

Peripheries in Our Cities

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I am honored by the opportunity to speak with you this morning as the concluding speaker in the “peripheries in our lives” series. It may be a bit of a surprise that the Jesuit Refugee Service often works in the peripheries of our cities. Not everyone realizes that 60% of forcibly displaced people-refugees and those displaced in their own countries-actually live in cities not camps. In that sense, the peripheries in Rome mirror the peripheries around the world; migrants and refugees, urban poor, the homeless, the psychologically challenged, the addicted, they are all here in Rome, and they all invite us to encounter with Christ on the periphery of our love and experience.

I’d like to begin today with the classic Roman urban experience: I’m not talking about pizza or the Borghese. I am talking about these:

I bought these two animals for five euro the first week I was here – early September, 2015. As I was walking away from the Jesuit headquarters, a man came up to me showing me these two animals and saying, “please take them as a gift. My son was born today.” We been engaged a brief conversation... He came from the Cape Verde Islands; he arrived here four months ago, and of course... Would I be willing to share little change with on this special day? I finally gave him a five-euro note, feeling good that I had shared and dispensed joy.

And two minutes later, I realized that I had been “had.” Or had I? Because in that conversation the Cape Verdean man asked me to pray for him. I have continued to do so these two years; he’s on the list of people that I pray for every day. So whether the story was true or not--- and I suspect we would have a near unanimous vote on that question – there was a human connection in that conversation, something which for a few minutes closed the gap between myself, frankly a person of privilege, and a migrant from Cape Verde hustling little animals to make a living.

The theme of our conversation “Peripheries in our Cities” is relevant and critical to the world in which we live. The reality of the urban poor, especially the migrants and

refugees among them, and how we, as the human community respond is an essential question of this moment in time. To begin our conversation this morning, allow me to present a picture of the world of peripheries, a way of responding based on Ignatian spirituality, and finally, echoing Ignatius, how we might show our love more in deeds than in words.

The world of peripheries from God's perspective

In the Spiritual exercises, St. Ignatius presents the retreatant with a number of meditations to help her or him see the world as God sees it. One of the most important meditations is on the Incarnation, when Ignatius invites to imagine the Holy Trinity looking down on the world, and quite specifically: *see the various persons; first, all those living on earth, in such diversity of clothing as attitudes, some white y others black. Some in peace and others at war, some crying and some laughing, some healthy and others sick, some being born and others dying, etc.*

If we imagine the Trinity looking on the world today, undoubtedly, the divine persons would notice that there are at least 40 million refugees and internally displaced people living in cities. Here in Rome specifically, the official statistics say there are 9,000 homeless people, and 40% of the city's non-native population is from Africa and Asia. My hunch is that the number and percentage of these undoubtedly overlapping populations is higher. We recognize among them the homeless sleeping around St. Peter's (mostly male, mostly European, many with mental illness or addiction problems) the Congolese selling purses in front of Castel Sant'Angelo, the Bangladeshis selling light up toys at any public square in the evening, etc.

Of course, not all on the peripheries are homeless. Samaan, his wife and two sons used to live in Damascus. He worked as a tour guide for Italian visitors, a job which ended in 2011 when the war began. They had to move two years later because their apartment was on the line between the government army and rebel groups. The second move ended when their sons' school became the target of mortar rounds. Finally, they found no safe place, and when or if his sons came of age, they would be conscripted into someone's army. They left Syria in 2015, arrived in Rome, and were supported by Centro Astalli, a welcoming program of JRS-Italy. They and other refugees there are slowly putting their lives back together.

For most of us, on some level, the periphery in the city exists at the point of our encounter with them (whoever “them” might be). This is the demarcation line between somebody like me and someone not, someone in the orbit of my comfort zone, and “them/ those/they” who are not. The Saints among us may not have this periphery line, but most of us do.

Perhaps Samman is beyond your periphery, or maybe not. Perhaps yours exists at my acquaintance from Cape Verde... or not. Perhaps yours goes as far as the obviously disturbed woman who begs for change every afternoon and early evening in front of Santa Maria in Transpontina Church, changing her language depending on what she thinks you speak, and forgetting that you’ve seen her most days of the week. In all candor, she is at my periphery boundary.

40 million or 9,000 or 40% are abstract numbers. What do 40 million or 9000 people really look like? What do 9000 life stories of displaced people sound like? The Holy Trinity looking on the world can answer that question. You and I can only know a few of those stories of real people: Saaman and his family, my Cape Verdean friend whose story is true in a real way. Without safety, without work and often without connection – what do these brothers and sisters have? How do we respond?

