

IGNATIUS LOYOLA AND GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

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HOW CAN WE SAY GOD LOVES US? What does it mean to use that language? The fine tissue of the life of spirit needs constant attention and regular revising of its language to express what is sometimes so faintly felt, so easily swamped, and yet is at the core of human life. We need words that move us, words of wonder, words of wisdom. It can happen, though, that what sounds right at one moment may have implications that in the long term are not right. Love is one of those words that touches us deeply. The need has been in us since the beginning: 'it is not good that the man should be alone' (Genesis 2:18). Yet do we need the love of God? Does God need our love? What does it mean to say that God loves us?

Language of a loving God is commonplace in today's spirituality. One could be forgiven for wondering whether, sometimes at least, the language of an unconditionally loving God might be almost the equivalent of a useful code for refusal to believe in hell-fire and purgatorial punishment. On the other hand, acceptance of God's unconditional love is an invitation to us to rise above the oldest archaism of the human spirit. In my own words elsewhere:

The invitation is to aspire to a level of spirit-filled existence that so far too few have managed to sustain for more than fleeting moments: a disclaimer of self-interest in divine order and a freedom to be loved and to love in the disorder of life's experience, to accept in faith God's unconditional love and faithfully respond to it.¹

Throughout our lives today, faith and experience may require that we hold together, as a paradox in the mystery of the divine, both the

¹ Antony F. Campbell, *God First Loved Us: The Challenge of Accepting Unconditional Love* (New York: Paulist, 2000), xi.

powerlessness of a loving God—who rages, weeps and rejoices *with* us—and the ‘otherness’ of God. Perhaps we have to hold together in one faith the God who is ‘utterly other’ (of whom we can hardly speak and had best be silent), and the God who has been and is ‘here among us’ (with whom we must engage).

This challenge apart, in an earlier day God’s love was seldom expressed in terms of unconditional love. The language of an unconditionally loving God is absent from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola. Does its reality, nevertheless, have a place in his thought and prayer? Using his text, can we find it there for ourselves? I think we can. I would like to suggest that the Fourth Week’s *Contemplatio* throws helpful light on what precedes it.

Unconditional love might have been wrapped for Ignatius in the mystic heights of courtly romance; he dreamed about it. Whoever she was (possibly the Infanta Catarina), he was not in her league.² Fortunately for the future, Ignatius’ daydreams moved beyond the romantic imaginings and took a turn for the spiritual. Ignatius Loyola came to the life of the spirit from the life of a soldier. In those days,

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unconditional loyalty was something every soldier knew about; you died for it. Three of Ignatius’ brothers died for it. Ignatius starts with loyalty and moves towards love.

The unconditional in the life of Ignatius before his conversion was the loyalty a knight owed his lord. Ignatius’ first lord was Juan Velázquez, ‘a noble in the finest traditions of old Spain’,³ who, however,

² W. W. Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 240-241.

³ Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 18, and n. 4.

died in disfavour. With the death of Velázquez, Ignatius transferred his services to the duke of Nájera and was facing the French on his behalf at Pamplona, capital of Navarre, when the cannonball shattered his leg. Ignatius knew the loyalty of the soldier. As anyone at the time knew, it was a two-way loyalty. The soldier was expected to be loyal to his lord; the lord was expected to be loyal to his vassal. Ignatius was brought up at court and was enamoured of the Infanta; this was the air that Ignatius breathed. The ideal of chivalry articulated ideas of honour, loyalty and disinterested self-sacrifice, and 'softened the harshness of the military code which was its heart'.⁴ If we are pained by the martial imagery, we need to remember that somewhere around the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century the emotional and intellectual attitude to the activity of war changed. As we well know, Ignatius Loyola lived, experienced, and wrote several centuries before that. The ideals of chivalry then were the structures of Ignatius' world; veiled in these structures may be his understanding of the love of God.

A Loving God

All language about God has to work with analogies. We can only speak of God by analogy, by comparison with something else, applying the appropriate safeguards. Whatever faith-claims may be made, as a rule we do not have direct sense-experience of God. Language about God's love for us is necessarily figurative. When faith has made the leap to the existence of God (or from the end-point of an argument for the existence of God to the actual commitment of oneself to the acceptance of God), what does it mean to say God loves us?

