

Towards a Culture of Vocations in UNIJES



The Vocational Culture Project aims to offer a response to The Universal Apostolic Preferences in the context of the Jesuit Universities in Spain. This article examines the tradition of Ignatian pedagogy to identify the overarching aspects which inspire the new UNIJES Project and considers how this Project proposes to respond to the Third Apostolic Preference.



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Introduction

During Holy Week in 2018, I had the opportunity to share a long walk with a young ignatian woman who had attended Jesuit schools all her life. At this point, she was in the middle of her university studies at one of the Jesuit universities in Spain and it was not the first time that she reserved part of her spring break to celebrate Easter with her faith community instead of going on a trip like so many of her classmates. In short, she was a young woman, well formed by the Jesuits in academics and spiritually. Even so, her perspective on her education as well as the relationship between her future profession and her faith surprised me a lot and I still find myself reflecting on it occasionally.

After almost an hour of chatting and walking together, I tried to dig a little deeper by asking: “So tell me, if tomorrow you won the lottery and didn't have to work for a living, what would you do with your time? What excites you or gets you out of bed every morning?” She took a long time to answer me but finally, she said “I don't know, really. I would love to travel, take photos, and write a blog about my journey.” A fairly common answer in my experience but I did not want to leave the conversation there. “So what do these dreams have to do with your studies?” I asked. Here the response was faster. Without giving herself time to breath, much less to think about it, she replied “They have nothing to do with it! I'm studying my major to get a good job!” What was left unsaid in this conversation lays at the heart of the Culture of Vocations Project; the future work of this young woman does not affect her dreams beyond what she can earn in her professional career.

Perhaps it could be said that this conclusion is a bit exaggerated — although the conversation is real — but this example underlines a major question for the Universities of the Society of Jesus in Spain (hereinafter UNIJES) Are we educating people who live their studies and their future professions as part of a vocation inspired by their faith? Do the universities of the Jesuits foster personal and



professional vocations or are they simply gateways to lucrative careers? How can we form “men and women for others” who finish their university years more competent, conscious, compassionate, and committed? The UNIJES Culture of Vocations Project proposes a new answer to these questions and invites the entire educational community to engage with the mission of the Society in the 21st century.

Over the past few years, the UNIJES Pastoral team has reflected on several substantive issues, including those I presented in the previous section, and considered the role that its proposals have in the formation of “people with and for others.” On the one hand, the team offers activities based on ignatian spirituality which invite students to live their studies and their future professions from a deep and personal vocation. However, on the other hand, this vision stands in contrast with a society that seems to value professional success above everything else. This discrepancy separates the integral, personal and spiritual formation that UNIJES wants to propose from the studies and future professions that students have on their horizons. Although the young people of UNIJES participate in volunteering, spiritual retreats and formations that invite them to deepen their personal vocation, professional and academic success still dominates their lives.



In the best-case scenarios, these two realities can align and lead a young person to an inspired professional vocation. However, the most common result is that the tension between a personal and spiritual vocation and professional success increases throughout their university years. As a result, young people will either choose between these two visions, or they will continue to live both separately. This dynamic surprised me during that Easter retreat in 2018 but both my personal experience and that of the members of the UNIJES Pastoral team reaffirm its relevance each year.

In spring of 2019, the Pastoral team received two important impulses that helped them formulate a new response to this dynamic. First, the Society of Jesus, on a global level, published its Universal Apostolic Preferences. Second, the Province of Spain defined its Apostolic Project, identifying ten fundamental options for its mission in the next six years. In response to these two documents, the UNIJES Pastoral team proposed a new vision for their activities within the universities: the Vocational Culture Project (“Proyec-

