

## **How does the theme of the Ignatian Year, “Seeing all things new in Christ”, contribute to our reflection on the post-Covid society?**

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I am very happy to be with you at the Edinburgh Centre this evening. My only regret is that the continuing Covid situation requires that it is virtual.

I want to invite you to reflect with me on two opportunities that this year gives to re-imagine our lives, our societies and our world: First, in this Ignatian Year, when we commemorate the conversion of St Ignatius, we are invited “to see all things new in Christ”.

Second, what possibilities has the pandemic opened for us to imagine a better society and a better planet? More importantly what opportunities must we create to work for it? These two opportunities go together but they are not without their challenges.

However, before we begin to explore them, I wish to pay tribute to Br. Ken Vance. As you know, Br. Vance has been responsible for the Edinburgh Centre. Under his leadership the Centre has developed. Indeed, Br. Vance is a good example of our themes this evening. He and his team have managed to take advantage of the difficulties that Covid has imposed to widen the scope of the lecture series and through the creative use of technology, to reach a much wider audience than could have been anticipated. As well as Director of the Centre, Br. Ken has combined two other important roles. He has been the minister of the Jesuit community at Lauriston, and he has also been the Provincial’s Delegate for Pastoral Ministries. I also believe that he is responsible for one of our most important works – the Jesuit holiday villa in Barmouth!

This combination is not only a testimony to his energies but to his apostolic availability and adaptability. In this, too, he reminds us of the inestimable value of the Brother’s vocation, central to the mission of the Society.

## 1: Seeing all things new in Christ

When we were considering the theme for this Ignatian year, one version was simply 'seeing all things new.'

It is an expression which Ignatius himself uses to express the effects of his conversion and the new understanding, which lasted the whole of his life.

However, 'seeing all things new' somehow felt incomplete. It really needed 'in Christ' because Christ is not only the source of this 'newness'; Christ himself is the newness.

In fact, for Ignatius, Christ, was never an abstract idea or a theological symbol. Jesus was always intensely concrete and personal, experienced in our lives and in our histories. The grace he encourages us to ask for in the 2nd week of the Spiritual Exercises is "an intimate knowledge of our Lord, who has become man for me, that I may love Him more and follow Him more closely" (§104). Always for Ignatius, loving and following are together, for following – or mission - is love in action.

The experience of these recent years, with massive upheavals in the social and political orders, nationally and internationally, the rapid pace of globalisation and technological innovation, create a world of immense opportunity and many contradictions. The world is changing before our eyes, and we can't go on looking at it through the same lenses as before. All these changes and pressures force us, to see 'all things new' – things in their totality and inter-relatedness.

Ignatius always asks us to be attentive to 'the times, people, places and circumstances' in which we live. His is an intensely incarnational vision, which is totally immersed in the realities of our existence. It is there that we meet Christ, for it is there, in all these complexities and confusions, that we also find him 'labouring and working'. When we grasp this, then we can see things in a new way, for we see them from Christ's perspective, and we see Christ in them. It is another way of seeing and understanding, it is a Christo-centric vision, and it forces us to re-evaluate everything, especially those things to which we have become blind or familiar. Pope Francis captures this Christo-centric vision in going to the peripheries. Here, we have our first principle for re-imagining our world again.

The amazing thing about seeing everything again in Christ is that nothing is lost. Christ does not distort our vision, he enhances it, makes it truer. Of course, there is a change of perspective because the old ways of seeing and understanding will not work. They are still governed by the long-accumulated dust of fears and prejudices; we are still subject to all the illusions, which have mis-directed us and offered us false hopes that can never be fulfilled.

As Ignatius discovered through his own conversion experience, in coming to know Christ and to love him, our sight is restored. Not only do we know ourselves more honestly, but also we come to see all things more truly and more vividly.

### **Apostolic Vision**

There is also another dimension to this gift of sight and in-sight. It is the new mind and heart that makes us ready for mission. We might call it 'apostolic vision' or sight.

