

IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AS A SPIRITUALITY OF INCARNATION

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'The third love is Jesus Christ, the Eternal King of the Exercises, the Incarnate Son of God, to whom we all owe a personal love, the key of our spirituality.' (Pedro Arrupe)¹

A KEY, BASIC ELEMENT of Ignatian spirituality is its incarnational character. By revisiting two ancient Christological heresies and the theological responses to them, we can see how these heresies persist in our spiritual lives today, generating a disembodied faith. This prompts us to reflect on the relevance and importance of the Incarnation in Ignatian spirituality as a means of living an authentic and incarnated faith in the world today.

Affirming Faith in the Incarnation in the Early Church

In the early Church there were neither dogmas nor structures, but simply a people who experienced the effects of the encounter with the Risen One. As they came into contact with other peoples and cultures, the early Christians developed reasons for the faith they lived, in response to the questions that foreigners put to them. One of the essential points on which they were challenged was the humanity of Christ and his relationship with the Divine. Various heresies appeared which the early Church had to combat: among these, two of the most important were Docetism and Nestorianism.

In the second century Docetism questioned the humanity of the Son of God, asserting that the Word did not, in fact, become Flesh, but rather

¹ Pedro Arrupe, 'Fifty Years as a Jesuit', in *Essential Writings*, edited by Kevin Burke (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 72.

assumed only the appearance of a body. The term Docetism has its roots in a Greek word which means ‘to seem’ or ‘to show’. Docetists deny the reality of the Body of Christ. For them, Jesus is a kind of Greek god who visits mortals disguised as one of them, performing marvellous deeds and acting as a teacher who communicates secret knowledge—but without actually becoming human. The Docetists assert that Jesus is God—but *only* God; his flesh, and his humanity, are mere appearance.

To speak of flesh, in the sense of St John’s Gospel and of ancient tradition, means speaking of the totality of human being, in all its broken, transitory and mortal fragility. To speak, therefore, of redemption of the flesh is to speak of the redemption of human fragility.

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A salvation which does not involve the whole of the human being and of history—including the salvation of the body, and the fragile reality of humanity—is not Salvation. This is why Christian tradition has always firmly defended the Incarnation of the Word: if the Son of God had merely the semblance of a human condition; if, in other words, he was dehistoricised; and if he did not take on our *flesh*, then our *flesh* would not be saved. In response to the Docetists, St Irenaeus affirmed that the flesh is the ‘hinge’ or ‘axis’ of Salvation. The Council of Nicaea (AD 325) taught, with Irenaeus, that ‘Jesus is true God and true Man’.

The second heretical current, Nestorianism, appeared in the fifth century.² So anxious are Nestorians to emphasize the transcendence of the Word in the Incarnation that they end up denying the unity of the human and the divine in Christ. Alongside the ‘divine subject’ is a ‘human subject’, which takes upon itself everything relevant to humanity, but in such a way that its divinity remains untouched. Nestorius’ essential question was: how do we conceive the person of God, if God really became Man in Jesus Christ? If God is God, reasoned Nestorius, God cannot be Man. So in order to explain that Christ can be both human and divine he affirms that Christ has two distinct natures—one human, one divine—which are entirely separate from each other.

For the Nestorians, the humanity of Christ is the human face of God, a kind of mask or fantasy which divinity chooses to adopt but

² The heresy is named after Nestorius, a fifth-century Patriarch of Constantinople, though it is not certain that he actually held all the views attributed to him, at least concerning the humanity and divinity of Christ [editorial note].

which does not affect it. In this way in the passion, for example, it is only human nature which suffers, not divine nature, as if God were a kind of actor playing a part in a play—not the same as the character being played, nor affected by what is being represented on stage. In Jesus, according to the Nestorians, divinity and humanity are both present, but separate.

The Council of Ephesus (AD 431), however, affirmed the unity of the two natures. There is only one Christ, one Son, one Lord. Nestorius had also declared that Mary could not be the Mother of God, because God, existing before all, could not be born or brought about—could not, in other words, have a beginning in a woman. The Council consequently made clear that Mary was *Theotokos* (Mother of God). This title for Mary has a profound christological meaning: God has willingly chosen to undergo the human experience, and has become human in Jesus Christ. He has a mother, is born, suffers, dies, and so on, because he really has become flesh and lived out human experiences. He is not just a transcendent God who remains above the fragilities and uncertainties of humanity and its history. Thus Nestorianism and Docetism pose the same challenge: if God did not take on human flesh, there was no redemption of humanity.

