**Magis: A Challenge To Jesuit Universities**

**By Megan Townsend**

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Photo by Reyna Wang

*Lord Jesus, teach me to be generous.* When I hear this opening line to St. Ignatius’s prayer, said in unison with my community of students at Fordham University, I question what it means for *us* to be generous. Prayer and scripture require interpretation based on the times and the ever-changing situation. What does it mean, coming from a Church of the powerful, to ask for mercy? What does it mean for us to learn the gift of generosity? *To give and not to count the cost.* It seems to be harder for the wealthy to give without counting the cost. And we, at Fordham - where I am currently an undergraduate student - are the wealthy. We are those who are told we will inherit the Earth of man, of money and profit and means. When the gospel of Mark tells the story of the widow who gives her last two coins, Christ says that she gave more than the rest, for they gave of their wealth while she gave of her poverty. How capable are we, at Fordham, of giving without counting the cost? *To toil and not to seek for rest, to labor and not to ask for any reward.* This linereminds me of how I felt during my first year at Fordham. I was beginning to open my eyes to injustice, as I had been encouraged to do by my professors and administrators, and I was always tired from subway rides to and from volunteer opportunities, lectures, protests...and what I learned from listening and praying taught me a faith that cares not for the powerful.

This has been humbling for me and often difficult: my faith teaches me to act in ways that can be contradictory to what others at Fordham are doing, what they care about, even what the rules of our university state. *Save that of knowing that I do your will.* I am writing this because I think there is a serious problem with the industrial nature of American universities today, but especially Jesuit universities. Building on a culture of social justice, Jesuit universities appropriate the language of the oppressed while continually educating and ruling in favor of the oppressor. Fordham must respond to this moral crisis by ceasing to perpetuate the experience, preferences, ideologies, language, and the education of a ruling class and attempt to understand what it means to practice a preferential option for the poor. That is, to exist to educate the poorest and most vulnerable, and teach the privileged not to act as saviors, but to give - without counting costs - so that those they serve might live with dignity. *Amen.*

I recall my first year at Fordham as one of falling in love and building a home. I have since learned that feeling safe and comfortable at Fordham is a privilege. In the years since then, Fordham as an institution has made me frustrated, angry, and disappointed. I have also felt energized and supported by those who still make Fordham feel like home: my friends, the Campus Ministry staff, my professors, my coworkers. But I feel I must pay attention to the gulf of distrust that has grown between my faith and my school. Most importantly, I have learned that Fordham may be able to educate students to be forces of justice in the world, but Fordham cannot be one itself so long as its priorities remain the same.

I began volunteering in the Bronx, as I had been encouraged to do during orientation, immediately after the start of my freshman year. I did many short-term service projects with different organizations, spending time cleaning up in local parks, answering phones at a health clinic, working at the Baptist church soup kitchen, and almost anything else I heard about as a volunteer opportunity. I wanted to learn, and I believed it was the best way to do so, and I thought I was different from other Fordham students because of that. I cared. I liked going outside of the gates and meeting people, but it wasn’t long into these volunteer projects that I realized the power with which I entered their communities. I began to realize the toxic nature of Fordham’s presence in the neighborhood. Fordham encourages students to volunteer, looking at the Bronx as a place of opportunity for budding student projects but often overlooking the excellent justice work being done by Bronx residents. The relationship between Fordham students and the Fordham-Belmont area is a frequent topic of discussion on campus, but the conversation centers around fear. Comments made by students about the Bronx being a “ghetto” and local residents being “thugs” or “criminals” are marked with the ugliness of racism and classism. Well-meaning Fordham students who wish to make a difference are rarely encouraged to talk about the power dynamics that exist between us and the people who live around us, which prevents many volunteer projects from advancing beyond paternalism. Fordham students are gentrifying the Bronx by creating a demand for luxury apartments and trendy bars, encouraging landlords to drive out existing tenants, pushing out local businesses, and creating more spaces reserved for wealthy students.

The most dangerous part of this relationship is that Fordham students are not educated on the history of Fordham and its place in the Bronx: only a select group of students who make the decision to take a class on Bronx history or attend a yearly presentation by the Dorothy Day Center are ever made aware of what went on in the past 30 years. Considering the way that Fordham largely withdrew from the Bronx while real estate developers set it aflame in the 1970s and instead invested in its Lincoln Center campus (which displaced thousands of families from affordable housing at the motion of Robert Moses), it seems arrogant and offensive to try and reassert ourselves in the community while it expands upon its own work of the last few decades. Fordham, when telling its own history, chooses to highlight the mission of Archbishop John Hughes (an immigrant from County Tyrone, Northern Ireland). He intended to create a university for immigrants and young adults of the working class. Imagining this version of Fordham in the present day, I see one that stands with those who are removed from their homes, not the ones buying them out. If Fordham had chosen to prioritize this mission, it would serve those who live outside the gates and hail *them* as creators, leaders, authors, or inventors, instead of the imported children of wealthy suburbs. The statue of Archbishop Hughes on campus is said to honor that mission, but Hughes was known in his time as a slavery apologist. We are left to continually ask: which legacy does Fordham celebrate?

