

Personal Epilogue Interview with Elias Lopez, SJ

Pieter De Witte and Geertjan Zuijdwegt

This issue of *Louvain Studies* has been composed in celebration of the life, work and theology of Jacques Haers, SJ. In a recent publication, Jacques has characterized theology as a “discerning conversation amongst friends on a journey.”¹ One of his most important fellow travellers has been his dear friend Elias Lopez. To honour Jacques’ commitment to theology-as-conversation we conclude this special issue with an interview with Elias.

Elias, can you introduce yourself?

I am Elias Lopez, a Jesuit companion of Jacques Haers. I met Jacques in Oxford, at Campion Hall, when he was doing his doctorate there on the theology of creation in Origen. I was there studying English for a month. I remember our first encounter. I was painting doors because that was part of paying my stay in Oxford. He came from time to time to give me conversation, to make me practice my English. He was so incredibly kind. Really, that was the first time I met him.

When you came to Leuven, was it because of Jacques?

Yes, I came to Leuven because of him. In 1996, I had begun to work in refugee camps in Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania with the Jesuit Refugee Service. At first, I went only for one year. Then my provincial asked me to do my licentiate in theology. And because I knew Jacques, I asked my provincial whether it was possible to go to Leuven to study with him and to do my licentiate thesis on forgiveness with him. Already, Jacques was interested in the topic of reconciliation. That was the main issue that brought us together.

1. Jacques Haers, “Common Discernment in Theology,” in *Answerable for Our Beliefs: Reflections on Theology and Contemporary Culture Offered to Terrence Merrigan*, ed. Peter De Mey, Kristof Struys, and Viorel Coman (Leuven, Paris, and Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2022), 657-677, here 658.

Once, around 2000, he also came for a week to learn about our work in the refugee camps in Tanzania. There, he experienced the reality of the refugee camps directly. He was not really made for work in refugee camps, but he managed. We were living some 25 kilometers away from the refugee camps because of security issues, but every day we would go to them. We visited the refugees and Jacques was always just as we know him: very open to dialogue, very engaging with people. I think somehow that experience marked him as well. The experience in the refugee camps is so hard. To see the injustice. To see the difference between the lives of people who have lived on this side of the world and those who were not so lucky. That also shaped his way of looking at things and the whole commitment he had to liberation theology. Later on, I actually worked with him in the Centre for Liberation Theologies, mainly on topics related to reconciliation.

What has Jacques meant in your life and in the life of the Society of Jesus?

I think Jacques was a prophet on two or three topics that have been key for me, in my life, but also in the life of the Society of Jesus. I think already in 1997, Jacques was talking about the importance of reconciliation. Already at that time, he used to mention the four dimensions that later, in 2008, the Society of Jesus would assume as its main mission worldwide: the reconciliation with God, with others, with oneself and with creation. So, he was a prophet. He could see that this was one of the important issues to be developed in the coming years for the Society. And I think it will become more and more important for the Church, for the synodal Church that Pope Francis is pushing ahead.

Jacques was a prophet on this issue, but he was also a prophet on the issue of creation: the reconciliation with creation, the whole environmental concern. I have to say that in the beginning, for us, for all the people, it was hard to listen to his forecast. His forecast was very tough. I think it was from the very beginning of my time in Leuven, that Jacques was already talking about this. I arrived there in 1996 and always Jacques was on the topic: environment, environment, environment. We were late, we were late, we were late. And I think this was hard for us to listen to. And also for him to say, because nobody could follow him. In the years that came after, it became clear how important it was. Now it is huge for all of us. But Jacques was the first to say this in his Research Unit and also in the Society of Jesus. And he had to take the reaction of the people upon his shoulders, because, like with every prophet, no one could believe him.

It was only a minor issue then. But time has proven Jacques right. It is the main issue of the Society of Jesus nowadays, and of the world in general.

So, I think the two issues of reconciliation in general and environmental reconciliation with creation have been very important for him and also for me. Mainly the issue of reconciliation. He has had a big influence on me on this topic. When I was in Leuven, we had a class with him on reconciliation with people coming from all over the world. And it was the war in the Balkans. Imagine. And we had students coming from the Balkans and others from the United States. And the class was magnificent because Jacques helped us to enter into dialogue. In deep dialogue. People coming from different backgrounds who were engaged directly in the conflict at that time.

But Jacques has also been a prophet on another issue that has become really important nowadays, when everybody is talking about the synodal Church. If there is one concept that is really relevant in the process of synodality, it is this: communal discernment. Most Jesuits barely talked about discernment. And if they did, it was personal discernment. But never ever communal discernment. It might have been a bit of topic already. Father [Pedro] Arrupe had written a letter about it, and then there was also a letter from the next Superior General, [Peter Hans] Kolvenbach. But Jacques was always talking about discernment in common. He was always putting the accent on the relational theology that he has always had, and that Pope Francis is now talking about in terms of encounter. For Jacques the starting point in any type of reflection, theology or whatever, has always been the bond between people. From that bond, or dialogue, or encounter emerges the experience of discernment: searching for the will of God together, also together with nature, in creation.

When it comes to discernment, Jacques always refers to Rahner. It dates from the time Jacques studied with him in Germany. I think Mark Rotsaert, his novice master, also had a good influence on him on the issue of discernment. And I got it from him. The term “discerning reconciliation” has now been coined by Father General [Arturo Sosa] and this has been also because of Jacques’ influence. Not directly, but indirectly. Because of the dialogue I have with Father General. In a keynote lecture on the main issue of the Society of Jesus, the mission of reconciliation, he has now made a link with the process of common discernment and the term he uses is “discerning reconciliation.”² Today we are rediscovering the mission given by Ignatius to the Society in 1550: *reconcile the estranged*.

