SPIRITUAL DESOLATION IN TODAY'S WORLD

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Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard, they have trampled down my portion, they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness. They have made it a desolation; desolate, it mourns to me. The whole land is made desolate, but no one lays it to heart. (Jeremiah 12:10-11)

IN THE DISCERNMENT RULES, IGNATIUS describes desolation by contrasting it with consolation. It is 'everything the contrary of the third rule' (Exx 317.1), the rule which describes consolation. Yet we are not dealing with two equal influences, two equal sources of attraction and repulsion. The normal state is consolation, and desolation is a deviation from this state which happens during certain, perhaps lengthy, periods of our lives, but which is always transitory and unstable.

The Ignatian Texts

Even literary considerations help us to put desolation in its place. The paragraph in the *Spiritual Exercises* that deals with consolation (Exx 316) is well structured. Three kinds of consolation are described one after the other in separate sentences, giving a sense of growth towards a climax and of internal harmony. The paragraph seems to move towards a goal. We end up satisfied and whole in the Creator and Lord.

The paragraph describing desolation (Exx 317) is not like this. The feelings and states of mind that Ignatius evokes here are thrown together. They are piled up, as though he wanted to convey a sense of oppression, disorientation and perplexity. 'Here we are out of joint', he seems to be saying to us; feelings just happen, and hit us without our knowing what they are. They seem to destroy the personality, reducing us to some primitive life-form. We are in a world of darkness, of disturbance and temptation, of conflict and listlessness, of sadness. We

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4th rule: The fourth, of spiritual desolation. I call desolation everything the contrary of the third rule, such as darkness of the soul, disturbance in it, movement to things low and earthly, the disturbance of various agitations and temptations, moving to lack of confidence, without hope, without love, and its finding itself all lazy, tepid, sad, and as if separated from its Creator and Lord. For just as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts which come out of consolation are contrary to the thoughts which come out of desolation.

cannot actively interpret our situation; we only feel it. Even the tentative 'as if' which introduces Ignatius' litany of disturbances—in contrast to the clear descriptions of Exx 316—reinforces the sense of instability. It reminds us of another 'as if', in the Two Standards, where we 'imagine as if the chief of all enemies were seated in that great plain of Babylon' (Exx 140).

The first significant word in Exx 317 is 'darkness', a word which Ignatius substituted for the one he had written earlier: 'blindness'. 'Darkness' suggests something which is somehow part of the external climate, a transitory experience rather than a permanent impairment. Darkness can turn to light, whereas blindness can only be cured by a miracle. Nevertheless, this darkness, like the disturbance that comes next, is a darkness 'of the soul'. It affects the person's whole interior life.

Such a state makes the person more vulnerable to temptation. If a person has lost control of their life, something or someone else has taken them over. 'Base and earthly things' provoke specific demands which have to be satisfied urgently, sometimes to the point of obsession. The double expression is typical of Ignatius, and the language has a neo-Platonic tinge. But in fact things become 'base and earthly' only when the people using them lose their capacity to transcend them, when people can no longer go to the roots of things and recognise the source of their beauty, usefulness, and meaning.

A person in desolation is moved primarily by instincts of power and pleasure. Their human potential is inhibited, and they live in a conflict

between contrary agitations and temptations. They are like a doomed ship in the middle of the ocean. They cannot strike out in any direction, nor can they maintain themselves. They are just going under.

Ignatius goes on to name symptoms of a more spiritual character. These contrast directly with the third of the mental states which he names as typical of consolation. Instead of an increase in faith, hope and charity, here we find them lacking. And as a consequence, instead of experiencing interior joy leading to quiet and peace in the Creator and Lord, the person in desolation has a tendency to feel listless, tepid, sad, and '*as if* (because desolation in itself does not bring about a separation) separated from its Creator and Lord'.

This sense of separation is the last symptom that Ignatius describes, and it marks the most acute suffering that afflicts people in desolation. God, the source of life and of reliable love, seems absent, and the person loses touch with what they want. The result is disturbance, agitation, temptation; they no longer know what they want. Perhaps they will be attracted to something which reminds them of the attractiveness of the God who is so distant, so inaccessible. But it will not satisfy them. Their quest for surrogates to relieve their anxiety leaves them worse off than they were before. One must therefore not be harsh with someone in desolation (Exx 7). The person is a victim, albeit of themselves.

