

IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AND THE REBUILDING OF SELF-ESTEEM

Beth R. Crisp

OF ALL THE RELATIONSHIPS IN MY LIFE, one that has been among the most difficult is the relationship with myself; overcoming low self-confidence is an ongoing struggle. One might contend that self-denigration is a form of self-mutilation, and at times it has been a powerfully destructive force in my life. All too often, low self-esteem has limited the opportunities available to me, and has had an impact on the relationships with significant others in my life, including God. It has even been suggested that it has been one of the inordinate attachments from which I have needed liberating (Exx 23). While the problem is now much less severe than it has been, maintaining a functional level of self-esteem requires ongoing effort. In this paper, it is my aim to tell of my own journey into Ignatian prayer, using illustrations from my own journals, and to explain why it has become important in my efforts to preserve a sense of my own value.¹

A Journey into Prayer

My forays into Ignatian spirituality began when I was a doctoral student. Somewhat to my surprise, what began as just another intellectual exploration slowly moved to being a transformational experience. Finally I had found a spirituality which seemed to be a good fit with the person that I was. In time, this attraction led to an experience of the full Spiritual Exercises made in daily life (nineteenth Annotation). Since then, I have had periods of regular spiritual direction and been on a few individually guided residential retreats.

¹ This article is based on the personal experiences of the author, who has made the Spiritual Exercises; it is not a theoretical analysis of the content of the Spiritual Exercises as developed by Ignatius.

What began as wanting to learn *about* Ignatian spirituality became a way of life in which prayer is central.

One day it dawned on me that the Ignatian approach to prayer and spirituality was not only helping me develop my relationship with God, but was also having positive side effects on my mental health, especially as regards self-esteem, an observation that is borne out by some empirical studies that point to an association between self-esteem and faith development.² Healthy self-esteem can, of course, degenerate into mere selfishness, and some Christian traditions are very much preoccupied with forestalling this danger.³ Much in our culture encourages a crude form of self-gratification, and caution is certainly appropriate. But it remains the case that a degree of self-esteem is necessary if we are to affirm that God not only loves and accepts us as individuals but also invites us to serve in partnership with Jesus in the great project of the Kingdom (Exx 95). Among the many features of Ignatian spirituality, I explore here a few that have been particularly significant for me and my journey: the use of the *imagination*; the *colloquy*; and the *examination of consciousness*. I have also found myself exploring how confession of sins can occur in a way that is not self-denigrating.

Imagination

It would be difficult to envisage an experience of the Spiritual Exercises in which the imagination was not invoked. Even a quick glance through Ignatius' instructions reveals a number of exercises that invite retreatants to use their imagination in order to develop their relationship with God:

The point is to have your own picture, the image that arises in your imagination when you have put yourself in the hands of the Holy Spirit in prayer. That will be the picture that belongs to your relationship to God as you pray over this mystery. It could be a busy

² See, for example, Paul J. Watson, Ralph W. Hood, Ronald J. Morris and James R. Hall, 'Religiosity, Sin and Self-Esteem', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 13 (1985), 116-128.

³ See for example William E. Andersen, 'Self-Esteem, Self and Sin', *Journal of Christian Education*, 42 (1998), 25-36; and John Makujina, 'The Second Greatest Commandment and Self-Esteem', *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 8 (1997), 211-225.

motorway or it could be a starlit footpath: either could be the setting in which God chooses to communicate with you.⁴

Having grown up in a Christian tradition where the emphasis is much more on the rational, I found this use of the imagination new, important and distinctive. As Lavinia Byrne has written:

When the imagination wanders freely into a scene ... constraints fall away. In their place come an intimacy and immediacy which visit and heal our most distorted images and understandings. Jesus walks in our landscape, comes into our home, is our brother, our lover, our friend. The Gospels are peopled with our own friends and enemies; we choose to follow the Lord and walk the way of Calvary. We stand at the foot of the cross and wait in the garden for resurrection.⁵

In my own experience, however, the matter is not quite as neat and tidy as that quotation suggests. Praying imaginatively, even when it leads to interesting and helpful insights, has sometimes taken me to difficult places, and I have needed comfort and reassurance from those who have been accompanying me on this journey of exploration. Nevertheless, despite such discomfort, activating the imagination in Ignatian prayer has aided psychological reconstruction by opening my eyes to new possibilities.⁶

Colloquy

One form of prayer which Ignatius included in his Exercises is the colloquy, or conversation, with God. This form allows the individual to say quite frankly what is on their mind, and to imagine what God's response might be.

