

# GROWING INTO GOD

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HOW ARE WE TO UNDERSTAND the process of growth promoted by Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*? It can be interpreted both as a psychological process and as a spiritual process. Perhaps we can see it as one process of human growth, described by two different languages, each of which distinctively enriches how we understand the dynamic of the Exercises.<sup>1</sup>

This article draws on the pioneering work of the US American Jesuit, W. W. Meissner, as a way of illustrating this claim.<sup>2</sup> It explores a few key concepts: the 'psychology of grace'; reality orientation and the First Week; the transvaluation of identity and the imitation of Christ; discernment; and asceticism.

## **Some Key Terms**

*Id, Ego, and Superego*

In psychoanalytic theory the psyche is composed of the id, the ego, and the superego. 'Id' refers to the energies of unconscious, instinctual, libidinal drives; 'superego' refers to attitudes arising from the introjected demands of parental and other authorities; 'ego' refers to the conscious, reality-orientated part of the psyche. Meissner describes the relationship between these elements of the psyche thus:

The function of the ego in the interaction between these structural components is to arbitrate between the forces of the id, the demands of the superego, and the demands of external reality to

<sup>1</sup> What is said here obviously presupposes a person in reasonable psychological health; the Exercises are unlikely to help, and may well do great harm to, people suffering from a pathology.

<sup>2</sup> Meissner's major works relating to Ignatian spirituality are: *Life and Faith: Psychological Perspectives on Religious Experience* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1987); *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); *To the Greater Glory: A Psychological Study of Ignatian Spirituality* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1999).

which the organism must adjust. The ego is, therefore, the agent of intrapsychic harmony and adjustment to external reality.<sup>3</sup>

### *Ego Strength*

Ego strength can be described as the ability of the ego to direct and control its energy in the face of the various pulls from the id, from the superego, and from outside forces. Sufficient ego strength implies a level of conscious self-control, restraining the drive of the id and the admonitions of the superego, and holding on to one's considered and internalised values and ideals in the face of external opposition.

### *Reality Orientation*

Reality orientation is the relationship between the facts as they actually are, for instance concerning self, other people, situations and the nature of relationships, and the way in which they are perceived by the individual concerned. For example, if a woman has grown up with a basic sense of mistrust owing to early life experiences, she probably regards other people as likely to let her down, to disappoint her, perhaps even actively to try to hurt her. Such a perspective will affect the way in which she relates. Thus, even if she is in a situation where the intentions of other people are neutral or indeed good regarding her, she is not likely to perceive this easily. To the extent that how she perceives the situation is different from how it actually is, her reality orientation is distorted.

Reality orientation also relates to self-perception: a person can have an over-inflated sense of self, of their abilities and worth; more commonly, they can have a low level of self-regard, and they can be effectively blind to much of the good in themselves.

### ***Ignatius, Identity and Psychological Growth in the Exercises***

Meissner discusses in psychological terms the processes that may have been at work in Ignatius (referred to as the pilgrim) during his conversion experience. He states:

<sup>3</sup> Meissner, *Life and Faith*, p. 24.

The substantive effect of this process was internal growth within the ego itself. Looked at solely from the point of view of the psychology of the ego, that growth is achieved through increasing integration within the ego and between ego and superego and by the progressive integration of instincts . . .

Such integration freed up energy and psychic potential, enriching Ignatius' self-structure and his sense of identity. Ignatius thus came to appropriate ever more deeply,

. . . a fuller, more realistic and more spiritual system of values. It is this same path of spiritual development that Ignatius proposed to exercitants following the programme of the Spiritual Exercises.<sup>4</sup>

Note how Meissner begins here by considering growth within the ego and then towards the end refers to 'spiritual development'.

Meissner sees the transformation of Ignatius' identity as of central importance to the overall pattern of growth. This transformation occurred as Ignatius took on a new set of values and made them his own. These new values, based largely on the insights that occurred during his convalescence from a serious illness, were at odds with his previous values and ideals. This conflict of internalised values in time produced a crisis of identity. Ignatius,

. . . had to experience a transvaluation of identity, a transformation of the value system and ideals that formed the core of his sense of identity. That transvaluation required, in a sense, an internal reorganization and resynthesis of . . . the pilgrim's psyche. The primary agency of that reconstruction was centred on the pilgrim's ego. The primary target was the superego, along with those narcissistic elements constituting the ego ideal.<sup>5</sup>

Transvaluation of identity as described by Meissner, then, involves the ego relinquishing one set of internalised values and internalising another set. Conversion in Ignatius—and by extension in others—can be understood as psychological growth:

<sup>4</sup>Meissner, *To the Greater Glory*, p. 613.