I want to suggest that response—or lack of response-- to those at the peripheries of where we live is fundamentally a spiritual issue. Not a religious one, defined by commandment and practice, but spiritual in the sense of being at the core of our deepest selves.

Ignatian Spirituality: a Mysticism of Service

On a trip to Nairobi over a year ago, I met a woman from Rwanda named Michelle. She had escaped the genocide there, found JRS, and was helped to a new start. When I was introduced to her as the head of JRS, she said “For me, JRS is Jesus Christ.”

Now JRS is not Jesus Christ in the flesh-- though perhaps there are a few Jesuits who think they are! But Michelle’s comment reminds me of something distinctive to Jesuit spirituality as practiced by St. Ignatius and explicitly renewed by Pedro Arrupe, the founder of JRS: our experience of the divine calls us to serve others. Our experience of following Christ should lead us to see and serve Christ in the world.

Janet Ruffing is a Sister of Mercy currently at the Yale School of Divinity in the United States. I am grateful for her analysis “Ignatian Mysticism of Service: Ignatius Loyola and Pedro Arrupe” as the foundation of this part of my talk. She identifies a distinctive quality of Ignatius’ mystical experience as an expression for social transformation, of seeking to discover and reveal Christ in the world.

Ignatius was not interested in being a church reformer, or in leaving the church a la Martin Luther. Further, God’s mystical work in him was not fundamentally about the mystical relationship itself, a la John of the Cross. Rather, in the context of church, God more deeply revealed himself and his relationship to the world through Jesus Christ to Ignatius. Ignatius, in turn, through this mystical experience in encountering the crucified Christ, especially among those on the periphery, found the call to save souls and thereby, change the world.

Perhaps the most iconic of Ignatius’ mystical experiences that has come down to us is the vision at La Storta, where the Father placed Ignatius with his Son carrying the cross. The experience of union with God produced an encounter which thrust Ignatius into the world of Christ being crucified and Christ crucified redeeming it. This dynamic, I think, is crucial to understanding an Ignatian way of responding to the reality of the periphery. Allow me to provide three examples.

Pedro Arrupe, Superior General of the Society of Jesus from 1964 to 1983, maybe best known at this point as the founder of the Jesuit Refugee Service. JRS started as a response to the Vietnamese boat people crisis of the late 1970s/ early 1980s, and now serves 750,000 people in 50 countries. What led Arrupe to found JRS in response to a community literally on the periphery of life and death?

Arrupe was a Basque, a medical student when he joined the Society of Jesus. Forced to leave Spain to finish his formation, he absorbed himself in the history and spirituality of the Society of Jesus and Ignatius himself.

This deep felt knowledge came to fruition in 1945 while serving as the director of novices in Hiroshima. The atomic bomb and its consequences on thousands of innocent people forever stayed with him and allowed him to be joined always with those most in need, those needing the freedom of Christ crucified. In that dark time he prayed for victims and those who dropped the bomb. He threw himself into service

to those grievously injured. This was the periphery brought home, brought to heart. The experience marked the rest of his life and especially, his understanding of the role of the Society of Jesus in its articulation of the Catholic faith of which justice is a requirement.

This call to justice – in the Society of Jesus and in other Catholic and Christian traditions – has been unfairly tarred with labels of Marxist class analysis, devotion to an abstract cause – and worse. Those criticisms share a fundamental misunderstanding of this service mysticism. It is precisely the encounter with the crucified Christ in the world that demands that their needs must be taken seriously, that we engage the world to set them free. It is the freedom due to the children of God, the freedom to follow Christ crucified that is the ultimate goal of the Spiritual Exercises. And here we return to the peripheries: for Arrupe, the boat people were Christ crucified just like the victims of Hiroshima. If they are beyond our periphery, they do not reveal to us the crucified Christ.

A recent addition to the Gesù church in Rome captures this reality. Called the Deposition of Christ by the artist Safet Zec, it shows Pedro Arrupe with two figures taking the body of Christ down from the cross. It hangs in the Pignatelli Chapel where Arrupe is entombed. It expresses the mysticism of following Christ in an expression of love and accompaniment.