2. See Arturo Sosa, “Discerning Universities for the Mission of Reconciliation,” International Symposium *Ignatian Reconciliation* (Madrid, PU Comillas, May 2021).

How would you describe “discerning reconciliation”?

It is a process, a dialogue between different parties in a conflict. It does not have to start with both parties together. Both parties can be separately prepared for the encounter in which they look for the will of God together in the process of reconciliation. It is about how they heal their wounds, how they deal with their anger, with the natural rejection of the other after the injustice or violence that this other has committed. What is interesting in the concept is that it does not have an essentialist approach to the process of reconciliation. There is no unique concept of reconciliation. It depends on different situations, different people, different times, different places and contexts. So, it is a very contextual approach to the process of reconciliation. When we approach reconciliation from the perspective of discernment, we usually talk about reconciliations, in the plural, because everyone has his own approach. Discerning reconciliation is the process of “reconciling different reconciliations” by different parties involved in the conflict. The key is to put our differences in communion, not equalizing them, at the service of a mayor common good for the *whole* person and for *every* person involved. If we don't take a discerning approach to reconciliation, the process of reconciliation can be damaging, revictimizing people. This is the basic idea. Jacques has always told me that ideas can be of great help. And that we are helping through developing ideas. And it is true, there is nothing more practical than a good idea. His ideas are behind all that I do.

What are you currently working on in terms of reconciliation?

Here at Comillas, we are carrying out a research program on the issue reconciliation from a transdisciplinary perspective. We have around 16 different disciplines working on the issue of reconciliation in this university. We have been constructing a transdisciplinary methodology to approach reconciliation by using the concept of discernment in common. The idea is to help different disciplines to work together, knowing that the paradigms, the concepts, the narratives, the methodologies are so different at times. The challenge is how to approach a common research issue, in this case reconciliation, in a way that is not only multidisciplinary, but transdisciplinary.

First, we have done research in five different Spanish cities on migration and refugees coming from Sub-Saharan Africa. We brought together all these different disciplines to try to understand the refugees' way of understanding reconciliation from these different angles. Discernment has

been the process of trying to enter into the perspective of the other in such a way that we can somehow co-create the narrative. Without discernment, it is very easy in the end to come to some insights, but one besides the other, not real co-creation. So, discernment for me, and I think for Jacques, obviously, is a way toward co-creation. Discernment in common helps to co-create. Any issue you want to address, you can address from the perspective of discernment in common, discernment of spirits, to see where God is leading us. Common discernment helps each participant to be freed from his or her own perspective to co-create something for the common good. This is what we have been doing here.

On all these ideas, Jacques and I have been working together in the International Association of Jesuit Universities. This is a worldwide network of more than a hundred institutions of tertiary education of the Society of Jesus. Jacques and I are involved in the task force on Peace and Reconciliation. And all these ideas, that we have been working on together for so long, we are bringing into the conversation worldwide. Next August, we want to bring these ideas to Boston, where we will have the second Assembly of the International Association. Really, although nobody knows it, Jacques is the father of the whole concept of discerning reconciliation. And I think it will be increasingly relevant in the coming years.

It would be interesting to hear about possible tension between discernment as a religious concept, discerning the will of God, and the collaboration between many secular disciplines at the university.

For me it is very easy. Where we put “God,” other people put their own “source of life.” And then it works. It helps people, even if they are from a non-religious background. This has also been my experience working with JRS worldwide. I have been working in Asia, in Africa, in the Middle East, in the Americas, in Europe, and always we work with people who are not believers and with people of other religions. We say, let’s now have a moment of silence, each one of us connecting with his or her own “source of life,” whatever it is. And then we ask, from that inner and deeper connection of existential meaning, goodness or beauty, how do you feel about this issue and how do you feel you are invited to respond to it? With these simple invitations, people enter into the process. And then it is a matter of circles of listening. And it works. I tell you that it works. It is very simple: instead of God, the “source of life.” And connect with it. Maybe it is your children, or the environment. Friends can also be a “source of life.” And when people connect with these deeper bonds of love that are guiding their life somehow, then they

find their way to contribute with their best talents and best decisions, in the service of this common issue that they are dealing with. This is our experience all over. It is easy and it works. We do not do theology to try to explain it. No, we use it in a simple way to reach everyone.

Any final words about Jacques?

He is the best person in the world to have as a friend. He's wonderful. Our friendship is one based on spiritual conversations throughout life. As Jesus says: "I do not call you servants but friends, because all that I have heard from the Father I have shared with you."

Any wishes for him, after his retirement?

To enjoy life! He deserves it.

Fr. Elias Lopez is professor of Conflict Transformation and Leadership at Comillas Pontifical University, the Jesuit University in Madrid. For more than twenty years, he was worked for the Jesuit Refugee Service in central Africa, especially in Tanzania. He has also worked in Ethiopia, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and, of late, in Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico and Ecuador. Between 2007 and 2011 he was deputy director of the Jesuit Refugee Service in Rome. Currently he is chair of the Peace and Reconciliation Task Force of the International Association of Jesuit Universities. Address: C. de Alberto Aguilera 23, 28015 Madrid (Spain). Email: elp@comillas.edu.