The early Church sought to respond to everything that denied the reality of the lived experience of faith in Jesus, son of God, Incarnate Word—who ‘went about doing good’ (Acts 10:38), died, rose again, and was named Lord and Christ. These became the words of the Profession of Faith, one of whose central articles is: ‘Conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary’.

Professing and Living an Incarnate Faith in Today’s World

The Second Vatican Council emphasized the importance of the Incarnation and spelled out its true meaning, taking what is essential from the statements of the first Councils and translating them into today’s terms. God lives humanly in Christ, and is united to every human being, even those who still do not know God explicitly, in such a way that the Word lifts our human state, taking it on in his person. In *Gaudium et spes*, the council declares:

Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too.

For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man (22).

But in order to live a faith which is true to these statements, we come up against a problem which is as old as Christianity itself: the denial, in practice, of the Incarnation of the Word—not in heretical words, but in the way we act in our daily lives. Cardinal Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) writes:

At the very moment that we discover the corporality of the human being with all the fibres of our existence, in such a way that we can only understand His spirit as incarnate, in such a way that Christ is body, not *has* body, people try to save the Christian faith by completely disembodimenting it, by taking refuge in a region of 'mere' mind, of pure self-satisfying interpretation, which seems to be immune from criticism only through its lack of contact with reality. But Christian faith really means precisely the acknowledgement that God is not the prisoner of his own eternity, not limited to the solely spiritual; that he is capable of operating here and now, in the midst of my world, and that he did operate in it through Jesus, the new Adam, who was born of the Virgin Mary through the creative power of God, whose spirit hovered over the waters at the very beginning, who created being out of nothing.³

Our problem is that we repeatedly profess our faith, but very often ignore the practical consequences of what we profess. All too many of us live a disembodied faith. The heresies continue in the very air we breathe. In the second century Christians faced the temptation of believing in the Christ-God, forgetting that he is Jesus of Nazareth, a real flesh-and-blood man. And this Docetist tendency is present in our practice of our own faith when we seek the miraculous or spectacular in an all-Divine Christ who is disconnected from human reality. We speak enthusiastically of his miracles, of his power to cure and to cast out demons. But we may also treat his temptations as wholly spiritual, and therefore fail to realise that the Gospels speak of temptations to specific concrete actions, directed against Jesus as Messiah. These temptations pay lip service to the mission which his Father gave him, but would alienate him from a messianism of service in favour of another messianism, which would make him a king in the eyes of this world, using his divine condition for his own benefit.

³ J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 278–279.



The Agony in the Garden, by Albrecht Dürer

We find it difficult to accept that Jesus was ever afraid or upset, that he experienced anguish when confronted with the proximity of death and questioned himself in the face of the Father's will. We tend to speak of his miraculous Resurrection without taking into account the life choices which led him to the Cross. And we risk treating the Ascension like a firework display, with thunder and lightning and angels going up and down, playing trumpets. But this pays no attention to the words directed at the first Christians—'Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?' (Acts 1:11). These words send them back to the place of Christ's Crucifixion in order to begin sowing the seeds of the Kingdom of God, incarnating themselves in the history of

their own people as their Lord had incarnated himself to the point of dying on the Cross.

What many of us do, in practice, faced with the Kingdom of God, is to choose 'Jesus as God, but without the Kingdom'. Often we are dressed in mystical clothing, but alienated as Christians because we refuse to be embodied in the miseries of history. This is to deny the humanity of the Lord like the Docetists; or, like the Nestorians, to separate Jesus' divinity from his humanity. That is why we must not forget that the humanity of Christ—his way of living, his choices, attitudes, words, feelings, relationships, the positions he took faced with real situations, his way of dying—are the revelation of God among us. 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us' (John 1:14), and from that moment 'He is the image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15).

So professing faith in a God whose Word became incarnate has to lead us to live a faith embodied in history. Without ever ceasing to cultivate an intimate relationship with the Lord and living a faith always rooted in the experience of Jesus Christ, we have to realise that the authentically Christian interior life is not mere interiority. Our authentic living-out of the faith must be embodied in history; if it is not, it is heretical. Christian faith is not an enclosed ghetto of belief, but a radical opening to the world. The God of Jesus took flesh and lived among us, in *this* world.

The Christian believes that the world is the revelation of God, even when God's presence so often appears hidden and veiled; which is why the faith of a Christian must be lived embodied in a specific reality. Our faith is authentic if it leads us to place our feet on the ground, if it leads us to an encounter with the poor, the humble. It is not an interior faith, restricted to feelings; it is not an other-worldly faith, alien to the realities of this world. Faith is only valuable when it practises love (see 1 Corinthians 13:1–13): 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). It is a faith of solidarity which shares both goods and life itself. And it is authentic only when it takes on a body in history—for the sake of love, which realises itself in actions.