I wrote the following colloquy a couple of days into a week-long retreat. An astute director, sensing difficulties in this area, encouraged me to spend some time contemplating what God's image of me might be. To this end, it was suggested that I read the parable of the man who

⁴ Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Way of St Ignatius: Finding God in All Things* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1999 [1987]), 54.

⁵ Lavinia Byrne, 'The Spiritual Exercises: A Process and a Text', in *The Way of Ignatius Loyola: Contemporary Approaches to the Spiritual Exercises*, edited by Philip Sheldrake (London: SPCK, 1991), 24.

⁶ Andrew Brink, *Creativity as Repair: Bipolarity and its Closure* (Hamilton, Ontario: Cromlech Press, 1982).

found a pearl of great value and sold all of his possessions so that he could purchase it (Matthew 13:45-46). I was obviously supposed to think that God considered me to be that pearl. Instead, however, I somehow found myself being drawn to the seemingly accusatory sounding voice of God asking Adam in the garden, ‘who told you?’ (Genesis 3:11). I started to explore this tension between these two senses of how God might imagine me, with no idea as to where the exploration might take me. What resulted was the following dialogue, an imagined conversation between God and a woman like myself:

God: And who told you that you were not beautiful?
 ... that you are not a delight to behold?
 ... that you are not good enough for my love?
 ... that I would not put myself out for you?
 ... that you are not a pearl that I value highly?

Woman: I can’t recall who told me, but why shouldn’t I have believed them?
 Where were you when I was abused?⁷
 Where were you on the numerous occasions the world misunderstood me and treated me with disdain?
 Where were you?
 Where were you?
 Where were you when the pain of life got too much?

God: I love you and always have.
 I am sorry that you have been so hurt, that you have not been able to see me.
 Have I not sent many wonderful people into your life that have given you the love and care that you have cherished?
 Have I not provided you with opportunities far beyond what most people can only dream of?
 Have I not given you the very finest of gifts—intelligence, a loving heart, wisdom?

Woman: But you let them damage me:
 ... strip me of my confidence;
 ... try to make me feel I was always second best;
 ... make me feel that any act of kindness was not deserved.

⁷ The original version mentioned a number of specific incidents. For a more detailed discussion about the impact of sexual abuse in relation to spiritual development, see my earlier article, ‘Spiritual Direction and Survivors of Sexual Abuse’, *The Way*, 43/2 (April 2004), 7-17.

God: I would rather ask for your forgiveness than watch you do as so many of your peers have done and turn away from me. I can't promise you that you won't be hurt again, but I will keep loving you, and will keep sending people to you to reflect that love. Please trust me on this.

Woman: My ability to trust was what the abusers violated, along with my mind and body.

God: I will give you my hand. If it hurts too much to be touched, I will walk beside you. It's a long journey and I'm not planning on leaving you to make it alone.

Woman: And I don't want to go without you. Please come and take my hand.

At the end, the woman seems to have quite a significant change of heart, and to shift towards God. But loving relationships require open communication or 'interchange between the two parties' (Exx 231) if they are to remain meaningful, and hence it may only be possible to have such a frank interchange with God if there is already a degree of trust.

This colloquy was imagined and written spontaneously. On reflection, it seemed to me that the woman's more affective responses are typical of someone who has been deeply hurt and struggles to understand how a supposedly loving God could have allowed particular situations to have occurred. Conversely, the part of God seemed to represent a more reasoned and intellectual approach to prayer, even though some affective elements are present. Importantly, the Ignatian tradition does not privilege either the affective or rational, and finds space for both.⁸ To some degree both were present in this colloquy even if the affective and rational did not neatly divide between the participants.

Some of the images in this colloquy, such as God offering an apology and asking forgiveness from the woman, might seem theologically questionable. Clearly, there are some limits here, though there are some modern doctrines of God that could indeed accommodate what I was saying. However, the forum was a private one, and it would not have been helpful had I self-censored such ideas.

⁸ Exx 3: '... in all the following Spiritual Exercises, we use acts of the intellect in reasoning, and acts of the will in movements of the feelings ...'.

