

THE SCHOOL OF THE HEART

José A. García

‘THE SCHOOL OF THE HEART’ IS AN IGNATIAN PHRASE. Ignatius used it to describe the final phase of Jesuit formation, now known as the tertianship. His words were *scuela del affecto*.¹ But the phrase applies more widely. Indeed all Ignatius’ writings—the *Reminiscences*, the *Spiritual Exercises*, the *Constitutions*, the letters—are simply a large-scale pedagogy aimed at integrating the heart, a ‘school of the heart’ in which we can learn to receive ourselves totally from God, and to give ourselves totally to God’s Reign.

What follows therefore is not an article about the Jesuit tertianship, about its aims and its methods. My aim, rather, is to trace through Ignatius’ best-known and most widely applicable work, the *Spiritual Exercises*, some of the most basic features of this school, the styles of analysis and therapy that it offers. I shall concentrate particularly on what any of us can recognise as our own, as corresponding with our own desires. Could there ever be a greater yearning in the heart of a believer than that of uniting themselves lovingly and actively with God, not just in the religious context of prayer, but also in the complexities of everyday life?

Integration and Dispersion: Attacking Three Obsessions

It is sacred teaching that we are creatures arising out of God’s love. When this becomes something more than an intellectual belief, something bubbling within us, then a movement of integration towards God begins within the human heart: a movement of confidence, of song, of love, of dedication. ‘From the moment I understood who God is for me, I knew that now I could exist only for God’, said Charles de Foucauld, referring to this basic experience of faith. Whether or not we recognise ourselves in this statement, it points us towards the Christian experience of being God’s creation as daughters and sons of God.

¹ *Constitutions*, V.2.1 [516.4].

In this God-centred vision, objects too cease to be brute facts; they become creatures in the full sense. They too are rooted in God; they too are sacred; they too seek to be drawn into this movement of praise and service of God along with the human person. Humanity cannot simply dispose of them at will.

However, the double movement—of everything coming from God, and seeking to return to God and to be drawn into God's dream for the world—is under threat. From where? From the human heart itself. And the threat spreads across the whole human sphere.

The human heart is the image of God, of a God who is love. As such, it is capable of what is highest and best. It has been gifted with the power to love others in that same love with which God has loved it into being, to love others with a free, generative love. But because the image has been sullied by limitation and sin, the human heart is also capable of what is lowest and basest. It can deny its origins. It can deal with the rest of reality destructively. It can turn its back on God, and live at odds with its central identity.

Experience tells us that this is so. When our hearts are centred in God, when we receive everything from God and live for God, then everything is in place, everything goes well. We are not tempted by things outside us, nor by other people, nor indeed by our own ambiguous selves. Even our most primal instincts are taken up into this current of love received and love given.

But when the heart is de-centred, when it is cut off from its source and therefore also its destiny, when it is in slavery to the devil (a word from Greek roots that signify separation—the devil is whatever separates, splits, disintegrates), then everything begins to fall apart. People and things become nothing but objects of desire; the human self becomes a predator; our basic instincts become tyrannical.

At this point, three obsessions take root. Our survival instinct becomes perverted into an obsession with health and longevity; our possessive instincts become avarice; our self-esteem becomes an obsession about prestige and power. The human heart loses its sense of direction, and its sense of vocation becomes twisted. The things of this world, other people, even the very self, become despots, lording it over our freedom and determining what becomes of us. And so the vacuum which should be God's in the human heart gets filled up with obsessions. No longer are we able to take real decisions about how we spend our lives; instead we are mortal victims of our dividedness.

What brings about such a brutal rupture, such a travesty in the human heart—a travesty that, tragically, lies at the root of all humanity's ills? In Ignatius' vision, humanity is marked both by God's grace and by human malice and ignorance. But there is nothing new here. What is really interesting is how Ignatius saw the way out of this situation, how we can overcome the state of alienation into which ignorance and guilt plunge us. Here the classroom metaphor becomes significant: what are the school exercises, as it were, that we have to do in order to reorientate our hearts towards God and reintegrate them once again? What are the lessons that we must study and learn? I think there are basically three, and I shall describe each in turn.

