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## The Circle of Insight: A Process for Deepening Ignatian Imagination and Inviting Hope

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### Abstract

Former Jesuit, educator, scholar, clinical social worker, peace and justice activist and advocate, and co-director of Seton Hall University's Catholic Social Thought (CST) in Action Academy and NYU's Post-Master's Certificate Program in Spirituality and Social Work, Dr. Anthony Nicotera shares his Circle of Insight framework as a tool for deepening Ignatian imagination and inviting hope. The Circle of Insight's See, Reflect, Act process, inspired by CST, and curated and created by Dr. Nicotera over twenty-five years of spiritual, social justice, and social work advocacy and practice, including teaching social justice courses and engaging in nonviolent civil resistance, builds on Ignatian spirituality and invites practical, imaginative movement toward realizing our deepest desires and attaining the love of God. Dr. Nicotera shares lessons learned from his time as a Jesuit novice and scholastic, his experiences working with Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and his current work leading the CST in Action Academy. In the spirit of St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, he offers a framework for prayerful practice to attain the love of God. Together the Circle of Insight and Ignatian spirituality help foster Gospel hope and love that invites liberation and an awakening from our illusion of separateness.

*"We are here to awaken from our illusion of separateness."<sup>1</sup>*

*"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."<sup>2</sup>*

*"If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."<sup>3</sup>*

*"You have given all to me. To you, O Lord, I return it. All is yours."<sup>4</sup>*

### Introduction

I have been blessed by sacred, privileged, and profound experiences that have shaped me, and helped me develop what I call the Circle of Insight, a See, Reflect, Act process for the practice of peace, justice, and transformative love. As a Jesuit volunteer in Detroit and Nicaragua, and then as a Jesuit novice and scholastic, I spent time working with persons living on the street, in shelters, and in homes that were uninhabitable. I spent time working with mothers and community members working to rebuild their country after war. I spent time in prisons. I spent time with people dying of AIDS, and in social service centers, urban schools, and parishes in Chicago

and Camden, NJ. I also studied theology, philosophy, law, and social work at Loyola University Chicago and lived and worked with Saint Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, India. Reflecting upon these experiences invited ongoing movement toward liberation and justice. My own experience, as well as my study and research of various traditions and disciplines, sacred and secular, philosophical and religious, led to my creating the Circle of Insight (Figure 1). My hope is that individuals and communities will find it to be a helpful complement to Ignatian imagination and spirituality, and a practical tool for inviting hope, and deepening commitments to the work of faith doing justice.

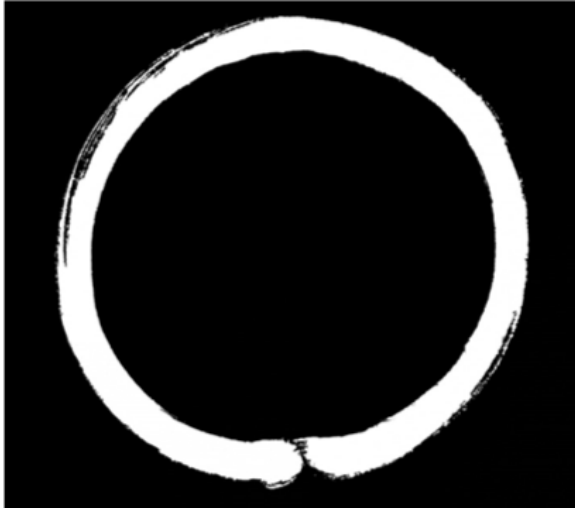


Figure 1. Calligraphy by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, used by the author to represent the Circle of Insight. [www.circleofinsight.org](http://www.circleofinsight.org).

After leaving the Jesuits, the formation continued. I spent time as a member of the Leavenhouse Community in Camden, NJ, modeled after Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement. I worked with Camden's Guadalupe Family Services and the Jesuit Volunteer Corp offices and served as lay chaplain to law and adult students at DePaul University. I engaged in nonviolent civil resistance, helped found a peace and justice studies program at DePaul, and a Cristo Rey Network school in Newark, NJ. I worked with Thich Nhat Hanh (Figure 2), Mairead Maguire, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation. I counseled clients as a clinical social worker and currently teach at Seton Hall University where I helped found our Catholic Social Thought in Action Academy. I also currently direct a post-master's program in spirituality and social work at NYU. I continue to apply the Circle of Insight process to my own experience, looking and listening deeply, learning and applying learning, and living in a way that seeks to make manifest God's greater glory. It is my hope that the Circle of Insight process can help foster and deepen "an intimate knowledge of the many blessings received, that filled with gratitude for all, I may in all things love and serve the Divine Majesty."<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2. Image of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, used in award-winning film co-produced by author, made in collaboration with Nhat Hanh, The 5 Powers Revolution, <https://mindfulworld.vhx.tv/products/2022-the-5-powers-revolution-film-thich-nhat-hanh>