For us human beings, at a first level at least, love implies extensive involvement of the senses: sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell. Aspects and circumstances vary so much, but so often there is a glance, a touch, a kiss, holding, hugging, sexual play and bonding; there's a closeness physically and emotionally. And, of course, there is so much more: understanding, intimacy, acceptance, commitment.... It is the sense-experience that is lacking with God: no glance, no touch, no sound. In the context of faith, God's impact on us may be felt; it is our own sensory contact with God that is lacking. How do we

⁴ J. M. Roberts, *The Penguin History of Europe* (London: Penguin, 1996), 160.

talk of love where mutuality is so stretched, where the disparity is as wide as that between creator and creature?

**Can we speak
of God
needing us?**

We rightly speak of our needing God; can we also speak of God needing us? Perhaps yes, but if so it shakes up a lot of classical theological understanding. If not, it puts an enormous weight on the analogical or metaphorical aspect of our language about God's love. What might it mean to love someone and not need them? Acceptance, benevolence, commitment (the ABC of love) are all very well, but most of us need something more—something somewhere along the spectrum from affection to passion. Even at the extreme end of the spectrum, passion need not be excluded from our relationship with God. Not from our side. Our being passionately in love with God may take many forms, but it is possible. The faith-statement often attributed to St Teresa of Avila, 'though you damn me I will love you still', is as good an example as we get of such passionate love. Not from God's side either. I've heard those I'd trust—the wise and theologically well-informed—speak of our being passionately loved by God.

If we find all this passionate love a bit far away from where we are, it may help to go back to the opposite: cold indifference. Yet, although it is not, of course, the whole story, there is much to be said for imaging our God as accepting of us, benevolent toward us, committed to us—where it is OK for us to be in the divine doghouse because we believe that, despite our flaws, our frailty, our failures, God is committed to us. Deeply displeased (there are other ways of putting that), but committed to us.

Put bluntly: it is tricky to say God loves us when normally the experience of the senses is out of the question. A possible balance to the coldness early in the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* lies in our awareness that Ignatius Loyola was a highly emotional man. His spiritual diary is awash with his tears. The emotion was felt; it was evidently there in the man, available to him in his reflection on his experience.

The Spiritual Exercises

Ignatius starts his Contemplation for Obtaining Love (Exx 230-237) with the dry note that love is more a matter of works than words (*más en las obras que en las palabras*). He goes on to talk about mutual

communication (*comunicación de las dos partes*). We need to push the idea of communication further than his examples of knowledge, honours, wealth and so on; we need to be alert to the 'mutual', which Ignatius brings out in his repeated prayer: you, O God, have given to me, so I give to you.

We can broaden the prayer massively; we can also feel its sheer terror—at least in some of its words. For example, 'Take and receive ... all my memory'—'not on your sweet nelly, dear Lord; it sounds like the equivalent to Alzheimer's, and I don't want that.' Unfolding the contemplation itself, before the prayer or colloquy at the end of each point, Ignatius talks about remembering the benefits we have received from God (creation, salvation, special gifts); he talks about life and all the ways we can experience that in the environment (plants, animal kingdom, humanity); from there he moves out to the whole of creation, daring to speak of a working God just as Genesis dared speak of a resting God, and ending up with God as the source of all goodness. He dares even to speak of a God who '*desea dárseme*', who longs to give God's own self to me. That is love. The bulk of the contemplation is a reflection on the love of God, a reflection that operates out of faith, that invites our senses to play on the objects of our sense-experience and tie these in faith into God.

Ignatius does not sidestep what it means to talk about God loving us; rather, he comes at it from a particular angle. For Ignatius, as we have seen, love is grounded in deeds more than words and is a mutual communication between lover and beloved. Not surprisingly, therefore, the evidence of God's love for us is sketched in the facts, available to the eye of the believer, rather than in the weaving of words. We can see what we believe God does for us and around us; it is a further step in faith to attempt to find words for the emotions of God, to speak of God's love for us. It is interesting that the process of the Spiritual Exercises begins with God (Principle and Foundation, First Week), turns to Jesus Christ for his life, death and resurrection (Second to Fourth Weeks) and at the end of this introduces the Contemplation for Obtaining Love (*para alcanzar amor*). The implications require reflection.

