents attest to are signs of Christ’s Lordly power. The only way to explain or systematize this practice-evoked and discerned experience is by means of Christ’s heavenly life, which happened through his ascension. Without a theology of ascension, his presence ended with the termination of his resurrection appearances on earth, and his current influence would only be a humanitarian or moral one of example.

The interpreted Jesuit experience points to Christ as at work now, “on mission” as the “Servants of Christ’s Mission” puts it. Not only does this presuppose his ongoing influence and heavenly status, but it also makes an eschatological link to his future parousia. If he is on mission now and at work, then it is for a purpose. That purpose is the full realization of the Kingdom of God, when Christ will become manifest in all things.

But if he is still working now, then what does this say about his earlier work –was anything completed with his death, resurrection and ascension? His work then was also oriented toward the goal of the Kingdom of God, but what was completed with his death, resurrection and ascension was not the transformation of the world, but the beginning of that with his own transformation¹⁸ or, to put it more precisely, the definitive transformation of his humanity.

If Christ through his glorified human nature is at work in the world here and now to prepare it for the full Kingdom of God, then this is good reason to take that world seriously and the call to transform it for the good of all. Thus history -and for ecological justice, nature too- is not merely context or circumstance but has properly religious significance. Liberation theologies, contextual theologies, and indeed all engaged forms of religion seem to give properly religious status to the world. This is the same effect on the status of history and context that GC 32's elevation of social justice to religiously comprehensive status had. Such an appreciation of the world, whether of history or nature, helps to prevent a docetic interpretation of Christ, even in his heavenly session.

What is new about Christ's ascended life is its universal reach and accessibility, its sovereign presence¹⁹. Jesus is not only raised to new life, but also to heavenly power²⁰, from where in the Spirit he can share or transmit his new life to others. In our analyses of the GC 32 and 34's transformations of consciousness and mentality, we have seen the theme of universality or comprehensiveness or increasingly global consciousness come up repeatedly. First, with GC 31 there was the universality of mission that relativized the boundaries between Jesuit ministries and enabled them to be conceptualized in one category. Then there was the universalization of contextualized mission by means of the incorporation of justice into the service of faith, which relativized the boundaries between church and world, between sacred and profane. Finally there came the universalization of the active presence of Christ that relativized the boundaries between subject and object of mission. It enabled social justice work to be construed as religious experience instead of something that must be justified or explained with theological or moral argumentation. For the same reasons, it also permitted a more ready discernment of Christ at work in the world, and therefore an active strategy of seeking to be further transformed by reading the signs of his activity.

Another new aspect of Christ's ascended life is the character or quality of the universality he now has: he is now able to enter completely into human life in a way that he was able to do in only a limited way during his "earthly" life²¹. Such a self-emptying solidarity is the opening note of *Gaudium et Spes* when it stresses the radical connectedness of the followers of Christ with all of humankind. The Jesuits have come to understand that real contact and friendship with the poor and those who are victimized is a vital aspect of Catholic social practice, even if not every Jesuit may be able to do this.

That post-conciliar Jesuit social consciousness and practice can be fruitfully analyzed in the light of the ascension demonstrates something important about how Christ's exaltation and glory should be understood. This glory must be understood in a kenotic way, as something that yields solidarity and compassion, something that labours

lovingly and patiently toward a goal, something that results in the empowerment of others and the formation of community. Once his glory can be thus understood, then we will be better able to use the whole story of Christ to interpret our experience of social justice work, or any other ministry, and we will be more disposed to discover the whole Christ in our ministries.

Conclusion

In these ways, post-conciliar Jesuit social practice and consciousness, and by extension Catholic social thought and practice, manifests the ascended Christ's session at the right hand of the Father. If post-conciliar Catholic social practice, characterized by justice understood as a constitutive part of evangelization, leads to the discovery of the crucified and risen and ascended Christ at work, in the Spirit then there must be something good and right about the distinctiveness of the new insights, and about the Council's contribution. Moreover, it seems that this new form of social practice requires some kind of global or comprehensive consciousness, one that can both be supported by and witness to the ascension of Christ. This seems to be one kind of change that his transforming presence produces. The social apostolate also demonstrates that attention to the ascended Christ does not yield a vague, diffuse or discarnate spirituality, but yields instead an attention to the presence of Christ that brings much vitality, for such a commitment and work could not long survive on a vague spirituality. The incorporation of social justice into the heart of evangelization, as enabled by the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes*, has enabled a new appreciation of God at work in history²² and in the world. It has also enabled the church to expand its appreciation of the paschal mystery and to use a more complete version of the story of Christ.