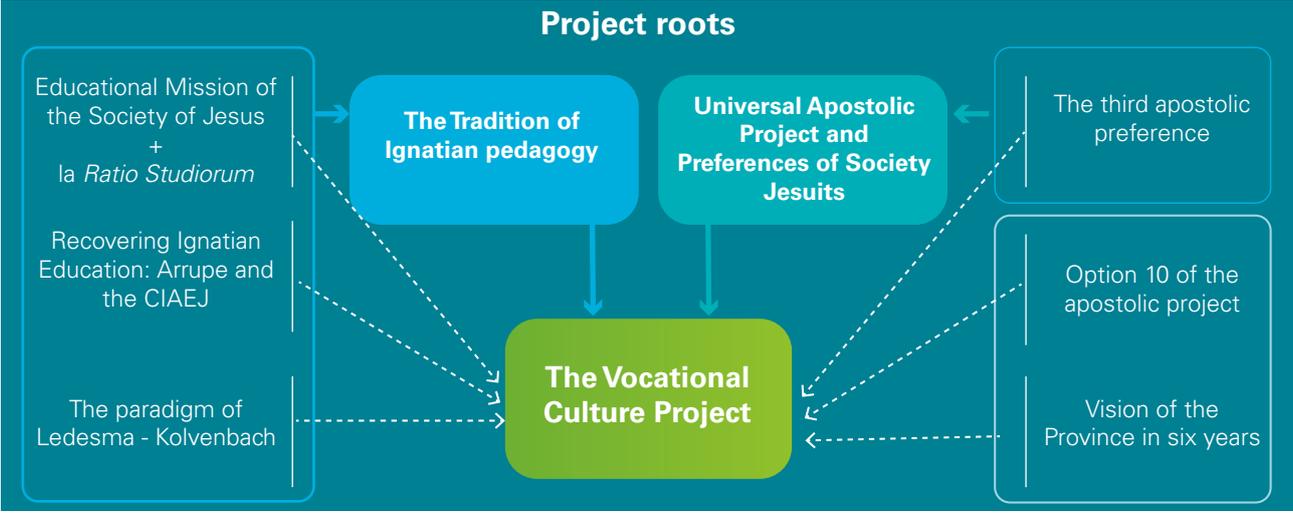
to de Cultura Vocacional” in Spanish — hereinafter PVC or Project).

What is the Vocational Culture Project?

Ideally, it would be possible to offer a clear and concise answer that defines the PCV with precision, but the project is still adapting and growing in the different universities around Spain. Since the PCV was limited by the COVID crisis during these first few years, there is still quite a bit of ambiguity about its exact dimensions. However, the first documents and articles about this project give us some clues about its goals and mission within the universities.

To begin with, as mentioned before, this new project was first designed by the UNIJES Pastoral team, and its proposals seek to invite the entire educational community of the universities to strengthen the relationship between academic studies and personal vocations. The team indicates that there are three objectives for this new project: “To help our young university students to search for, find and develop their vocation, from the professional to the existential. Transmit the Christian faith as part of the UNIJES mission. Offer opportunities to promote, engage with and appreciate the religious vocation to the Society of Jesus and other specific vocations” (UNIJES Pastoral Team, 2020).

The new Project hopes to respond to these ambitious objectives through proposals such as workshops, small group meetings, spiritual exercises, service experiences, university identity classes and spaces to publicize and value the religious life. These proposals may vary according to the needs or specificities of each university center, but they are generally grouped into three phases of vocational development: connecting with one’s vocation, situating one’s professional life relationship with one’s faith, and cultivating a relationship with God and a dialogue about vocations. In its entirety, the vision that the team wants to propose is one of a formative trajectory that promotes the



integration of faith and personal vocation in one’s academic education.

Beyond these concrete objectives and proposals, the true vision and mission of this project can be better understood if we consider its roots and inspirations. Although there are many, what seems most pertinent in this phase of development is the relationship that this project has with the Universal Apostolic Preferences and its connection with the tradition of ignatian education.

The PCV as a Response to Universal Apostolic Preferences

The Universal Apostolic Preferences are an invitation to all Jesuits and the people who collaborate in their apostolic mission, to open ourselves to “the winds of ecclesial renewal” and to participate in the reorientation of their works towards this new horizon. Fr. General Arturo Sosa SJ explains this invitation by saying “the Universal Apostolic Preferences aim to deepen such processes of personal, community and institutional conversion. They are guidelines for improving the apostolic work of the whole body of the Society and the way we carry out our ministries in which they will take shape.”

With the PCV, the UNIJES Pastoral team wants to respond to this challenge and, in particular, to the third apostolic preference: “journeying with youth.” From this perspective it is easier to understand that the PCV is not a new proposal for the sake of renewing the pastoral programs in these universities but is rather a spe-

cific response to the new preferences of the entire Society of Jesus. This vision underlines the importance of the engagement of the entire educational community with this new Project since it is part of the overall answer that UNIJES is developing in response to this new horizon.

