

A Catechism of the Heart

A Jesuit Missioned to the Laity

Chapter 11

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Sent To the Frontiers

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MY FAVORITE DOCUMENT FROM the Society of Jesus' General Congregation 35 is Decree 3, *Challenges to Our Mission Today: Sent to the Frontiers*. In it, the Jesuits in attendance sought to describe what it means to be a Jesuit on mission in a globalizing, pluralistic and environmentally endangered world. It is, to me, the richest and most intellectual document produced by Jesuits from around the globe. In the document the Jesuits affirm:

The aim of our mission received from Christ, as presented in the Formula of the Institute, is the service of faith. The integrating principle of our mission is the inseparable link between faith and the promotion of the justice of the Kingdom. Thus, the aim of our mission (the service of faith) and its integrating principle (faith directed toward the justice of the Kingdom) are dynamically related to the inculturated proclamation of the Gospel and dialogue with other religious traditions as integral dimensions of evangelization.

It was Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI who told the Jesuits:

Today I want to encourage you and your brothers to go on in the fulfillment of your mission, in full fidelity to your original charism, in the ecclesial and social context that characterizes the beginning of this millennium. As my predecessors have often

told you, the Church needs you, counts on you, and continues to turn to you with confidence.

Your Congregation Thirty Five takes place in a period of great social, economic, and political changes; sharp ethical, cultural and environmental problems, conflicts of all kinds, but also of more intense communication among peoples, of new possibilities of acquaintance and dialogue, of a deep longing for peace. All these are situations that challenge the Catholic Church and its ability to announce to our contemporaries the Word of hope and salvation.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and the Society of Jesus had it right, as the world is in need of right relationships, with God, self and others. Such rightness or balance of relationships is becoming of the human good, for all people are good in themselves because they are created by God. But of course not all are people equal because some, like LGBTQ people are re-directed away from their human flourishing by churches like Roman Catholicism, e.g., which tells LGBTQ people overtly or through misdirection to deny themselves the fullness of their character. Ours is a world that longs for reconciliation—a world that beckons each other *to find God in all things*. A world charged by Christ to preserve the the life of the other, not to dissemble one's true teachings with a smile. Hence, the Jesuit Fathers at General Congregation Thirty Five said, that the Jesuits must give *The Spiritual Exercises*, "to allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord to lead people to a deeper relationship with God in Christ and through that relationship to service of his Kingdom."

As I packed up my belongings at the St. Peter Faber Jesuit Community in Boston, I longed to remain a Jesuit. I knew that some of my brothers thought I was being impetuous. Far worse, I felt they thought my discernment, while spiritual and holy, lacked intellectual rigor, as if discernment is an algorithm, theorem or hypothesis to prove. Once my rental car was packed, I sat behind the wheel for a moment and took my final look on the place I called my last Jesuit home. Next to me sat my Vow Cross, ahead of me my new Jesuit mission: I had been missioned by the Society of Jesus to become a layperson (again).

The drive from Boston to Riverdale, in the Bronx, where I'd stay with an ex-Roman Catholic nun, took about five hours. It was a lot of time, much of which I spent in silence, thinking about my family that rejected my decision, thinking my being a Jesuit was what God wanted most for me in my life. Of that, perhaps I could agree. No, I did not enter religious life to save my soul, no matter how much my Church tried to tell me that gay men have few options, either choose the voluntary celibacy of the priesthood or the

mandatory celibacy of single life. Yes, the reasons why I left religious life are more endemic to the human condition.

To my very Catholic family, I had made a hasty decision. They clung to my status, even calling the Province office to tell the Province Vocation Director that I'd had a breakdown, or had been terribly misled. To my very Catholic family, deciding to leave religious life to support the LGBTQ community made little sense.

Intellectually I grounded my departure in the rational and logical extension of Feminism, the Ethics of Care. The feminist Nel Noddings writes about the Ethics of Care this way,

Recognizing that ethical caring requires an effort that is not needed in natural caring does not commit us to a position that elevates ethical caring over natural caring. Immanuel Kant identified the ethical with that which is done out of duty and not out of love, and that distinction in itself seems right. But an ethic built on caring strives to maintain the caring attitude and is thus dependent upon, and not superior to, natural caring. The source of ethical behavior is, then, in twin sentiments—one that feels directly for another and one that feels for another with that best self, who may accept and sustain the initial feeling rather than reject it.

To those who found Feminism bemusing, I posited a logical or rational extension of the Ethic of the Good Samaritan. The Church, no matter how much *progress* Pope Francis is channeling, remains stuck on sex. I refused to remain a Jesuit, and be silenced by the Roman Curia, like some of my Jesuit brothers.

