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Respect for the Person: Saving the Proposition of the Other

Friends: I'd like, first, to thank, first, Dr. Donald Wells for the invitation to speak to this very distinguished group, the Massachusetts Bible Society. I feel it a great privilege

Looking for a theme, I was tempted to go through a favorite directly biblical theme that has had me preoccupied for many years, the very frequent texts that run all through the Hebrew Bible and the n keep coming up throughout the Gospels and other parts of the New Testament: the "Do Not Fear" texts – "Do not fear, take courage, for I am with you."

But I thought that instead, as a Jesuit asked before this company, I should give you something a bit more derivative from Bible teachings, yet something particularly Jesuit. This is a page of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius Loyola, an introductory page called the "*Praesupponendum*," the "Presupposition" for the exercises. When I identify myself as a Jesuit I have always hoped this might in fact be the most Jesuit thing about me.

Let me explain about that. Ignatius, our Jesuit founder back in the 16th century, was a soldier, wounded in the Battle of Pamplona, a minor skirmish along the Spanish-French frontier in the Basque country. He was vain enough so that, when his broken leg was badly set, he had it broken again and reset, all done in those days without anesthetic. Recuperating at his family's castle, he read the lives of the saints and determined to find his way to conversion in imitation of them – a kind of evangelical project. Once recovered, he went to the monastery of Montserrat in the Pyrenees, where he left his weapons and armor before the altar, consecrating his life to God. From there, he went on

to a cave at Manresa, along the River Cardoner, where he remained ten months as a hermit, reflecting on his life and how he could lead it as a following of Christ.

By the time he emerged, he had shaped his notes into the book we call the *Spiritual Exercises*, not the sort of book you pick up and read through but rather a series of directions for exercises of prayer and contemplation designed to help the exercitant to decide on a way of life in imitation of Christ. Ignatius had only a soldier's education at this time, no Latin even – how could anyone manage without that? – and began, as he made his way through Spanish universities and then the University of Paris, to guide others through a course of these exercises, so that they could make their own decisions about their lives. Because he was not a trained theologian at this stage, his work attracted the dangerous and suspicious attention of the Inquisition.

At the very beginning of Ignatius' book, he has this remarkable page, a Presupposition to the Exercises. It reads:

To assure better cooperation between the one who is giving the Exercises and the one who receives them, and more beneficial results to both, it is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to save the proposition of another than to condemn it as false. If he is unable to save the proposition, the one who made it should be asked how he understands it, and if he understands it badly, it should be discussed with him with love. If this does not suffice, all appropriate means should be used so that, understanding his proposition rightly, he may save it.

This short paragraph has been put through many processes of translation. The original was in Ignatius' rough local vernacular Spanish. It was rendered into Latin and into a more literary Spanish and eventually into numerous other languages, those more often translated from the Latin or from the more elegant Spanish than from the original. The paragraph scandalized many editors of the *Spiritual Exercises* to such an extent that it was left out of several editions, and when it was retained the final sentence was often

translated to mean that the one giving the Exercises should argue the case with the exercitant so as to win the argument and make him abandon his proposition. Not so the original, in which Ignatius is still, even at that stage, arguing that he should be helped *to save* his proposition, not to abandon it.

The essential question in all this is: Whom shall I exclude from my moral community? You see the radicalism of Ignatius' procedure. At one time I used to carry this text about, copied out by hand in the original rough Spanish, as Ignatius wrote it, in a diary/date-book which I carried about in my pocket, until I ripped out the page to give it to a close associate of the great Lebanese Shi'ite Imam Musa al-Sadr, the Ghandi-like figure who had founded a Movement for the Dispossessed of all creeds in Lebanon and was most universal in his dialogue with all creeds, Christian and Muslim, an ever radical voice of peace. Musa, by the time I met his associate, holy man that he was, had already been "disappeared" in Colonel Khadafi's Libya, surely killed, but his Shi'ite followers in Lebanon, used to the idea of vanishing Imams who would return, sought in every way to plead with Libya for his release. I found that his spirit closely matched what I had learned from the Ignatian *Praesupponendum*.