One must not be harsh with someone in desolation

If consolation is the opposite of desolation, then the same opposition exists between the thoughts that emerge from the two states. It is as though Ignatius were saying: 'do not be too concerned with the ideas you get in this state, because crazinesses of all kinds may well arise. Concentrate more on the simple recognition that you *are* in desolation, and take appropriate steps to get beyond it as quickly as possible.'

So much for Ignatius' description of desolation in the Discernment Rules. But Ignatius has left us other accounts. Perhaps the text closest to the Rule that we have just been describing comes in one of the so-called *Autograph Directories*:

> Desolation is the opposite [of consolation], coming from the evil spirit and gifts of the same. Its components are war as opposed to peace, sadness as opposed to spiritual joy, hope in base things as

> opposed to hope in lofty ones; similarly, base as opposed to lofty love, dryness as opposed to tears, wandering of mind as opposed to base things versus elevation of mind. (Dir 1.12)

Here the contrast with consolation is drawn even more sharply; this text is Ignatius' strongest statement that desolation comes from 'the evil spirit', who is trying to disillusion us and to hold us back in our growth towards God. It is not that we are lacking in hope; rather, we are placing it in 'base things' rather than living hope as a theological virtue. We cannot live without hope—what matters is where we have placed that hope, what gives us strength and endurance, what our goals are. In the end, the placing of hope in 'base things' will inevitably lead to sadness or disappointment.

Obviously desolation has a particular effect on the life of prayer: finding time for prayer and perseverance in prayer become impossible. One reason why so many people abandon prayer is probably that they have not properly resolved situations of desolation, and are therefore leaving them unaddressed. In Ignatius' famous letter to Teresa Rejadell there is another description of desolation that brings out the connections with the life of prayer:

> … our old enemy places before us every possible obstacle to divert us from what has been begun, attacking us very much. He acts completely counter to the first lesson (consolation), often plunging us into sadness without our knowing why we are sad. Nor can we pray with any devotion, or contemplate, or even speak and hear of things about God our Lord with any interior savour or relish. And not stopping there: … he brings us to think that we have been completely forgotten by God, and we end up with the impression that we are completely separated from Our Lord. Everything we have done, everything we were wanting to do, none of it counts. But we can see from all this what is the cause of so much fear and weakness on our part: at one time we spent too long a time with our eyes fixed on our own miseries, and subjected ourselves to his deceptive lines of thought.[1]

[1] Ignatius to Teresa Rejadell, 18 June 1536, MHSJ EI 1, 99-107, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, translated and edited by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), 129-135, here 133.

'Not even all the gold on earth can provide rest and peace to one of these tired souls'[2]

There is an element found only in this important text which deserves comment. Strictly speaking, 'our old enemy' cannot detain us or divert us directly—what the enemy does, rather is to put obstacles in the way. The enemy works from outside, as it were, rather than by having any interior control over us.

One aspect of our suffering is sadness, a sadness which seems to be 'without cause' (like the consolation of Exx 330), because we do not know where it has come from or where it is leading, and which is therefore all the more overwhelming. We can hardly bear to hear of the things of God; it becomes intolerable for us to pray or even to make time for prayer. The final sentences in this paragraph describe the affective state that arises from such thoughts, in terms very reminiscent of psychic depression and low self-esteem. The evil spirit, as it were, humiliates the person in desolation: they lose any sense of

[2] The pictures in this article come from illustrations for Dante's *Inferno* by Gusave Doré (1832-1883).

their own integrity and value, and are subjected to a destructive force. Nevertheless, there is no such thing as 'desolation without preceding cause'. Every desolation has a human cause, whether individual, collective or structural.

Desolation is widespread today, and we often live through it without reacting to it, as if it were without remedy. Some of desolation's typical features are genuinely spiritual, arising in the context of a lived faith in God. Desolation occurs when this faith is disturbed: in Ignatian language, desolation of this kind can happen only if the Principle and Foundation of the Exercises is inspiring our lives. If our sense of the Principle and Foundation is becoming overshadowed, if we are tempted to destroy the harmony that it implies and to be driven by less disinterested or more self-centred values, sooner or later we will fall into desolation. For we are not made for such narrow things, and yet in such a state we are living as if God did not exist. There are also factors of a more psychological order. In our psyches, desolation produces the feelings of sadness, darkness, insecurity and self-absorption that the Ignatian Rule mentions.