### Ignatian Formation and Imagination

*"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."<sup>6</sup>*

*"Using my imagination wasn't so much making things up, as it was trusting that my imagination could help to lead me to the one who created it: God."<sup>7</sup>*

I was formed by the Jesuits as an undergraduate at Georgetown University, a Jesuit volunteer in Detroit and Nicaragua, and as a Jesuit novice and scholastic. Ignatian spirituality helped me grow and develop a deep sense of connection to the divine alive in our midst, present in and animating the depths of our being. I prayed regularly, and still do, a version of the preparatory prayer from the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, begging for the grace that all my intentions, actions, operations, thoughts, words, deeds, and desires might be directed solely to the praise, reverence, and service of God, the First Love.<sup>8</sup> My experience of the Spiritual Exercises continues to invite a deep listening to the still small voice in my heart and soul, present in the whisper, the gentle breeze that blows by Elijah.<sup>9</sup> It is often imperceptible, but when I am still and listen deeply, I hear that voice beckoning me, us to "be still and know that I am God."<sup>10</sup> I hear that voice whispering, sharing the insight that we inter-are, that each one of us possesses a spark of the divine, each one of us is created in God's image,

each one of us is beloved, blessed, and beautiful. Consistent with the First Principle and Foundation of the Spiritual Exercises, I continue to know that the First Love speaks to me directly.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the First Love speaks to each of us directly, and invites each of us, via our imagination and intellect, to absorb with all of one's senses the insight, the good news, that we have been known in Love from before we were formed in the womb, and that we belong to one another in Love.

My Jesuit formation also has helped me to see more clearly the ways in which the dehumanizing lure of power, riches, and honor can pull us from the love of God, from seeing the other as our sister, brother, our self. Inspired by this insight and ongoing discernment and study, I have sought to counter that which keeps us from abiding in God's love, from living in a way that is humanizing, just, and liberatory. I recall early on in my Jesuit formation hearing the story of St. Ignatius in the cave in Manresa as he went through various experiences of fasting, doubt, and despair, as well as mystical experiences, revelations, and visions that guided his spiritual formation and the writing of the Spiritual Exercises. I was told by Jesuit companions and mentors that Ignatius wrote down these experiences but ultimately destroyed them, believing it more important to share the framework—the process he engaged to deepen his relationship with God—than to share in detail his personal struggles, experiences of God, and spiritual growth. Over the years, I have continued to contemplate this story and its meaning for my own spiritual growth and development—what it means for me, for us, that Ignatius left a framework for developing one's relationship with God rather than a detailed account of consolations and desolations experienced during his months of retreat. Reflecting on Ignatius' example, and researching the ways in which myriad cultures and communities have sought to live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God and one another, inspired me to create the Circle of Insight. The Circle of Insight framework is a dynamic process—not a static theory or definition—that can be engaged to deepen the practice of peace, justice, and transformative love. It is my hope and belief that the Circle of Insight can serve as a complement to Ignatian

imagination, inviting hope as we labor to attain the love of God.

Rev. Kevin O'Brien, S.J., shares in his book *The Ignatian Adventure*, "Ignatius was convinced that God can speak to us as surely through our imagination as through our thoughts and memories. In the Ignatian tradition, praying with the imagination is called contemplation. In the Exercises, contemplation is a very active way of praying that engages the mind and heart and stirs up thoughts and emotions."<sup>12</sup> In his blog post, "Ignatian Imagination," on IgnatianSpirituality.com, a service of Loyola Press, Rev. Daniel Harrington, S.J. shares that imagination includes the ability to form a mental image of something not present to the senses, and adds that in "the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius encourages exercitants to apply the senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch, etc.) and so enter into the key meditations and become part of Gospel scenes."<sup>13</sup> This understanding of Ignatian imaginative, contemplative prayer, and its invitation to the application of senses, to absorb with all of one's senses a scene or story or memory or vision, in order to deepen one's insight and felt experience of God's abiding presence and love, has been central to my spiritual formation, and the fashioning of the Circle of Insight process.

