

THE OFFICE OF CONSOLING

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Look at the office of consoling which Christ our Lord sustains, and comparing how friends normally console each other. (Exx 224)

AMONG THE ‘MOST HOLY EFFECTS’ (Exx 223) that the Risen Christ brings about in his disciples is a central Ignatian reality: consolation. Ignatius seems to see a continuity between the effect of the Risen Christ on his disciples, as he restores their sense of joy, vocation and mission after the disaster of the cross, and the movement of the Spirit in any retreat. This article explores Ignatius’ account of the ‘office of consoling’, drawing both on Ignatian sources and on the resurrection narratives in the Gospels. It also considers how we can be called to mediate this consolation, even though it remains a gift of God alone.

Ignatian Consolation

Though in ordinary speech ‘console’ and ‘consolation’ can refer to almost any act of encouragement or sympathy, these words have a special resonance when they are used by Ignatius: they denote the action of God among us, the communication of the Creator with the creature—a divine initiative which, when received gratefully and honestly, never leaves the person unchanged. Divine consolation always sets in motion the divine reality in the human person. It generates love, joy, faith, encouragement; and it always leads to mission.

The point is confirmed by Ignatius’ own texts. Centrally, the third of his Discernment Rules lists a number of states which ‘I call consolation’:

Concerning spiritual consolation. I call it consolation when some inner motion is prompted in the person, of such a kind that they begin to be aflame with love of their Creator and Lord, and, consequently, when they cannot love any created thing on the face of the earth in itself but in the Creator of them all. Likewise when a

The Way, 43/3 (July 2004), 7-18

person pours out tears moving to love of their Lord, whether it be for sorrow over their sins, or over the passion of Christ our Lord, or over other things directly ordered to His service and praise. Finally, I call consolation every increase of hope, faith and charity, and every inward gladness which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, bringing repose and peace in its Creator and Lord.

However, it seems that this account is by no means complete. In his magisterial commentary on the *Spiritual Exercises*, Santiago Arzubialde claims that in the third Discernment Rule Ignatius 'leaves out seven important aspects of consolation that he develops in other places'.¹ Arzubialde goes on to list these:

- the *illumination and elevation of the mind*, explicitly mentioned in Exx 2.3 and 363.5;
- how consolation is a *sign of the way to follow*—Ignatius tells Teresa Rejadell that 'interior consolation ... shows to us and opens to us the path we are to follow';
- how consolation enables us *to bear difficulties easily*—Ignatius tells Rejadell that it makes 'no load so great that it does not seem light to them, nor any penance or other hardship so great that it is not very sweet';²
- the *gratuity* of this ineffable divine gift, its being beyond human control—Ignatius tells Francis Borja that consolations 'are not in our very own power to summon when we wish, but ... are purely gifts from the One who gives all that is good';³
- the kind of *experience of the three divine persons* that we find in the *Spiritual Diary*;⁴

¹ Santiago Arzubialde, *Ejercicios Espirituales de S. Ignacio: historia y análisis* (Bilbao: Mensajero, 1991), 624-625.

² Ignatius to Teresa Rejadell, 18 June 1536, MHSJ EI 1, 99-107, in Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, translated and edited by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), 129-135, here 132-133.

³ Ignatius to Francis Borja, 20 September 1548, MHSJ EI 2, 233-237, in *Personal Writings*, 204-207, here 206.

⁴ See *Diary*, 19 February 1544, 21 February, 27 February, etc.

- an attitude of *humility and obedient reverence towards Holy Mother Church*;
- the *disinterestedness* marking how the person enjoys these holy gifts.⁵

Ignatius is making no attempt in the Discernment Rule to be exhaustive in his account of consolation. What he omits here is essential, and needs always to be borne in mind. We might summarise his overall teaching under three headings.

Firstly, spiritual consolation is a free gift of God's which needs to be recognised and acknowledged as such. It is not for us to summon up devotion and love; 'all is gift and grace from God our Lord' (Exx 322.3). If we try to take control of it, we pervert it.

Secondly, this gift of the Spirit creates within us a centre of energy focused on God that integrates our sense of ourselves and of the world. Spiritual consolation, so Ignatius tells us, brings about a miracle within the one being consoled. 'They cannot love any created thing on the face of the earth in itself but in the Creator of them all.' (Exx 316.1) People, events and things are not something apart from God; rather, God is dwelling within them, sustaining them. To love created realities without loving the God within them is a perversion of reality, an idolatry. It follows that a person who is consoled radiates a mysterious luminosity and integrity, both in their dealings with the outside world and in their own identity. There is an experience of freshness, of new insight into things, of profound joy and spiritual relish, which flows from within the person's centre right out to their sense faculties, and which modifies their conduct irrevocably. Such was Ignatius' experience on the banks of the Cardoner.