Lesson 1: Salvation and Sin

'What do you know of salvation, you who have never sinned?' In these words, Bernanos attacked a pharisaical version of Christianity, which believed itself to be created in purity and not to need salvation. Bernanos and Ignatius are at one here. The reintegration of the heart begins with the experience of grace, even within the experience of sin.

The first lesson that we learn in the school of the Exercises is, as we have said, that all things find their home in God—in whom 'we live and move and have our being', as Luke's Paul, quoting pagan authorities, put the matter in Athens (Acts 17:28). The first lesson is that of God's original project for humanity and for each of us. In the beginning was not only the Word, but also grace, this grace.

But as soon as those receiving the Exercises begin to look at themselves and at the world, they see at once that things are not like this. What calls the shots in the self and its world is not grace but sin, not communion but division, not peace with oneself and with God but discord. Why? What has happened in the world to bring about this enormous perversion of God's original plan?

'You too are guilty' is what must be learnt at this stage. For all his pupils, all who receive his Exercises, Ignatius seeks to undermine their complacency. The world is not simply a story of goodies and baddies out there, but rather an all-embracing *history*—a history including evil—in which we are all involved. Then Ignatius undermines our tendency to see our own behaviour in private, subjective terms. Sin is not confined to the individual conscience, to the sphere of its personal relationship with God. It is public, cosmic. It has specifiable, measurable effects in

the world, in the Church, in the self. It is morally evil and aesthetically ugly.

But when Ignatius the teacher removes the ground from under his pupil, his purpose is not to leave them exposed, without any support at all. His concern, rather, is for the person to seek a new support: not their good deeds, or even their self-hatred dressed up as penance. His hope is that they will deepen their sense of being a creature arising from the love of God, and thus come to see themselves also as a sinner, welcomed and accepted in mercy even when guilt has ruptured their communion with God. The drama of our estrangement from God, the drama of the world's exile from God, is always framed within the divine goodness, within God's suffering for us, within God's call to return to communion.

Entering into this experience is in a radical sense heart-breaking. Such goodness as a response to such estrangement, such love and suffering (the crucifixion is a symbol of both of these) as an answer to the evil we have inflicted! It is at this point that we can understand better what Bernanos meant. Only a person who knows themselves as a sinner knows anything at all about salvation; only this person can recognise the crucified Jesus as their saviour. A person who has not experienced their own sinfulness knows nothing about salvation. They lack this basic experience.

***A heart-breaking
experience***

What is really important here is a sense of gratitude. It is gratitude which brings about the reorientation of the heart, sets it on the pathway back to God, and begins the reintegration of the potential within. Gratitude is the human key to the Ignatian school of the heart. Thus it is also the most frequent lesson given in the Ignatian school, and the most important for our progress. The deeper its gratitude, the more the heart will be integrated in God. If the sense of gratitude is weak, there will be little desire for God, and little integration in God. But then, how can we be anything but grateful when confronted with the double revelation Christ brings us: that of being both creatures loved by God, and sinners loved and welcomed into God's mercy?

The process ends in a moment of acknowledgment and of questioning: 'Thank you, Lord, for such love, for such goodness, for such acceptance. What can I do with you and for you?' The heart is fully centred; it becomes filled with gratitude and joy; it prepares itself to pass back to God and to others the love that it has received, a love that emerges from us and is truly ours, but which has its origin prior to

us, in the Other. One of my friends calls this love satellite-love—a satellite which orbits God's own love.

Lesson 2: Generosity and Perversion

Then we come to a second lesson, one that is both important and difficult to learn: 'There are deceitful things which look like the truth—that is what makes them attractive'. For Ignatius, the human problem is not so much one of malice as of ignorance. Or, to put it another way, much of our malice derives from our ignorance and our lack of clarity about the deceits with which the Evil One entraps us.

It is striking that within four days of the First Week experience—that is, on the fourth day of the Second Week—Ignatius puts the brake on the process of gospel contemplation. Ruthlessly, abruptly, he damps down our enthusiasm about following the Lord. Why this sudden halt? Why suspect so blatantly that our following of the Lord, so personal and so new, could be based on false premises, on lies that look like truth?

