SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION AND ENVY

Ignacio Iglesias

'Let me hear joy and gladness.' (Psalm 51:8)

IT WILL ALWAYS BE A MYSTERY, something beyond human comprehension, how far episodes of consolation and desolation arise from human reality as such, from the conscious and unconscious mechanisms of human nature, and how far they are caused by agents 'from outside' (Exx 32.3). But the fact that all this is a mystery should not become an excuse for just giving up on the quest to understand it. The matter can lead to sheer adoration, and to the wisdom that comes from adoration, but it can and should also be explored.

Not long ago, a book called *Living Through a Spiritual Discernment* made me think again about this old problem. The author tries to shed light, from her own personal history, on what is of God and what comes from the human person in the inevitable 'mixture of God and oneself' that marks our passage through life:

> Every experience of encounter with God has to move from a certain fusion and confusion towards differentiation. God does not pass above our humanity to reveal Himself by just hitting us, as it were, with the divine condition of absolute being and truth. God's self-revelation, rather, occurs through our human temperaments, through our personal histories. Gradually it distinguishes itself from these, through the whole course of our lives with God—with the help also of discernment. And gradually it makes itself known as something distinct from me. And then I discover that I too am distinct from God.[1]

Ignatius' Discernment Rules—his analysis of the phenomena of consolation and desolation in 'rules for in some way sensing and getting to know the various motions which occur in the soul—the

[1] Noémie Meguerditchian, *Vivir un discernimiento spiritual* (Madrid: San Pablo, 2001), 9; see also 151.

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good to receive them and the bad to lance them' (Exx 313) as well as in those which 'with more accurate ways of discriminating between spirits … are more suited for use in the Second Week' (Exx 328)—are a magnificent example of this kind of exploration. Since ancient times, other great classics of spirituality and mystical literature have attempted the same task. But neither Ignatius nor anyone else offers complete and finished treatments—in drawing up the Rules, Ignatius was clearly conscious of this. He is passing on the results of his own explorations as a basis for further discovery.

In this article I would like to look at consolation in the context of a deeply-rooted, complex set of feelings, common to almost all human beings, namely envy. The root meaning of 'envy' is 'seeing badly' (Latin *in-vidia*) the good of another. It includes a sadness at others' success and happiness at their failure. Envy is a capital or primal sin:

> Like all egoism, from which it takes one of its most repugnant aspects, envy undermines the work of personal salvation, and, in so far as it frustrates the plans of God with regard to one's own vocation, it tends towards making the envious person a serious obstacle to the vocation of others.[2]

I have always admired how Ignatius could at once value consolation as such so highly, as a great sign of God's presence in history, and yet remain so suspicious about the way in which human beings receive this consolation and work with it.

Spiritual Consolation and Anxiety

Of course there is no place for talk about anxiety in connection with the origin of spiritual consolation. God who is the source and origin of all consolation (2 Corinthians 1:3) is, in person, pure consolation and joy, radiated and manifested in the various forms of joy to be found among creatures. We can only speak of anxiety in connection with human receptivity to consolation, with how the human person comes to accept and maintain a sense of consolation.

[2] *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, 4, col. 774.

Consolation's Evanescence

Ignatius sees consolation as a dynamic reality within the person ('interior movement', 'motions', 'move', 'increase'…). Moreover, there is something inherently evanescent in it (Exx 323), given its dependence on how human beings receive it and foster it, on how they co-operate with it, on how they are tempted to claim ownership and control over it, and on how they can either follow or resist the impulses that it involves. Ignatius explores the paths that consolation takes, interprets its signs, reveals obstacles and resistances to it, makes helpful suggestions from his own experience, and puts forward ways in which the human receiver of consolation can make corrections.

As Ignatius talks about consolation in terms of the soul's being 'inflamed in love for its Creator and Lord' (Exx 316.1) and of how the soul is consequently incapable of loving any created thing 'in itself' rather than 'in the Creator of them all', he certainly indicates the ways in which lived consolation can be disrupted. For in fact we can slide all too easily between loving creatures 'in the Creator of them all' and loving them 'in themselves', between using them to 'love and serve' and worshipping them idolatrously, between between taking the creatures as an invitation to love their Giver, and as a vehicle for our own self love. Even in this first description of consolation, Ignatius is placing consolation before the exercitant in terms of the Principle and Foundation. He is speaking of the God who has created humanity and all things on the face of the earth so that they may serve God (Exx 23).