***A mysterious
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Thirdly, Ignatian consolation is not just a lived experience but a movement, a movement towards something. It shows us the way to move forward, and strengthens us for whatever step we need to take. Spiritual consolation in the form of 'interior joy', or 'illumination of the mind', or an 'increase in faith, hope and love' will obviously be a powerful experience—what the psychologist Abraham Maslow calls a 'peak experience'. But there is more to it (and if there is not, there are grounds for suspicion). Whatever form it takes, consolation from God

⁵ Ignatius to Francis Borja, 20 September 1548, in *Personal Writings*, 207.

is both vocation and provocation. It illuminates a way to move forward, indicating this as the divine will; it suggests choices and changes. If we are not meant to make a change in time of desolation, we certainly should be open to making changes in time of consolation (Exx 318).⁶ Otherwise we are treating consolation as if it were an occasion for complacent narcissism—we try to remain on Tabor, in ways that lead to stagnation, regression and death.

The experience itself and the direction in which it is leading us belong inseparably together, but we should also keep them distinct. Sometimes a consolation is so powerful that it can only leave us, for a time, in silent adoration. Nevertheless, true consolation always leads to vocation and mission. In consolation, God calls us to be co-workers, to pass on freely to others what we have freely received, to ‘change ourselves’ so that we move forward ‘on the way we have begun which is the divine service’ (*Constitutions*, preamble [134.5]). There is a ‘something more’ inherent in Ignatian spirituality which is never merely a matter of the human will, but rather an experience of how divine love is always stretching us. And Ignatius seems to suggest that the experience of Jesus’ disciples following the resurrection was of just this kind.

‘Most Holy Effects’

The effects of the resurrection are to be found not only in the glorious body of the Risen One, but also in the radical change brought about in his disciples. Ignatius gives us no elaborate account of these effects—he remains faithful to his principles enunciated in the Annotations about being brief so that the Spirit and the individual can do the work. However, since this article is exploring the links between ‘consolation’ and the effects of Christ’s resurrection on his disciples, we may reasonably try to go further. What are these effects? Do they make a difference to the disciples? Can we still see links between them and Ignatius’ account of consolation? It is neither possible nor necessary to give a full account here. I shall simply cite some biblical examples with Ignatian parallels.

⁶ See Ignacio Iglesias, “En tiempo de consolación sí hacer mudanza”: Lectura subyacente de la Regla 5ª de discernir espíritus (318)’, *Manresa*, 72 (2000), 83-88.

Away from the Tombs

The Risen One moves his disciples away from the places where they are searching, away from their different tombs where he is not. He directs them instead to the community of mission where he continues to be Lord. The women in Mark, who had been 'looking on from a distance' (Mark 15:40) at the crucifixion, come to pay homage to the broken body of Jesus. But they are directed away from this quest:

'... you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' (Mark 16:6-7)

Mary Magdalen, too, is directed by the Risen One to bear witness within the community: 'go to my brothers and say to them ...' (John 20:17). The disciples on the road to Emmaus, who are touched by the Risen One even as they are on the road of disappointment and desolation, are sent back to the Jerusalem community, which is already



preparing itself to take the good news to the world (Luke 24:13-34). The Risen One brings gifts of peace and the Holy Spirit; he transforms the disciples' fear into joy and mission (John 20:19-20).

In the Gospel resurrection narratives, the Risen One always brings about a moment of recognition on the disciples' part, leading to vocation and mission. The risen Jesus carries out among them an 'office of consoling' that lights up their way, showing them who they are in him, and what they have to do in his name. The connections with Ignatian consolation are obvious: Jesus is showing the disciples the path they must follow, and giving them a sense of God's presence in everything. He is calling them to be his co-workers, and giving them the energy they need to carry out that task.

Interior Joy

Besides the amazement, even fear, that we find in the Gospel resurrection scenes, we often come across a sense of joy. Sometimes this is left implicit; sometimes it is expressly named: 'the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord' (John 20:20).

Resurrection joy was central to Ignatius' spiritual experience, and it passed into the petition governing the whole Fourth Week:

... to ask grace to rejoice and be glad intensely at such great glory and joy of Christ our Lord. (Exx 221)

This joy, however, is primarily a joy for Christ, rather than for anyone or anything else. Ignatius' joy, and the exercitant's joy, are intense because the One to whom we owe so much has not remained buried in death, but has been placed definitively with God. Again Arzubialde is helpful:

Ignatius uses ... the word 'joy' in two distinct senses: as a synonym for the glory or triumph of Christ, and to denote a subjective experience provoked in the human person by the action of the Holy Spirit. The latter originates in the former, and manifests the disinterestedness of true love. It marks the person's coming to share in the triumph and definitive life of the Lord, culminating in mission.⁷

⁷ Arzubialde, *Los Ejercicios*, 473.

