AN IGNATIAN WAY OF PREACHING THE GOSPEL

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IS THERE A PECULIARLY IGNATIAN APPROACH to preaching the Good News? If so, does it have something valuable to say to us? These questions are timely since, for some decades now, all the Churches have been exploring the paths of 'a new evangelization'. Does the Ignatian tradition have a specific contribution to make to this process?

An Original Theme

Throughout history, many ways of proclaiming the gospel have been employed, depending on the period and the context. There is, for example, preaching at large (Acts shows Paul haranguing crowds; and in the thirteenth century the mendicant orders brought back this style in force); there is also instruction addressed to the Christian community, aimed at strengthening it in the faith, so that it can in turn spread the gospel to others (Paul's letters are beautiful examples, as are the texts of the Fathers of the Church). To these obvious examples one should add another: an exposition of faith as a systematic whole, presenting different arguments and demonstrating the strength of Christian thought when confronted with objections. Alongside these ways of preaching the gospel in words, we should not forget the mode of preaching by action—for example, by a change of life (the Desert Fathers were the first to proclaim the gospel in this way, followed by the entire monastic tradition); or by the transmission and teaching of simple gestures which instil a faith-based approach to life (which is how the gospel has been passed on within families throughout the centuries); and of course there is the call to change our relationships with one another (demonstrated by initiatives of solidarity with the weakest among us, of which there have been innumerable examples in the history of the Church; the Franciscan tradition has made it the cornerstone of its approach to preaching the Good News).

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Clearly, each of these ways is a part of the richness of the Christian Churches, and it would be absurd to try to rely on one or another exclusively. It is noteworthy that at different periods, one form or another may have been favoured or left aside.

The Art of Spiritual Conversation

Did Ignatius have a preferred way of preaching the gospel? If I had to name a typical element in his way of doing things, something that reveals his personality, I would immediately suggest the art of spiritual conversation. The pleasure and ease with which he initiated conversations with those he met are mentioned from the very beginning of his conversion. When he was convalescing at Loyola and had experienced different spirits, and after the vision of Our Lady with which he was graced one night, we find in his *Autobiography*, in an aside:

> He, not troubling himself with anything, was persevering in his reading and his good intentions, and the whole time he spoke with those in the house he used to spend on things of God, with which he did their souls good (11).

Later in his *Autobiography,* we find the Pilgrim frequently talking to those he met, either to glean something for his own benefit and edification, or in order to share what he himself had experienced (see *Autobiography*, 26, 34, 37 and 42). It seems Ignatius had a knack for this: it can be recognised as one of his principal gifts. In this we can see, not so much the Ignatian way of preaching the gospel (he and his first companions resorted to almost all the kinds of preaching that we have already mentioned), but rather a particular style, a contribution that he made to the missionary tradition of the Church. This was in fact a revival of a practice that was typical of the Church from the beginning. One has only to think of examples in the New Testament, such as the way the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is reported; the story of the disciples of Emmaus; or the meeting between the eunuch and Philip.

It seems to me that, for Ignatius and for the first Fathers of the Company, the art of spiritual conversation colours their approach to the

work of evangelization.[1] After all, the Spiritual Exercises could be seen as a form of 'organized spiritual conversation' (structured differently, of course, from spontaneous exchanges, but having an essential interactive aspect). This brings us to the point that spiritual conversation itself is an event with three participants: it involves not only the two interlocutors, but is based on the awareness of a third actor, invisible but present—the Spirit. In the Exercises, this third reality is named from the outset, the exercitant being invited to give most attention to this axis of dialogue.

So how does this approach contribute to evangelization? It assumes the consent and, even more, the commitment of each of the participants. The starting point of their journey is set by the questions that they begin to consider together. Progress obviously depends on their willingness to go forward. In this sense, the work of evangelization is shared from the outset. It is not left simply to the one preaching; it takes place in the context of a relationship. It assumes that both are listening to the Spirit for guidance. This occurs particularly by paying attention to desires which may be revealed, and also by daring to name them and bring them before God.

So this is a way of understanding evangelization that involves exchange of words, commitment in freedom, and the awakening of desire and discernment, in order to understand what is calling on God from our own depths, and to recognise those places where God is already at work. There are two other aspects which should be added, which are very relevant for my theme.

[1] Compare John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits (1540–1565)* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1993).

The Radical Nature of the Struggle and the Call to Liberty

Ignatius is a radical. When he enters into conversation with someone, he wants his interlocutor to go to the furthest point, where his whole life comes under God's gaze. We know of course that we resist this very strongly. Receive God? Certainly, in a place that is worthy of God—the parlour, perhaps. But do not let God intrude into the cellar or the attic, or into all the rooms full of disorder, and let God not bring me back to places that make me afraid. In spiritual conversation, however, Ignatius does not rest until God has been given access to every part of the person. So he uses practical methods to encourage all doors to be opened up to God.

