

NOW I AM RETIRED ...

Marion Morgan

MAYBE IT WAS THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH of my teens which impressed the idea of personal mission on me so strongly. But I was also struck by the sheer difficulties involved with mission. How do I preach the gospel without becoming a pain to my friends and acquaintances? For that matter, what am I preaching anyway? And these questions eventually led me to the Roman Catholic Church.

The church I arrived at for instruction was St Mary on the Quay, Bristol, in England, which at that time was staffed by Jesuits. My experience of Ignatian spirituality started from there, and I was for many years very active. I was one of the first lay people to make a retreat at St Beuno's, the noted retreat centre in Wales, and I continued to go there regularly for many years. I did courses in theology, including a full-time year at Heythrop College in London. I then worked for the Bristol Council of Churches until 1992—the same year as the Jesuits left St Mary's— eventually becoming Executive Secretary.

But what has happened since then? How have I been living out the Ignatian charism? How has it been helping me now that my life has changed? I have not only retired but am now the full-time carer for someone with mental health difficulties. I cannot go on retreats any more because I cannot take the time off. And I probably could not afford them anyway, even if I were able to get in! I still attend St Mary's, but I am less involved than before because of my domestic commitments. I no longer give talks on Ignatius as I once did—others have moved into the spaces and the whole spiritual scene has developed. People are being trained for spiritual direction on local courses run ecumenically by Anglicans with some Roman Catholics, and I am no longer the only one around who can claim some knowledge of the subject.

At the personal level, how does Ignatian spirituality help *me*, now that I am retired, not working, no longer 'important' and in the flow of things?

Let me describe my days a bit. We have a dog, Lucy, who loves lots of exercise; and so, twice a day, we go up on the Downs in Bristol and let her run. And there I meet lots of people. Dog-walkers are on the whole a sociable lot. The dogs play together and the owners begin to chat. We talk about anything and everything. It is easy to talk because there is no ongoing commitment, no arrangement to meet. You chat to whoever happens to be up there. As well as being part of the church community, I now find I am part of the dog-walking community as well.

Which brings me to *The Conversational Word of God*, a book written by Thomas H. Clancy SJ in 1977 and long out of print. It was published by the Institute of Jesuit Sources in St Louis, and I probably bought it at St Beuno's. It is the book that gives meaning to all the time when I am not 'working for the Church' or being explicitly apostolic. It makes me feel once again part of the great missionary outreach of the Church and the Exercises. I keep coming back to it.

For Fr Clancy, 'spiritual conversation is one of those topics that is so evident that no one writes about it'. There are not many books or articles on the subject. But Ignatius saw it as one of the ways in which his followers could be of help to people. Moreover,

... the overwhelming impression that one gets from the Gospels is that relatively few of Christ's words were 'proclaimed' This is perhaps most evident in the Gospel of John, which at times appears to be nothing more than a series of one-on-one encounters of Jesus with Andrew, Peter, Mary, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and many others.

Every Christian is supposed to be a missionary, a person who conveys the Good News of Christ to the world. The only way most Christians can fulfil this obligation is by godly conversation. And even the clerics among us who are authorised to proclaim the gospel from the pulpit will never reach the vast majority of [people] in this manner. (pp. 1, 5, 6)

I find all this very inspiring. It gives me an apostolate that I can try to fulfil even in the middle of my existing activities and duties. God can work through me whatever I am doing, so long as I am meeting

people and open to encounters. My responsibility is simply to stay close to God, whether through prayer or other means, so that I can remain sensitive to the Spirit's prompting. And perhaps also to involve myself in whatever interests me in 'the world', so that I have genuine points of contact with others.

Bernd Knüfer, writing about his experiences in post-Communist Leipzig in the July 2005 number of *The Way*, reminded us that such contacts may never bear any fruit. Or else they may bear fruit, for one or both parties involved, only many years after the initial meeting. But that does not matter. We do not need to know the impact, if any, of our encounter. The important thing is to be available for encounter—and where better than quite normal places such as the Downs, the supermarket, the garden with neighbours, the bus stop, or wherever?

If I am too busy, this cannot happen so easily. If I have leisure, then the opportunities are there all the time. And the experience is a two-way one. One of the ways in which challenge and healing is going to come to me is through my encounters with these other people. A relative stranger came up to me recently and said: 'It is hard looking after someone. I *know*.' That was all—but it released the tears and gave me the strength to carry on through a rather bad patch.

I do find that trying to see or find God in all things is difficult. Surely what Ignatius means is something more like an underlying stance or attitude, not something that can be actively and consciously put into practice all the time. But nevertheless, this ideal does give me permission, as it were, to engage in other activities. Just as there are Jesuits who are artists, scientists, architects and astronomers, so I know that being a carer, or doing the garden, or even playing tennis is still a legitimate way of being a committed, dedicated Christian. And Ignatius' guidance on discernment helps me to make the decisions of just how to spend and balance my time. Should I take on an extra commitment, or am I busy enough? Should I go out for coffee with a friend or go down to the Holy Hour? An instant check on how it feels, where the suggestion is coming from, where it is going, helps me respond appropriately. A later Examen confirms—or sometimes rattles—the decision.

Church people can forget that God is in *all* things. Of course we can point to Jesus' hidden years, when we assume he worked at least some of the time as a carpenter, thus giving value to ordinary work. But it often seems that the only work that really counts as meritorious

is work for the Church. Anything else is somehow neglecting one's duty. Exaggerated? Maybe—but you try explaining why you can't help with the church cleaning or the annual bazaar. And if you happen to be unlucky enough to be running either of these activities, try getting people to help and see how annoying it is when they put their own lives first.

As for the insults and injuries that Ignatius mentions in the Exercises—yes! I have plenty of those. In these times of political correctness, when so much emphasis is put on a person's rights, people are scandalized when they hear me being verbally abused from time to time by the person I care for. They do not know that he is always sorry afterwards, nor do they know the efforts he is making not to do this. I see their point of view, but there is not much I can do. However, Ignatian spirituality creates a rare space where we can see such humiliations as valuable. Which is good, because there are a number of us around who have rather a lot of them and it doesn't help when we are simply told we shouldn't put up with it.

I have flirted with or explored a little various other types of spirituality: Franciscan and Carmelite among others. I have discovered that yes, I can certainly learn from all of them, but there is none that rings that bell deep inside me which says: 'Yes. This is where you fit and belong.' But it is incredibly difficult to say exactly what it is that makes this happen. I simply know that if I get out of balance, or confused, or out of sorts with myself, something from Ignatius usually gets me back on track.

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