Before continuing, it is necessary to recognise two states that are not desolation, or at least not simply desolation. Firstly there can be painful or disconcerting feelings that are positive. Sadness at one's sins, shame and confusion, the remorse caused by the good spirit in hardened sinners (Exx 314), and other such feelings are within the sphere of consolation. They are calling us towards liberation.

Secondly there can be an overlap between desolation and depression. Desolations can arise from our compulsiveness, from false and scrupulous arguments, from narcissistic perfectionism. Depression can be endogenous or it can be a reaction to external circumstances, and desolation can tap into either form. In Manresa, Ignatius was in both desolation and depression as a result of having abused his physical and psychological powers.

A depressed person is closed to the continuation of life: all the doors are shut, and nothing makes sense.[3] But a person in desolation alone does not lose their motivation for living. What they want (whether as temptation or tendency) is to live 'from mortal sin to

[3] For an account of the relationship between desolation and depression, see Brigitte-Violaine Aufauvre, 'Depression and Spiritual Desolation', *The Way*, 42/3 (July 2003), 47-56.

mortal sin' (Exx 314.1). They react sharply against the idea of changing their lives, or of continuing along 'the way begun which is the divine service' (*Constitutions*, preamble [134.5]), which now appears to them insipid and hateful. They do have hope, but they place it where they see that everyone else places it: in the 'low' things that are only substitutes for the 'higher' things that God is trying to give us. They have no desire to lose or to change their perverted affective supports, or to set their spiritual lives in order.

Desolation Today

My sense is that the situation we are currently experiencing as a Church is, in Ignatian terms, primarily a First Week one. This claim is in no way an accusation against anyone, and it needs to be qualified in many ways. Some, indeed, may find it too optimistic, because the 'capital sins' seem to dominate the economics and politics of the West. They might argue that the Spirit within us is so stifled that we have no mental space within which we can feel desolated, still less experience the desolation of anyone else. Only occasionally do we feel a pang of conscience, which passes away without any major change occurring in us. But let us assume that we are at least aware of the negative within us. We feel that we are sinners, and we want to move beyond our sin, but it still has powerful effects in us. And many Christians behave as if the goal of the Christian life consisted only in not sinning. Many of our prayers, including those of the liturgy, ask simply for the grace to avoid sin.

Many Christians behave as if the Christian life consisted only in not sinning

Let us be honest. How many people in the Church today are really prepared to throw themselves into the adventure of following Christ with all the consequences that this entails—in other words to pass into the Second Week? We do our best to keep the commandments and not to be immoral, but often our Christian life takes on a negative tinge: it becomes a matter of asceticism, a tiring grind. Our authority figures tell us what we should do and should not do, and we try our best. But we do not, for whatever reason, get to the point of 'offerings of greater moment' (Exx 97.2), or of feeling any attraction towards following Jesus, or of identifying ourselves with the Beatitudes. We do not readily find ourselves desiring a more active faith, or making commitments towards justice and solidarity. But only then do we come to the Second

and subsequent Weeks. Roman Catholic public rhetoric is still too rooted in issues about sin, issues of the First Week, despite the teaching of Vatican II about the universal call to holiness, which in Ignatian terms is a call to take the Contemplation to Attain Love as the key to one's life.

If there is anything in this claim, then it becomes relevant that the First Week is the time of greatest danger of desolation. We often lose heart; we often tire of our propensity to the same old sins; our conversion often feels fragile, too much a matter of the will. Our affectivity is still relatively uninfluenced by spiritual conviction. Breaking with our past generates anxiety and disturbance, and we will use any excuse to return to it. These initial stages are where we are most vulnerable to desolation. We have cast off our defences, because we are trying to begin to live unselfishly; we are just learning to walk within the Reign of God. But we do not yet know the joy that comes from discipleship, from gratuitous love, from trustful dedication.