Ignatian Mysticism and the Incarnation

The great originality and contemporary relevance of Ignatius' mysticism lie in his capacity to take us to that concrete incarnation in human history. He is convinced that the Creator can act directly on the loved creature in the most intimate way (Exx 15). In Ignatian mysticism, the subject is the key—his or her personal characteristics and freedom. The retreatant is going to feel, and to experience greater depths of feeling, and from these will flow a world of desires inflamed by the question, 'What must I do for Christ?' (Exx 53). The contemplations of the life of Christ are not static but unsettle and move the subject—provoke motions of the Spirit—to do something for the Kingdom of God. So the intimate and individual experience of the Exercises does not remain confined to the internal forum of the retreatant, but opens him or her up to the reality and weariness of the surrounding world .

In this sense, the experiences of evil and of mercy occur not only in the conscience of the retreatant. The meditation on sin seeks to show that the trauma of evil is historical, even if it has transcendent causes. Evil is tied up with a set of attitudes that are egotistical, proud and self-sufficient in each individual. To feel 'shame and confusion' (Exx 48) is to become aware of our own participation in the evil of history. This feeling, at the same time, brings the experience of mercy which embraces and converts the retreatant, culminating in a sense of gratitude and generosity at being a loved sinner, making oblation to the Lord, handing over everything to the One who loves the retreatant and calls him or her to follow (Exx 98).

The trauma of evil is historical, even if it has transcendent causes

At this point comes the key contemplation for our reflection here: the Incarnation (Exx 109). In the text of the Exercises this comes after the exercise of the Call of the King (Exx 91–100) and before the second contemplation, the Nativity (Exx 110–117). In this way, the Incarnation is a story to be contemplated: it shows us the Trinitarian identity of the Eternal King and, at the same time, it precedes the contemplation of His birth in history, which in turn shows us the nature of his rule: his birth in extreme poverty and his death on the cross after suffering hunger, thirst, heat, cold, insults and slanders (Exx 116).

The scene of the contemplation of the Incarnation is the world, which is the destination of the Word in the descending movement of His incarnation (Philippians 2:6–10). In the first prelude Ignatius



Cestello Annunciation, by Botticelli

suggests imagining the Trinity and the way in which God sees the world, full of conflicts and discord. Moved by the sufferings of humanity, God decides to save it through the incarnation of the Son: 'Let us redeem humankind' (Exx 107). In the second prelude retreatants are invited to contemplate the world and the humanity of which they are a part, with all its contradictions. In the solitude of the retreat, they are placed in communion with that history which the Incarnate Word seeks to transform. Straight away they proceed to the contemplation of the house at Nazareth where the incarnation is made concrete by the acceptance and *fiat* of Mary.

All this movement has its end point in the third prelude: to ask for 'an internal knowledge of the Lord who became man for me, in order to love him more and follow him' (Exx 104). Retreatants seek to know, in

the depths of their hearts, the heart of the Incarnate Word, in order to be attracted by him,

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness (Philippians 2:6–7).

Therefore, contemplating this mystery, the retreatants place themselves in the centre of an incarnational movement. Just as Mary, who carries in her womb the Incarnate Word, goes out to meet Elizabeth, the retreatants begin a movement of incarnation in history to help, in order better to love and to serve.

Following this same movement in the group of contemplations of the life of Jesus, retreatants not only imagine the events, along with Jesus' choices and words, but actually live through them with him.

The exercitant should in this Second Week try to become familiar with the Incarnate Eternal Word, accompanying Him, listening to Him, serving Him, worshipping Him as Lord, Elder Brother and source of all that is good.⁴

As they contemplate, the retreatants use their imagination to enter the scene described in the Gospel, always asking for the same grace to have that internal knowledge which leads to greater love and a more intense service. The retreatants gaze on Jesus, paying attention to his words, gestures, feelings and internal dispositions, and to his way of living the mission received from the Father. They take part in the scene by being present to the events through imagination and faith. They become historical personalities, who talk with Jesus, who touch and are touched by him, and who relate to other characters in each scene. They savour each scene in their hearts, and try to 'receive some benefit from each of these things' (Exx 108). In other words, they try to become aware of what effect the contemplation has had on them internally and of what the encounter with the Lord has impressed on their hearts, and then they try to apply it concretely to their lives.