We can see this clearly in the Exercises. From the Principle and Foundation onwards, he invites the retreatant to imagine all sorts of situations—riches and poverty, health and sickness, honour and dishonour, short life or long life—so that he can recognise through his imagination that God will remain with him, whatever direction his life takes. This is the most important point.

During the First Week and in the meditations on sin, he encourages exercitants to descend to the depths, where they will see themselves as 'a sore and ulcer, from which have sprung so many sins'. He does this in order that the exercitants may see themselves accepted as such by God with 'an exclamation wonderingly with increased feeling' (Exx 60). In the colloquies of the Second Week, when exercitants have discovered Christ as their saviour, he suggests that they tell God of their desire to follow the Lord even in insults and poverty. In the course of the Third Week, Ignatius suggests that the grace asked for be that of 'grief, feeling and confusion because for my sins the Lord is going to the passion' (Exx 193). Finally, in the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love that closes the Exercises as a whole the exercitants are invited to make a radical surrender of themselves: 'all that I have and possess. You gave it to me: to you, Lord, I return it; it is all yours; dispose it entirely to your will.' (Exx 234)

Exercitants are invited to make a radical surrender of themselves

The Ignatian path is clearly not a little stroll for the good of one's health. It is a journey involving risk—a combat—and Ignatius invites the exercitant to surrender at the intensest moment of the battle. There is nothing easy-going about this undertaking. Believers leave safety and security behind and put themselves on trial in the most radical way, not

to remain in that situation, but to be able to receive the restoration that comes from God: to know themselves to be loved to the uttermost, and to respond to that love.

But is there really no manipulation in all this? Was not Ignatius a bit of a guru? This is where another very important aspect of his spirituality comes into play: trust in God and in the liberty which God gives. Ignatius was aware of the pressures that can be exerted, more or less consciously, during spiritual direction. In Annotation 15 of the Exercises, he clearly invites the director to avoid seeking to influence the decisions that a retreatant may take:

> The one who is giving the Exercises ought not to influence the one who is receiving them more to poverty or to a promise, than to their opposites, nor more to one state or way of life than to another …. So, the one who is giving the Exercises should not turn or incline to one side or the other, but standing in the centre like a balance, leave the Creator to act immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord. (Exx 15)

This proceeds from respect for God's action and from the conviction that God can act in the one who seeks God. This is what contributes a third element in the description of an 'Ignatian way of preaching the gospel': proclamation of the Good News will never fight against or short-circuit the capacity of any person, as if the one preaching could take the place of the believer and know what he or she should reply. The believer's own capacity to listen and to choose God is never dulled or muted, but rather stimulated and strengthened.

Thus when these three elements are highlighted and taken together—the art of spiritual conversation, radicalism, and respect for personal liberty—they could point towards an 'Ignatian way of preaching the gospel'. Having initiated an exchange, it would allow others to be touched interiorly, and would invite them to take the risk of presenting their entire life to God, while continuing to take account of their capacities to hear God's call and respond to it.

None of the three elements can be neglected: if the radicality of the Ignatian approach is forgotten, spiritual conversation can turn into a comfortable discussion in which nothing significant occurs; if one is not careful to respect the believer's liberty, one starts to manipulate; and if one never initiates such an exchange at all, the primary charism of

Ignatius is betrayed and a person is deprived of the opportunity to let the gospel speak to our darkest places.

What Does This Offer to the Church?

What relevance does this Ignatian way of preaching the gospel still have today, and what does it have to offer the Church? To answer this, I will first offer a very schematized review of the present situation. What we have to beware of is a collapse of the broad Church (the 'multitudinist' Church, in the schema used by the sociologist of religion Troeltsch)—which would lead to a confrontation between what I shall call 'spiritual travellers' on the one hand and 'conversion Christianities' on the other. The Ignatian tradition may be able to contribute something to the avoidance of such major confrontations.

'Spiritual Travellers' and 'Conversion Christianities'

By 'spiritual travellers' I mean people who are driven by a true spiritual quest, but who scarcely feel the need to state a definite religious affiliation. They lack the opportunity to discuss their spirituality, and so they often do not have the words to express their exploration and discoveries. They frequently have little confidence in the large institutions that have traditionally been expected to give direction, which are seen, rightly or wrongly, as giving replies without listening to the questions. To 'spiritual travellers' they are large organisations which pay scant attention to the particularity of people's journeys and respond to them by reflex. The personal quest of such travellers often remains vague and inchoate, particularly when it is not backed up by a tradition through which to express itself.

On the other hand, we have seen in recent decades a powerful surge—especially in the Protestant Churches, but also in the heart of the Catholic Church—of what sociologists have called 'conversion Christianity'.

This Christian mentality has four characteristics:

1. Willingness to make a clear statement which communicates directly, with no concern for what is 'religiously correct';
2. The ability to speak to everyone individually and allow them to experience immediately what would change for them if they

believed (this reflects a contemporary attitude which attaches great importance to experience);

3. Promotion of a way of living which cuts itself off from present-day lifestyles;

4. Concern to accentuate the transcendence of God, and not to blur the distance between us and God (in the Catholic Church, this is chiefly expressed in the liturgical sphere, for example, by insistence on respect for the sacred). In general, this also involves a way of living out faith which creates links between believers (not just in fraternal communities, but in the form of networks—the internet is used extensively for this).