The Principle and Foundation

The Principle and Foundation, at the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*, is surprisingly loveless—the text is devoid of any mention of the word. In the Gospel parable, Jesus suggests that builders and warriors prudently count the costs before committing themselves (Luke 14:28-32). From the start of the Exercises, with the Principle and Foundation, the process of counting the cost begins. Later in the Exercises, during the Second Week (above all, in the Kingdom and the Two Standards), Ignatius asks for chivalrous commitment to Jesus' cause. Costs must still be counted, and cost-counting is a hard-headed business.

The opening statement is one that we could hardly make today. Ignatius says: man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord (Exx 23—*El hombre es criado para alabar, hacer reverencia y servir a Dios nuestro Señor*). The issue is not inclusive language; that is important, but it is easy: 'We are created ...'. The more significant change is massive and facing it is not easy. To be responsible today, we would have to preface this sentence with 'we believe': 'We believe that we are created ...'. There is a deep gulf between an age when an affirmation of faith could be made as a matter of fact, without any thought of faith, and an age when accuracy demands the avowal of faith.

***In our age,
faith cannot
be taken
for granted***

We might also wonder whether the absence of love from Ignatius' sentences reflects the gulf between the sixteenth century and now. Not so. In 1570, Mary Queen of Scots wrote to her four-year-old son that she hoped he would know that he had in her 'a loving mother that wishes you to learn in time to love, know and fear God'.⁵

The First Week

The First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* is taken up with what is today the immensely unpopular theme of sin: first the angels, Adam and Eve, the single lost soul; then my own sins and my own insignificance; finally the horrors of hell-fire. For many a modern, such thoughts and imaginings are miles away from reality—and miles away from the idea of an unconditionally loving God. What they can hold to is the utter

⁵ Antonia Fraser, *Mary Queen of Scots* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), 421.

seriousness of human life. Christian faith tells us that we are not on this earth for the fun of it. Today, with global communications, we know enough of the horrors inflicted by humans or by nature not to take this life lightly. There are no easy answers, unless we stay with superficiality; at a level of depth, we face either absurdity or mystery.

The imagery of Ignatius is pretty brutal; it is the imagery of the time. Dr Johnson's observation that the knowledge that you are to be hanged concentrates the mind wonderfully may be true; it is certainly unduly blunt and, to many today, highly insensitive. But that was over two centuries ago. Early in the last century, James Joyce, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, could have a preacher say: 'God would not be God if He did not punish the transgressor', even if for some today, God would not be God if God did. So we recognise in Ignatius the thought and language of his time. We cannot let it obscure for us the essential: if we believe there is a God, then nothing is more central in life.

Being central is not the same thing as being certain. For Ignatius, the sinfulness of specific actions was certain. The consequences of such sinfulness were equally certain. For many of those who believe in a world with God, there is no proposition so certain in today's world as to warrant staking eternal salvation on it. For a chivalrous soldier in the sixteenth century, there was one thing certain enough to die for: loyalty to one's liege lord.

Commitment to Christ

The Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises opens with a prayer of deliberate commitment to the cause of Christ. The imagery of chivalry is everywhere. The human king is there, at the pinnacle of earthly prestige. His offer is irresistible; the cause is unquestioned, and the burdens will be shared by followers and king alike. Any soldier with the slightest sense of honour would sign up to the cause without hesitation.

The whole fabric of the world of chivalry is the background against which Ignatius portrays Christ's call for commitment. The irresistible offer is made. Those signing up are admired. The soldier with any sense of honour will set out to distinguish himself. Unspoken here, but utterly real, is the conviction that the follower's commitment to Christ is matched by Christ's commitment to the follower. As anyone at the

time knew, loyalty was two-way: the soldier was expected to be loyal to the lord and the lord was expected to be loyal to the vassal. Christ's commitment could be counted on and taken for granted. Readers today will be aware of the masculinity of much of this imagery from centuries long past, but perhaps not of its mutuality.

**Readers must
find Ignatius'
meaning for
themselves**

What is wonderfully liberating about the text of the *Exercises* is that at certain key points Ignatius does not spell out his meaning in detail. It is left for readers to do it for themselves. So here. The 'cause of Christ' is put in broad general terms: to conquer the whole world and all the enemies, and so to enter into the glory of my Father (Exx 95.4—*conquistar todo el mundo y todos los enemigos, y así entrar en la gloria de mi Padre*). The nature of the 'conquest' is not spelled out; neither is 'the glory of my Father'.