I recall my time as a Novice at the Novitiate of Saint Isaac Jogues, Wernersville, PA, now the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth. It was an immense, beautiful, serene, and sacred property gifted to the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus in 1930. It was built for an era when there were some 150 to 200 novices and scholastics residing there. I was in a class of four novices, including myself, and we were the last class to take first vows at Wernersville. Despite the immensity of the place, for me it was intimate, warm, welcoming, and holy ground. Contributing to this felt sense of intimacy was the fact that the Jesuits had transformed two wings of the main building into a Jesuit retirement community and a spiritual retreat center. Thus, almost always, there were dozens, even scores of retreatants and spiritual mentors and directors present. We were a communion of saints and sinners, holy and so very human, drawn together by a deep desire to

discern and live God's will in our lives. It was there, in the winter of 1992 that I made the thirty day Spiritual Exercises long retreat. I recall moving through the four weeks of the Exercises, deepening my relationship with God, discerning my deepest truth and desires, and learning the power of imaginative prayer and contemplation. In particular, I was moved by the practical wisdom of Ignatius, inviting the retreatant to engage in contemplative prayer, composition of place, application of senses, and colloquies, beginning with the colloquy at the end of the First Week of the Exercises, to imagine Christ before us on the cross, and to ask, "What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?"<sup>14</sup>

These techniques invited the retreatant to imagine oneself in a particular scene, maybe a Gospel passage or story, maybe a scene from one's own experience, maybe a scene related to the movement in one's life of the Holy Spirit or First Love. Retreatants were invited to absorb with all of one's senses the sights, sounds, smells, taste, and feel of a place or encounter. This made the experience incredibly intimate and personal. It also brought stories and memories and sacred texts to life in a way that was often surprising and transformative. I recall one conversation with Jesus where it was clear to me that I had joined with Peter in denying Jesus in his time of need, and I was feeling quite distraught. Earlier in the retreat, I found myself boldly walking out onto the water with Peter, at Jesus' invitation, but then fear consumed me and I began to sink. Using the application of senses, conversational colloquy, and composition of place techniques, I found myself with Peter and Jesus, expressing my sadness, sorrow, humiliation, and frustration. I found myself encouraged by Peter, and imagined Jesus saying something to him, and to me, like, "You know what your problem is, you think you can sin more than God can forgive." Out of this place of denial and doubt came peace and consolation, and a felt sense of being accepted as I was. This deep, Ignatian imaginative looking and listening with all of one's senses to the movements of Love in the depths of one's being, and in the world, even in the midst of doubt and denial, animate the Circle of Insight.

## The Circle of Insight

The Circle of Insight process and framework (Figure 3), which I curated as much as created over 25 years of teaching, advocacy, activism, spiritual, and social work practice, "combines concepts from indigenous healing and peacemaking circles, restorative justice processes, Aristotelian philosophical traditions, Catholic social teachings, liberation pedagogy and theology, civil rights era nonviolence trainings, and social science inquiry."<sup>15</sup> It is a See-Reflect-Act framework. Its first phase, See, invites one to gather data, much like a crime scene investigator or investigative journalist, to absorb reality with all of one's senses, with a particular sensitivity to those who are suffering, most vulnerable, and oppressed. Its second phase, Reflect, invites one to examine critically the observed reality, with head and heart, intellect and empathy. Its third phase, Act, invites one to make choices, consistent with the reality observed and critically examined, in a way that moves persons individually and collectively toward deeper insight and justice. It is a tool that invites Freirean praxis, action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it, and connects analysis to action such that personal and collective oppressive patterns and behaviors can be transformed in love.<sup>16</sup> "The framework invites both individual and collective connection and movement toward deeper understanding and liberation. It challenges us to see, and reflect, and act upon the illusion of our separateness."<sup>17</sup> It can be used by anyone seeking to deepen their practice of peace, justice, and transformative love. It has been used by scholars and social work educators and practitioners to help bridge contemplative social work education and emerging technologies, such as virtual reality, and to deepen social justice practice and pedagogy.<sup>18</sup> I have used it personally to deepen my practice of Ignatian contemplation and the Ignatian Examen. I have also used it to organize social justice and peacemaking courses, trainings, and workshops, and to deepen discernment with respect to social justice advocacy and action. It is my hope that it might serve as a tool to cultivate and deepen Ignatian imagination and invite hope in the midst of an epoch of increased violence and division, and environmental, economic, racial, and mental and physical health crises.

In its first phase, the Circle of Insight deepens the practice of imaginative presence central to Ignatian contemplation, application of senses, and composition of place, by inviting deep looking and listening, absorbing with all of one's senses, the reality of relationships, events, places, experiences, and sacred stories that reflect God's love alive in our midst. The second, critical reflection phase of the Circle of Insight offers a complement to the Ignatian Examination of Conscience, using intellect and empathy, head and heart, and the truth of our interbeing, to shine a light on our imaginative experience.<sup>19</sup> In this way, we touch the mystery and healing power of *kairos* time, time which transcends *chronos* or chronological time. *Kairos* time is the time we experience when we sit with a loved one, or take a

walk-in nature, or engage in an activity that fully absorbs our attention, and we experience time slowing down, maybe even standing still. For C.S. Lewis, this is expressed in his insight that the present is the point at which time touches eternity.<sup>20</sup> In the third phase, the Circle of Insight process invites movement to action consistent with that which has been absorbed and reflected upon in the depths of one's being. In the Ignatian imagination, this is God's love alive, made manifest in the living of one's deepest truth and desires. It is the liberatory action that is the fruit of Ignatian contemplation, prayer, and the Examen. It reflects and ignites the spark of the divine present in each of us and all of creation, and engenders transformative hope and love.