Is the Larger Church Fading into the Background?

Between these two groups, the larger Churches often seem irrelevant. Their classic structures, particularly a parish life managed by priests or ministers and centred on regular observances, have been severely tested. Alternative forms have been slow to emerge—and with reason. As long as we cling to the 'parish culture', creativity remains limited. At the same time, I am convinced that parishes and local organizations have a great reserve of energy and creativity, which is somewhat neglected at the moment. When other ways of 'doing Church' have been put in place those energies have been discovered.

If our Churches do not find within their own tradition the way to renew themselves, it is not completely inconceivable that they will slowly become insignificant (that is, 'unable to be a sign'); or they will

seek to remodel their life on that of conversion Christianity. I would see considerable problems associated with either scenario.

In fact, the larger Churches have many treasures, such as an experience of the passage of time, giving them the ability to transmit a message beyond the impact of current fashion and to stand fast in difficult periods; a certain wisdom; the ability to welcome all comers; and finally the capacity to communicate the Good News in different languages, for example, in the social or cultural spheres. Their institutional weight and the great variety of their activities open up the ability to express themselves in the public domain.

If the larger Churches were to disappear, we would be faced with a sort of confrontation between the 'spiritual travellers' and 'conversion Christianity'. This would be alarming. These two ways of believing have a strong repellent effect on each other: 'travellers' have a horror of ready-made truths; they do not feel respected in their personal journeys when people claim to offer them the keys to ultimate questions. On the other hand, those who call to conversion often tend to write off 'spiritual travellers' as people who have 'lost their way'. Feeling that they have arrived at a safe harbour, they find it difficult to imagine that anyone might want to continue the journey indefinitely.

A Contribution from the Ignatian Tradition

The Ignatian way of preaching the gospel, as I have sketched it, has many points of difference from the usual ways of doing things: it does not easily express itself in clear and hard-hitting messages; it prefers to work on the deeper level, which always needs patience and, often, a certain amount of silence; it moves forward slowly, and rarely puts on a show. We can safely to assume that this spiritual tradition will not be at the top of the bill in the coming decades—and it is questionable whether this is the appropriate place for it. Nonetheless, it may well have something to contribute.

The Ignatian approach may be able to prevent a direct confrontation between 'spiritual travelling' and 'conversion Christianity'. As we have seen, it combines respect for subjectivity and care for individuality (a key element for 'travellers') with a radical call to conversion (the cornerstone of 'conversion Christianity'); and it makes use of the art of spiritual conversation, that is, speech. It can therefore help travellers to find a path in which they are respected and which takes them some distance; and it can

help 'conversion Christians' to root their attachment to Christ in the depths of their humanity—their personal history and their place in society. In this way it demonstrates that the clash between these two mentalities is not inevitable, and suggests a possible mediation—not arising out of compromise, but by transcending attitudes that could prove to be sterile. This mediation would come about specifically as a result of invoking the third 'participant' in the conversation—the Spirit.[2]

These reflections, based on the Ignatian tradition, also point to something to which the wider Churches need to pay attention—the need to provide a place where views can be exchanged (not just heard). Without such a place travellers may end up enclosed in a silent and solitary quest that could lead to despair; and converts could believe themselves to have 'arrived'. The Churches still desperately lack such places of listening and sharing, where believers can accompany each other in their discipleship of Christ.[3] Providing such places would mean, among other things, that parish life would have to develop beyond the Sunday congregation (which is hardly a meeting conducive to spiritual conversation), so that Christians could come together in smaller groups to read the Bible, pray, ask questions, strengthen each other in faith, exchange news, talk about their daily life, and seek together how to respond to God's call.

Our times call for the art of spiritual conversation to be expanded, to the point where it occurs at the community level (not just between individuals), and characterizes how communities organize themselves. For example, how do they receive newcomers, or respond to those who ask for a sacrament? The art of spiritual conversation could help a Christian community or local Church develop a whole new relationship with those around it. If such communities begin to listen and express themselves, certain questions will arise for them: what are the calls, the spiritual longings, the paths of promise that they can discern, based on what is happening in their neighbourhood, their town or their region? How do they identify and receive these

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[2] The success of spiritual initiatives in the dioceses indicates in any case that this is what practising Christians are asking for.

[3] Compare Philippe Bacq and Odile Ribadeau-Dumas, *A Taste of Gospel: Mark, a Pastoral Account* (Brussels: Lumen Vitae, 2006), 289–313.

questions? Are Christians in these communities able to risk saying what they believe, pointing to the star that they are following?

Of course, spiritual conversation is not to be seen as the whole life of the Church: it is just one aspect of it. But our times invite us not to ignore it.

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