It is for these reasons that Ignatius writes so extensively about desolation in the time of conversion, in the First Week. The exercitant has to be strengthened in order to deal with devastating feelings: shame and confusion at having done nothing even half serious for the Reign of God; a sense of being trapped in an exhausting and seemingly endless cycle of struggle and failure. It is not surprising that desolations arise at this point, desolations which the bad spirit can use to discourage us and to divert us from our path, or else to hold us back from making progress by detaining us in fretful obsession.

It is perhaps in this light that we can understand why so many people seem quietly to be abandoning Christianity. There is desolation in today's Church and in today's world. Moreover the First Week does not last indefinitely. Perhaps in Ignatius' time things were different, but for us the First Week is essentially transitional. Either a person moves forward positively, into a Christianity of the paschal mystery and the Reign of God, or they end up being absorbed into a world where the capital sins are rampant. They cannot simply remain still. And in such a situation, there are various kinds of desolation that easily arise.

Desolation through Stagnation

If it is right to say that the people of God are still too stuck in the First Week, this is because of tradition and the way that they have been taught. But they are also constantly becoming more critical and

questioning; they are no longer prepared to be treated like mute sheep, but rather insist that the Holy Spirit lies within them inalienably, leading them to full personhood—this is why they have been confirmed. The First Week finishes with the exercitant asking a question: what am I to do for Christ in the future? Jesus responds 'to each one in particular' (Exx 95.3) with the contemplation of the Kingdom, which is itself a call, a project involving the whole of life. It is here that the final consolation of the First Week emerges. The exercitant has to be given a future, a mission, a task. If they still think in terms of conforming to established norms, they will experience the law as slavery, however holy the law may be. This slavery will produce desolation, although it may be accompanied by a false sense of security. Anyone who confuses consolation with security or with rule-keeping has never experienced it. They are lacking everything which draws a person into relationship, which takes them out of themselves and opens them to the commitments of love. This desolation—for so it is—arises from a deficiency in the interior life, from a lack of nourishment and growth. It generates rigidity and moralism in the people who suffer from it. They will find it difficult to see God in all things; their focus is always on defects.

Anyone who confuses consolation with security or rule-keeping has never experienced it

A Depressive World

We have spoken of a Church stuck in the First Week; we need also to speak of a cultural world which is prone to psychic depression. Why is there so much depression today? This article cannot explore the question fully; I shall simply point to the relationship that obtains between depression and affective deprivation. A healthy interior balance of the kind that helps us to appreciate reality and enjoy it properly, that enables us to commit ourselves confidently and enthusiastically and to establish various kinds of relationship, presupposes healthy self-esteem, grounded in a realistic assessment of our capacities and our limitations. This assessment is nurtured by affective contact with others who love us, and who—without being aware of it—reveal to each of us, through both affirmation and contrast, who we are, what we can do, what we desire. The people who love us give us self-confidence; they enable us to discover what life means and what we can hope to attain in it, always in collaboration

'Our punishment consists in nothing else but living in desire without any hope'

with others, for the common good. If we feel loved and supported, we can love and support others. And if this is further reinforced by a sense of God as creator sustaining and protecting life even to the point of self-emptying, then the way is open for a life lived in consolation. There will be plenty of problems, but there will be a rooted consolation—as Paul put it, 'I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our affliction' (2 Corinthians 7:4).

Again, however, we need to be realistic. Who is born into such a supportive setting, and who grows in this kind of way, within the realities of our present-day world? The most frequent cause of the lack of self-esteem that affects so many of us is an inability, from the womb onwards, to open ourselves to love received and given. And when we move from an infancy lacking in love into the world of work and social relations, we find from adolescence onwards that society itself is closed and on the defensive. Unemployment and wage-slavery create depressive environments. Whole social classes, whole nations and continents feel abandoned and excluded; we might well talk of collective depression.

From this global situation of depression, there also arise forms of desolation proper to our time. There is, as has already been said, a significant difference between depression and desolation. Desolation is a spiritual state. The cramped lives which so many people have to live inevitably obscure the presence of God within them. Who is the God transparent to street children, or among people whose children are dying of hunger? Who is the God transparent in broken relationships or unjust social structures? Where is the omnipotent God (for so we were taught God is) free of the global economic system? For many people, God is simply not visible in contemporary reality; God does not exist. For others, the God revealed in such situations in a God in desolation, a crucified God, a God who is both desolate and depressed, hellishly so, a God whose divinity is hidden.