As I departed, faithful to my vow of obedience, I argued that the LGBTQ community remains comprised of fringe characters and safe outsiders. When the Jesuits missioned me back to the laity, because they would not rehire fired workers like Colleen Simon and Nicholas Coppola, they proved everything I knew to be socially sinful about workplace discrimination. The younger Jesuits I met, besmirched the moral higher ground I sought on this issue; they wantonly redirected me to consider the poverty of refugees, migrants, inner city Black youth, upper class white students who need an education or go to the frontiers of boundary-less nations, to give water to the earth so that food might be produced. To them the LGBTQ weren't poor or fragile enough—they didn't meet the poverty line, for to them, the LGBTQ community could hide or pass, while "the real poor" couldn't.

I cannot see a difference between doctrine and practice. As Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI once wrote,

Doctrine helps create a unity within pluralism; it is faith that signifies an ultimate bond to God, who is truth, it does indeed furnish man with norms for his concrete action in society, yet, the community of believers does not find its center of unity in social or political praxis but only in the authentic binding force of truth itself.

For men and women like Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, pluralism is a major problem. For such people, it is doctrine then that helps the faithful to distinguish between Truth and truth, Theology and theologies. Hence faith, scripture and doctrine open man to true knowledge, to the truth of his being in God, to know precisely what the dignity of man is in relationship to God's revelation. The revelation of Jesus Christ as Word-made-Flesh, Jesus who loves us and calls us to conversion and to kenosis, is then the theosobia, the incarnated and sacred mystery of our worshipful wonder, the plain and simple teaching at the heart of doctrine, dogma, and tradition.

Doesn't whitewashing the Truth disavow men and women of the ability to distinguish between what the Church Stands For, and what the Church stands for? With mere messaging, repackaging and tonal shifts, the Church denies her very members the capacity and freedom to discern membership, thereby confirming what Karl Marx said, that "religion is the opiate for the masses."

Why be a Jesuit sent to the frontiers if scripture's application to the twenty-first century isn't different from the time of Saints Augustine, Anselm, Benedict, or Bonaventure? In other words, is Pope Francis really changing the Church, as the Boston Globe's reporter John Allen, Jr. suggests, "without altering a single comma in the catechism?" Will Francis outlive the Catechism, or Holy Mother Church? Or is Pope Francis saying that the deposit of faith is settled, that revelation is closed, thus, implicitly agreeing with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, though less creedal, and more picturesque or publicly adorable?

The proof to me is in how Saint John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI walked mightily backward the reforms of Vatican II, *e.g.*, slowing the reforms of collegiality and priestly accountability and transparency. Vatican II almost gave women the right to use contraception, and introduced the vernacular in the liturgy. Now, even under Pope Francis, women have such a little place, and the liturgy is increasingly said in Latin (the sacred language), while the translation of the liturgy leans heavily toward formal equivalence (literally word for word).

Thomas Cranmer wrote in his *Defence* (sic *Apologia*):

Many corrupt weeds be plucked up. . . But what availeth it to take away beeds, pardons, pilgrimages and such other like popery, so long as two chief roots remain unpulled up? . . . the very body of the tree, or rather the roots of the weeds, is the popish doctrine of transubstantiation, of the real presence of Christ's flesh and blood in the sacrament of the altar (as they call it), and of the sacrifice and oblation of Christ made by the priest for the salvation of the quick and the dead. Which roots, if they be suffered to grow in the Lord's vineyard, they will spread all the ground again with the old errors and superstition.

While Pope Francis I has a moral imperative to bring the Church out of Plato's caves and away from Aristotle's forms, to meet the secular and religious and spiritual issues of today, and the future, the Pope Francis Effect has yet to be fully recognized. Is he making the Church stand for those things of the world that need most attention? Only history will judge. Is Pope Francis a social justice pope more interested in confronting realities, like material poverty, than elevating the Church to the spiritual? Only his bishops and priests will demonstrate it. Is Pope Francis revolutionary in his transformation of the Church? Only time will tell. We must be prudent in how we embrace Pope Francis in the short term, for though the Kingdom of God is to come, hence metanoia, the Kingdom of God is already amongst us, in the form of Christ transforming cultures.

