

**LEILA PHILIP**

**On Reflection --  
the impact of the Ignatian Study Trip**

The summer after I returned from the Ignatian Study trip, I wrote a few paragraphs about how the experience had informed my work as a writer and teacher here at Holy Cross. I commented on the concrete ways I could see that the trip had met my expectations. I *had* returned with an enlarged understanding of Catholic thought in general and Ignatian thought in particular. I *had* found myself drawn into ways of thinking about Jesuit thought that are full of possibilities in terms of approaches to the teaching of creative writing to Holy Cross students. Back at my desk, I *had* found that my engagement with questions of pilgrimage, landscape and identity were enlarged and widened as a result of all that I experienced and learned on the trip.

Now, four years later, I am struck by the vividness of memories from that trip. I remember sitting with the group at a cafe near Loyola castle. The dry musty smell of sun baked rock, laughter, sips of cold water, the tantalizing smells of fresh bread, olive oil, wine. Like the rest of the group I was exhausted after our morning of walking and looking, but I couldn't stop thinking about the large wooden crucifix that we had passed in the stone hallway. On this particular crucifix, the kneecaps were a gruesome sight, smashed and bloodied. When I looked at it I felt uneasy. The questions rose unbidden; why depict such a bloody mutilated version of Christ? This image troubled and disturbed me, seemed to magnify the huge historical gulf between what I was trying to make sense of there in Northern Spain, and the fact of my twentieth century now twenty-first century self. Yet, what I remember most about sitting outside in that cafe, drenched in sun, hungry, was the moment that I shut my eyes and saw something else about the crucifix, something I hadn't thought of before. What surprised me most was the simplicity of this thought. How could I have missed it? The smashed kneecaps on the crucifix didn't only refer to suffering; they were the artist's attempt to emphasize Christ's humanity.

For someone raised in a Catholic faith and household, this observation may seem obvious, but for someone like myself, raised Episcopalian and somewhat immune to the visual power of the crucifix, this opportunity to understand and more importantly *experience* an aspect of Catholic thought and faith differently was powerful. Later, walking on the beach that night with group members, I discovered that one member was an art historian who specialized in the iconography of crucifixes. For the rest of the trip, I made sure to catch up to him at our destinations. He had fun sharing his encyclopedic knowledge of Catholic art history with me; I couldn't believe my luck in having such an informed guide. And so it was on the trip, the sites we visited offered lessons as we traveled, but so did our fellow pilgrims. Night after night, a group of us would head out after dinner, making our way into the dark streets of whatever city we were in, strolling

and talking, re-thinking the day, laughing, sometimes arguing about what we had seen, stopping at cafes for cold drinks or wine, then walking out again. Some nights we walked for hours, passing through barrios and piazzas, exhausted but still walking and talking, then walking and just quiet, grateful for the faint night breeze and for our growing sense of companionship.

As a teacher of creative writing I am always working with students to teach them how to construct individual metaphors in order to describe things vividly. On another level, I am striving to teach them how to perceive the entire process of writing as an act of metaphor. If they are writing about a hike up a mountain for example, they need to write about the experience with an eye toward exploring the ways in which that personal experience touches upon larger themes and ideas that they want to convey. In other words, the personal experience is just the starting point and rendering that on the page without a sense of the larger story isn't enough; they need to write into the material deeply enough to begin to know what it is they want to say about that hike up the mountain, only then are they working on levels both metaphorical and narrative. This may sound easy, but in reality it is a huge lesson for students, one that involves a kind of seeing and thinking that they usually have little practice in. Only when students can begin to understand that connection and see the ways in which all writing is an act of metaphor – the attempt to capture the abstract in terms of the concrete, to describe one thing in terms of another – can they really begin to explore their capacity to write.

What I have found here at Holy Cross is that many students have more of an awareness of metaphor than they realize and much of it is intuitive, inherent in their experience with and knowledge of sacrament. As a result of participating in the Ignatian Pilgrimage trip, I find that I now have an awareness of dialogues within Ignatian thought that enable me to draw upon Catholic tradition more directly within the classroom. In other words, I now have access to the shared language (based not only upon reading but now upon experience) in which it is possible to make those connections. I can talk about these things with confidence because in addition to reading and thinking about these ideas, I was there, outside a dusty castle on a hot summer's day, experiencing the landscape of St. Ignatius.

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