What is really a matter of desolation is that this self-emptying God is a God without resurrection. Perhaps this God is truly God in the credal sense, but not in the full sense of the God of Jesus Christ. Easter Sunday never comes; we remain trapped in Good Friday; and we cannot see any future. This is what it is to live in a world of desolation. We are so far from glimpsing the resurrection that desolation becomes an anticipation of hell, a state without hope or love. This kind of spiritual desolation has affinities with suicidal depression, or with the absence of desire for children. The land is desolate; the chosen vine has been ravaged; all is broken, barren, without beauty or attraction. For many people life is like this, and, as Jeremiah put it, 'no one lays it to heart' (Jeremiah 12:11).

Education in Gratuity: Ignatius' Three Causes for Desolation

All these forms of desolation are nourished by our postmodern, globalised culture. The ninth of the First Week Discernment rules suggests three reasons why desolation can arise: our own lack of faithful response; our being tested in service and praise; and our needing to learn true wisdom about the gifts of God (Exx 322).

It may not be forcing the Ignatian text for us to suggest a common factor running through all three of these, one that may give us insight into many experiences of desolation today: the theme of gratuity. Gratuity is divine; humanity operates at best on a principle of tit-for-tat. If we draw closer to God, we learn to think and behave gratuitously. If we become distanced from God, we become more

concerned with retribution and just deserts; money and material benefits of other kinds become a means by which we measure personal value, in a way that is very difficult to give up. Gratuity is a hidden treasure that opens the way to the Kingdom of Heaven. It was because Ignatius had an intuition of this kind that he insisted so strongly on gratuity of ministries for the Society he founded (*Examen* 4.27 [82]). He saw something in the Church of his time—and he would see it today too—which was not in keeping with the proclamation of the Kingdom.

Consolation and gratuity

Consolation is given to us gratuitously, and it empowers us to give all that we have and are gratuitously. If we start making bargains with God and confuse generous dedication to God with forms of recompense, then the purity of our love is compromised and our identification with God is weakened. Perhaps the ultimate root of desolation is here: the value of created things tends to become an absolute, whether these be our own initial plans and desires, or the compensatory substitutes that we settle for if we find the challenge of right living too much. The result is a disruption of the right ordering of love.

All three of Ignatius' 'causes' of desolation can be related to the idea of gratuity. In the first case, we respond to God's gratuitous love tepidly, lazily, negligently, stingily—and consolation departs. This is straightforwardly First Week material, and simply needs to be worked through. The second 'cause' of desolation is that God wants us to grow in the gratuity of love, and is extending us in the divine service and praise 'without so great a reward of consolations'. God knows that this is the only training that will help us 'attain love', the love to which God is calling us, the love which grows all through the Second Week as we contemplate the Christ who loved his own 'to the end' (John 13:1). The third of Ignatius' 'causes' can be termed 'the wisdom of gratuity'. Gradually we learn and acknowledge that everything in life is 'gift and grace'. No one can conjure up these gifts on their own—if only because the gifts of consolation and love are only a sign of how 'the Lord Himself desires to give Himself to me'. Only God can do the giving.

Gratuity Lost

In our contemporary culture, the sense of gratuity so central to Ignatius' teaching is being lost. God's gratuitous gifts may remain

permanently on offer, but we are losing our sensitivity to them. Everything is to be bought and sold; without money, you are no-one and have nothing. The confusion of identity and possessions is a profound source of desolation. The best things in life are not for buying and selling, and they lose their lustre if people try to trade in them.

The absence of a sense of gratuity in our lives—the deepest cause of so much desolation—has many different manifestations. Often we feel valued for what we do rather than for who we are. Work can seem mechanical, like a form of slavery; if you do not produce, you are nothing. Ministers of the Church may define themselves in terms of the service that they give, and then they may face questions about whether this could not be provided just as well in a secular context. Our prayer can become simply instrumental, a means to attain benefits, or so-called 'graces'. Sexuality too can be trivialised by being commodified. Our consumer society seriously disrupts the balance of human relations.

