

Collaboration as a Way of Proceeding
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Collaboration, in solidarity and generosity, as a Lifestyle

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Hello! Greetings from the unceded territory of the Algonquin-Anishinabek, here in Ottawa.

In the Book of the Prophet Malachi, it is written, “Those who feared the Lord spoke with one another, and the Lord listened and heard.” The same applies when we work together. We should not do by ourselves what we can do with others. I would like to share with you a deep transformation that the Jesuits in Canada have been experiencing with respect to collaboration.

It was the summer of 2015. The Jesuits were doing a large-scale communal discernment about our priorities. We had prepared it for almost two years. The group gathered most of the active Jesuits of the province and all the lay directors of our ministries. We spent four or five days together in prayer and in guided discussions, listening to each other and speaking with each other.

What emerged as the top priority was spirituality: using the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola in creative ways, especially adapting them to discernment in common for groups. This was not a surprise. What emerged as a second priority however, was a surprise. It was Indigenous relations.

What did that mean? Indigenous relations did not mean Indigenous ministry, which we had been doing for 400 years. It did not mean serving others who “needed” our help, serving them with something that we had but that they lacked. Instead, it meant working together as partners and equals, where both sides gave and received, learned from each other, were affected and changed by each other, where we worked together shoulder to shoulder to build the Kingdom of God. The shift from “Indigenous ministry” to “Indigenous relations” did not mean eliminating pastoral work in Indigenous communities, but it did mean that working for right relations was no longer the “job” of one ministry among many others. It meant that right relations of equality with Indigenous people should be part of all that we did, for example, in our schools, in our retreat houses, in our social justice centres. It had to be part of our way of proceeding.

But the shift in language and in commitment meant more than this. It came from an insight that, in Canada, we are our best selves, we are most Jesuit, when we are in right relations with indigenous people. This insight also meant that we needed Indigenous people in order to be truly ourselves, to be truly Jesuits in Canada. This insight was not simply about work, about what we do. It was also about our identity. It was about who we are and who we are called by God to be.

My story is not finished. At the end of the meeting an Indigenous elder rose up. She announced, “Finally I feel recognized. Finally I feel like a friend.” She had been working with us for 40 years! In other words, despite fruitful work relations, she had felt patronized by us, treated as inferior, for 40 years! Yet she did not abandon us in frustration.

She did not suddenly become a friend. **We** were the ones who changed so that she could say we were friends.

How did we change, and how are we continuing to change? We do not fully understand what this change is, but we do know that something is happening to us. The Lord is up to something.

Similar changes are happening to us in other relationships, not only with Indigenous people. Nevertheless, the most dramatic and most painful of these changes has been with them. Let me therefore explore this with you a little bit.

The stories that have been told about Jesuits, and the stories that we have told about ourselves, have presented us as protagonists. (“The true north strong and free” has a new ring to it, given what we know now). For example, we helped build the Church in Canada. We helped build the nation. We taught your parents and your grandparents. Jesuits are part of the Canadian “founding myth”. Not only are we talented, we are also good guys. We know what you need, we are sure you will agree with us, and we want to help you. You should like us, and you should even be grateful. Then two things happened: the clergy sexual abuse crisis, and Indigenous resurgence.

These two things knocked us out of the protagonist role. When the clergy sexual abuse crisis struck, we discovered that the stories we told about ourselves were not the only ones. Indigenous people had other stories about us, often very negative ones. Even Indigenous Catholics had negative stories. Their versions were not completely different from ours, but they were different enough to shock us. At first, we were angry, then we were indignant. After much struggle, we began to recognize that their stories were also true. Lawsuits were among the consequences of these stories. The lawsuits harmed, frightened and humiliated us, but more frightening still was the threat to our story, to our identity, and to how we understood ourselves and how we understood the integrity of our holiest desires and motivations. Accepting a more complete and more accurate story about us, and allowing others to tell the story with us, displaced us from the protagonists’ role.

Indigenous resurgence has also been part of our displacement. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission exposed us to the rich movements to decolonize and to reclaim Indigenous spiritual, cultural and political identities and power. The renewed self-confidence of Indigenous people and their impatience with being treated in subordinating ways, gave us partners and friends who were not afraid to challenge us treat them as equals.

We are still being displaced now, and we are still bruised by the processes of displacement. At the moment, we understand better what we are being displaced **from** than what we are being

displaced **to**. What I can say so far is that the new thing is a new form of agency, one where protagonism is not essential, and whose foundation does not rest in one agent over another, but in the relationship between them. There are new words for the process of displacement, like “decolonization”, and there are new words for the new role, like “ally” or “partner”.

As protagonism has declined, collaboration has grown –not strategic collaboration as a means to an end, or collaboration within in a power differential, from higher to lower. Rather it is a fundamental collaboration as part of identity, making identity more relational, more vulnerable, more humble, more fluid. This process of transformation has certainly been painful and confusing, but we believe it is good because we have found new relationships and new life on the other side. This new form of agency, where collaboration is fundamental, feels lighter, more spiritual. Perhaps it opens us up more to the reciprocal exchanges in the inner life of the Trinity. After all, we celebrate Pentecost tomorrow.

The Jesuits have been experiencing similar changes in our agency in other parts of our life too. For example, the way we share responsibility with lay people for our ministries demands a whole set of disciplines for collaboration, such as job descriptions, contracts and boards, while trying to animate these with our mission and charism. We have also been developing ways of thinking about our mission that are not based on priorities but rather on ways of doing things together, which we call “universal apostolic preferences”. Finally, we have been experimenting with ways of Ignatian discernment that go beyond individual spiritual life but are based rather in the collaborative spiritual life of groups. This kind of discernment, which we call discernment in common, is based on a kind of listening and speaking that is an open, non-judgmental and non-defensive collaboration.

The Lord has been disturbing our waters to transform our habits of protagonism into collaboration. Let us therefore not do by ourselves what we can do together!