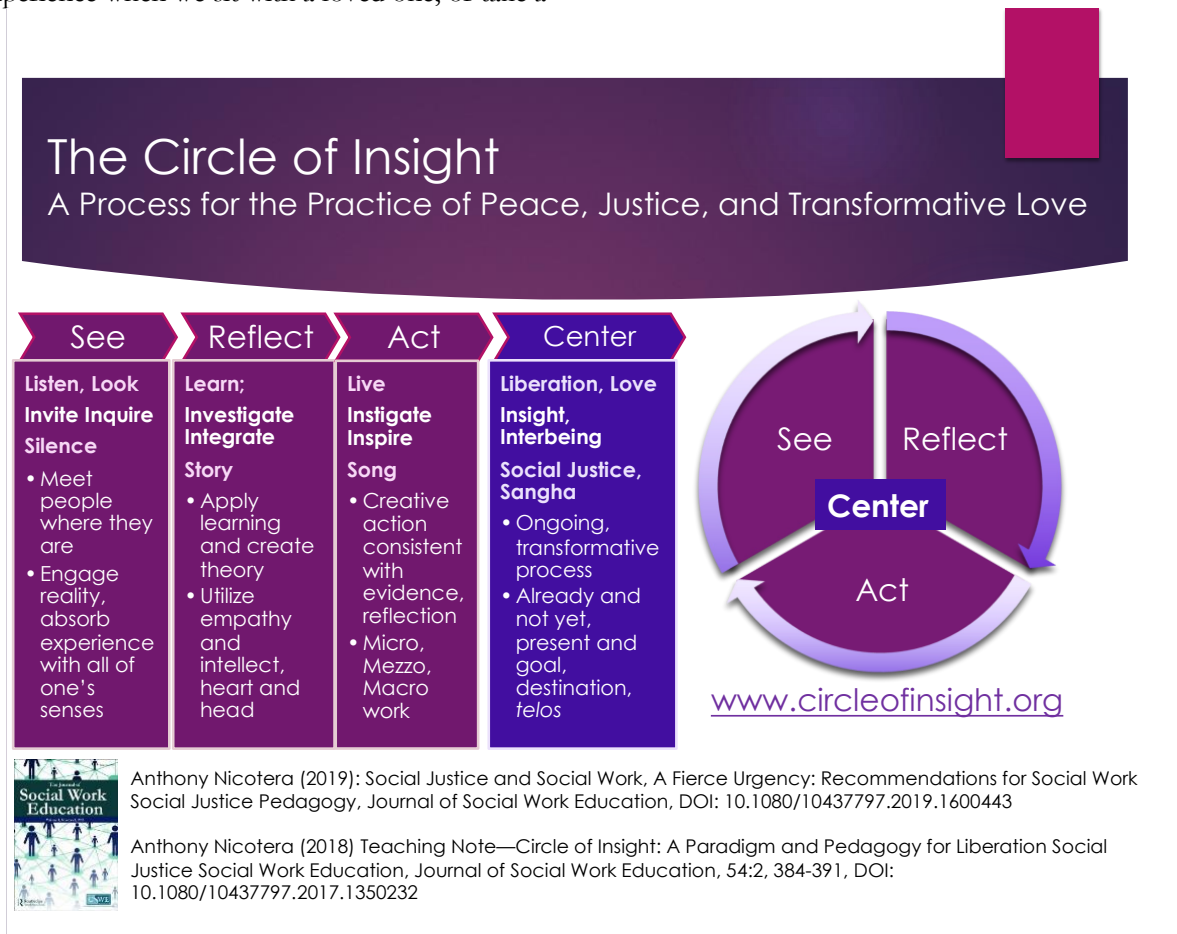


Figure 3. The Circle of Insight overview.