Certainly, consolation and the 'office of consoling' culminate in mission, in our taking the right path. But the sense of the path to follow that we experience in consolation is born from something else: a pure and totally disinterested joy at the Lord. For Ignatius, nothing is as effective a motivation as gratitude, and nothing is as reliable a sign of gratitude as pure joy at the good of another.

Awareness of the Paschal Mystery

We can also see in the Gospel narratives how the disciples come to understand the paschal mystery. Obviously, it was not that the disciples began to preach overnight a full atonement theology. Nevertheless, the Risen One's luminous presence produced what we can call a revelation within them, overcoming what had been their incorrigible affective resistance to the paschal mystery both in Jesus' life and in their own.

At various points in the resurrection narratives, the Lord at once gently reproaches the disciples' lack of faith and explains to them why his Passion was 'necessary':

Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory? (Luke 24:25-26)

It is as though Christ is somehow removing the disciples' sense of scandal at his death and restoring a sense of hope and purpose to them by saying: 'do you not realise that it was impossible for me to save the world by offering it new possibilities of individual and collective existence without its powers reacting against me and sending me to my death? Are you so idealistic and stupid as to think that I could escape such a fate? Do you think you are yourselves going to escape such a fate if you really desire to follow me?'

Once the risen Lord has shown his disciples his wounds, once he has invited Thomas to put his finger in his side, once he has bidden his disciples to look on his hands and feet, they become quite at peace with the paschal mystery. No longer do they seem scandalized by the idea that the life of the world requires them to give their own lives, that the grain of wheat has to fall into the earth and die, that they have to lose their lives in order to gain them—ideas which during Jesus' earthly ministry had caused them repeated difficulty.

Now that they have discovered God present and active in the cross of Christ and in his wounds, they are able to find God truly in all things. The connection is an important one, and is brought out by Karl Rahner:

The only person who attains the finding of God in all things and the experience of divine transparency in things is the one who finds God where God has descended to the murkiest reality of this world, the reality most closed to God, so to speak, the darkest and most inaccessible reality: the cross of Christ. Only thus can the eye of the sinner be cleansed and the attitude of indifference become possible; only thus can the person find the God who emerges to meet them also in those things which strike them as a cross, and not just where the person might wish to have God.⁸

Without this kind of experience of Jesus' paschal mystery, and without this kind of identification with it, mission becomes impossible: it simply does not last. Therefore, the paschal experience has to come

**Mission and
paschal joy**

first. Ignatius is alluding in passing to this particular 'wondrous effect' when he says that the hidden faith active within consolation brings about tears in the one being consoled through 'sorrow over their sins, or over the passion of Christ our Lord' (Exx 316.2), and when he speaks of an increase of hope in the same account of consolation. The Fourth Week petition, too, with its talk of joy at Christ's joy, depends on this kind of awareness of the paschal mystery and its necessity. For a person contemplating the triumph of the resurrection, the fact that the paschal mystery has come to completion in Christ is a source of intense joy and relish.

Consoled So That We Might Console

The consolation that we receive from the Lord is not given to us to enjoy in a narcissistic, self-enclosed way. Rather, it empowers us too for a ministry of consolation. The gift is for mission. If it is not shared and passed on, if it is appropriated for a person's own enjoyment, it dies. Paul expressed the principle at the outset of the second letter to the Corinthians:

⁸ Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises* (1954/5), translated by Kenneth Baker (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 272, translation corrected.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

We are to pass on to others both the interior joy of consolation, and the sense of focus that it gives to a person's dealings with external reality: the two essential aspects of Ignatian consolation. Let me develop this point in three ways.

Greed

Ignatius had a penetrating insight about how the most radical enemy of true human life was greed, whether material or spiritual. Moreover, he taught that this enemy worked in collusion with the most primeval compulsions of the human heart—the heart whose insecurities and basic fears seek relief through accumulating things (Exx 142). From this lie which appears as truth, from this enormous trick played on the whole human race, most of humanity's problems arise, both individual and collective. Here too are rooted our habits of exploitation and abuse. There is no other area of human experience that seems so much to require the consolation of God in the form of 'true joy and spiritual relish': the consolation which frees us from this diabolical deception and which leads us to the enjoyment of delights of a different kind.

What are these delights? Those that Jesus offers. By inviting us to share his relationship with Abba and his solidarity with our brothers and sisters, Jesus shows us that the real human problem is not suffering (which we can willingly bear on one another's behalf), but rather the apathy and sadness that comes when there is no one who affirms our being through loving us, and nothing and no one to love apart from ourselves. This offer of relationship is the consolation we and our world need from God—and we are called both to receive it and to pass it on.