That is why Ignatian contemplation is no mere flight of the imagination, a fantasy which produces pleasant feelings. Rather the

⁴ Directory of Fr Gil González Dávila, 97, *Dir* 31.

retreatants, moved by the Spirit, have an intimate experience of a direct encounter with Jesus, with his life and work, in his passion, death and resurrection. In their own way the retreatants relive a founding experience of the first disciples, who are called at first to be with Jesus, and are sent on mission only later, after living for some time by his side (see Mark 3:13–19). In the contemplation, therefore, retreatants experience following Jesus—becoming disciples, in other words—and are able to move from interior experience to lived experience.

Following Christ is not an emotional experience dissociated from reality, but something that comes about by confronting difficult situations and choices. It is a mature choice, made in the depths of the heart, and in the face of the harshest of realities. Seeking an internal knowledge of Christ, who became incarnate in the history of all men and women, retreatants contemplate this story together with the Trinity, and will apply the contemplation directly to their concrete existence and to that of the people around them in the service of the Kingdom of God. In this way, they discover their place in the history of Salvation, in the concrete unfurling of the Kingdom of God in history.

After the Exercises: Incarnating the Motions of the Spirit in History

In the Exercises, Ignatius brings us to meet Christ, the Incarnate Word, who is the precondition for our living an incarnate and authentic faith. Once the Exercises are over, those who have had a real experience of God will be enabled to find God in all things: in their own lives, in the lives of others, in Creation, in history. The Contemplation to Attain Divine Love is the bridge between the lived experience of the Exercises and daily life. We contemplate the God who acts in us, lovingly communicating to us all that God has done and can do, in all Creation and in Redemption, in people and in events, in every time and place. It is a constant, uninterrupted communication, of which we need to be aware in order to find God always and in everything (Exx 234).

During the Exercises we experience the gratuitous communication to us of God's goodness. We leave grateful and amazed by all the good things we have received (Exx 233), especially in the form of the central motion of the Spirit given to us by God, which is the call to concrete service. The Contemplation to Attain Divine Love throws us back towards daily life, where we will live out this movement in history, the plan of life discovered in the Exercises. So this contemplation is never

over, because as soon as the Exercises are finished we are back in the world, seeking to be united to God in action, looking for and finding God in everything. Hence the importance of the *Examen*: giving thanks for the graces received, recognising constantly all the good things that come from God, examining the daily movements of the Spirit, seeking and finding God in all things and all things in God.

This was Ignatius' own experience. For him, the contemplative in action, everything and everyone were sacraments of God. So we can characterize Ignatian spirituality as 'horizontal'⁵—the mysticism characteristic of an apostolic people. For 'horizontal' mystics, the world and history are the primary places for the adoration of God—even though they do not stop having intense moments of intimate and personal encounter with Love. But rather than being an obstacle to that encounter, their historical context becomes a necessary mediation of it.

The world and history are the primary places of the adoration of God

The Contemplation to Attain Divine Love and the *Examen* characterize Ignatian spirituality as 'seeking God in all things'.⁶ This is the essence of a spirituality of service, for whoever cultivates intimacy with God in contemplative prayer discovers that anything or any situation becomes the place of encounter with Him. Ignatius told Luis Gonçalves da Câmara that he was:

... always growing in devotion, i.e. in facility in finding God, and now more than ever in his whole life. And every time and hour he wanted to find God, he found Him.⁷

He felt so united to God that he could give himself over totally to his work. Nothing could distract him from God, for he managed to find God in everything he did. For Ignatius, the presence of God and daily service became synonymous. That is why he became, as Jerónimo Nadal described him, a 'contemplative in action'; his mystical prayer does not lead him to the passive contemplation of eternal truth nor a drunkenness on God's love, but rather to the service of God in history—in mission.

⁵ This is an expression coined by Edward Kinerk, 'When Jesuits Pray: A Perspective on the Prayer of Apostolic Persons', in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 17/5 (November 1985).

⁶ A profound study of this expression is that of Josef Stierli, *Buscar a Deus em todas as coisas* (São Paulo: Loyola, 1990)

⁷ *Autobiography*, 99.