As I transitioned from a Jesuit in good standing to lay life, I quickly landed a job at St. Luke's in the Fields, an Episcopal Church located on Hudson Street in New York City. St. Luke's sits in an area at one time deeply decimated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It was an ugly era, one where the Church neither condoned nor condemned the negative labeling of the disease as GRID or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. In a *New York Times* article on November 13, 1989 Cardinal Joseph O'Connor said, "Sometimes I believe the greatest damage done to persons with AIDS is done by the dishonesty of those health care professionals who refuse to confront the moral dimensions of sexual aberrations or drug abuse. Good morality is good medicine." That to me sums up what I term "The Francis Defect", the dishonesty of those moral theologians and gay or straight priests who to confront the positive moral dimensions of same-sex love and same-sex relationships, refuse to examine the disastrous effects of anti-gay theology and anti-gay rhetoric. In this case, bad morality, bad theology is bad medicine.

About midway through my summer job at St. Luke's in the Fields, I met with Mother Melanie Fuller. Since I was no longer Roman Catholic, I sought to learn about reception into the Episcopal Church. As we sat together, she distilled for me the relationship between The Book of Common

Prayer, Episcopal Polity and the Hymnal; listening to her, I felt an incipient attraction to the Episcopal Church. Truth be told, I didn't like being a homeless man, and that's exactly how I felt as a former Jesuit and a former Catholic—homeless. (It pains me to say this, my heart is broken.)

As a Jesuit I was trained in the spirituality of our founder Saint Ignatius of Loyola. For just about ten years, I practiced the discernment of spirits, seeking to know God through the movements of the good spirit and being tempted in my life with God by evil. I felt let down by the Church, asking, "Why is the Church leaving so many behind?"

As I learned more about the Episcopal Church's own mission, I imagined a community of faithful people's continuously evolving through *chronos* and *kairos* time (man's time and God's time) to include, *e.g.*, women who desire ordination, and women who desire the use of contraception, not to have an abortion, to make love without the fear or worry of adding unwanted children to their family. The Episcopal Church's mission is very human, which means it is also complicated and messy, *e.g.*, the elevation of Gene Robinson as an openly gay Bishop.

Yet, I remembered LGBTQ Roman Catholics who were led to the pews of "gay friendly" parishes like St. Francis Xavier, Good Shepherd or St. Cecilia's. These parishes were run by liberal diocesan priests or liberal religious orders like the Jesuits, Paulists and Franciscans OFM. To me the Episcopal Church embodied *en vivo* St. Ignatius' theology of human flourishing. For him, *The Spiritual Exercises* are an exhortatory means for a rather close and personal encounter between Jesus, the Godhead, and the retreatant, the human meeting the Divine in time, one that will fulfill itself not in encounter but in relationship. To me that is what the Episcopal Church offered, relationship not encounter—the capacity to wrestle with issues out in the open, with laity and clerics who agree and disagree, something impossible to imagine within the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church.

I meditated on the lives of unmarried or remarried men and women who were spiritually poor, who felt left out because of an overemphasis on the needs of those without food, or shelter, but for whom the Church said, "because you are divorced, you cannot supper at the table of the Lord." Such is the paradox of the papacy of the very green and populist Pope Francis I.

As the African-American intellectual and mentor, Cornel West, says, "Deep integrity must trump cheap popularity. To pursue truth and justice is to live dangerously."

As my first experiences of *The Book of Common Prayer* came to an end I was consoled knowing that God was acting in my life, that the grace of the Holy Spirit was in me. Although during this time I was filled with apprehension, I now felt an influx of peace.

While I felt some loss about my departure from the Society of Jesus, the good spirit, which led me toward consolation, enkindled me, and I felt gratitude deeply, something that the spirituality of the Society of Jesus and the Anglican Communion share.

Today, I do not wrestle with how to be gay and Christian in the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, I actively participate in services in the Episcopal Church, publish articles from time to time, and work with students in public education. I am also completing my doctorate at Teachers College, Columbia University where I examine the possible intersection between the pedagogical philosophy of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the character formation of public school students. The years since my departure have been mixed with consolation and desolation. That is what it means to be living a pilgrim's journey.

I end my memoir where I began, with gratitude in sharing how I arrived at my true self. Mostly, as I receive and carry out my mission from the Society, to continue being a layperson, I return to the world of dating and to human touch. At the Easter Vigil (2015) as I was received into the Anglican Communion, I remained priestly, but I was no longer studying for the priesthood. I learned again what it meant to be Christian in the city that never sleeps.

The Danish philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, "Life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards." When I had professed vows on August 11, 2007, I promised to enter the Society of Jesus and to remain within it forever. At the mass, I thought of Earl, who stood in the back of the church. I thought of Fr. John Languish who called me part of a blessed trinity. Then I turned around, and saw my dad, Albert James Brenkert, weeping, tears of joy running down his cheeks. I looked only for an instant, while his silence told me everything: his love for me was bold, courageous, true and eternal.

