

EMPOWERING THE HUMAN COMMUNITY

JESUIT EVANGELIZATION and SOLIDARITY with the POOR

RESPONSES BY FR. THOMAS J. REESE



Q & A

Thomas J. Reese, SJ, editor in chief of *America* since 1998, is a widely recognized expert on the U.S. Catholic Church and author of a trilogy examining church organization and politics on the local, national, and international levels: *Archbishop: Inside the Power Structure of the American Catholic Church* (Harper & Row, 1989), *A Flock of Shepherds: The National Conference of Catholic Bishops* (Sheed & Ward, 1992), and *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church* (Harvard University Press, 1997). He entered the Society of Jesus in 1962, was ordained in 1974, and has served previously as associate editor at *America* and senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University.

Q What does it mean to have “solidarity with the poor”?

A Solidarity means standing with and working with the poor, helping overcome the personal, social, and political obstacles that keep them poor so they’re empowered to

live as free, contributing persons in the human community. It’s opposed to a paternalistic charity, where we simply “help” the poor because we know what’s good for them. It requires listening to the poor and taking their experience and views seriously.

In a November 4, 2002, article in *America*, David Hollenbach said solidarity includes social, intellectual, and institutional dimensions as well. A Jesuit I once lived with, who was a Coptic scholar, told our community about a visit he made to Ethiopia to study manuscripts. During the trip he saw great poverty and was severely tempted to drop his scholarly pursuits and work in a refugee camp. The people in Ethiopia talked him out of it. “You’re preserving our culture for us,” they said, “until we have the resources to do it for ourselves.” That’s a great example of Hollenbach’s point.

Q Where does this desire come from, or maybe more aptly, what’s the historical context of the Jesuit desire to be “with the poor”?

A The short answer is Jesus Christ. Even the most superficial reader of the Gospels would have to acknowledge that Jesus cared for the poor, reached out to them, and told the better off that “when you did it to them, you did it to me.” Jesuits throughout history, beginning with Ignatius himself, have had a ministry to the poor. Ignatius worked in hos-

pitals, where, in those days, the poor were sent to die. He helped prostitutes. He wanted our schools to be tuition free and open to all. The Jesuit Reductions in Latin America protected the Indians from the colonists. At the beginning of this century Jesuit schools in the United States educated poor immigrants and their children so they could take their proper place in society. Jesuits also ran special labor schools to train union organizers. The civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the Hispanic influx and our own General Congregations that met after Vatican II have made us sensitive to new realities in our world that need attention.

Q How is the contemporary Society of Jesus trying to attain solidarity with the poor?

A I would point to three ways: new ministries, new attitudes in old ministries, and new partnerships.

Jesuits have started new ministries such as the Jesuit Refugee Service, the Claver Mission in Cincinnati, Nativity Schools, Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago and similar schools in Los Angeles, Denver, and New York. These ministries respond to particular needs of poor people and try to empower them to take charge of their own lives.

In older ministries, there’s been a change in attitudes where “solidarity with the poor” becomes one of the goals of the ministry. We see

parishes opening shelters for the homeless, distributing food to the poor, and twinning with parishes in the ghetto or even in Latin America. Jesuit schools raise money for scholarships, not just to educate the poor but also to keep the schools themselves from being middle-class, white ghettos.

In some schools, “solidarity with the poor” is a theme that comes up naturally in classes dealing with theology, ethics, business, economics, politics, history, sociology, psychology and even literature. If questions about the poor are ignored in these classes, then they’re not only un-Christian, they’re ignoring a big chunk of reality. Today there’s also an international dimension because of globalization and its impact (both positively and negatively) on the poor. Our students need analytical tools and moral values to deal with these issues, not just bumper-sticker slogans.

Jesuits are also reaching out for partnership with others. With declining numbers of Jesuits and the growing complexity of issues facing the church and the world, no Jesuit believes today that we can do things by ourselves. Only with colleagues and partners can we face the future with hope. This means, for example, that our schools can no longer simply help poor people move into the middle class. Rather our graduates and alumni must themselves be inspired by Christian and Jesuit values, including solidarity with the poor.

Q Switching gears a little bit to our next topic... evangelization. How, if at all, has the recent explosion of new technologies changed the purpose or shape of evangelization?

A Evangelization is taking the message of Jesus Christ to the people. That message can be conveyed through the spoken word, by letters (as St. Paul did), books, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, the internet, art, and music. In the early years of the Jesuits, we evangelized through long sermons in baroque churches, preached retreats and missions, staged student plays, processions, and pageants in cities (which today would be considered small towns) and circulated letters from distant missionaries. Later we published catechisms, textbooks, and journals.

America, the magazine where I’m editor, was founded almost 100 years ago, before radio or television. Today we are on the internet at americamagazine.org, where the magazine can be read anywhere in the world (sadly it’s not free because we still have to pay bills.) Each medium has its own unique characteristics that shape the message we try to convey.

Q How are Jesuits today trying to evangelize contemporary culture?

A This is one of the most serious challenges of our time. When

St. Ignatius was born, Europe was Catholic. The elites were educated in Latin, Greek, and scholastic philosophy and theology. Of the rest, only a few could read, and most of them were clergy. The clergy had a tremendous impact on culture. Ignatius saw this unified Catholic culture begin to collapse with the Protestant Reformation.

Today it’s gone. We live in a multi-cultural, multi-religious world where many of the laity are better educated than the clergy. Contemporary culture is driven and shaped by the media-entertainment industry, which is ruled by giants like AOL Time Warner, Disney, Fox, *The New York Times*, Hollywood, and so forth. There are few Jesuits in this work. Graduates of Jesuit schools are there, but do they bring distinctive values to their work?

This is not to say there’s nothing good in contemporary culture, but there are also many things that need challenging by Gospel values, including our culture’s attitude toward those who can’t compete in the marketplace. “Evangelization” and “solidarity with the poor” are not two distinct ministries, because an important part of the Gospel message is solidarity with the poor. In their times, our Jesuit forebears were incredibly creative and successful in their ministries. Today, Jesuits, along with their colleagues and partners, must be the same. ■