Being contemplatives in action means that when we encounter the world we must find God in it and love it; and when we lovingly approach God, we are called to love the whole world in God. The first motion prevents any attempt on our part to flee *into* the world, losing ourselves in a sterile activism; we are called to be *contemplatives* in action. The second motion forbids us to flee *from* the world, losing ourselves in an alienated interiority: we are called to be contemplatives *in action*. So in Ignatian spirituality there is a search for a way of overcoming the opposition between pure interiority and the world out there, ensuring that *contemplation* is something done by the whole person in all circumstances, and that *action* is a human practice which flows from contemplative experience. To be contemplatives in action is to live in a constant attitude of listening and reverence before God in the world, asking always: ‘Lord, what do you want me to do?’, and responding obediently. In this way, intimate experience of God through prayer and service in daily life are two inseparable poles, each meaningless without the other.

Ignatian mysticism leads, therefore, to a concrete Incarnation in human history. To live out that spirituality means to enter—to be enfleshed in—the world and in reality. It means recognising that there is no disjunction between God and the world: God is fully present in the world and it is up to us to make sure that that the world is fully in God.⁸ We announce the incarnation of God by incarnating ourselves in the lives of other people, through our presence, service, listening and sharing. We announce the incarnation by incarnating ourselves in society, culture, politics, economics, in order to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 6:13–16).

At their meeting in Aparecida in 2007, the Latin-American bishops told us that ‘those who live in Christ are expected to give a credible witness of holiness and commitment’.⁹ That commitment, they said, leads to the Incarnation in history of our suffering people because ‘Jesus, the Good Shepherd, wishes to communicate his life to us and to place us at the service of life’ (n.353). The great scandals of our age are injustice, poverty, social exclusion, corruption, and lack of respect for life. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is the one who makes clear God’s

⁸ GC 34, d. 4, n. 7.

⁹ CELAM, *Documento conclusivo* (Bogotá: CELAM, 2007), n. 352.

preference for the poor and for the little ones, for 'truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40). This God is revealed as love and service; kneeling, He washes our feet (John 13:1-13). This is a God who is engaged with the person and with history, the One who takes the initiative in going out to meet us (Mark 5:21-33). God places Godself at the service of each of us, and tells us that if the Master and Lord, does this, we too must do the same (John 13:14-15).

The Christian experience of God, therefore, is not distant from reality, it is not sentimental ecstasy, but rather implies an engagement with the building of fraternity in history. The spiritual experience of Ignatius brings together an ever more intensely passionate confession of God and the cause of universal solidarity. To live out Ignatian spirituality means being a friend of the poor and struggling for the justice of the Kingdom; it means including the excluded, as Jesus did. It means recognising that 'the living conditions of many of those who are abandoned, excluded and passed over in their misery and pain' contradict the Father's loving plan and challenge us to engage afresh with culture, for 'the Kingdom of life which Christ came to bring is incompatible with these inhuman



Christ Washes the Disciples' Feet,
by the Meister des Hausbuchs

situations'.¹⁰ That is why those who choose to live out Ignatian spirituality in their life choices—in their professional lives and their relationships, as well as in their lesser daily decisions—must have at the centre of their existence the good of the human being rather than financial profit, power, wealth or the market; 'and should be a man or woman who makes visible the merciful love of the Father, especially for the poor and for sinners'.¹¹

In sum, we have seen how Ignatian spirituality brings us to an experience of the Word being incarnated within us and in history, in such a way that we are, in turn drawn to the world to practise love in concrete ways. If we do not enter into that movement, but merely claim that the Word became flesh in Mary's womb without living out that incarnation in the day-to-day, then our faith is not the same as that which was brought to the world by Jesus of Nazareth. Let us close with the words of St Ignatius of Antioch (to the Trallians, 9–10) shortly before he was martyred. The words reveal the clarity with which this man saw the concrete effects of professing his faith in the incarnate Word of God:

Stop your ears therefore when anyone speaks to you that stands apart from Jesus Christ, from David's scion and Mary's Son, who was really born and ate and drank, really persecuted by Pontius Pilate, really crucified and died while heaven and earth and the underworld looked on; who also really rose from the dead, since His Father raised him up, his Father, who will likewise raise us also who believe in Him through Jesus Christ, apart from whom we have no real life. But if, as some atheists, that is, unbelievers, say, his suffering was but a make-believe—when, in reality, they themselves are make-believes—then why am I in chains? Why do I even pray that I may fight wild beasts? In vain, then, do I die! My testimony is, after all, but a lie about the Lord!¹²

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¹⁰ CELAM, *Documento conclusivo*, n. 358.

¹¹ CELAM, *Documento conclusivo*, n. 358.

¹² St Ignatius of Antioch, epistle to the Trallians, in *The Epistles of St Clement of Rome and St Ignatius of Antioch*, translated by James A. Kleist (Westminster, Md: Newman Bookshop, 1946), 77–78.