When means take the place of ends, life disintegrates. If our sense of ultimate purpose is alive, then it integrates our personalities and deepens our mutual solidarity. We cannot be static in our use of means: either they prepare us for something better, or they become absolutes. If we become fixated on means, then desolation finds fertile soil. We become isolated, and individualism—which is simply fragmentation taken to its logical conclusion—becomes rampant. The lack of gratuity, the valuing of means over ends, the rupture of solidarity in favour of a narcissistic, self-preoccupied individualism—all these foster the spiritual desolation so prevalent among us.

Overcoming Desolation

Ignatius, however, does suggest some ways of escaping from desolation. These are taken from his own experience and from the perennial tradition of the Church. He offers us something like a spiritual psychotherapy, of great wisdom and simplicity.

To start with, he insists that a person needs a spiritual guide. An isolated individual can grow old in desolation without finding any solution—a situation which the evil spirit can astutely exploit. Discernment cannot occur without guidance. Here, the seventh Annotation is significant. The guide must not be 'hard or closed-minded' with an exercitant in desolation, but,

> … gentle and mild, giving them encouragement and strength to go on, uncovering to them the tricks of the enemy … and having them prepare and dispose themselves for the consolation which is to come. (Exx 7)

It might be thought that Ignatius is trying to replace divine consolation with the retreat-giver's advice and encouragement here. Not so—there is no substitute for consolation. The one giving the Exercises can only prepare the way. The gentleness and mildness that Ignatius speaks of is simply a kind of mediation, offered in the hope that consolation might thereby come more easily. Ignatius is describing an accepting human relationship which God might use in order to overcome the obstacles within the person.

There are also some pieces of advice for the time of desolation itself, directed both to the one receiving and to the one giving the Exercises. We are not to change in our lives in the ways the desolation is suggesting; conversely, we should try to act against it. Both of these are difficult for us today. We have become very used to letting our moods rule us. We prefer to abandon ourselves to them, or to find compensations that numb our sense of desolation. Many of those around us try to resolve their problems in these false ways. Ignatius' talk of more prayer and penance seems medieval and strained. But we need not think in these terms. Prayer and penance are means by which we can express our faith and hope in God, our quest for God, our desire to overcome the obstacles surrounding us. Above all, by 'examining ourselves carefully', we are seeking to see from a divinely enlightened perspective why our desolation has arisen—an insight that will remove desolation's sting. Ignatius' means are not the only ones to be borne in mind here. The individual's psychology may suggest that self-scrutiny will be counter-productive, and that what they need is simply a healthier and more open way of life.

Two further rules (Exx 320-321) are addressed specifically to the person actually suffering the desolation, encouraging them to patience. There is an implicit Christology here: understand the desolation from Christ's point of view, see it as Christ sees it, remember that Christ is accompanying us and going before us with his passion and cross. 'Give me your love and your grace; that is enough for me.' (Exx 234.5)

Dante and Beatrice

We are living through a crisis of love, and we do not often experience it. We therefore find it difficult to believe in the love that God has for us. But without this love, life has no meaning.

Finally, Ignatius encourages us to make good use of our desolation, so as to foster in ourselves the capacity for living in a stable spiritual balance. We need consolation, but we should not depend on it in the wrong kind of way. The important point is to learn to move forward in the divine service, 'whether with many divine visitations or fewer' (*Constitutions*, III.1.10 [260.2]). Divine service is linked to *divine* love—and that will certainly be stable. Divine visitations are, however, like the watering of a plant: they are necessary, but how they happen depends on times and persons.

A final and vital means to help us work through desolation (and indeed consolation) is the process of becoming, through the experience of interior movements of different kinds, a person of discernment. The

Exercises are a remarkable school of prayerful, prudent discrimination that helps us to understand life in depth and to make the most of its reality. People who are growing each day in self-understanding and in the understanding of God have resources for living amid the most conflicting motions and provocations, whatever their historical circumstances. So it is that Jesus and the great figures of the spiritual tradition continue today to be our guides. For, above all, they knew how to discern well, and to live constructively 'through all the changing scenes of life'. Ultimately, this acquired skill will be our richest resource.

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