We are free to fill these out for ourselves. We are not bound to images of redemption; we can be free for images of salvation. 'The glory of my Father' can be our recognition of who we are, our recognition of the achievement involved in our becoming who we are, and our recognition of the value that is ours in the eyes of our God. At least, that is a good start.

In what follows in the *Exercises*, hell and redemption do have a part to play, even if a restricted one; this is sixteenth-century theology after all. But right at the beginning, we are free to make our choices. We can envisage a conquest that is free of negative overtones and that instead involves the overwhelming conviction of God's commitment to this 'whole world and all the enemies'—God's seeing a value in us that can so often be hidden from us in all the horrors of too much human life. In such an understanding, we are not so much redeemed from a power that holds us bound and must be conquered. Rather, we are saved, overwhelmed, by the awareness of our right relationship with God that is truly called salvation. For Ignatius, the Trinity contemplate the human fate of hell and the human need for redemption and they decide on the Incarnation. Ignatius does not spell out a theology of this incarnation and redemption. For us, the incarnation—Christ's becoming 'God here among us'—can be the expression of God's commitment to us, of God's capacity to value and hold precious all that is human (see Isaiah 43:4). Must God punish the transgressor? Isaiah does not seem to think so (Isaiah 43:25) and nor does Job (Job 7:20-21).

The Life, Death and Resurrection of Christ

Subsequent prayer in the Spiritual Exercises, with a few exceptions, is dedicated to contemplating the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The commitment to Christ has been made. The leader is put under the microscope and studied in minute detail. The aim is to enhance the follower's commitment. The assumption of the leader's commitment is automatic.

In contemplating the events of Christ's Passion, the petition of the first contemplation in particular notes that it is 'for my sins' that Christ suffers (Exx 193—*porque por mis peccados va el Señor a la pasión*). Quite rightly, this can be understood in terms of my need for redemption from sin. Interestingly though, in the second contemplation Ignatius shifts the focus from sin and speaks simply of the suffering Christ bore 'for me' (Exx 203—*tanta pena que Christo pasó por mí*). Without claiming to know precisely what Ignatius might have meant by the shift, we are entitled to put our emphasis on the incarnation as God's great saving act, from which Christ's passion and death follow as the natural results of sharing our human life to the full. To put this sharply: Christ's incarnation need not be seen as merely the necessary prelude to his suffering and death which alone are what redeem us; instead, Christ's incarnation itself—his becoming one of us—can be seen as the expression of God's commitment to humanity, and Christ's suffering and death are then the inevitable consequence of his life, of his values, and of the way he lived them in that particular period of time. This is 'suffering for my sins'. It is a sharing in human life that, in the 'sinfulness' of that life, can have violent and appalling consequences.

Psychologically, it makes good sense to have the process of the contemplation of Jesus' life precede the Contemplation for Obtaining Love (or 'for recognising love', as we shall see below). When we have absorbed through all the senses what human life and suffering meant to Jesus, how deeply Jesus must have found value in all the ordinariness and burden that is part and parcel of human living, at that point we are better prepared to accept the extraordinary faith-claim of God's love for us. As at the transfiguration, so in the resurrection appearances, some hint is given of the value God puts on human life. Against the background of the resurrection, it is appropriate to become increasingly aware of the love of God for us. What has gone before is

not Christ's suffering in order to free us from sin. It is the fullness of salvation—the awareness of the value God sets on human life, the awareness of the love God has for us—that frees us to live abundantly.

The Contemplation for Recognising Love

It is against this background that we come to the Contemplation for Obtaining Love. The Spanish has '*para alcanzar amor*'. I believe it is best understood as 'for recognising love', becoming fully aware of, coming to grips with God's love, grasping or reaching an understanding of God's love for us—before turning to the immensity involved in our response. The Spanish title is suitably ambiguous; it has the advantage of making space for the dual focus of the contemplation as a whole: primarily on God's love for us; secondarily on our response.