At this point, we are encountering one of Ignatius's most telling intuitions about the nature of the human heart, and about how the heart can be deceived by the 'devil' under the appearance of truth and goodness. For Ignatius, the first and greatest temptation of the human heart is the 'desire for riches'. He does not tell us why he thinks this; he takes it as his starting point. What he does say is that the human person, once entrapped in this desire, starts to build ladders above (or below!), first in search of prestige and power, then towards pride, and finally towards all the other vices (Exx 142). By setting his famous meditation on Two Standards in the context of the following of Christ, Ignatius is saying that this death-dealing process occurs among those who are actively following Christ, as well as among those who are not. This is possible only if we are being deceived, only if we are taking to be true what is actually a lie in disguise.

We can imagine the human heart as made up of fine material and black holes. The fine material is its capacity for love, its readiness for communion, its openness to the transcendent; it is, as we should never forget, created in the image and likeness of God. The black holes result from its creaturely limitations, and also from sin. They are called insecurity, fear, lack of confidence, vulnerability to illness, fear of the future, ultimately the fear of death. How can we avoid these great

wounds in the psyche, this wretchedness of heart, this fundamental insecurity?

A first answer to that question seems to be embedded in the anxiety itself: a false answer, but one that appears to be true, and can therefore deceive us and trap us so easily. 'It is riches that can calm and assuage the anxiety that brings about insecurity and fear for the future. If we can manage to surround ourselves with many good things—be these material goods like money, or more intangible goods such as personal qualities or learning—then this will put an end to our insecurity, fear and anxiety.' So goes this first, natural response.

It is quite normal to think like this, and this all too persuasive logic leads many people astray. Nevertheless, it is no more than a trap, a trap with both short-term and long-term consequences. Fear provokes instincts of survival and possessiveness that stop at nothing and nobody. Our experience of ourselves and of others teaches us this all too well. But the deceit is not obvious.

Ignatius saw clearly that the heart which has fallen victim to this desire for riches inevitably comes to be dependent on what other people think. Thus it seeks, at all costs, 'the empty honour of the world', in ways that lead to oppression and arrogance. But it is the destructive version of the possessive instinct that lies at the root.

So much for the description of this process. What is the cure? The Ignatian school of the heart puts forward two major exercises aimed at curing this mortal disease. The first is to become aware of the deceit—the prayer for the grace to know 'the deceits of the evil chief' and for 'help to keep myself from them' (Exx 139.1). This lesson is about clarity of vision, and it becomes more and more necessary the more we acquire riches of various sorts: intelligence, training, institutions. These are not evil in themselves; they can be of service to others and to God's Reign, indeed they can be new ways of serving Christ as an apostle. The deceit occurs when our hearts come to be dependent on such riches. Then they cease to be ways in which the Reign of God comes into being, and become idols of one's own heart. It is to them that we begin to look for salvation, and not to God. We fall victim to a practical atheism.

***Becoming aware
of the deceit***

The second exercise in this lesson also confronts the heart through the head. We ask for 'knowledge of the true life that the supreme and true captain shows us, and for grace to imitate him' (Exx 139.2). The hope is that in seeing contrasts—rebel chief and true captain, deceits

and true life—the mind and heart should make a decision for Christ Jesus. And not just for any old Christ, for the Christ whom I imagine in accordance with my desires, but for the Christ of the gospels, for the Christ who is poor, humble and humiliated, for the crucified one. If this is my deepest desire, born out of personal love for the Lord, my heart will yearn for identification with Christ more than for anything else. If I have to use particular kinds of wealth, personal or institutional, these will no longer be a temptation, but rather means of greater service. This attraction that Christ exerts over my heart will come to neutralise my disordered attachments, and create in me a ‘pure heart’. Indeed, the love of Christ can come to be so deep and personal within me that I come to desire a life like his: poor, humble, humiliated. Just for itself. Just because I want to identify with him.

