A History of Recent Commitment to Justice at Loyola University Maryland

*by June Ellis, Ph.D.*

*Professor of English and Chair of Loyola’s Commitment to Justice Committee*



Loyola’s Commitment to Justice committee was founded in the year 2000, charged with helping implement Jesuit justice ideals.

To help make the Jesuit justice mission even more vital at Loyola, among other initiatives, we:

* Sponsored a series of campus-wide discussions and

talks, focusing on the Reverend Peter-Hans Kolven- bach’s “Service of Faith and Promotion of Justice in

U.S. Jesuit Higher Education.” For the discussions, we invited people to identify ways they could con- tribute to justice in their daily work. For the talks, we invited speakers from across campus to share ways they were already “doing justice” at Loyola.

* Conducted two campus-wide self-studies of justice initiatives
* Founded the Kolvenbach Summer Research Grants
* Founded the Kolvenbach Research Fellows program
* Published three editions of the book *Commitment to*

*Justice in Jesuit Higher Education*, including the pres- ent one focused on how we, as individuals and as a community, can strengthen justice in all of our ac- tivities.

* + Founded Loyola’s signature justice speaker series. We work to integrate this high-profile talk into a year- long series of events, partnering with offices and pro- grams such as Messina, Common Text, the Martin Luther King Convocation, the Diversity Reading Groups, the Environmental Studies program, to pro- vide breadth and depth of discussion, understanding, and action.

All of these activities and initiatives are dedicated to helping deepen understanding of justice, inviting all to participate in the conversation and in self-transformation that arises from this deeper understanding. This approach presents justice as intrinsic to academic excellence and to Loyola’s Jesuit tradition and identity.

A few reflections about the foundations of this justice commitment at Loyola: Justice at Loyola, as at any Jesuit institution, is built into the fabric of what we are and what we do. A Jesuit emphasis on justice goes all the way back to the beginning of the order, when Ignatius of Loyola and six of his friends chose to walk a pathway of service and joy. They responded to the urgent needs of the world in a spirit of exuberance and gladness.

Ignatius shares a sense of joyful urgency – a desire to help foster personal liberation and wholeness for every human being. He taught the practice of discernment and inner clarity to high society people and to street people, to men and to women. He taught that everyone could find a direct

connection to their deepest humanity and their own integrity, and that when they did, they would be able to act in freedom, without bias, for the highest good of all, including themselves. A story illustrates the way that Ignatius saw keenly the humanity of everyone he met. One day he was traveling along in his finery, before he had completely walked away from his aristocratic upbringing, and he came upon a man who was seeking alms. A beggar, we would call such a man today. And Ignatius saw the inner light of the alms-seeker so clearly, saw that the man was not less human than he. Ignatius saw that there was no reason for him to maintain his privilege, in the face of this greater need. In the face of pure humanity, Ignatius started feeling overdressed. And so Ignatius asked the man to

do Ignatius the favor of trading clothes with him.

Ignatius walked away in the beggar’s clothes. The beggar walked away wearing finery. The police apprehended the beggar, accusing him of theft. Ignatius corrected the misimpression, saying the man had given Ignatius a great gift by freely exchanging clothes with him.

The story tells us something that is at the heart of the Jesuit tradition: we become fully human, fully alive, only in relationship to one another. No human being is loved more by God than any other human being, and no one is loved less. All are equal when we see the divine in all. Seeing God in all things is not a slogan. It is at the heart of Jesuit institutions. Jesuit institutions do not exist apart from this love in action. They do not exist, absent justice. Justice is not optional, and it is not peripheral. It is Jesuit, intrinsically so.

So what is Loyola doing to help foster this understanding? The initiatives are many, and of high quality. When Loyola

conducted an Institutional Examen in 2011-2012, we found that across campus, offices, programs, and departments in all areas of the university are committed to helping carry forth this vision and make it even more vital, more alive. We are never done living up to and expanding our ability to share this high ideal.

In the year 2000, the Reverend Peter-Hans Kolvenbach,

S.J. (then Superior-General of the Jesuits) called upon all

U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities to help Ignatian justice shine at their institutions and everywhere they served: locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. Twelve years later, checking in on our progress, the Institutional Examen indicated a shift in the culture at Loyola – a broad and deep understanding that justice is not an add-on. It is not something we do that is separate from our daily work, no matter what that daily work is.