<sup>5</sup>Meissner, *To the Greater Glory*, p. 76.



There was an enrichment of the ego which achieved a fuller realisation of its own potential and a higher level of internal organization and synthesis. In a sense then, the transforming experience of Iñigo made him more fully, more authentically himself.<sup>6</sup>

### ***The Purpose of the Exercises***

Spiritual Exercises having as their purpose the overcoming of self and the ordering of one's life on the basis of a decision made in freedom from any disordered attachment.<sup>7</sup>

This heading summarises Ignatius' intention for the Exercises and involves two elements:

- 'the overcoming of self', which Ivens elaborates as a 'graced process of personal integration';

<sup>6</sup> Meissner, *To the Greater Glory*, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Translation from Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), p. 22.

- the ordering of life through a decision made as freely as possible, unhindered by anything within the person that reduces their freedom, keeps them attached to something harmful, or acts as a blind spot distorting perspective.

Ignatius hopes that exercitants will, by the grace of God, become more themselves through self-mastery, and thus be more free to 'order' their lives. In the Principle and Foundation, the exercitant is asked to own the truth that they are created for relationship with God: all else must be understood as either fostering or detracting from that relationship. If this orientation is appropriated, the person will then have at least the desire for the indifference described subsequently and thus the impetus for making the Exercises well. Or, to put the matter in psychological terms, their ego strength will be bolstered by the desire to be open to God's grace.

### ***A Possible Psychology of Grace***

In this dialogue between faith and psychology, the concept of grace can appear problematic. What does it mean to say that *God* acts in the concrete circumstances of daily life? Meissner addresses this theme by examining the *function* of grace in the person rather than by trying to prove its actual existence, since such proof is not possible from a purely psychological perspective. What we can do is to theorize on what the effects of grace might be, and on how, if grace is accepted as a given, they might be made manifest:

The basic principle is that grace works in and through the resources of the ego. Its influence is manifested in the vital capacity of the ego to perform its proper and autonomous function. In this framework, therefore, grace can be regarded as a dynamizing activation of the energy resources latent within the ego. Its effect is to reinforce, support and energize the ego in the exercise of its proper ego functions.<sup>8</sup>

Whether or not grace exists at all is a matter of faith. The point being made here is that the effects of grace should not be understood in almost magical terms, transforming the self from the outside. Grace

<sup>8</sup> Meissner, *Life and Faith*, p. 23.

can also, and more fruitfully, be understood as a power that energizes from within the normal structures of the human psyche. This claim converges with the solid theological principle that grace builds on nature and perfects it.

### ***The Grace of the First Week and the Reality Orientation of the Ego***

In the First Week the exercitant, this reasonably mature individual with a positive image of self and God is asked to reflect first on the nature of sin, and then specifically on their own sin. Up to this point in the Exercises the ego-ideal of the exercitant (the perception of the self) has been reinforced and strengthened by their reflection on the love of God for them and on their inherent self-worth. With the consideration of the Principle and Foundation, it is possible that some doubts about their self-image may creep in. However generously they have entered into the process, they are perhaps not totally indifferent to all but the will of God. This doubt is then increased by exercises on sinfulness. 'The guilt and shame connected with a deep recognition of one's sinfulness puts the exercitant's ego-ideal under pressure and begins the process of transformation of the sinful self.'<sup>9</sup> Even a well-integrated ego will probably have to contend with an ego-ideal that is at least to some extent unrealistic.

In the First Week, an exercitant can deepen their sense of God's love by discovering how it remains untouched despite their fallibility and sinfulness. Within the perspective of straightforward spiritual direction, this movement seems natural, spontaneous; it does not have to be forced. Love empowers the person to recognise the truth of themselves. In psychological terms, the greater the ego-strength, the more likely it is that an individual can accept the negative aspects of themselves. Then, as such acceptance occurs, that ego-strength increases yet further.

The First Week, then, can encourage a more realistic perspective on the self, a better reality orientation. It does this by stimulating changes in the ego-ideal within the context of a loving, supportive and

<sup>9</sup> Meissner, *To the Greater Glory*, p. 120.

accepting relationship—with God, and to some extent, with the director who tries to mirror God's acceptance.