Going a little deeper, the elaboration of this preference gives some guidelines about how we ought to journey with young people, which can be of help for this new Project. The Society of Jesus is not asking that its works develop more pastoral programs for young people but, rather, it invites a transformation of the way that the society interacts with young people, inviting them to participate actively in the mission of the Jesuits. In this sense, it seems to me that there are three clarifications about this preference that can help to understand the vision of the PCV and its role in the UNIJES centers.

First, the preference wants to give the floor to young people and asks that the Jesuits and their works stand with them in their journey. This preference does not speak of “guiding” or “caring” for young people but of accompanying them. “It is young people, with their perspective, who can help us better understand the change of epoch we are experiencing and its hopeful novelty.”

Second, university ministry offers young people different tools of reflection and prayer that facilitate personal and vocational growth; it invites young people to deepen their discernment and creates spaces for prayer and reflection that facilitate these processes. Both the PCV and the third Apostolic Preference speak spe-



cifically about the importance of creating these spaces.

Finally, the presentation of the Universal Apostolic Preferences specifies that educational works have an important role in the transmission of the faith because of their connection to young people. "We ask our schools, our universities and those who work in parishes to help in the faith development of young people and creatively adapt the Spiritual Exercises so that young people can personally know Jesus in ever deeper ways and follow Him more closely." This vision is reflected in another important element of the PCV. The project speaks of a long journey that UNIJES students can live during their university years; starting with a first invitation to consider their vocation, professional or religious, and leading towards the full integration of one's faith and studies. This path also passes, in the best of cases, through the spiritual exercises, a key element of the proposal that the PCV makes for the Universities.

This understanding of the third Apostolic Preference connects and situates the PCV in the current context of the So-

ciety of Jesus and orients it towards the horizon that the Society has envisioned. However, neither these Preferences nor this new project are born out of thin air. Almost 500 years of tradition and history give meaning and mission to the works of ignatian education. This tradition inspires and invites us to be part, each in his or her own way, of its continued development.

The roots of the Vocational Culture Project

This ignatian tradition is clearly present in the drafting and presentation of the PCV. In their articles and internal documents, the team references some of the deepest roots of ignatian education. From the Ratio Studiorum to the speeches of Fr. General Peter Hans Kolvenbach SJ, it is possible to identify several elements that connect to the development of the PCV. Of all these roots, there are three which I consider to be particularly important to understanding and grounding this project.

First, since the original letters establishing the first educational works of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits have always

insisted that these works respond to an apostolic mission and must be oriented towards the transformation of society through education. In the words of Juan Alfonso de Polanco SJ, secretary of St. Ignatius of Loyola, educational works should form “good priests, good officials and administrators of justice and good citizens of all social conditions for the benefit and example of all others.”

Second, ignatian education has always sought the formation of the whole person, not just his or her academic education. This point is especially evident in the reflections of the International Commission of Apostolate in Jesuit Education (ICAJE) of the 80s where it was expressed that the goal of the educational works of the Society is the growth of the whole person, which leads to action, an action soaked in the spirit and presence of Jesus Christ.

Finally, we ought to consider the Ledesma-Kolvenbach Paradigm, which is often reduced to the famous four C’s, and which collects these two visions and expresses them as a new horizon for modern ignatian education. “Men and women of competence, conscience and compassionate commitment” is a phrase so recognizable that most students of the Jesuits can repeat it, and yet in universities in Spain it is less common. This means that one of the great challenges of the PCV to introduce this vision of ignatian education into the discourse within the universities.



We have been talking about

Ignatian Pedagogy; Vocation; Jesuit Tradition; Universal Apostolic Preferences; Pastoral care with Young People.

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Conclusion: The challenge of a transversal PCV

I am called once again to remember the young woman who accompanied me on that Holy Week walk. The truth is that I don’t know if the proposals of the Vocational Culture Project would have helped her to see her studies in a different way. Each vocational path is different and develops at its own pace. Still, I am convinced that this new project is responding to the same tension that I saw in her. The tradition of ignatian education and the Universal Apostolic Preferences also speak about this dynamic and invite us to walk with our students in their formative years; we are called to join them in finding and living professional, personal, and spiritual vocations that respond to God’s vision for each of us.

Although the PCV is still developing, it seems to have an opportunity to be the basis for a holistic response to the main challenge of Ignatian education: How do we educate men and women for and with others, persons of competence, conscience and compassionate commitment? •



Spanish version 



For more information

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