This is partly answered by Fordham admissions and the hundreds of white children from private schools Fordham accepts every year, but it is also answered by the campus culture for current students, which is so thick with privilege it prevents a certain depth of learning. When protesting for prisoners’ rights, I heard multiple students yell - not in an attempt at dialogue - that prisoners “deserved what they got.” When trying to speak about Fordham’s food service provider (Aramark), one of the greatest beneficiaries of the prison industrial complex in the US, I was met with blank stares from polite students and aggressive, uncaring remarks (which were not composed enough to be called arguments) from others.

In a struggle spanning several years of my Fordham experience, adjunct faculty gained the right to unionize after many protests. During this struggle, the reaction from most of the student body was the same: apathy from some students, and an outright inability to understand the importance of a living wage from others. Many statements I heard were, ‘they don’t deserve more money’; ‘Their job only requires that they work part-time, why do they need a living wage?’; ‘If you want to make money, get a better job’. I did not expect my peers to be so far from the struggles of the people who teach them and make sacrifices for them every day. Especially given its thriving faith community, I once thought that the spirit of Fordham was one allied with the oppressed. I realize now how naive this was, and this was when I began to notice the futility of ‘allyship’ that exists in the space between words and actions. When I go to Church on Sunday nights and sing with the choir, I see students filling pews all the way to the back. However, when a Liturgy for Racial Justice was held in the University Church this past winter, I noticed from that same spot that there were barely ten pews filled with entirely different faces than the ones I saw on Sunday nights.

All this need not turn to cynicism: I believe that Jesuit education has the ability to shape individual students with a profound energy for justice work. A few weeks ago, a friend said she thinks that Jesuit institutions create students who turn against them. If Jesuit universities are teaching justice in the right ways, students should turn to the institutions with resistance. It is of great importance, I think, to emphasize that Fordham made me the way I am. And I am thankful for that. But in turning into this person I have watched the members of my university slowly turn against me as they continue to align themselves with the powerful. Fordham trains students for careers in business and war, perpetuating the myths of ethical capitalism and benign colonialism while refusing to acknowledge the ways in which those careers hurt the poorest members of our communities and our world. University presidents and administrators have posters of MLK and Gandhi presiding over their desks, but implicitly endorse torture by granting John Brennan an honorary degree and then granting him a distinguished fellowship after years of ignoring voices of dissent. Fordham offices give expensive, glossy photo books of Dorothy Day as gifts to visiting senators or cardinals; they quote Oscar Romero, mourn the loss of Fr. Dan Berrigan, and sponsor lectures with Gustavo Gutierrez to speak about the *radical* work of love. But to students of color who feel unsafe on our campus, to another family who has been evicted from their home to make way for the next luxury student apartment building - this means nothing. No university can educate students to be both innovators in a capitalist society and servants to the poor: Fordham must choose.

In 2016 I attended the Ignatian Family Teach-In, a gathering of Jesuit schools hosted by the Ignatian Solidarity Network that culminates in “bearing witness” on Capitol Hill with a focus on one or two pressing social justice issues. For the 2016 Teach-In, the central topics were criminal justice reform and immigration reform. After meeting with members of the Senate, all of the students stood in Columbus Circle to listen to speakers. There were two women who appeared to be homeless, their belongings around them, sitting on a bench. When someone from one of the Jesuit delegations walked over and asked them, “Do you need anything?”, one of the women responded with, “Not from you.”

We do not need a large number of jesuit-educated college students to bear witness on Capitol Hill for justice; the prisoners and immigrants are the bearers of witness themselves. This is the problem with attempting to educate a generation of young people to be ‘champions of the poor’. The poor do not need a champion. More resources, pathways to success, encouragement and accolades are given to this brand of college student trying to help the marginalized than there are offered to marginalized communities themselves.

I have been told over and over again that I will best be able to serve the needs of the world if I get a bachelor’s degree, a law degree, a master’s degree...and I have ultimately arrived at the conclusion that this is not true. I have been told this in consolation for my guilt, to keep me in my social class, to maintain the myth of meritocracy, *and* I have believed it to relieve myself of discomfort. I have found the truths of social injustice and its roots in our capitalist society, and that is where Fordham, institutionally, can no longer answer my questions or support me in my search for answers and solutions. I will believe in Ignatian Solidarity when Fordham makes a decision to serve the community before serving its own needs, and only then.

We must recognize that if Christ is alive today, He is not dwelling in our Jesuit institutions. He probably could not get in because He could not afford an SAT tutor. If He did manage to get in, His nation would not be recognized (justice in Palestine is blacklisted as ‘too polarizing’ a topic for the campus political climate). He is kicked out of his residence hall for the danger of his words and ideas and the threat he poses. He sleeps outside of the gates at night, condescended to by students who have only lived here for a few weeks, who think that property is dignity. He is crucified, just the same.

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