### ***Transvaluation of Identity and the Imitation of Christ***

After the First Week, the exercitant sees reality differently. In ideal circumstances, they are moving towards the deeper, more realistic sense of identity just described. They are now open to a radical imitation of Christ as evoked in the meditation on Two Standards:

. . . first, poverty in opposition to riches; the second, reproaches or contempt in opposition to honour from the world; and the third, humility in opposition to pride. (Exx 146)

These three objects of desire which Ignatius puts before us as values to be internalised and lived out represent a significant challenge to most egos:

To internalise such standards and norms means to personalise them, to make them a functioning part of one's own inner psychic reality. In the process of internalisation, therefore, such values are modified, changed, given a uniqueness and specificity within the personality of which they are part. They must become an integral and functioning part of the person.<sup>10</sup>

As these values are internalised they in turn affect the identity, already changed by the experience of the First Week. This is more than the simple replacement of one set of values with another, bringing about a change in outlook and identity. The values offered to the exercitant by Ignatius are directed not only towards change but also towards growth. The growth envisaged is an increased desire freely to love and to serve in all things, a theme which recurs throughout the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks. The service invited from the exercitant is not simply a response to orders from a more powerful or more talented master, but a response drawn out of love—love for God, for Jesus, and for others. This desire for service can withstand opposition, because the exercitant has begun to recognise who they

<sup>10</sup> Meissner, *To the Greater Glory*, p. 78.

truly are. This service emerges naturally from of a growth in ego strength and in identity.

### ***Tools for Growth***

#### *Discernment of Spirits*

The Rules for Discernment of Spirits (which are more guidelines and practical counsels than rules as such) are written in terms determined by the theology and worldview of the sixteenth century. The person is seen as being acted upon by a number of external and internal forces: good spirits (or the Holy Spirit); bad spirits (the personification of evil, or its agents); and influences arising from within the person. Today, Ignatius' rules, when interpreted in the light of more contemporary assumptions, can still be used as guidelines for the spiritual life:

[Discernment] . . . can be broadly defined as the wisdom which enables a person to distinguish by inner sense (as well as by objective criteria) between the spiritually authentic and its opposite, between what is and is not of the Spirit. Its operation presupposes particular qualities and dispositions, which include psychological balance, self-knowledge and good judgment.<sup>11</sup>

These 'rules' provide the basis for much of the work of recognising and attending to areas of unfreedom, so central to the dynamic of the Exercises.

Seen theologically, discernment of spirits is concerned with the action of the Holy Spirit (the action of grace) within the believer, as a gift of God. Ignatius' full title is here instructive:

Rules to aid us towards perceiving and then understanding, at least to some extent, the various motions which are caused in the soul: the good motions that they may be received, and the bad that they may be rejected. (Exx 313)

The process of discernment of spirits involves reflection on inner movements, which may well be 'involuntary', and the attempt to understand where they are coming from and where they are leading, in order to act appropriately. This is not an absolute science, as the

<sup>11</sup> Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, p. 205.



phrases ‘aid us towards’ and ‘at least to some extent’ make clear. Nevertheless, the informal wisdom enshrined in such rules of thumb is helpful as we try to act reflectively.

Seen psychologically, the limitations of Ignatius’ framework appear in sharper relief. His approach is limited to conscious processes. He has never heard explicitly of the unconscious, and therefore assumes that what moves a person is accessible to reflection, and at least amenable to being perceived, however hard it may be to understand. For contemporary psychology, the matter is more complex, even if the rules retain some usefulness within the realm of the conscious, particularly as regards growth in self-knowledge, and hence in the capacity to change or develop in areas of weakness.

The Rules for Discernment are based on a particular way of perceiving the human person, on a belief that the action of God is moving individuals towards greater wholeness, towards a greater integration of the person they were created to be. If psychology, too, assumes a basic orientation in human beings towards lifelong growth and integration, it can articulate similar principles and practical advice concerned with how to become more fully oneself. It can help teach us how to receive and act upon those influences that direct us towards fuller life, and to reject what keeps us from growing.

#### *Asceticism and Psychological Growth*

Asceticism is an element in many approaches to the spiritual life. Asceticism is a broader reality than mere self-discipline, the attempt to control detrimental influences or impulses (important and essential though this may often be). Asceticism also involves renouncing things which are in themselves good for the sake of a higher value. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, this higher value is described as love of God, or as God’s greater glory.

The asceticism of the Exercises varies. It can be expressed in simple instructions regarding the way in which an exercitant can adapt their environment in the First Week in order to maintain an appropriate mood: ‘I should not think about pleasant or joyful things’ (Exx 78); ‘I will deprive myself of all light, by closing shutters and doors while I am in my room’ (Exx 79). It can be a matter of penance (Exx 82-86); it can also be more theologically expressed in the self-abnegation of the Third Degree of Humility. Throughout the Exercises asceticism is directed towards the ideals expressed in the Principle and

Foundation: namely, that exercitants may free themselves from anything that hinders their progress towards the end for which they were created, that is of being in a loving relationship with God.