You note that this is not simply a proposal of Christian charity in our discourse. It is a theory of knowledge, applicable to all, specific to the Christian only insofar as it is a practical living-out, in its openness to the other, of Christian faith. If I am to win all the arguments, know it all beforehand, my mind has already shut down. The proposition of the other, of course, refers to what is truly important in the other's perception, experience, conviction. It is not as if there were no truth criterion. If I am to learn, I must approach the other's proposition with openness. Winning an argument will get me nowhere and I will lose the light that the other's perception could give me. But the other will learn also, coming to an understanding of his own proposition that will enrich it and lead deeper into truth. I raise this matter often in connection with the quest for orthodoxy, faithfulness in teaching, but this is a very different concept of orthodoxy than being equipped with unshakeable certainties at every point.

I said that I find, in this Presupposition to the Ignatian Exercises, the most Jesuit thing by which I would like to define myself. We Jesuits are often seen as people who win arguments, who have an answer to everything, whose objective is to turn people away from their own “propositions” to ours. But that is the very opposite to what Ignatius proposes here. There is a bit of the “Don’t, please, turn me over to the Inquisition, at least until you’ve thought about this some more.” But at its root there is a way of life.

I’ve read, recently, John Paul Lederach’s book on *The Moral Imagination*, what he called, in his subtitle, *The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. I found that he discovered himself writing in a very personal, experiential way, what he called an “*inductive learning*.” I will do something analogous to that here.

When I first joined the Jesuits – it was in 1949, on my eighteenth birthday – we were a very authoritarian church, very sure of everything. My great concern then was with the formidable Jesuit teaching on obedience. I challenged it directly, knowing I had to be responsible for my own life, and my wary Novice Master gave me astonishingly patient help over many months to discover how to keep both these commitments, something quite outside his own life experience. Investing great difficulty on his own part, he heard my proposition.

I learned that beneath the one big umbrella of the Catholicism of that time there was everything from Far Right to Far Left, and I learned how to address it all: always with deference, not in the in-your-face manner of the ’60s. Years later, when I went to Union Theological in New York, I found that Union could be a very happy Union so long as it was run by a good liberal Presbyterian. Episcopalians were all right, though it seemed quite a risk to install an Episcopalian bishop as President while I was there. The weren’t then like EDS now. Lutherans were a problem. Many Union people found it difficult to talk to them, and they could not speak to Baptists at all. But I could, having met them all, and conversed respectfully with them all during the ice-age of Catholicism.

This had already stood me in good stead during five years teaching in Jamaica, where I had become closely involved with Rastafarians. They were, in the '60s, altogether a scapegoat people, despised and blamed for everything. They hadn't yet invented Reggae or made any money.

I had my first encounter with a Rasta-Man when crossing a downtown park in Kingston. I heard a voice intoning: "Woe to you who scatter the sheep of my people." It came from a man with ample dreadlocks seated on a bench, and thinking that a pretty good conversational opening I sat down beside him. His next words were: "White man must go, blood must flow." We talked for a matter of hours and I was thoroughly inducted into Rastafarian lore. As we parted, by now good friends, he told me, in religious language we have all heard before, how sorry he was that, while he was in life, I was in death.

I went on about my business, and by the time I came out I am sure there had been some talk around the street. As I walked along another Rastafarian came around the corner, pointed at me from close quarters and said: "Death!" I knew where we were in the conversation from the earlier exchange, so we went back to the same park bench and talked for quite some time further. That encounter, maintained then through regular contacts, enabled me some months later, when the Rastas met a terrible catastrophe, thousands of them abruptly expelled from Kingston, to follow them to where they were scattered all over the island, many of them starving, and organize help with their needs for subsistence.

I hope you are connecting this with the Ignatian *Praesupponendum* and the imperative of hearing and saving the other's proposition. These were preliminary experiences that prepared me for heavier conflict situations to come.

In 1972 I went, as part of a mixed group of 17 Protestant and Catholic theology students, to Northern Ireland, which had come to look like the 17th century. We did work projects in the community, I carrying hod on the building site where whole streets of row

houses had been burned out in the rioting of the previous summer. I thought I was going for a summer, but quickly became involved in mediation and peace-building projects that I could not walk away from for the next nine years. Circumstances dictated that I could not be resident in Belfast, so I lived in London, linking up with a gifted Austrian Jewish Holocaust refugee, Richard Hauser, who himself worked constantly at such tasks in a variety of conflicts world-wide. Richard had married Hephzibah Menuhin, Yehudi Menuhin's pianist sister who toured the continents with him. But Hephzibah treated her music as her recreation while her work was what she did with Richard and myself. We made a colorful trio.