Then I heard Jesuits starting to sing, *Take, Lord, and receive, all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will—all that I have and call my own*, and bewildered by the love poured out on the cross, I stood up and started to sing.

For the next nine years, I'd be missioned around the world as a Jesuit in good standing. Some may call me strident, others might call me foolish or angry, still others will call me an authentic Christian witness. At my reception into the Episcopal Church, the sky did not fall, nor did meteors hit the Hudson River; no, the simple liturgy captured God's time and gave to us all the gift of grace, the gift to be God's in a community.

On June 15, 2014, the feast day of Charles Lwanga and Companions, Martyrs of Uganda, I wrote my Jesuit brothers about my departure from

the Society of Jesus. I desired sacramental priesthood, but could not seek priesthood while LGBTQ persons of faith or no faith were being fired or penalized or criminalized because of whom they loved. Priesthood and social justice are part of one call, for some men it can be mystical, but one does not become a priest because he desires to celebrate sacraments alone, Jesus himself is the penultimate sacrifice, the one oblation of the Lord. In Baptism the Christian is incorporated into Christ's body and sent on Christ's mission.

Thus, after a period of prayer and discernment, I wrote the brothers of my small community:

Dear Brothers of Miguel Pro,

After a year-long discernment, including deep prayer and much consolation I am now freely and actively departing the Society of Jesus.

You have each been a beacon of life for me and a companion on the journey, for this I am grateful.

I have completed my discernment under the direction of my spiritual director, our rector, and close Jesuit and lay friends. Recently I completed an 8-day retreat, in Cambridge, where I was accompanied by Fr. Robert Dowd, during which I sought and received additional confirmation and clarity about my discernment. I wrote my dismissal letter on the feast day of saints Charles Lwanga and Companions, Martyrs of Uganda. Martyrs, who now pray for the LGBTQ men and women physically and spiritually imprisoned by the Church, many of whom live on the continent of Africa, or in countries like Uganda.

Having now met with my Provincial, I leave the Society in good standing, and with great peace and gratitude. I am most happy to speak with you in person, or by phone, to tell you about my discernment and the reasons for my departure.

As a Jesuit my spiritual self and vocation flourished. As the poet Mary Oliver says, "I have been risky in my endeavors, I have been steadfast in my loves; Oh Lord consider these when you judge me. Mine too is a vivid a blessed life, a pilgrim on a marvelous and Spirit-led journey."

With fellow Jesuit Richard Zanoni, S.J. I know that, "Taken separately, we are men of little worth, God knows. But the point about us is that we cannot be taken separately; we must be taken together; and, taken together, we may perhaps count for something in God's plan to save the world." This is *Magis*.

Please be assured of my thoughts and prayers. With great affection and love,

Ben

When I signed the paperwork, sealing my departure from the Jesuits on July 16, 2014, my provincial told me, "Ben, on this issue you are right, but there is nothing the east coast Jesuit provinces can do. In the meantime we are meeting with lawyers to explore employment and volunteer protections for LGBTQ people." How timid!

As a lay person, missioned by the Society of Jesus to the frontiers and margins of the Church, I desire to do what any son of Ignatius might—to pray for the grace from the Second Week of *The Spiritual Exercises*: "to know Jesus more intimately, to love Him more dearly, and to follow Him more closely." Still today, I am living and breathing the Fifth Week of the Spiritual Exercises. I am who I am because of the love that surrounds me, I could not be who I am without that love. I am full of gratitude.

Let me conclude by saying that there are many Jesuit friends that I want to thank by real name, but cannot. These Jesuit friends had such a profound, dynamic, and kerygmatic affect on my life. It is hard and painful to say why my former brothers feel deeply alienated from me; it is unclear to me why they feel let down by my departure, or about the veracity of my narrative. Perhaps they feel vulnerable, which I must respect. I love them.

Yet, these men were my companions on a journey; brothers who served side-by-side with me, as much as any family member or best friend might. In paying tribute to them, and their impact on my life, I reveal a deep longing for those Jesuit friendships. But mostly, I acknowledge that there has not been a day that has gone by, since my departure, when I have not prayed for them. I very much hoped that I could answer this question from my prayer, Will everything work towards the good in the long run? Life is long, and I have no crystal ball, magic wand or genie-in-a-bottle, how life unfolds I cannot know. I do have a heart full of love, and when I remember these three Jesuit friends my heart fills with gratitude for them.

I would like to write about them but I can't. They will always be in my heart.

All for the Greater Glory of God, *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*.

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