Loyola’s Commitment to Justice Committee was founded as a result of Fr. Kolvenbach’s call. In the year 2000, we fostered a series of campus-wide dialogues and talks to promote understanding of Fr. Kolvenbach’s call. Many will be profoundly familiar with that inspiring talk, “Commitment to Faith and Promotion of Justice in U.S. Jesuit Higher Education.” One of the first things that emerged from this talk is the recognition that we are all invited to “do” justice – no matter what our work or job description – and we can all contribute to justice in our every encounter with every human being on campus and in the world. This approach to justice calls us to constant self-examination, so that we become aware of our thoughts, words, and deeds, and the ways we are constantly affecting others.

Every one of us is invited to live justice, and to continue learning and transforming ourselves so that we think, speak, and act in ever more just ways. If we all make this commitment, it will be impossible not to transform any unjust structures or thinking or language that we encounter. The contrast between our justice orientation and the structural injustice or language will become so clear that it will require that we unlearn any unjust ways we have learned, and create just ways – that we dismantle any unjust systems, and create just systems.

Students understand this approach, with great clarity. One student, writing on a mid-semester exam, declared, “If we can imagine a more just way, we can create it – it has the capacity to become reality.” The statement offers a wonderful reminder that we may always continue to learn from and with our students, who understand that the way things are is not the way they have to be. Another student, defining what Jesuit education is, proclaimed, “Dare to be a student forever, and for a higher purpose.” Ignatius and the Jesuits model this constant learning and self-transformation, this recognition that we are never done with living justice.

The Kolvenbach Summer Research Grants were directly inspired by the 2000 Kolvenbach talk. The grants offer a brilliant opportunity to produce publishable research for the student (graduate or undergraduate) or faculty member who obtains one. Community organizations – and the people they serve – also benefit immensely. For instance, in her letter assessing Christian von Thomsen’s research, Lin Romano writes, “GEDCO operates several housing and service programs in the Govans area, and Christian’s work could impact upon literally thousands of the people we reach each

year.” That’s the effect of a single student. That’s why Jesuits focus on education: one student who is transformed by contact with reality may contribute to ongoing transformation, in ways we cannot possibly anticipate.

Every year the grant recipients present the results of their work at a dinner at Loyola, thereby helping foster academic community and culture. The community partners also speak at the dinner. These presentations offer fascinating research findings, and sometimes quite moving human results. The director of a group devoted to assisting victims of torture and trauma attested that the research results achieved by Miriam Gerber would enable them to apply for substantial funding by grant agencies. The needs of the clients they serve had been so pressing that the agency didn’t have time to pursue such research; Gerber’s study revealed how successful their work was. These statistically significant results, the director reported, will yield grants and in turn enable them to help many more people.

Over the years, other agencies who have worked as partners with Loyola researchers include Archbishop Borders School, Baltimore Homeless Youth Initiative, Beans and Bread, Caroline Center (job training), Epiphany House (senior citizens), and Mother Mary Lange School. After seeing several years of such substantive research, truly of service to all involved, the Loyola Jesuit Community, with great generosity, provided a $250,000 endowment to ensure continuation of the Kolvenbach Summer Research Grants.

The Kolvenbach Fellows Program was also directly inspired by the 2000 Kolvenbach talk, and make possible socially engaged research that helps galvanize our institution’s

commitment to justice. That program, too, fosters research that is of mutual benefit to the faculty member and the community partner or agency where the research occurs. The Council of Academic Deans also supported and helped make possible Loyola’s signature justice speaker series. In 2014, the justice speaker series focused on “Racial Justice: Beyond Rhetoric.” The program began at 7 pm and ended at 8:30. At 9:00 pm, students were still in the room, talking eagerly. In 2015, the speaker series focused on “Migration Justice: Beyond Rhetoric.” Students (and faculty and administrators) who attended mentioned that they were in tears, so moved were they. These responses indicate a great hunger for justice

– a deep recognition of the joyful urgency that is at the heart of Jesuit institutions.

Every one of us at Loyola is invited to do justice – to let justice be the way we think, speak, and act, every day, in the most humble and the most grand works that we are privileged to be able to carry forth. Every one of us is affected intrinsically by our decisions to turn toward justice or to turn away. Justice begins with each of us, and it benefits all of us. So justice is not just about adding even more of the excellent programs that are a hallmark of Loyola, and it is not just about improving our existing approaches. It is about asking, daily, “How am I being just, in my every thought, word, and deed? Am I contributing to justice or injustice in the ways I am treating every person I meet?” It is about understanding that justice is a way of being. If we get in touch with that way of being, our next steps forward, to ever greater justice, will be clear and will arise from a shared understanding and inspiration.