I spent a week to two weeks of every month of those next nine years in Belfast, working the rest of the time, from London, with conflicts in the then Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola, in the Middle East with Israelis and Palestinians, with Lebanese of every confessional variety, with the Kurds of Iraq, with the East Timorese suffering Indonesian invasion; with India as Indira Ghandi launched her "Emergency" campaign against all her enemies, during which time we had George Fernandez, her chief labor union opponent, as our house guest in London. Later, as Mrs. Ghandi brought her "Emergency" to an end, she asked us ourselves to advise her. We worked with the Soviet Union and its dissidents and its Jewish emigrants on their way to Israel; with South Africa and the process of Rhodesia becoming Zimbabwe. And we were deeply into prison reform in Britain, elderly care, crisis schools, care of battered women and an array of other social problems.

All this time I came to understand what I was doing as basically a task of interpretation, trying to decipher what was going on in these conflicts. No one can attempt to do that on his own without flagrant presumption. Necessarily it involved respectful conversation with every faction. I found that people in conflicts detest the fact that they are isolated from one another, and wish to understand what makes the other side tick. They welcome a process of interpretation that involves the others, and their participation in such a process, even at second hand, often leads to their being able to communicate directly with one another.

From the start, in Northern Ireland, I made the assumption that I was not meeting psychopaths, but people who had resolved, at great personal risk, to serve the interests of their own community. I tended never to agree with their conclusion that violence was the necessary or an acceptable answer to their problems, but I found I had to respect their dignity as persons and, normally, the integrity of their commitment. In later years some did yield to the psychopaths, some became thieves, predators on their own community, but initially this was not so.

I worked to build up a network of community associations across Belfast, somewhat in the manner of Saul Alinski. Belfast people, Catholic and Protestant, were much like disempowered communities elsewhere, isolated from their fellows, people that things happened to. I looked to empower them to take charge of their society, confident that their militants, who until then had been the only ones to define the communities' interests, and that only in the matter of their military security, would respect their communities' decisions about their wider interests, and support them. The community associations brought also a disciplinary power to the community, to ensure that their militants didn't themselves violate their interests, and that was one of my main concerns.

Leaders of the Loyalist militant associations, I found, prefaced every conversation with acknowledgment that they had done terrible things, and with their desire to find non-violent alternatives. The IRA, Catholic boys, were very anxious to believe they were engaged in the Just War, and it grieved them always that I would not accept this. My view, always expressed plainly to them, was that they were not planning a society that Protestants could live in, and they would not be working for justice until they did so.

In later years, after mediating through a six-weeks stretch of the 1981 hunger strike between the IRA's Army Council and the Northern Ireland Office, I held sessions, which we dignified with the name seminars, in the H-Blocks of all stripes of militant prisoners in the Long Kesh Prison, the Maze, arguing always that neither side of that quarrel would have a life until they learned to accommodate one another. I was back in

the United States by then, and kept traveling back to Ulster for these sessions. My mantra was that they should all become the guarantors of one another's difference. Decisions on this score had to be made by the militant leadership outside the prison, but the thinking was done inside and it was the militant groups who actually initiated what we since call the Northern Ireland Peace Process, beginning with their cease-fire decisions of 1994. You know the difficulties that have dogged that process over recent years. They arose from those, regarding themselves as the righteous who had never taken to the gun. For a long time they not learned that accommodation was now the name of the game, but still believed they should have a victory over those whom they regarded as evil forces, until just this last week they finally arrived at the miraculous scenes of community reconciliation that we have witnessed in Belfast.

For me, it became normative that any time I was not speaking to whoever was the greatest problem in a conflict, I simply was not speaking to the right people. That brought me by 1982, after I had returned to the United States, to every faction and confessional group in the Lebanon conflict, and by 1985 to the principal leadership of Israelis, Palestinians and Americans in the Mideast conflict. The essential work was still interpretation. I found that I explained what I saw happening, still in conversation with all the participants, in different language than they were accustomed to, and that this opened up not only new understanding but also a menu of options which they might otherwise not have seen. It was not for me to make decisions for them, but the uncovering of these multiple options, alternatives to violence, gave people choices to make.