The Circle's center holds and invites stillness, to be still and know, and also ripples out to embrace and inform the See, Reflect, Act process.<sup>21</sup> The Circle's center is both already and not yet, the

destination and the path, the means and the end. The Circle's center is the teleological truth which we seek, and also the truth in which we live and move and have our being. The Circle's center

reflects the insight that the other is distinct, and also sister, brother, self. Thus, engaging the Circle of Insight, “one understands that harm to the other results in harm to the self, and harm to the self, results in harm to the other.”<sup>22</sup> For Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., this insight, this way of seeing and perceiving acknowledges our interbeing, the fact that we cannot exist outside of relationship one with the other. Each of us is wave and ocean.<sup>23</sup> Thus, we inter-are. In fact, Nhat Hanh reminds us, as does Jesuit scholar and mystic Teilhard de Chardin, we are comprised, both spiritually and scientifically, of the same stuff, the same cosmic dust.<sup>24</sup> We know that matter is neither lost nor gained in the universe. We also know that no one is forgotten in God’s sight. We exist in God and for God. Indeed, even the hairs on one’s head are counted.<sup>25</sup> For Mother Teresa, we belong to one another; for Ignatius, we have received all from God, all is God’s, and we are beckoned, even created to return it. This is the Ignatian *suscipe*, literally translated “to receive,” which is more than a prayer, it is a disposition, an openness to the truth that, in the words of Muriaboriginal artist, activist, educator, and scholar Lilla Watson, our liberation is bound up one with the other.<sup>26</sup>

Love, liberation, transformation, and hope lie at the center of both Ignatian spirituality and the Circle of Insight. Ignatian spirituality and the Circle of Insight process and framework invite contemplation, sacred seeing, critical reflection, and engagement with heart, mind, and soul that moves dialectically, openly, and purposefully toward enlightenment, our center, our oneness in the First Love. Thus, the Circle of Insight framework and Ignatian imagination complement and inform each other, and deepen our ongoing laboring in love to live our deepest truth and desires. Together, the Circle of Insight process and Ignatian spirituality offer a spade to aerate the soil of spiritual exercise, to cultivate the surrender necessary to strengthen and support our effort to respond ever more faithfully to the love of God.

## The Circle of Insight in Action

*Seton Hall’s Catholic Social Thought in Action Academy, The Circle of Insight and Service-Learning, Liberatory Pedagogy*

*“We learn to see the face of Christ – the face of Christ that also is the face of a suffering human being, the face of the crucified, the face of the poor, the face of a saint, and the face of every person – and we love each one with the criteria with which we will be judged: ‘I was hungry, and you gave me to eat.’”<sup>27</sup>*

In collaboration with Bachelor of Social Work Program Director, Dr. Dawn Apgar, and Director of Catholic Studies, Dr. Ines Murzaku, I co-founded Seton Hall University’s Catholic Social Thought in Action Academy. I understand the Academy to be a practical expression of the Circle of Insight and Ignatian imagination and hope. It exists at the intersection of core commitments and principles of social work, Catholic studies, and Catholic social thought, offering lectures, panel discussions, scholarship, research, publications, presentations, events, and core university courses, including service-learning classes that explore the confluence of these core principles and commitments in action. It is a labor of love. My role as co-director of the Academy grew out of my personal application of the Circle of Insight process and practice of Ignatian contemplative, imaginative prayer. The Academy, for me, makes manifest a commitment to faith doing justice. It is the fruit of Ignatian application of senses, looking deeply and absorbing with all of one’s senses the symmetry between social work and Catholic social thought, reflecting critically on this confluence, and acting in a way that seeks to respond to Ignatius’ First Week colloquy in the Exercises—again, imaging Jesus on the cross, and asking, What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?

As part of the Academy, I created and teach our *Catholic Social Thought (CST) in Action: Social Work and Catholic Studies Service-Learning* course. The class invites students to work directly with oppressed and marginalized communities in partnership with Catholic social service initiatives and organizations. As part of the course, students critically reflect on core principles central to both social work and CST, including commitments to the inherent dignity of all persons, solidarity, the common good, and justice. I use the Circle of Insight



process within each class, and to frame the overall arc of the course. Also, students are introduced to the Ignatian Examen and Ignatian contemplative practices as a way to practically engage the Circle of Insight process. In the context of their study and service-learning experience, students use Ignatian exercises to create strategies for actualizing socially just, liberatory, culturally competent, ethical practice.

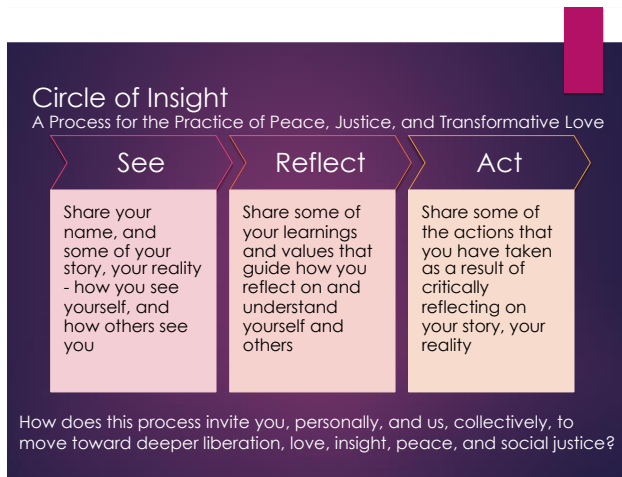


Figure 4. The Circle of Insight, applied as pedagogical community-building, ice-breaker tool.