When I do this exercise, what happens to my black holes? They remain present, but the Lord is now in charge of my heart, with a therapeutic presence and peace. The peace of the risen Christ, alive and present in my life, loved above all things, is what neutralises the fear that gives rise to possessiveness and all its disastrous short-term and long-term consequences. If fear leaves us, we can moderate our desires and claims. Dreams of power and happiness cease to seduce us. ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid’ (Matthew 14:27).

Lesson 3: Action from the Heart

‘What matters is that the world should touch the heart and that the *heart* should go out towards the world’: this is the third and final lesson. This exercise seeks to bring about an authentic miracle: that of bringing the world into the very centre—not just the periphery—of our own being, and of sending us wholeheartedly out into the world. Let me explain.

The human self is complex. Though individual, my heart is surrounded, as it were, by three concentric circles. The circle furthest from the centre is that of the senses: my self in so far as it sees, hears, tastes, touches. Next comes my intelligence: my self in so far as it thinks, makes connections, moves from one thing to another. Then there is the sphere of the affections, arousing feelings and subject to the emotional influence of others. But at the pure centre there is the heart itself, in which all the other manifestations are rooted. Here the self’s true liberty is to be found; here too the Spirit of God seeks to enter us

and to shape us. Obviously these levels are richly connected and affect each other all the time, forming a rich unity. Nevertheless, they also have a certain autonomy in their interaction.

This way of looking at the self is obviously crude and oversimplified, but can help us understand two things. Firstly: material things, other people, and the external world can reach the very centre of the self, the heart. They can affect who we are; they can move us interiorly; they can mobilise us into action. Or, by contrast, they can remain, as it were, intercepted, at one of the more superficial levels of the self—senses, intelligence, affections—without reaching the centre. Second, and conversely: our self can deal with external reality either from its heart or else from one of the other levels.

What makes the difference here? Obviously the extent to which the self is fully integrated as it encounters the world, whether as perceiver or as agent. If the world can reach my heart—the source of all thoughts, feelings and decisions—then my whole self, not just a part of it, is affected by the world. And when I act for the world out of my heart, then the world receives the whole, integrated reality which is myself, not just a part of it.

What does the Ignatian school of the heart have to say about all this? What exercises does it have to offer in order to foster this double spiritual movement? Let me make three suggestions as a way of concluding this article.

Contemplative Vision

If we read the world in a God-centred way, as suggested earlier, then the external world is not just a set of brute facts. It is made up of gifts, people and things in whom and in which the Giver dwells. God is in things; God gives them to us; God gives us God's own self in them, dwelling in them, working in them, descending to them (Exx 234-237). If that is so, then how can I confine them, when they impinge on me, simply at the level of the senses, of the mind, or of the emotions? They are holy and sacred, dwelt in by God; through them God's own self is loving me, calling me. I cannot but take them into my deepest centre so as to strike up a fruitful dialogue with them, and with God. My heart itself has to be involved in receiving the reality through which God is approaching me thus. God is seeking to dwell in the centre of the human self, not just on its surface.

The Ignatian school invites us to maintain a constant contemplative gaze on the real, a wide-ranging, loving regard for things in general. It acknowledges things, events and persons for what they are, but then recognises—re-cognises—they as living sacraments of God's presence and closeness in our lives. When we see everything as a gift, we are flooded with gratitude and desire. At the same time, we have no fear of breaking the iron bonds that hold the self as prisoner of its own interests. We can 'take leave of our self-love, desire and interest' (Exx 189.10) in our encounter with the world, in a movement of pure love, like that of God, free of distortions.

The Conversion of Sensibility

However, this kind of contemplative gaze depends—far more than we would like to believe—on our senses. We only approach things by seeing them, listening to them, touching them, smelling them, tasting them. Obviously our hearts are dependent on the senses if external reality is to impinge on us; but it is equally true that what we call our contemplation can only happen through the senses.