This was the case for Yasser Arafat, deciding to recognize the legitimacy of the state of Israel and its society and leading his people to seek a Palestinian state alongside Israel, with which they would live in peace. It was the case for Yitzhak Rabin, who saw that the PLO was indeed the chosen representative of the Palestinian people, with whom he must deal if he were to make peace with them. We all know the disappointments that have come to both peoples as they have sought to implement these decisions, but the recognition of one another's legitimacy as peoples and their need to reconcile lives on.

Over this last year and more, as the Hamas party has come to the fore, my largest endeavor has been to open communication with them, discuss the new non-violent options that their election has opened to them and the unexpected responsibilities to which they have fallen heir. Last summer I went, with Reverend Jesse Jackson, with whom I have traveled before, to meet Khalid Mish'al, the central leader of Hamas, to verify my expectation that these are the people who, eventually, will make the peace with Israel.

The basic lesson and the motivating force of all this is that the other, and the other's proposition, must be treated with full respect, the utmost effort to hear the other's needs and aspirations clearly and to save the other's proposition. To be genuinely the friend of one party to a conflict need never mean that you become the enemy of the other. In fact, when any of us outsiders becomes the partisan of either or any side of a conflict, we are surplus baggage for the real participants and sufferers. Rather than that, it is our task to be respecters of all and partisans of the peace.

This should never mean that we condone or connive at injustice, or make believe we do not see the injustices that we really do see. The interpretative process must throw light on these, and make it possible for the perpetrators and oppressors to recognize what is happening and seek ways of justice and reconciliation with their victims.

There is an inter-religious component to this as well, and for me it is also one to be met with the priority: save the proposition of the other. In Jews, I know I meet the heirs to a Covenant to which God remains forever faithful. In Muslims, I meet a people of monotheistic faith, who respond as we Christians and the Jews do to the knowledge that God is with us and that we can always rely on his care. I simply know less of the farther-Eastern religions, but am sure that I should credit people of faith with an openness to the work of God and seek to find where it is.

We find constantly the suspicion that religion is a fomenter of conflict and violence, expressed often in the form that we would be better off without it. Religion

easily becomes prey to a kind of hijacking, an abuse by others who use religion for purposes that have nothing to do with the agenda of faith. Very generally, we all see our religious affiliation as a badge of our identity. When identity takes priority over faith itself, or becomes false object of faith and an instrument for excluding those who do not belong to our club, it is indeed the generator of wars and hatred. When, in the course of administering the necessary institutional dimensions of religious communities, we come to regard conformity to the direction of our religious leaders as the essence of our duty, we have substituted a false object of faith for genuine faith in God, and made religion merely an instrument of power. Religion can become an instrument of terror when it is transformed into a dualism, that sees the world not as the work of God, who saves us, but as the uncertain battleground of opposing forces of good and evil in which we must devote our lives to the discovery and destruction of enemies.

What we need in these all too frequent cases, I am convinced, is a deepening of faith rather than a rejection of it, a realization of its true reconciling character. We have stunning witness to this in the work and the writings of Rabbi Marc Gopin, as seen in his books: *Between Eden and Armageddon*, and *Holy War, Holy Peace*. Marc, working for peace in many places but especially concerned with the Israel-Palestinian Middle East, recognizes that the religious people, Jewish and Muslim, find themselves excluded from the process of seeking peace by professional peace-builders who are predominantly secular and regard religion as a force for violence and wreckage. He seeks out the religious actors, often in fact the militants of either side, and appeals to them in their own religious language, which in fact does harbor the deepest motives for peace.

I find it necessary for me not to believe in evil people, that people can be evil at core, despite all the evidence of evil actions. I have become accustomed, in many places, in many situations of violent conflict, to meeting the perpetrators of the darkest deeds. How am I to deal with them, as enemy or as potential ally against the evil in their own deeds? Here is the example of the choice of Saul of Tarsus as Apostle to the Gentiles, the choice of Peter, so consciously the sinner, who when converted is called to strengthen his brethren.

The wisdom, then, of that principle, most fitting for the Christian, most fitting in fact for every person, to save the proposition of the other, to strive mightily in our relation to the other to save that proposition rather than to crush it and crush the person who holds it, stands as a measure of the moral imagination. When the other's proposition is falsely understood, even by himself, we work strenuously that, understanding it rightly, he may save it.