The apostle who sees Christ already at work in the world has been given 'new eyes.' Not only do we have the grace to witness to the reality of the living Christ, "which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands" (I.Jn.1:1-2), but we are awakened to the world in which we live. We see its suffering and need. Yet, if the resurrection means anything it must surely mean that God, in Christ, has not and never will abandon us or the world that we make, no matter how disfigured it may be. In some sense, the crucified Christ has already encompassed this and made of it a source of healing grace rather than destruction and despair.

It is the Spirit who sends each one of us into this world – familiar and weary but also new - to 'labour and work' with Christ for its redemption: we are all ministers of Christ's love. In a beautiful phrase from Pope Benedict's encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, we now have 'a heart which has eyes' (§31b) to see, especially those who's suffering and distress has been made invisible. In this conversion of the heart, Pope Benedict anticipates the contemplation on the Good Samaritan, which frames Pope Francis' visionary encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, when he says, that the command to love our neighbour ceases to be an exterior command. It becomes a way of life, a way of seeing and being in the world, the way of faith, "a faith which becomes active through love (cf. *Gal* 5:6)." (*Deus Caritas Est* §31 a).

Even in this rapid sketch, we may begin to appreciate what “seeing all things new in Christ” might mean for us this year. If it is about the conversion of our way of seeing, it is also an invitation to the conversion of our imagination. To imagine another way of relating to God and to each other.

When we planned this Ignatian year, we had no sense that it would take place in the time of the pandemic. Yet, for all the pain, loss and stress that it has caused, maybe the pandemic has also given us an unsought, but timely opportunity to re-think things? We cannot go back to ‘normal’. We can only begin to re-build and create something which has the possibility of being better than the ‘normal’ we had become used to.

Whether we like it or not, the pandemic and the urgency of the ecological crisis, surely tell us there is no way to go back. They force us all to become pilgrims on a journey to a future, the shape of which we do not yet know. Yet seeing the future in Christ is seeing with the eyes of faith and hope: faith and hope in God and in humanity.

## **II: For the Life of the world**

It is in this context, then, that I want to share with you some reflections about the questions that are now facing us as we move into a post-Covid world. I am very much aware that 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) will be held in Glasgow on 31 October – 12 November 2021. It is a critical moment for us all. Pope Francis has repeatedly said that “we cannot save only ourselves; we are saved together, or we will all be lost together.” I also see that the Climate Change Conference has chosen the banner for its website, “Uniting the World to tackle Climate Change.”<sup>1</sup> If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is surely that we are all inter-dependent. Not only do we have a solidarity in our struggles and suffering, but also we must have a solidarity in the solution.

Therefore, the old nationalisms are no longer sustainable. If we continue with a mentality of isolationism and competition, if we continue to erect national barriers thinking that somehow these will be a protection, we are living an illusion. Neither the pandemic nor the heating of our planet, the degradation of the environment and the irresponsible exploitation of natural resources, combined with the rapid loss of biodiversity, leave anyone exempt. Most

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1 <https://ukcop26.org>

importantly, they expose how fragile and inter-dependent we all are. In an immediate and vivid manner, they highlight the deep structural inequalities within our societies and between nations. We not only need the new vision of solidarity developed in *Fratelli Tutti* and *Laudato Si*, but we also need the conversion of thinking and of action that goes with it. In a recent message to world leaders on the Fifth “World Day of the Poor”, Pope Francis argues that we need a different approach to poverty, “a far-sighted social model capable of countering the new forms of poverty.” He calls for a ‘paradigm shift’ in the way we help the poorest among us. We must not let ideological commitments or vested interest get in the way of the transformation that is possible and needed if we are to have a sustainable future with justice and equality for all our peoples.