One of the most enduring strains of Liberation Theology can be found in the thinking of two Jesuits, Basque *Ignacio Ellacuría* (murdered in El Salvador in 1989 with five other Jesuits, their cook and her daughter), and *Jon Sobrino*, who was out of the country when the massacre took place and lived to deepen the analysis. Through pastoral contact with the poor of El Salvador, Ellacuría and Sobrino identified Christ Crucified in today's world as the poor. To use Sobrino's words, "The sign of the times is the existence of a crucified people, and the prime demand on us is that we take them down from the cross."

When we think of Ellacuria and Sobrino, the idea of reaching out to the poor on the periphery makes all sense. That is not what got the Jesuits killed 28 years ago. In 1989, at the height of the Civil War, they were among the very few who would cross the periphery, that gulf between the two sides in the war. Had they not tried to be

peacemakers, they might well have lived. Their vision for a transformed El Salvador, where no one, rich or poor, was on the periphery, a society in tune with gospel values – this is what cost them their lives, and in a real sense, marks Sobrino’s even to this day. Their thinking and actions are expressions of a deep encounter with the reality of Christ crucified. Such an expression does not leave one grieving at the foot of the cross but doing what must be done to free those on the cross.

An even more noteworthy expressor of the reality of Christ crucified in our day is *Pope Francis*, whose pastoral ecclesiology is clearly drawn from ongoing encounter and reflection with the poor and marginalized. It is not an accident that his first journey outside of Rome as Pope was to Lampedusa, the Mediterranean island of desperation and hope for Africans crossing to Europe.

One can also find an expression of La Storta in one of Francis’ most well-known images: the church as field hospital: His 2013 interview with Jesuit magazines captures this: *“The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.”*

Sunday November 19 was the first “World Day of the Poor” as declared by the Pope. Usually I do not find the documents that inspire such days powerful, but this quote from the declaration message was: *We may think of the poor simply as the beneficiaries of our occasional volunteer work, or of impromptu acts of generosity that appease our conscience. However good and useful such acts may be for making us sensitive to people’s needs and the injustices that are often their cause, they ought to lead to a true encounter with the poor and a sharing that becomes a way of life. Our prayer and our journey of discipleship and conversion find the confirmation of their evangelic authenticity in precisely such charity and sharing. This way of life gives rise to joy and peace of soul, because we touch with our own hands the flesh of Christ.*

This is service mysticism in action...we touch with our own hands the flesh of Christ. To follow Jesus is to follow the crucified one. We find him today in the most marginalized, the most feared, the most unwanted. Our peripheries in the city invite us to move there.

Our response: from fear to welcome

How do we deepen this mystical vision? How do you and I begin to see those on the peripheries of our cities as sisters and brothers of ours as the Holy Trinity sees them? We have to start inside ourselves noting the feelings and thoughts we have about these sisters and brothers. Let me guess at a few:

Sometimes we find indifference to the needs of those on the peripheries. We find ourselves imaging the mess, the impossibility of extricating ourselves out of the complexities of their lives if we enter. Sometimes we find ourselves confused or overwhelmed, throwing our hands up in the air at what can be done, perhaps having tried several times before. Sometimes we don't want to be taken advantage of. Sometimes we are too busy. For those who are migrants and refugees, add to the mix language, culture and terrorism.

If we are honest with ourselves, most of these have some relationship to fear.

Fear is a human reality. Each of us has her or his own fears--situations or people that put us in a state of discomfort or apprehension. There *are* things to fear. When fear crosses the line of rationality, it can become anxiety, a fear out of proportion with what might be normally expected in a situation.

We currently live in an ambiance where migrants and refugees coming to our cities are seen as a primary source of fear and anxiety. While terrorist actions in the world are statistically rare, their randomness is frightening. Getting to secure areas in airports quickly is an appropriate way to deal with the fear; looking at every Arabic migrant in Rome as a source of danger crosses the line.

In the spirituality of Saint Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, fear and anxiety can be seen as "attachments," something blocking us from seeing reality as it is. Attachments get in the way of the freedom to see the world as God sees it, as the trinity looks down upon the world. Anxiety paralyzes us: it leads to isolation, to mistrust, and to the attitude of "us versus them," and it encourages the divineness and fearfulness of the evil spirit.

Fear and anxiety usually propel us to look for security; but solutions based in fear are typically so lacking in perspective that the desired security is fundamentally an illusion. Closing the Mediterranean may seem to bring security. How illusionary is it to

think that conditions of war in Syria will not continue to force people to find a better life?