The 2023 CST in Action spring semester’s service-learning class traveled together to Romero Center Ministries in Camden, New Jersey to take part in their urban challenge program. Romero Center Ministries reports that the median Camden household income is \$26,105, the poverty rate is 37.39%, and the unemployment rate 14%.<sup>28</sup> The Romero Center resides on the grounds of the St. Joseph Pro-Cathedral parish and is named after the former archbishop of San Salvador, Saint Óscar Romero. Saint Romero was assassinated by the military government while saying mass. He was targeted for centering the dignity of the poor, oppressed people of El Salvador, and for speaking out for justice. The Romero Center commits “to the care and future of Camden and its people,” believing that “our lives and journeys are inextricably linked to the lives of those around us.”<sup>29</sup> Our Seton Hall students and I listened to the stories of members of the Camden community, reflected on these stories in the context of core social work and CST values, and considered what individual and collective action might move us toward deeper liberation, justice, and love (Figure 4). We engaged the Circle of Insight process as we listened to stories of toxic waste dumping, trash incineration, and sewage treatment plants in residential

neighborhoods. We prayed and reflected and worked with the Camden community to plant trees and help provide social services to those in need.

To facilitate deepened application of the reflect phase of the Circle of Insight process in the context of our service-learning course and experience, I created a concentric circle framework (Figure 5) for understanding and exploring the core principles that animate CST and social work. At the center of these intersecting social work and CST principles is the inherent dignity of all persons. The service-learning experience invites a deep seeing, absorbing with all of one’s senses, the reality that all possess inherent dignity, no matter one’s creed, religion, culture, race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, ability, class, or other socially constructed label. This insight with respect to inherent human dignity inspires charity and service, in particular to those who have been oppressed, to those in need, to those whose dignity has been fractured and attacked. Surrounding service/charity and dignity is solidarity, rooted in the truth of our interbeing, our understanding that we belong to one another and are all created from, and comprised of, the same matter in the universe. As the concentric circles ripple outward, our solidarity invites a laboring for the common good, ensuring that the well-being of all is cultivated and promoted. The next circle is justice. Justice necessitates notions of dignity, charity/service, solidarity, and the common good, while centering the most vulnerable and oppressed. It requires equity and the healing and repair of broken, oppressive relationships, systems, structures, and institutions. It asserts that the measure of a just society is the well-being of those in greatest need. All of these principles are embraced by love, the Gospel love of John 13:34 and Matthew 25:31-46. This love invites us to love one another as a reflection of the First Love, and it compels action to attain the love of God, namely, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing those without shelter, visiting those in prison, providing education and healthcare to those without it, caring for the sick, and comforting all those in need. This love animates all of the other principles.

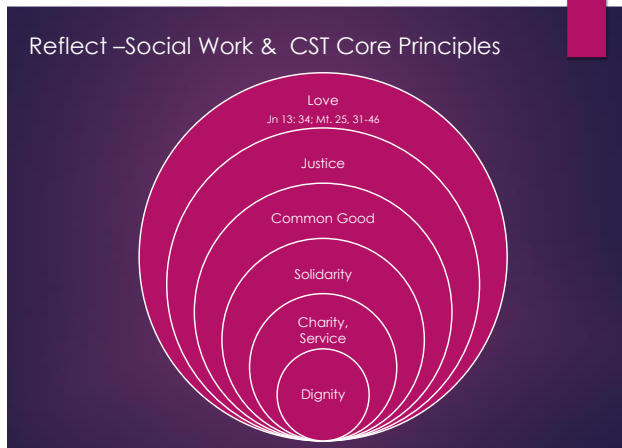


Figure 5. Concentric circles framework for critical reflection on intersection of social work and CST core principles.

I shared the concentric circles framework as well as the Circle of Insight process with our service-learning students and invited them to use these, as well as the Ignatian Examen as tools to guide a journaling exercise reflecting on their experience in Camden. Additionally, as part of their culminating service-learning group projects and presentations, they used these tools to make recommendations for personal and collective action. One group committed to reaching out to our neighbors in Newark to build bridges of understanding. This student group shared that they wanted to challenge fellow Seton Hall students to consider and overcome misconceptions about Newark, similar to the way that their Camden service-learning experience had challenged them to move beyond misconceptions they had had about the Camden community. One student shared that in the process of reflecting on and applying the Circle of Insight and concentric circles framework, she understood more palpably and experientially the power of love in action, and the need to work to break down barriers between communities. She shared that the Circle of Insight process helped her understand more deeply the need to create opportunities for personal encounters and for working together in a spirit of solidarity and justice. Another student shared that the Circle of Insight process helped her see the connections between her family and neighbors in Newark, NJ and Camden. She had made false assumptions about Camden residents based on misleading media stories, without any personal experience of Camden and its residents.