The imaginative work here helped me identify my anger and my distrust of God; had these been left unaddressed, my ability to bring my relationship with God to maturity would have been hindered. David Fleming's 'contemporary reading' of the *Spiritual Exercises* makes the point well in its version of the second Annotation:

The director ... does not hinder God's movements in us by imposing interpretations of scripture or of theology. The Exercises are, above all, a time for intimate contact between God and a retreatant. We, as retreatants, will profit far more from the understanding and love aroused by the grace of God within us than from the rhetoric or brilliant insights of a retreat director. For in a retreat we do not find knowledges satisfying us, but rather deepdown tastes and feelings that sensitise us to what really matters.⁹

In the colloquy, theological truth or falsehood is generally not a key issue. What was significant here was the fact that the process was enabling me to explore new images both of myself and of God. Such growth is often an effect of making the *Spiritual Exercises*:

What Ignatius does in the Exercises, it seems to me, is to enable me to recognise and tell myself ever-new stories of the ways in which my life is caught up in God's love. It is important here to acknowledge what may be obvious, namely that if I am genuinely growing before God, then such stories, as they develop one from another and maybe supplant one another, are not fictions but ever-closer approximations to the truth of who I am.¹⁰

In my own case recounted here, the remaining days of the retreat were ones in which I felt freed to explore a range of difficult issues in my life and to work towards some resolution of them. As I walked in woodlands on the final day, it was the words of that ancient prayer of thanksgiving, the Gloria, which kept rattling around in my head.

⁹ David L. Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises, a Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 4-7.

¹⁰ Brendan Callaghan, 'Do Teddy Bears Make Good Spiritual Directors? Ignatius Loyola meets Donald Winnicott', *The Way*, 42/3 (July 2003), 19-32, here 31.

Examen

Another form of prayer which Ignatius advocated is the examination of consciousness, or Examen. Here we look back and reflect on our actions and on how we have seen God working in recent times—typically over the previous day or so, but sometimes over a much longer period (Exx 24). When I have had a hard day, when I can almost feel my confidence levels sinking, I invariably find it worth spending some time considering God's action in my life. And then I am often pleasantly surprised at just how much evidence there is of God at work in me and in those around me, of God active in the stuff of ordinary life—in a smile or a kind word, in an e-mail or a postcard just saying 'Hi, thinking of you', or in a glimpse of something beautiful as I hurriedly move from one task to the next.

Occasionally, there will be some impetus to review a much longer time period. When, for example, a friend departed to live elsewhere, I was drawn to reflect quite extensively on how God had worked in both of our lives over the previous couple of years. These had been challenging times, and in the midst of the experience it was not always apparent, at least for me, where God was. However, the process of looking back over an extended period revealed some significant things to give thanks for:

Prayer to the Crucified One

When you were on the cross
you were given no choice
but to have your hands reach out
to capture the hearts and minds of
us who have found ourselves feeling
lost
confused
confounded
dejected
in a place we did not want to be
but somehow we believed you called us
and although we sometimes wanted to run away
the holy spirit breathed life into us
helping us to grow
sometimes even to thrive
and just occasionally to feel enchanted.

Prayers such as this one are certainly not a panacea, and they do not remove the kind of pain caused by having to say goodbye to someone whose presence in my life had been significant while I was living in Scotland, far from my home in Australia. Nevertheless, the memory of what God has done in the past can nourish our hope in a God who continues to break into our lives when we least expect it. Furthermore, the act of remembering a positive relationship with a friend seemed to act as a buffer against negative feelings about myself—feelings to which I was quite susceptible at a time when friends living close by were few in number. Recalling the memory of a journey shared with others provided evidence to contradict myths such as, ‘I’m a dreadful person’, or, ‘I’m no good at making friends’, which my low self-esteem might have had me believe.

Confession

In Ignatius’ mind, one fruit of a deeper relationship with God is likely to be a desire to confess our sins (Exx 44). While to some extent this confession may happen on a daily basis through the Examen, it may also at times take the form of the liturgical sacrament of reconciliation.

