



Talk Given By Howard Gray, S.J. At Hearts On Fire 2011

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If you Google the term “hearts on fire,” you are given a list of possibilities ranging from “Hearts on Fire Engagement Rings” to a terrible 1987 film starring Bob Dylan, *Hearts of Fire*, which lasted only two weeks in theaters in the UK and was not even released in US theaters. On further search you can also discover that there is a volume entitled *Hearts On Fire: A Treasury of Poems On Love*. I mention these variant uses of tonight’s theme not to trivialize it but to underscore something important in what we are celebrating this evening. We’re part of a redemptive mission tonight. We are taking a term that has beautiful resonance and challenging implications for our commitment to all JRH represents and rescuing that term from abuse or, at least, misuse. The General Superior of the Jesuits, Adolfo Nicolas, has said that one of the chief contemporary obstacles to the life of the Spirit is the distractions that flood our life. We find it difficult to sustain prayer or reflection or study because we have too many trivial competitors for our attention. The title of this evening’s event asks us to concentrate on what sets our hearts on fire, on what I like to characterize as “our non-negotiables.”

What does the title, “Hearts On Fire” say to us? First, we probably think of Luke 24:13-35, the narrative of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Discouraged and disappointed, they have separated themselves from the other disciples. The fact that Jesus was abandoned by all and crucified like a criminal that they know. Jesus was branded a loser and a failure - an assessment that, as disciples, they feel deeply and painfully. But now the rumor that Jesus is alive and walking among them, they find hard to accept and impossible to sort out. In this state of confusion they hit the road, getting as far as they can from Jerusalem and the dispirited and disorganized so-called disciples. It is with these disciples-on-the-lam that the risen Jesus chooses to walk and talk and bring new understanding. And in that magical moment of the breaking of the bread he enlightens them, opens their clouded eyes, so that they can recognize him and embrace what they had almost lost, to be with him as his disciples. And as these two now rush back to Jerusalem, the only way that they can articulate that moment of spiritual recovery is to ask one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scripture to us?”

The Emmaus event defines the mission of JRH to be a place on the road of life where women and men can pause to let the word of the Lord touch their hearts anew, to deepen their interior lives.

Or maybe JRH is a respite from the chaos and angry debates that cloud our political and religious environment, a place where people find peace. But I want to suggest that there is a further direction in what me might term “the way of JRH.” That way is the call to leadership for which personal prayer and peace of soul prepare a man or woman. The leadership I am focusing on is apostolic leadership - the kind of leadership we honor this evening in Rich Jerdonek and Joan Nuth.

In a recent doctoral study the Jesuit Karl San Juan has surveyed the various approaches towards spiritual leadership and culled from them the following list of characteristics of spiritual leadership: vision, community, and values like service, morality, faith, hope, and love. Secular models of leadership emphasize the need to be in relationship to the culture the leader will represent and the ability to respond creatively and articulately to that culture. Apostolic leadership, then, is **the ability of a man or woman to work creatively within a community to help its members articulate their vision, relate that vision to the priorities of Jesus and the Kingdom he preached, and to find ways that inspire, challenge, and mold the wider culture in which they live and work.** Let me parse this description a bit and then apply it to Ignatian spirituality.

When I say that apostolic spiritual leadership is ability, I mean that who we are and where we are constitute the realities upon which grace settles. I mean that God dwells with us and in us. When I describe that grace, that gift from above, as the empowerment to be creative to be articulate about a vision, and to relate that vision to the preaching and actions of Jesus, I am spelling out what we mean by being **Christian**. When I talk about the direction of this spiritual energy as a power that can change the present culture so that it resembles a bit more the Kingdom of peace, justice, and love that Christ intended, I am talking about being **apostolic**. JRH is about women and men discovering what the Lord calls them to do for their world to nudge it, push it, startle it, into becoming more the creation God intended, the Kingdom Christ promised, and the renewed universe the Spirit labors to bring to birth.

As an Ignatian enterprise, JRH adds to this Christian vision of a renewed creation, a realized Kingdom, and a divinely beloved universe - **a method for fulfilling this vision**. Ignatian apostolic leadership digs deeply into the soil of a woman’s or man’s soul to make each ready for great deeds and challenging projects (Week One of the Spiritual Exercises). Ignatian apostolic spirituality relates human reality to divine desires so the people can see who they are in terms of who Christ is and what priorities mark his ministry, to see their lives in terms of the wide and generous love Christ extends to all peoples, in terms of the relentless drive he has for the truth that sets the human heart free (Week Two). Ignatian

apostolic spirituality also confronts a man or woman with the reality of the Cross and the promise of the Risen Christ (Weeks Three and Four).

Through prayer and reflection the woman or man of the Exercises focuses on “What God asks of me in the one lifetime I have so that I live and die as a person who has lived for others.” That choice might be through the work of education or the work of social justice, through the home or in the factory or business office, in the courts or in the kitchen. The Kingdom is wherever people choose to live and labor in the likeness of the vision of Christ. This choice to lead within a community of believers and also within a community of doubters. For, Pope Benedict XVI reminded all who follow the Ignatian tradition, we must be at the frontiers where the Church meets the world not huddled behind some spiritual gated community where we congratulate one another on our rectitude.

Hearts On Fire is a great title for an evening that celebrates JRH because it also reminds us that when he sent Francis Xavier to the Indies, Ignatius told him to go and to set the world on fire. As inheritors of that apostolic spirituality, we remind ourselves that tonight we honor two folks who have worked to keep that fire bright and shining. We also remind ourselves that we are apostolic partners of a tradition that is enflamed by God’s inspiration but meant to be passed along to generations yet to come. The tradition is God’s ownership; we are the stewards. In that spirit, then, let’s reflect on these words written in tribute to Bishop Oscar Romero:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.*

*Nothing we do is complete,
which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.*

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church’s mission.

No set of goals and objectives include everything.

This is what we are about:

We plant seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

That enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

*It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.*

We may never see the end results,

But that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.¹

Tonight we celebrate two great Ignatian virtues: hearts of magnanimity and hearts tempered by humility. Our challenge is to do great deeds for the Kingdom but always to recall that it is more God's Kingdom than ours.

Howard Gray, S.J.

Howard Gray, S.J. serves as Assistant to the President for Special Projects at Georgetown University. He earned a bachelor's degree in English and classics, a licentiate in philosophy and a licentiate in sacred theology from Loyola University of Chicago, and a doctorate in English from the University of Wisconsin. Fr. Gray has lectured and written extensively on Ignatian spirituality, ministry and the apostolic mission of Jesuit high school and universities. He is a well-known director of Ignatian retreats in the USA, East Africa and East Asia. Fr. Gray has received five honorary degrees, the Georgetown Bicentennial Medal, the Jesuit Volunteer Corps Award and Xavier University's Leadership Medallion.

¹ This prayer was composed by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, drafted for a homily by Cardinal John Dearden in November 1979 for a celebration of departed priests. As a reflection on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Bishop Romero, Bishop Untener included in a reflection book a passage titled "The Mystery of Romero Prayer." The mystery is that the words of the prayer are attributed to Archbishop Romero because of how he lived his life for others, but were not written by him.