She was socialized to fear Camden as dangerous. She realized that others were similarly socialized to fear her and other Newark residents, and that these stereotypes, like those she had had of Camden, were rooted in racism, classism, and a lack of understanding and relationship. She shared that her experience in Camden helped her to see more clearly not only the power, faith, beauty, and resilience of the Camden community, but also of her own Newark neighborhood.

I also shared that my own application of the Circle of Insight and concentric circle frameworks enabled me to reconnect with my ancestors and my experience of living and working in Camden. My mom and maternal grandfather, and his parents, grew up in Camden. As a child, I recalled visiting my grandparents in Camden and happily playing in the street, no one locking their doors, and neighbors caring for one another. A mere 20 years later, as a Jesuit novice, I lived and worked in North Camden's Holy Name parish, my grandfather's childhood parish, and went to bed nightly to gunshots and drug deals on the corners just outside our parish rectory. After leaving the Jesuits, I lived and worked at the Leavenhouse Community, a shelter and soup kitchen a few blocks from Holy Name, modeled after Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker community. We fed hundreds of people a week, and it was never enough to meet the need. I coached teens in the Camden little league baseball program. I used to pick up some of our players on the street corners "trapping," selling drugs, to take them to practice or our games. Engaging an Ignatian composition of place, I traveled back in time to the needles, broken liquor bottles, and drug paraphernalia that infested Camden's Pyne Poynt Park, the field where we practiced and played. It was a dangerous place where drug deals and shootings were not uncommon.

During our time at the Romero Center, our hosts shared a film describing how the people of Camden had taken back Pyne Point Park and rebuilt it.<sup>30</sup> We traveled together to visit the park. I welled up with tears. Remembering how the teens I coached some 25 years prior had cut themselves on broken bottles buried in Pyne Poynt's baseball diamond dirt, I was deeply moved to see its transformation. I reflected and gave thanks for the strength and courage of a community committed

to healing, a community willing to fight for dignity and justice, a community willing to labor in love to rebuild, restore, and faithfully re-imagine their city. In prayer, I sat with the words of Archbishop Romero and his call to the Church, “A church that doesn’t provoke any crisis, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed—what gospel is that?”<sup>31</sup> The story of the resurrection of Pyne Point Park is a gospel story. It is a concrete manifestation of the liberation and power of transformative love alive at the center of the Circle of Insight. It is the story too that most resonated with our Seton Hall students when they reflected on their experience in Camden. It animated their imaginations. It inspired insight with respect to how one can put into practice core CST and social work principles of dignity, solidarity, justice, and love. It gave them hope.

*Don’t Lose Hope - The Circle of Insight, Merciful Love, and Becoming Real*

I heard his voice echo down the long corridor of the Jesuit Spiritual Center in Wernersville, “Tony!” I had returned to make a retreat after leaving the Jesuits, and Brother William Sudzina, aka Brother Sudz or Sudzy, was there to welcome me back home. He was part of the Jesuit community at Wernersville as he had been when I was a novice. Brother Sudz was beloved, a saintly soul, who always had a knowing smile and a twinkle in his eye. He was a holy and wise man with a huge heart, deep humility, and a way of proceeding that embodied St. Paul’s invitation to pray without ceasing. He served in the military during World War II, and in Chile and at Wernersville as a Jesuit, and like the Skin Horse in the children’s story *The Velveteen Rabbit*, he helped many of us young Jesuits understand what it meant to become real, to grow and mature in faith and love.<sup>32</sup>

I shared with Brother Sudz that I was feeling somewhat lost after leaving the Jesuits. I did not share that I felt hopeless, anxious, uncertain of my vocation, and was evening questioning my faith. However, he clearly sensed this. He was deeply present, and I felt Jesus’ presence as he looked at me lovingly and simply said, “Don’t lose hope.” He also shared with me the words from 1 John

4:18, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” I had studied in theology classes that the word “perfect” was more accurately translated “merciful.” Thus, in my need, I understood Sudzy to be inviting me to let go of fear and open myself to God’s merciful love. He was blessing me and offering hope rooted in Ignatian contemplation in action. After our encounter, in contemplative prayer, I reflected on Sudzy’s words and experienced them as the words and invitation of Jesus. Jesus, through Brother Sudz, was saying that no matter how desperate, how desolate, how hopeless things seem, I am with you, and I have loved you, even before you took shape in the womb. As a result of engaging the Circle of Insight process and the Ignatian Examen over the years, I now understand this encounter with Brother Sudz to be a sacred instance of God’s transformative hope and abiding love.