Sacramental confession and absolution are not necessarily straightforward when one lacks self-confidence. For me, it is important that I should not let the desire to confess my sins lead me to put myself down. I find it important, therefore, to be clear on why I am considering seeking out a confessor. If it is my desire to acknowledge my imperfection and seek forgiveness, then having someone hear my confession and pronounce absolution may be appropriate. But it could also be that I have confused an appropriate desire to confess my sins with a desire for some relief when I am in the grip of a conviction that I am a terrible person. Then the decision to enter into prayers of confession needs careful consideration. Ignatius himself recognised his own inability to differentiate between sins and inappropriate scruples, and is for reasons such as these that the Spiritual Exercises generally require a wise director (Exx 345-351).

A recurring problem for many people with low self-confidence is an inability to grasp that they can be valued by others and that good things can happen to them. In theological language, they have a problem with accepting the grace of God. The prayer ‘Polka Dots and Grace’ acknowledges this difficulty by likening God’s grace to irregular



splotches of paint, so different from the predictability of polka dots, which tend to be in regular and recurring patterns, and which for me subconsciously represent ordered perfection.

Polka Dots and Grace

Dear God of magnificence

I understand polka dots
regular and predictable
as if waiting to be joined up into meaningful pictures
by a child with her coloured pencils.

But grace I regularly fail to comprehend
messy like paint splatters,
difficult to interpret,
and frequently a challenge
unless it comes from a known and trusted source.

There are things which it would have been better not to have learnt:
Instincts such as 'I'm no good',
or 'why would they want to waste time and resources on me?',
or 'are they really interested in me as a person?',
or 'is this gesture just something to be paid back in the future?'

And now the challenge is to learn more about grace:
 to accept that good things can happen,
 and keep happening,
 and will happen some more,
 and that you, gracious God, ordain this to be so.

Forgive me when I seem slow to learn these new lessons.

Forgive me when I fail to recognise your grace, and in doing so, reject
 you.

Forgive me when my response to your grace is disappointment for what
 is not.

And please continue to challenge me by sending your irregular and
 unanticipated

plotches of grace

just as they are

and they don't have to be as perfectly formed as polka dots.

The sentiment in this prayer of confession is serious; it is the prayer of someone struggling to recognise grace. But there is also a degree of playfulness. Looking back, I can see that, while self-esteem was still an issue when I wrote this prayer, it feels very different from the much more despairing prayers of a few years earlier, when my self-confidence was very low.

Ignatian Spirituality and Building Self-Esteem

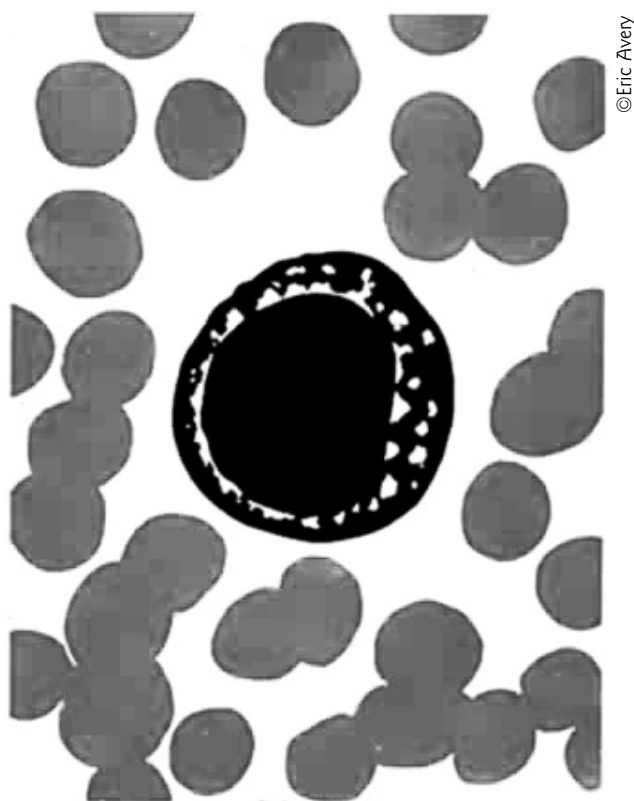
So far, this paper recounts a very personal story. But perhaps there are some lessons to be drawn from my journey which may be helpful to others who struggle with the same issues, and to those who support and encourage their spiritual development.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that some degree of self-esteem is essential if one is able to experience the grace of God acting in our lives. Consequently, gaining self-esteem is not sinful or incompatible with a Christian way of living *per se*.