This is where I can see a new relationship between a secular culture and the communities of Faith, between Christianity and the other great religious traditions which shape human cultures and can transform our ways of living. I think that the ideological secularism of a previous era which tried to exclude religion from the public sphere has gone. Likewise, the Church cannot remain permanently locked in an ideological cultural war. Too often, that leads to a distortion and diminishment of the richness of the life of faith and its prophetic mission of witnessing to Christ in the service all of humanity.

In its own way, the Society of Jesus has also been seeking to realise this path to a new future in Christ and through the mission of the Church. As you may already know, we have identified 4 UAPs or Universal Apostolic Preferences which shape our life-mission today.

- 1 - To show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment;
- 2 - To walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice;
- 3 - To accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future;
- 4 - To collaborate in the care of our common home.

You will notice that the emphasis is on working and walking together. This means that we approach our ministries from a new perspective: one of collaboration, learning, and serving. They work like the five fingers of the hand. The fifth finger represents the partnership with the others, and the wrist, which ensures that all fingers are working, is the Holy Spirit. In another sense,

they are also the 'sites' of encounter: encounter with Christ and encounter with others who are in the journey with us. They are the spaces we create together in which the Holy Spirit is present and active; all are welcome, and all can be partners.

Of them all, perhaps it is the 4th UAP, 'care for our common home,' which is the most urgent. The ecological emergency breaks through the news of the pandemic whether it is through rising temperatures, fires, flooding, pollution and every increasing list of creatures marked as endangered species. Of course, there are economic and social consequences through the increasing displacement of peoples and the growing levels of ecological inequalities between countries, the growing deprivation of resources that will affect the lives of our children and grandchildren. In turn, these place an ever-greater strain on national resources and international systems and structures.

### **The COP 26 Conference identifies 4 goals:**

1. SECURE GLOBAL NET ZERO BY MID-CENTURY AND KEEP 1.5 DEGREES WITHIN REACH
2. ADAPT TO PROTECT COMMUNITIES AND NATURAL HABITATS
3. MOBILISE FINANCE
4. WORK TOGETHER TO DELIVER

Expressed in this way, these COP 26 goals look relatively simple and straight forward.

However, you will know as well as I do, that we have had international climate change conferences in the past. They have been ambitious and confident but they have not always delivered on their goals. This is not only because systems take time to change, and there is always an innate resistance or inertia. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis recognises the urgency but he also acknowledges that change will only come about and be sustainable if we have a conversion – a new way of seeing, of acting and of living together. We will have to give up many of our consumerist habits and our indifference to the urban as well as the natural environments which we have created.

Yet, COP 26 is an opportunity to reach those goals and we all have an obligation to work to achieve them. We need to urge our leaders not to let this moment pass them by, not to let COP 26 end in a flurry of well crafted statements that

say nothing and commit no one. The time is now. We have our moment, we must not let it pass. Each one of us must find a way to take positive action – no matter how simple - for the care and well-being of our common home.

## **Conclusion**

The Jewish Philosopher Hanah Arendt speaks about the phenomenon of 'natality' – the capacity for new beginnings, for starting again. It is a concept she takes from St Augustine.

Natality is surely a source of hope because it reminds us that we have a capacity for change and adapt when we need to. Even so, it is more than that. If it is only about pragmatic adjustments for the sake of survival, then we diminish ourselves and our responsibility to all the living and sentient creatures that share this planet with us. We also betray past and future generations. 'Natality' is the graced capacity to change, to begin a new, to learning from our past and discover the good; to change, not because we need to survive, but because we have seen something greater that summons us and is worth giving our life for: a new way of being human and a new way of living in this world which God has created for us. When that moment happens, even when it comes through pandemics and ecological crises, then we have been touched by a grace; we have begun to see all things new in Christ, who summons us to follow him. And always, natality begins with our 'yes' to him.

I thank you for this opportunity to share these thoughts with you. I invite you all to join with the whole Society of Jesus in this Ignatian year, not only to celebrate the graces that we have received through his life and his spiritual exercises, but also to enter with us into that process of conversion and renewal, and that desire for greater service.