False priorities disrupt consolation

In the end, consolation is one of these 'things'—and the human person can either move rightly towards it or else go astray. Either we remain humble and grateful, dependent on the fact that it is given us and committed to the Giver. Or else we become quasi-owners of this 'thing'; we begin—without noticing that we are doing so—to adore it; and gradually we thus turn consolation in on itself. Either we share in the joy that we receive as a gift from a Giver, or we use it to become self-satisfied. The effect of the latter is to suffocate the consolation and to isolate us.

Hearts Turned Away

In the Old Testament, God places only one condition on the gifts made to Solomon: 'if you will walk in my ways' (1 Kings 3:14). But

Solomon's heart 'turned away from the LORD'. 'His heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David.' (1 Kings 11: 9, 4) The process of turning away was not deliberate, but rather a slow slippage, a progressive loss of clarity in the relationship. Whether or not it was voluntary is an open question in Solomon's case; such changes are indeed always imperceptible. But we can chart three stages within the process.

From Gratuity to Ownership

Up to a certain point, the Consoler and the consoled have been travelling together, in relationship, through an 'interior motion', caused by the Consoler, that 'inflames the soul'. But at some point—a point that cannot be identified—the break begins. We begin to make our own way, and a forgetfulness of God begins to condition all that we do. Somehow the relationship cools. Memories become less and less reliable. There is so much to take on board, and it becomes increasingly convenient to deal with things in a less than fully human way. It becomes tempting to treat our relationship with God as something that can be put into storage, leaving us more energy for the present.

Consolation is a gift that you cannot save up like capital; it is not like information that can be stored in a database to be accessed quickly and conveniently. On the contrary, it is essentially fluid; we have to replenish it by constantly receiving it as a gift. It is also by nature something to be shared: it has to be handed on just as it is, at once, with the same sense of free gift with which it has been received. John's Jesus prays to the Father that 'that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26). Gratuity is preserved only if it is continued and passed on. It loses its character if we cease to receive what is given as gift, or if we try to hoard it. Then the receiver's life is impaired: we who can only live in an atmosphere of joy start trying to find or create our own oxygen, our own consolation. When Peter wanted to build three dwellings on Mount Tabor (Matthew 17:4), the impulse was a spontaneous and natural one. At the same time, it indicated a harmful desire: that of taking control of what is essentially a gratuitous gift, and to be lived as such.

What is freely given cannot be hoarded

It is easy enough to move from consolation to desolation, and indeed (though less so) to move in the other direction. Ignatius'

account of the three 'causes' of desolation (Exx 322) opens up some possibilities for understanding the alienation that we can experience, as does Ignatius' shrewd intuition about the need to distinguish the time of consolation itself from what comes after it (Exx 336).

In economics, ownership implies power over something; in the spiritual life it ends up as slavery. As we try to hold onto spiritual joy, to preserve it, we stifle it. The abundance that the Bible sees as a sign of blessing can lead us into forgetfulness and idolatry. So it was in biblical times; so it is now. Moses warned the people as they passed into the Promised Land about how abundance (and, we can say, consolation) can obscure the memory and blind the heart:

> Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God … . When you have eaten your fill … do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God …. Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have got me this wealth'. (Deuteronomy 8:11-17)

Consolation is never a prize that is appropriated or earned; the idea of 'merit' distorts and profanes the very notion of consolation. If we begin to 'function' on the basis of consolation, to take it for granted, we have already stopped receiving it. A frantic effort to hold on to it will soon begin, of a kind that gives ample scope for the evil spirit to appear under the form of an angel of light (Exx 331).

From Ownership to Possessiveness

Even with material possessions, ownership does not make us feel secure. Rather it leads to new forms of insecurity, to the fear of losing what we own and of being robbed. We lose our sense of freedom and gratuity, and instead begin to defend what we imagine to be the freedom of our ownership, in a self-destructive spiral of avarice. Yet we can never be satisfied. We try to accumulate our own consolations as the work of our own hands. Blinded by enthusiasm, we can fail to recognise that we are no longer being led by the same good spirit. The spirit which brought us consolation 'for the soul's benefit, that it might grow and climb from the good to the better' has been replaced by the spirit which works 'for the opposite', and seeks 'to enter in a way that is with the devout soul, and to leave by himself' (Exx 331-332).