**We must learn
to experience
reality as
Jesus did**

We are all too well aware that our sensory filters are anything but innocent. We see things, listen to things, taste things in ways that are shaped by our own prior interests, and the same applies to the other senses as well. Our channels of perception and action need to be evangelized, therefore. If we want to look at reality as the Lord does, if we want reality to touch us, move us and inspire us as it did Jesus, we must learn to sense it as he did. We must gradually acquire a sensibility similar to that of the human Jesus, for whom all things, especially what was being abused, formed a *milieu divin*, a place of adoration, of encounter, and of service to God. He felt no need to use them as protection barriers for the self's distorting interests.

We must beware of conversions that are simply 'interior': experience tells us that they are not conversions at all. The unity of the human self expresses itself externally; its interiority is accessible through the different levels of its activity. Hence we can hardly speak of a converted person if the conversion has not permeated to every level. This would imply that the various levels were operating in complete independence.

Ignatius was aware intuitively of this problem and wanted to deal with it head-on. Only when my senses look at things, hear them, touch

them, smell them, in the same way as Jesus' senses did, will the reactions of my heart to what I experience resemble his. Before that stage, while I am still relying on my supposed 'interior' conversion, I can never be confident that my reaction to reality is truly Christian. In the specifics of everyday life, the majority of my decisions—those which make up the texture of my existence—will be made only at the level of the senses, not at that of the heart. Thus any authentic conversion to the Lord—any conversion that makes a difference to real life and is not just something we think about or want to happen—involves an ever growing conformity of our senses to those of the Lord. Prior to that stage, anything can happen. We are always something more than what we say that we want or think—however much this may challenge our innate narcissism.

Ignatius thought that the conversion of our sensibility to that of the Lord emerged from two kinds of exercise. It could be nourished by the wondering, grateful, loving contemplation of the mysteries of Christ's life; it could also emerge from a progressive forgetfulness of ourselves, leading us to dedicate ourselves to others. That was the price that had to be paid for the grace of seeing God in everything—as opposed to the habit of turning God into an object of our heart's acquisitiveness.



‘What the eye sees, the heart feels’, to quote a Spanish proverb. But the converse is also true: ‘what the heart does not feel, the eye does not see’. The different levels of the self are interconnected; they are not sealed compartments. The gospels often tell us of Jesus being moved in his guts; but such expressions are frequently preceded by verbs such as ‘see’, ‘move’, ‘go out to meet’, ‘disembark’. And conversely: only from this gut-level of compassion can Jesus address people deeply, see them in their full depth: ‘Woman, how great is your faith’ (Matthew 15:28); ‘Go in peace; your faith has saved you’ (Luke 7:50).

Progress is Possible

People whose senses and feelings are thus conformed to the Lord model what it is to be integrated. They are, in the end, miracles. Each day, such a person is growing in familiarity with God through whatever they do, in the quality that is both the basis and the goal of any apostolic spirituality. At the end of his life, Ignatius used to say that his life had been one of continual growth in ‘this devotion’.

Are we dealing here with something that is humanly impossible? Often it seems like that, but there are perhaps two facts which suggest the opposite. Firstly, there are real people, real women and men, who seem to live just like this. God and the Gospel seem to have become part of them, a kind of atmosphere which surrounds them—and this shows itself in everything they do, in their whole lives. They are at peace; they are centred; they are integrated; they are constantly open to the needs of others; God shines through them. Secondly, something happens as we get older and the surfaces of things confuse us less. We begin to suspect, and then to feel, that the grace of God is on offer and available for us too—a growing attunement to God that enables us to see everything with the divine eyes and the divine heart. Why not just accept it, instead of remaining paralyzed by our scepticism about such possibilities?

We began by speaking of three obsessions which grip the human heart when we draw on sources other than those of God, and orientate ourselves to a Kingdom other than God’s Kingdom. Then we went on to discuss the perennial, elusive temptation that leads us to try to solve the insecurities and fears within ourselves by following the acquisitive drives within our hearts. Finally, we have shown how difficult it is to

live in the world from our very hearts, and conversely to let the world actually enter our hearts. At every point I have tried to explain how the Ignatian school offers human therapies that heal the self's diseases. For we were right in claiming that it is not malice which is the central problem, but ignorance. That is why, in greater or lesser measure, we all need to pass, year after year, through the *scuela del affecto*, the school of the heart.

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