I may not be thrilled with the homeless population where I live around the Vatican. Fear would say “send them somewhere else,” anywhere out of my view. Decisions based in fear and anxiety are not the answer to the needs of our sisters and brothers doing their best to survive on the peripheries of Rome.

This, then, is the spiritual issue. The call is to seek out Christ crucified. The human reflex to draw peripheries which maintain *we vs. them* is not the call, yet it is where almost all of us live at least part of the day.

The first letter of John does offer us an answer. In chapter 4 verse 18 John writes: “In love there is no room for fear; perfect love drives out fear.” This may seem like a tall order, and we know our love will never be perfect. But the invitation is clear: a stance of love, a stance of openness to the other will not let fear and its expressions become the dominant mode of decision. If not fear, then what? What might love concretely look like in responding to those on our peripheries?

One necessary movement is to the language of justice. As noted sociologist of religion Cornel West writes: “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.” The language of the human rights of all people – including or especially, the rights of the urban poor, migrants and refugees – is important for civic society and political leadership to wrestle with and embrace. This is the civil or marketplace version of a faith that does justice, in essence.

Paired with justice, an additional, personal movement is needed. If perfect love can drive out fear, can imperfect love express itself in *welcome*? Can we take the risk to go beyond fear to come to know someone beyond our periphery, a homeless person, refugee, to listen to her or his story, to come to see the human person beneath the label of refugee, nationality, or religious faith? Can we make the effort to not focus on the 65 million or the 9,000, but on the concrete person that I meet in the street this afternoon?

The Scriptures are replete with welcoming that is complicated, imperfect and ultimately filled with God's spirit-- from Joseph welcoming to Egypt the brothers who tried to kill him, to the widow of Zarephath who haltingly offers the prophet Elijah water and a cake and is rewarded with a jug of oil and jar of flour which never go empty through a drought.

This movement from fear to welcome is foundational to understanding Jesus' message. The parable of the last judgment in Matthew 25—separating the sheep and the goats by whether they recognize Christ in the stranger—captures this dynamic.

This idea of welcoming is also essential to JRS. Pedro Arrupe called us to accompaniment, welcoming the refugee and taking his or her experience as the starting point for our service to them. From a place of welcome, JRS can help people heal, and help them move beyond their fear by finding the presence of God in the here and now.

Our response: Love ought to be shown more in deeds than in words.

So what might justice and welcome look like on our peripheries? To answer this, I invite us to remember the words of St. Ignatius towards the end of the Spiritual Exercises *Love ought to be shown more in deeds than in words*. It is time for each of us, as society and as individuals to step up and put our justice and welcome in practice.

Several months ago, I participated in panel with Elizabeth Collett, the Director of the Migration Policy Institute in Brussels. Her great line: "We've had enough poetry about refugees; it's time to put in the plumbing." To paraphrase: we have more than enough words about refugees coming to Europe; it's time to build the structures to welcome them. I would extend that to say, enough talk about refugees and homeless; it is time to fix the plumbing and welcome those on the peripheries.

Now I have to be honest and say that this part is easier for refugees. Pope Francis spoke of it in 2016, when he invited parishes and faith communities to sponsor one or two refugee families...not all 60 million. This has been happening around the world and especially across Europe.

Several years ago, JRS France started the Welcome Project, a structured program for people to welcome refugees into their home and come to know them as people. JRS Europe is now developing this Welcome Project throughout the continent, inviting all to find the way to open our hearts and homes.

Here in Rome, Pope Francis has put that into action, from offering showers to homeless people to the above-mentioned World Day of the Poor. I am aware of churches who offer food and clothing, the Missionaries of Charity who run a shelter, etc.

Taking Christ off the cross does not mean giving a euro to everyone who asks for it, nor opening borders to anyone who wants to arrive. But could it mean taking a mysticism of service seriously, orienting our seeing Christ in others toward social transformation? Perhaps the practicals of what this could look like can frame our discussion after the break.

Peripheries in our cities is a global reality, and as our brothers and sisters on the periphery have something to teach us. As Pope Francis said to a group of refugees at JRS' Centro Astalli in Rome, "You really are a gift...You can be a bridge that unites distant peoples...a way to rediscover our common humanity."

Can you and I see this gift? Can we see the world as God does, each of us a cherished one in God's eyes? Can we take Jesus off the cross? Can we let our imperfect love offer welcome to those in need?

Let me end this part of our morning together with a brief film made by JRS Europe.

Let us pray that this grace becomes more of a lived presence in our world. Thank you very much.