This transformative hope and love, at the heart of Ignatian spirituality, imagination, and contemplation also is the love that animates the core of the Circle of Insight, and the heart of Catholic Social Teaching. It is a love manifest more in deed than word.<sup>33</sup> It is a love that reflects and illumines our interbeing. In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis describes this love as ever more open, impelling us toward universal communion, calling forth “growth in openness and the ability to accept others as part of a continuing adventure that makes every periphery converge in a greater sense of mutual belonging.”<sup>34</sup> This is the Gospel love of Matthew 23:8, Jesus’ proclamation that “You are all brothers and sisters.” This is the love I experienced in a particular and deep way during my time living and working in India with Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta and her Brothers of Charity.

*Where is the love? Love, Love, Love! The Circle of Insight’s Central Query and Command*

As a Jesuit Scholastic, I was sent to India to spend time with Maryland Province and Indian Jesuits who had been working together for decades in rural villages and universities. I was inspired by the beauty and joy, the deep commitment and faith of these Jesuit companions. They embodied Jesus’ invitation to see the other, no matter their caste,

class, religion, creed, race, or ethnicity, as sister and brother. While in Calcutta, I asked if I might spend time working with Mother Teresa. The Jesuits encouraged me to do so and introduced me to the Brothers of Charity, with whom I lived for over a month. I practiced their daily order, influenced by Ignatian spirituality, which involved prayer, mass, yoga, music, spiritual reading, chores, and ministering at the various works of the Sisters and Brothers of Charity. I worked at Kalighat, the Home of the Pure Heart, Nirmal Hriday, formerly Mother Teresa's Kalighat Home for the Dying and Destitute. I attended to the needs of the residents, many of whom were dying of curable diseases, such as tuberculosis and leprosy. I worked with volunteers from all over the world. Each morning I would pray with Mother Teresa and her community at the Mother House before heading off to work.

I remember the morning I first met and spoke with Mother Teresa at the Mother House. She knew that I was a Jesuit Scholastic, so she decided to have a little fun. She smiled at me and handed me a small card, asking, "Did you get my business card?" Apparently, a benefactor had decided that Mother Teresa needed business cards and had hundreds printed for her. She enjoyed giving them away with a playful smile. As I recall, the card said simply, *M. Teresa, Calcutta, India*. After I accepted the card, she took my hand in hers and taught me a prayer, her five finger prayer, that she taught to so many who spent time with her. She grabbed my left hand, and one finger at a time, starting with my thumb and moving to my little finger, said "I will; I want; with God's grace; to be; holy." She then said, "Now, remember what Jesus said, 'As you did it to the least,'" and this time she took my right hand, thumb first, one finger at a time, and added, "You; did; it; to; me." Then she placed her praying hands over mine, and bowed, saying, "Put them together, and you will be holy."

That evening, during my Examination of Conscience, I asked for the grace to understand God's will for me, how I was being called to be holy in light of Mother Teresa's five finger prayer, which I had been repeating over and over. What came to me was my own five finger prayer. The next morning, I decided to share it with Mother Teresa. "Mother," I smiled, "today I have a prayer for you." She seemed humored and curious. I


prayed, "Help me to be present to those without," and then I grabbed my own left hand with my right, and one finger at a time, starting with my thumb, as she had done, added, "food; clothing; health; shelter; or education." Then I grabbed my right hand with my left and said, "Help me to share with them," and again, one finger at a time, starting with my thumb, "faith; hope; love; peace; and joy." She looked at me with a twinkle in her eye, and I imaged her expression to be saying, "Not bad." But then she paused, and said instead, "Where is the love?" In my nervousness, I had run through the prayer so quickly that she had not heard me say love. I repeated it, and she cried out exuberantly, "Ah!", and grabbed my middle finger on my right hand, the one representing love, and shook it saying, "Love! Love! Love!"



Figure 6. Anthony Nicotera with Mother Teresa, Calcutta, India, July 1997.

Mother Teresa's proclamation, "Love! Love! Love!" and question, "Where is the love?" lie at the heart of the Circle of Insight process. They are the command and the query, the subject and the verb, essential to guiding our actions if we are to live holy lives of faith doing justice. I continue to engage and apply the Circle of Insight process and Ignatian imaginative prayer with students and in

my own life. Students have shared that these tools have helped them move, personally and collectively, toward deeper insight and justice, hope and liberation. From Camden to Calcutta, they beckon us to dialectical, open, purposeful, and enlightened movement toward truth and transformative love. They help me to continue to hear anew, in gentle breezes, the voice of God and

God's sacred messengers. If I am attentive, reflective, and responsive, I hear God urging, "Do not lose hope!" asking, "Where is the love?" beckoning us "to awaken from our illusion of separateness," and calling us to "Love! Love! Love!" 

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