These 'spirits' or 'angels' do not just appear on the human scene as messengers from heaven or hell. Their action is organically part of

human nature, as the more or less exclusive cause of the gradual slippages—sometimes unconscious, sometimes consented to—within us as we become separated from God's leading.[3] As was said earlier, God does not pass our human nature by; God's self-revelation occurs through our human temperaments, through our personal histories.

In the Gospel parable of the rich man with his barns, Jesus makes fun of our craving for security:

> '"… I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.' (Luke 12: 19-21)

In Ignatian terms, the rich man loves his consolations and the things that give rise to them 'in themselves'. He forgets in his complacency both about their origin and their goal. Thus he becomes trapped within a painful isolation from God, and is left to his own mercies.

From Possessiveness to Rivalry

At this point mechanisms start to operate deep within the human person—mechanisms which can be sordid and shameful. Because we have appropriated to ourselves the joy given by God, it has become a vulnerable possession to be protected and indeed defended—if necessary violently—against real or potential competitors. As we look around us, we start comparing ourselves with others. It saddens us that others are living in a security and enjoyment which we do not have—we feel as though we have been robbed. The presence of these imaginary enemies make us tense, and our lives become full of bitterness and sadness. We become frustrated: 'for then it is proper to the evil spirit to gnaw, to sadden, to place obstacles' (Exx 315. 2).

Those who have studied the phenomenon of envy, whether in individuals or in groups, connect it to the psychological effect of primal

[3] See Santiago Arzubialde, *Ejercicios Espirituales de S. Ignacio: historia y análisis* (Bilbao: Mensajero, 1991), 596: 'The word "spirits" … enables the Ignatian text to contain three different significances. It can refer generically and abstractly to specific, individual *movements of different kinds* that show a certain tendency or propensity. It can refer the relation these movements have to the *causes* from which they proceed, conceived in more or less personalised terms. Finally, it can also refer to the *goodness* or *wickedness* inherent within these tendencies ….'

Envy *by Pieter van der Heyden—'a horrible monster, a most wild plague'*

experiences that were somehow frustrating or humiliating. These experiences lead to a double reaction in which people become very assertive and defensive about what they possess, using it to exclude others and to demonstrate their own superiority; at the same time they attack anyone who possesses something good that they lack.

For Ignatius, it is not only consolation that is reversible and that can fluctuate; positive growth in Christian discipleship can also go into reverse gear. The activity of the evil spirit—the 'progression of thoughts' (Exx 332-334) which frequently leads to desolation—seems closely to resemble, in committed people who are fundamentally people of consolation, the symptoms and passions of envy. One might even say that Ignatius, in his description of the strategies and activities of the evil spirit, has unmasked the 'envious one' who has never ceased to be present in human history from the beginning (Genesis 4:1-8).

The affinities here are not, obviously, exact, but nor are they purely fanciful. Oddly, the term 'envy' is not to be found in Ignatius' main writings—despite the fact that he himself passed from being quite

unashamedly envious to being himself envied without in any way wishing it. But his whole spiritual strategy, and particularly his commitment to a freely chosen 'lowliness and humility'—in the face of severe criticism—show that he is well aware of the corollary of human pride that is envy.

Consolation begins to decay when we make the subtle transition from joy to complacency, from a relational fulfilment to self-satisfaction. There follows a process of gradual degeneration, aided by our emotional inertia. We are seduced by human consolations of all kinds, as vain compensations for the loss of the first and true consolation. When the process is complete, we realise how fragile these surrogates are. We are worn out by the tension involved in looking as though we are devout and in consolation, when in fact we are interiorly bitter and alone and left to our own resources. At this point our behaviour may become shameless, and envy in its many forms may appear, consuming like a virus whatever remains of the original consolation, and venting its anger by attacking the consolations of others.

The subtle transition from joy to complacency

Envy and Clericalism

In his 'rules to help people feel and get to know', Ignatius deals with this process as it occurs in the individual, and it is to the individual that all his warnings are directed. But the seriousness of the issues at stake becomes manifest in their effects within society. Envy is essentially aggressive, both within the self and in the self's relationships with others. It creates a world divided into those who envy and those who are envied. The latter, innocently rejoicing in their consolation, find it almost impossible to understand the former's 'perverted intention and malice', and they find it very difficult to defend themselves. Certainly they cannot take up the same kind of weapons—they can only work with the goodness of their own gratuitously given consolation, which is 'not from this world' (John 18:36).