God's Presence Within All Things

We can develop the point further. Our world needs the form of consolation which Ignatius described as loving no thing 'on the face of the earth in itself, but in the Creator of them all' (Exx 316.2). Religious language plays tricks on us, and when we stop to look at it, we find it marked by deep and influential dualisms. One of these is

often expressed in spatial terms: here I am; there are the others; and God is in the background.

This does not correspond with the biblical vision of reality, nor with the experience of Ignatius at the Cardoner. Created things, the world, the self, others, Christ—all these exist *in* God. None of them exist on their own, or as some kind of superstructure, or in parallel with God, in the way that our inevitably figurative language about God often suggests. Our life is not something independent or autonomous, but rather ‘hidden with Christ in God’ (Colossians 3:3): it exists in God as the first and original reality, the *archē* (principle and beginning) of everything that exists, even if the relationship is hidden and not obvious. Acknowledging this truth is a matter of grace; failing to acknowledge it has dire consequences.

If people love things in themselves, this is the root of all idolatry. It leads to human sacrifice, to hell on earth. To love things ‘in the Creator of them all’ enables a love that excludes idolatry, and forbids all sacrifice of what is truly human. Some critics of religion are concerned that faith leads us to ignore the reality of this world. But an Ignatian ‘seeking of God in all things’ is an affirmation of creation, a defence of its value. To love creation well, we have to love One who is above all things, as indeed the first of the biblical commandments reminds us. And for Ignatius, our ability to love in this way is a fruit and a sign of divine consolation.

Consolation and Communication

At one point in his *Constitutions* for the Society of Jesus, Ignatius spoke of good communication among the members as serving ‘mutual consolation and edification in the Lord’.⁹ What Ignatius says here about Jesuits applies to the ministry of consolation in general. Our mutual communication and friendship are not just human realities but also divine ones. Through them we enable God to approach us more closely, and we mediate God’s self-gift to one another. Our communication and friendship enable a richer and more subtle discernment, both in our spiritual lives and in the ministries we undertake.

⁹ *Constitutions*, 8.1.9 [673.2]—this is the only place where Ignatius uses the word ‘consolation’ in the *Constitutions*. See Franz Meures, ‘Jesuit Corporate Identity: Promoting Unity and Cohesion in the Society of Jesus’, *Review of Ignatian Spirituality*, 89 (Autumn 1998), 23-40.

The connections here are profound, and in many ways remain to be discovered. Good communication, friendship and mutual support are not just means of making life less arid and more tolerable; they also build up a context within which we can discover God more easily, hear God more clearly, and follow God's lead more freely and openly. What others do, whether they are near to us or far away, can become a consolation for us, what one of my friends calls a 'vicarious consolation'.

This was Ignatius' dream for the Society he founded, and the principle can be applied to any mission within the Church. We all need something like this. We need to break down barriers that serve no purpose; we need to get beyond structures of relationship within the Church that do nothing but encourage narcissistic superficiality; we need to outgrow patterns of friendship that exist simply to meet mutual needs. We need to recognise that we are called to exercise the office of consoling among one another. Obviously we must acknowledge that true consolation comes only from the Spirit, and that it is in the end nothing other than God's free self-gift to humanity. At the same time, however, we must accept with gratitude and relish that God wants to share this office of consoling with us.

'Comparing How Friends Normally Console Each Other' (Exx 224)

In the Fourth Week, Ignatius invites us not just to look at Christ's office of consolation, but also to make a comparison with the consolation offered between friends. This comparison might appear to trivialise what we have just been saying about the Risen Christ. How could such a comparison possibly enable us to imagine the unique reality which is the Risen Christ's consolation?

With the best will in the world, we often offer each other false consolation. We can simply exacerbate each other's wounds—whether real, imaginary or exaggerated—by confirming each other's more or less justifiable feelings of injustice. Alternatively, we can belittle the pain of the other—again whether it be real, imaginary or exaggerated. Or we can keep an unholy silence, and fail to name what we perceive to be God's call and challenge within the pain of the situation. There are so many ways in which we can give false consolation to our friends.

Two points seem to me worth making here. Firstly, it is Christ's consolation which Ignatius sees as normative: it is not that Christ consoles in the way that friends do, but rather that friends should

exercise the office of consoling as he does. Secondly, true consolation among friends amounts to our being channels of God's self-gift for each other: of the love and joy that this gift produces, of the commitment to external reality that consolation clarifies, and of the discerned way of proceeding within the external world that consolation reveals. Without both this inward joy and this outgoing integrity, no friend truly consoles another. Conversely, we can confidently affirm the presence of the Spirit's consolation wherever this joy and integrity are present—not just in places conventionally thought of as spiritual, but in many other spheres of human experience.

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