Secondly, people may well also imagine that God views them with the same disdain with which they perceive themselves. They therefore have a critical need to develop new images both of self and of God, and the imagination may be an effective tool in this process.

Thirdly, Ignatian methods of prayer, such as imaginative contemplation or the Examen, may help us become more aware of God's grace both in our own lives and in the wider world.

Fourthly, Ignatius always envisaged a role for someone in facilitating and supporting individuals who undertake the Spiritual Exercises.¹¹ The First Week frequently induces some form of existential crisis as an individual's previous images of both self and God are shattered. The gentle support of a director is required at this time of desolation. However, for someone whose self image is chronically poor, wise and sensitive direction may be especially critical. It is vital that the experience result in revelations of grace rather than in the reinforcement of low self-esteem.¹²



The Last Lymphocyte by Eric Avery

¹¹ This person now tends to be called a 'director' although Ignatius did not use this word himself.

¹² Exx 7: 'If the one who is giving the Exercises sees that the one who is receiving them is in desolation and tempted, let them not be hard or dissatisfied with them, but gentle and indulgent,

But it is also important to offer some words of warning. For a start, low self-esteem in adults, typically something which has developed over many years, is not likely to disappear quickly. For many people the struggle to maintain a self-image positive enough to enable normal functioning is lifelong, even though lapses may become less frequent and less severe. In cases in which an individual's self-esteem is very low, the person will not necessarily be helped by prayer alone; they may need referral to a professional for counselling or psychotherapy. The fragments of my journeys with myself and God that I share in this paper are parts of a process that has taken many years, and involved psychotherapy, spiritual direction and ongoing loving relationships with a number of significant people in my life. None of these alone has proved to be a cure for my low self-esteem, but each has made a significant contribution, of a different and complementary kind, towards helping me to manage my tendency towards it, and not to let it manage me.

Moreover, prayer, for all the positive effects that it can have on my sense of self-worth, has a value that goes beyond its usefulness to my growth. Ultimately the reason why I pray is that I have a relationship with God which I value and wish to keep developing. As Margaret Hebblethwaite has warned:

Prayer is not just a soothing technique for self-improvement, and we do not pray to make ourselves feel good. A prayer life is not one of the luxuries of an over-fed, over-educated, over-developed western world—a final sign of physical, intellectual and spiritual well-being. It is about something much more probing and painful than that.¹³

As I have grown more confident in myself and more confident in my relationship with God, my explorations in prayer have sometimes taken me into scary places, and I have needed reassurance. At times I have found gushing arteries of pain that I scarcely knew existed. Even if loving support is readily obtainable, there is some pain that nothing but time can take away. The development of self-esteem, on its own, is far from a panacea or a route to paradise:

giving them courage and strength for the future, and laying bare to them the wiles of the enemy of human nature, and getting them to prepare and dispose themselves for the consolation coming.⁷

¹³ Hebblethwaite, *Way of St Ignatius*, 126.

... self-esteem does not spare one brokenness and suffering and service. Rather, self-esteem enables a believer to hear the call of Christ to identify with brokenness and suffering and service. A theology of self-esteem requires the believer to esteem her neighbour as herself, which hardly means success, happiness and peace of mind when so many of our neighbours are deprived of the most basic needs without which one can hardly think in terms of self-esteem.¹⁴

I have witnessed significant developments both in my self-esteem and in my relationship with God in recent years. But the work is not finished. My life feels very much like a work in progress; I see my present self as a prototype of the person who will be developing in the years to come. Karl Rahner once wrote, 'During temptation, don't say to yourself, "I can't"; say to God, "You can"'.¹⁵ I pray that at some stage in the future, I too will be able to say without any hesitation to God, 'You can', rather than 'I can't'.¹⁶

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¹⁴ Carroll Saussy, 'Faith and Self-Esteem', *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 42 (1988), 125-137, here 135.

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer*, translated by Bruce W. Gillette (Collegeville, Mn: Liturgical, 1997 [1946]), 96.

¹⁶ This article is written with thanks to the many people in Australia, in Britain and elsewhere who introduced me to Ignatian spirituality, who encouraged my explorations, and who believed in me when I struggled to believe in myself. I am particularly grateful to those friends who provided comments on earlier drafts of this article.