In the Exercises of the First Week Ignatius encourages the exercitant to consider areas of sin and unfreedom. He offers suggestions for penance, not as a punishment but rather as a means towards growth in freedom. In his discussion of penance, which he is careful to distinguish from its extremes of neurotic guilt or masochistic behaviour, Meissner sets out some of the possible effects of penance. He states:

Penance . . . represents a form of self-assertion in the face of forces tending to diminish one's autonomous functioning. It is equivalent to assuming responsibility for one's own self-direction and maturity, and thereby constitutes a decisive reinforcement of the independence of the self, particularly the ego subsystem, particularly *vis-à-vis* instinctual attachments and entanglements, through the execution of self-disciplinary action. The ego, in this process, assumes active mastery of instinctual impulses and desires, thus establishing and later maintaining its authentic control. When this dynamism has become an internalised and synthesized part of the functioning self, it can be said that the advance from contrition to penance involves a development in ego-capacity and another step towards self-maturation.<sup>12</sup>

Penance and mortification are, along with prayer, suitable means for seeking and disposing oneself for God's grace. Psychologically speaking, penance undertaken in this fashion represents a translation into positive action of spiritual desires and purposes. Consequently, it requires directive activity of the ego, which conceives of the purpose, selects the means, directs and organizes its energies to seek its objective, and translates this energy into effective action by its executive capacity.<sup>13</sup>

A decision to take on penance, therefore, is the fruit of reflection and discernment about the movements experienced during the retreat. When faced with feelings and thoughts that undermine growth in freedom and love, the exercitant may take on a penance as a means

<sup>12</sup> Meissner, *To the Greater Glory*, p. 168.

<sup>13</sup> Meissner, *To the Greater Glory*, pp. 172-173.

towards establishing greater ego control at the service of their chosen values.

There is an obvious danger that the process comes to appear as a matter of 'no pain, no gain', of effort and straining at spiritual growth. But here we should recall Meissner's approach to grace as energizing the resources of the ego. In this perspective, the process becomes one of 'graced collaboration'.<sup>14</sup> It is an active not a passive spirituality envisaged here, one energized by God.

Another central idea in Ignatian spirituality is the principle of *agere contra*, going against. Whereas healthy penance is always a response to sin or to what frustrates growth, *agere contra* may involve voluntarily giving up something good in itself in the hope of developing greater freedom, or, in psychological terms, of attaining greater ego-control. If the exercitant has a particular attachment, effort is directed towards its opposite. So: if you are tempted to shorten the hour of prayer, then you should try to extend it a little beyond the hour (Exx 13); similarly if you feel repugnance towards desiring poverty (as opposed to the indifference towards it of the Principle and Foundation), you should actively ask to be placed in a situation of poverty (Exx 157):

The objective here as always is to strengthen the position of the exercitant by helping him gain greater control of the psychic forces at work in his soul. Understanding and insight are essential to effective ego-functioning, but they do not constitute the total realm of effective ego-function. Sources of motivation must be brought into play, if gains achieved through insight are to be consolidated and made effective.<sup>15</sup>

Ignatian asceticism promotes ego-control. It is undertaken discerningly. It is not a matter of general principles: 'in situation *x* always do *y*'. Rather, it emerges from the exercitant's reflective sifting of their experience and their reactions, leading to greater self-knowledge and freedom, and helping them become more themselves, less determined by 'inordinate attachments'. Rightly understood, the process has nothing to do with self-absorption, with navel-gazing, or with narcissistic perfectionism, despite the language sometimes used.

<sup>14</sup> Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Meissner, *To the Greater Glory*, p. 131.

The aim is always a move away from self-preoccupation and towards the greater love and service of God and of others. But this love is possible only if one possesses oneself enough to give oneself away.

### ***The Dialogue Continues***

Modern psychology reveals much about the Spiritual Exercises. Perhaps it tends to distort the balance between God's action and the role of the exercitant, although there are many resources for avoiding this difficulty.<sup>16</sup> In any case, there is no need to hold that psychological interpretations of the *Spiritual Exercises* need converge completely with more conventionally theological approaches. We should simply acknowledge the existence of some common ground. A psychologist may not necessarily be comfortable with the concept of grace, but they might nevertheless acknowledge a holistic concept of personal growth. If for their part a spiritual director can move beyond quasi-magical understandings of God's action, and see the grace of the Exercises working in and through a human process, then there is some basis for dialogue. The world-view of each remains different, but they are not mutually exclusive—or at least not totally so. We can draw on each perspective in complementary ways as we continue exploring what it is to be human.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Meissner's own article in this collection, 'The Ignatian Paradox', pp. 33-46.