Almost inevitably, however, we have to ask: is there a form of envy typical of the clerical, churchy world? After all, Jesus was the victim *par excellence* of envy (Matthew 27:18); he was hounded by an envy which the religious leaders of his time skilfully manipulated. In the final retreat that he gave to the clergy of Milan, Cardinal Martini

provided an introduction to the *lectio divina* of John's Gospel. Within the framework of the Ignatian Second Week, Martini offered a meditation on the whole of chapters 5-12 of the Gospel, a meditation which he entitled 'the enemies of Jesus'. Martini discusses one group of these enemies in connection with chapter 7, under the title, 'the charge that arises from envy and mental blockage':

> In this episode, envy and mental blockage in the face of God's action mount up. The darkness is not some abstract, ethereal reality, but something very concrete, present in the human heart: this man is more successful than we are, and we have to eliminate him.[4]

In the Church that we see emerging in Acts and in Paul's letters, envy is abundantly and obviously present and active—not among the Church's 'enemies' but within the Church itself, gnawing away at roots that are still tender:

> Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defence of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. (Philippians 1:15-17)

And this has continued. The sadness of some early Church writers is all too prophetic:

> I would like to keep silence, but reality would shout louder than my voice …. If we denounce evil, we have nothing to lose—on the contrary. Yes, the Church herself is contaminated …. We are fighting with each other, and it is envy that is arming us against each other …. If, as we take out our hostility on each other, we all undermine the common task, where will we land up? We are weakening the body of Christ …. We are proclaiming ourselves to be members of one single body, and we are devouring each other just as the lions would ….[5]

It would certainly be interesting—though perhaps the task would be too complex—to write a history of envy, looking at the hornets' nest

[4] Carlo Martini, *Il caso serio della fede* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 2002), 134-137.
[5] John Chrysostom, *In epistolam 2. ad Corinthios*, 28.3-4.

of human resistance in the Church, especially among its clergy, to the ever creative and daring action of the Spirit. This resistance often adopts the very language of the Spirit, and claims to be operating 'in the Spirit's name', as it obstructs the joy and vitality that the Spirit seeks to foster. When Paul tells us not to quench the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19), he is speaking in a particular context, and out of his own experience of being envied. But surely he is pointing to something more universal, something which can spread like an epidemic. Those who are envied often appear as the 'little ones' of the gospel; those who envy them retain, under many disguises, the same old anxieties about power that even Jesus' disciples so ingenuously revealed in questions like 'who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?' (Matthew 18:1)

In the retreat conferences mentioned above, Martini affirms clearly: 'envy is the root of all evil, and this applies also to the ecclesiastical sphere'. Drawing on the work of Donald Cozzens, Martini argues that the use of family imagery for relationships within the Church, whatever its strengths, can foster relationships of rivalry and envy. If the Church is conceived simply as Mother, the bishop as Father, and the clergy as brothers, then various negative dynamics of the kind exposed by Freud can be unleashed. The limitations of metaphors need to be recognised:

> Personally, I have never wanted to stress the role of the bishop as father. There may be something of the reality of fatherhood in a bishop, but it must be understood alongside the word of Jesus, 'call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven' (Matthew 23:9).[6]

When Ignatius speaks of the evil spirit gnawing and saddening and placing obstacles, he is not speaking only of its attacks on those 'ascending from good to better' (Exx 315). Its greatest perversity comes when people have begun to slide blindly towards isolation and complacency, and when they start to take others with them. For it is not just they themselves who are choked by their sadness; they infect others with it. It is not just that their own consolation is corroded;

[6] Martini, *Il caso serio*, 136. See *The Changing Face of the Priesthood: A Reflection on the Priest's Crisis of Soul* (Collegeville, Mn: Liturgical, 2000).

their new 'consolations', those provided by 'the evil angel' (Exx 331), include the desire to see other people unhappy.