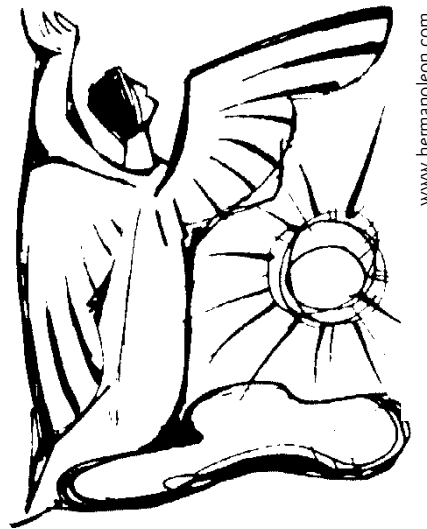
'Obtaining love' is a traditional English rendering; it is loaded and too easily misunderstood. 'Obtaining' or 'attaining' or 'arousing' are all focused on the prayer we are to make within the exercise; they do not take adequate account of the contemplation itself that Ignatius wrote, which in each part precedes the prayer. In Ignatius' preamble, the inner recognition (*cognoscimiento interno*) of God's goodness to us and love for us precedes the concern for our response. The prayer, repeated at the end of each part, is focused on our return of love to God, balanced by 'give me only your love and your grace' at the prayer's end. Fr Caswall's rendering in one of his hymns does justice to the core of the contemplation:

I love thee, O thou Lord most high,
Because thou first hast lovèd me.

The contemplation itself, in its core, focuses on God's love for us. We do not 'obtain' love; it has been given us. This contemplation does not invite us to 'obtain' God's love; it invites us to contemplate and realise the love from God that has been given us and continues to be given us, not as reward but as a free gift—like the sun from above and the waters from a spring. We are entitled to speak in faith of the experience of God's commitment to us, God's love for us.

It may be that in Ignatius' eyes, we are not justified in calling that commitment and that love unconditional—although the sun and the spring are. The fate of the sinner, as portrayed by Ignatius, argues against the unconditional. In feudal eyes, treachery wiped out any

obligation on the part of the liege lord. Such reality had to be present to Ignatius' mind. There is an uncertainty that only a commitment in faith eradicates. Even today we know that we cannot argue our way to the acceptance of love, much less to God's unconditional love; we believe it, and rejoice. We do not know that there is a God; we may believe. We do not know whether our God saves the few, saves the many, or saves the lot—all of us, including those we don't approve of. We choose, we believe, we may hope.



From the beginning, Scripture can give us hope: 'Never again will I doom the earth because of human sin, *since the desires of the human heart are evil from the start*; nor will I ever again strike down all living beings, as I have done'⁶—God is committed to us in all of our frailty (see Isaiah 54:9-10). We are able to love each other, despite knowing the flaws of those we love and who love us. Dare we deny that God, who knows our flaws far better than we do, is able to love us too? As with any love, we cannot argue our way to God's love for us. We can eliminate some of the obstacles and then hope for the leap of faith. The invitation is not to look on the miseries of Ignatius' world or ours; it is rather the invitation to look for the goodness of God within us and around us—to see ourselves as God would see us.

What Ignatius offers to God repeatedly in this prayer—'Take, Lord, and receive (*Tomad, Señor, y recibid*)'—is worth noting. It is basically everything: liberty, memory, understanding, will, possessions. If God took us up on this offer literally, we would be in for a shock, left with life and little else. In the context of this prayer, we are entitled to reflect on just how much Ignatius must have experienced as God's giving and loving. Ignatius' phrase was 'your love and your grace (*vuestro amor y gracia*)'. For us, perhaps that may bear reformulation:

⁶Genesis 8:21, translation adapted from the *New American Bible* and emphasis added.

‘your free gift of unconditional love’. Even further: is the unconditional quality of that love precisely what enables us to hear the invitation to accept and to respond?

Exercises in prayer are not studies in theology. The underlying theology may be visible; it is not explicitly addressed. Here, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, we may note that sin is present early in the piece without an explicit focus on God’s love for the sinner. We may also note that in the final reflection on God’s love there is not an explicit focus on the sinfulness of those who are so loved. That the two are in the same little book suggests that Ignatius could hold them together. The invitation today to Christian faith, and to each one of us, may be to hold together explicitly both God’s love and human sinfulness: we are loved, sinners though we are.

Once the Principle and Foundation and the prayer associated with it have enabled someone to establish the place of God in their life, the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks of the *Spiritual Exercises* take them into the life of Jesus Christ. At the end of this journeying, the person may be more ready to appreciate God’s love for them that has been there from the outset—like the sun. Like the sun, God’s love for us has not been offered as a reward to be earned but is presented as a given to be treasured. Like the sun, it is there.

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