Thus if we meditate deeply on post-conciliar social practice, we can witness with the proto-martyr Stephen: "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." In this way post-conciliar Catholic social thought and practice can itself be a sign of the times.

¹ *Justice in the World*, Second General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 1971, "Introduction" (n.6).

² "Our Mission Today: The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice", Decree 4 of the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, Rome, 1975, n. 2.

³ Interestingly enough, it was St. Ignatius Loyola himself, the founder of the Jesuits, who first used the term mission to refer to apostolic or pastoral work. Until then, it was used to refer to the economic Trinity, that is to the missions of the Son and the Spirit, sent into the world by the Father. Ignatius used the term in an analogous sense to refer to any kind of apostolic work for which one was "sent" by an ecclesiastical authority.

⁴ Juan Luis Segundo, "Revelation, Faith, Signs of the Times" in *Signs of the Times: Theological Reflections*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1993), 144.

⁵ Edward J. Sullivan, C.S.B., *The Use of the Concept of "Signs of the Times" in Papal and Conciliar Documents*, (M.A. thesis St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto), 22, 47.

⁶ See for example GC 34, Decree 2, n. 1.

- ⁷ In the text of the *Exercises*, this particular exercise is simply entitled “First Day and First Contemplation”. Nevertheless, in English it is normally referred to as the “Contemplation on the Incarnation”, an expression used in the brief introductory comment after the title.
- ⁸ Michael Ivens, SJ, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, (Leominster, UK – New Malden, UK: Gracewing, and Inigo Enterprises), 92.
- ⁹ *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph*, Louis J. Puhl, S.J., (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951), [102, 106-108].
- ¹⁰ GC 32, Decree 4, *Our Mission Today: the Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice*, n.14.
- ¹¹ GC 34, Decree 2, *Servants of Christ’s Mission*, n.4.
- ¹² See Michael Ivens, SJ, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, (Leominster, UK – New Malden, UK: Gracewing, and Inigo Enterprises), 77.
- ¹³ GC 32, Decree 4, n.19.
- ¹⁴ Indeed the most vigorous debate of all of GC 34’s plenary sessions was whether to stress the crucified or the risen Christ. Those who opted for crucifixion wanted to assert solidarity with people’s suffering, especially suffering due to social injustice; those who opted for resurrection wanted to encourage and empower those trying to remedy suffering and injustice. Even in this disagreement, the arguments of both sides cited reasons that were pastoral and apostolic. A compromise balance was reached, but with an underlying emphasis on the ongoing, present and participative activity of that crucified and risen Christ.
- ¹⁵ GC 33, Decree 1, “Companions of Jesus Sent into Today’s World”, n. 31-33.
- ¹⁶ Keith Langstaff, S.J., *The Third Week of Ignatius Loyola’s Spiritual exercises and Anti-Jewish Overtones*, (Th.D. diss., Toronto School of Theology, 1995), 226.
- ¹⁷ Indeed, this unifying point of view can be very fruitfully analyzed by means of the philosophy and theology of Bernard Lonergan, S.J., (1904-1984). His category of interiority or interiorly differentiated consciousness, and the intellectual conversion upon which it can be based, are most useful in this regard. I have done such an analysis elsewhere –cf. Bisson, Peter, S.J.. *Toward a Soteriological and Theological Grounding of the Promotion of Social Justice: A Lonerganian Theological Reflection on Mission in Decree 2 of the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*. Th.D. diss., Pontifical Gregorian University, 2002.
- ¹⁸ See Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 40.
- ¹⁹ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 250.
- ²⁰ Jerome Neyrey, “Ascension”, in *The Harpercollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 99.
- ²¹ Brian K. Donne, *Christ Ascended*, 61.
- ²² Cf. Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 30.

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