How is it possible that people who are, in principle, people of consolation, and who have certainly been touched by consolation, should slide towards an evil which they cannot even name? The insinuation of this kind of virus into the heart of the one consoled is nevertheless an obvious fact. Perhaps latent envy originates in a need to have one's own consolation recognised by others; in the process this consolation loses contact with the gratuity essential to it, and becomes a tool of complacency. If so, we can see Ignatius' wise advice as an allusion to this danger:

> Let the one who is consoled set about humbling and lowering themselves as much as they can, reflecting on how little they are fit for in the time of desolation without this kind of grace or consolation. (Exx 324.1)

Consolation's Healing

> For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations … are you not merely human? (1 Corinthians 3:3-4)

For Paul, envy is a problem of immaturity, a problem that arises when a person takes their own needs as the criterion of human value, whether in themselves or in others. Envious people are obsessed with themselves. They see their own reality and—especially—that of others in a distorted, perverted way. The results are multiple and complex. They can take the form of fight (intolerance, defamation, hostility, hatred) or flight (apathy, scepticism, negativity, conformism, withdrawal). Envy is thus difficult to recognise or to cure. Envy is blind, and makes people blind. Its first victims are the envious themselves, but they are not the last, because envy is essentially death-dealing.

Human growth away from mutual aggression and towards Jesus' self-giving love presupposes that we have gradually developed a new vision of ourselves and of people in general, and that we have gradually unlearnt the habit of putting ourselves first. We need to move from loving all things 'in themselves' to loving them, loving them *all*, 'in the Creator of them all' (Exx 316.2).

Thus our overcoming of envy has to begin with simply recognising it—witness Ignatius' teaching about retracing 'the progression of thoughts' (Exx 333.1). Once we have recognised the damage and distortion, we can reassemble our sense of integrity. Finally, we can break down the prison walls that our envy has led us to construct, and recover our freedom in the experience of being loved anew by God and of seeing ourselves as we are seen. The good spirit helps here, and can make use of the sadness that is itself part of envy (Exx 314). But we will almost certainly need another gentle hand to help us restore our vision and open our eyes to the signs that *God* esteems and values us, if we are to build a new and more profound form of self-esteem.

If we do not acknowledge our own envy, 'humbling and lowering ourselves' as much as we can (Exx 324.1), then the process of regeneration from envy will not begin—it was the lack of such humility that allowed our former consolation to decline. The regeneration process consists in recovering a sense of gratuity and giftedness, both passively and actively. Gratuity is the essential atmosphere within which both consolation and the person consoled can flourish. If we know that we are infinitely loved for who we are, this will take us beyond the need to make claims on anyone, or to seek anything at the expense of someone else. We will no longer be downcast because another is happy. The other is not an adversary, or even a competitor. On the contrary, for our regenerate self, the other's otherness is taken up into our own joy.

God wants us to work actively and responsibly with the 'good angel' as we follow the path towards full self-esteem that will open out when we rediscover the infinite esteem of God signified by consolation.

Recovering a sense of God's infinite esteem

In a world consumed by envies of various kinds, far more than are recognised or manifest, we can and must learn anew the objective value of the human person—a value that comes from within. This lesson consolidates consolation, and without it the maintenance of the spiritual practices wisely recommended by Ignatius for times of desolation (Exx 318-321) will not be easy.

What Ignatius says about the characteristic action of the good spirit seems naturally to describe this process of re-education. We can simply list the functions which Ignatius attributes to it. It begins by 'causing pain and remorse' in a person's conscience, opening the mind to reason (Exx 314.2), and counteracting envy's 'gnawing and

saddening'. It continues by encouraging and strengthening, giving consolations, tears, inspirations and peace. It removes illusions, until finally 'all sadness and disturbance' disappear, and make room for 'true joy and spiritual relish'. And all of this happens 'sweetly, lightly, gently, as when a drop of water soaks into a sponge' (Exx 335.1).

Much of this process involves both God and the human person, through the deployment and use of natural resources which are gifts from God, placed by God at human disposal. The functions of the 'good angel' not only converge with the human process of re-educating self-esteem; they coincide with it. What God adds is the sense of gratuity that enables us to sense that we are loved absolutely, beyond our shortcomings and limitations, even when we feel humiliated by our own envy.

The two 'progressions of thoughts' that 'come from without'—the one which destroys consolation and the one that restores it again—develop from different origins. The first arises from human ideas about self-sufficiency, as we attribute to ourselves what is God's free gift. The second builds on the truth and humility that come when we return to the unconditional self-esteem which has been freely given us, and which we should never have lost. When we recover that self-esteem and begin to radiate the joy that is springing up within us, when we discover that even the bitterness and sadness with which our envy punished us can somehow be recycled into love, then we begin to enter into fullness. Love alone overcomes envy. Moreover, if the Psalmist's prayer, 'restore to me the joy of your salvation', is answered, then inevitably this reality will overflow into the lives of others: 'I will teach transgressors your ways' (Psalm 51:12-13).

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