

DISCERNING JOY

The Ignatian Way

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These pages were originally written in honour of the anniversary celebrations in 2006 for Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier and Pierre Favre. They concern the 'modo de proceder'¹ called 'Ignatian spirituality': how best to approach it for the first time, and how best to savour its richness and exceptional strength once again having already begun to live as a disciple of Jesus under its influence. The starting point will be the Spiritual Exercises, which invite one to welcome the joy that comes from God, as one receives the gift of God's ever greater love, at the heart of the world created by God.

THE TEST OF AUTHENTICITY for any particular spirituality within the Christian tradition is that it should lead one through the Son to the Father. Ignatian spirituality is no exception to this rule. Its value stems from its gospel roots, and its distinctive character is revealed in the way it establishes a relationship between us and Christ.

The Call of Christ

The aim of the Spiritual Exercises is to help us in our resolve to live for God by contemplating Christ in the Gospels. But how do the Exercises go about achieving that aim? Initially, they encourage us to experience the call addressed by Christ to everyone. The Lord addresses each of us individually, and tenderly calls us 'his servants and friends' (Exx 146). He wants us to share in the great enterprise of the world's salvation, the aim of the life, death and resurrection of Christ (Exx 95). From their

¹ Literally, 'way of proceeding'.

very beginning the *Spiritual Exercises* form a sort of sounding box for the call made by Christ to the disciples in the Gospels.

As part of this process, Ignatius requires retreatants to speak to Christ on the cross in a long *colloquy*.² In a daring move, he brings the imagination of the retreatant into play. He or she should recall that moment of the passion:

Imagining Christ our Lord present before me and nailed to the cross, make a colloquy asking how it came about that the Creator made himself a human being and from eternal life came to temporal death, and thus to die for my sins (Exx 53).

Is this a fixation on suffering, an obsession with sin, a self-indulgent grieving over the wounds of the Crucified? Clearly such are not the intentions of Ignatius, who advises the retreatant to follow up immediately this imagining with a resolute self-examination:

Then, turning to myself, I will ask, 'What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?' Finally, seeing him in that state hanging on the cross, go over whatever comes to mind. (Exx 53)

God's love is displayed by means of the cross, and that love is an urgent call, an invitation to turn again to our innermost hearts in order to place them completely at the service of Christ. God is speaking in a direct way to our personal freedom.

At the next stage, the *Spiritual Exercises* urge that same freedom to pay greater attention to hearing and welcoming the will of the Father. To enable us to envisage how Christ wishes to establish his reign on earth, Ignatius makes use of the parable of the Earthly King, who calls his subjects to war. He suggests that the retreatant should,

... ask for the grace I want. Here it will be to beg our Lord for grace not to be deaf to his call, but alert to fulfil his most holy will to the best of my ability (Exx 91).

² The term, usually standing for a 'chat' or personal conversation, introduces what is essentially an affectionate way of communicating with God.

This response is rooted in a deep personal attachment to the person of Christ; it springs and develops from the contemplation of the Son of God: 'to ask for inner knowledge of the Lord who became human for me so that I might the better love and follow him' (Exx 104). Obedience to God's will eventually leads to the desire to help all of humanity to join with Christ in the enterprise of bringing salvation to the world; it begins with self-giving and the self-giving leads to God. The words of Hugo Rahner are appropriate here: Ignatian spirituality is a 'mysticism of service'.

A Mysticism of Service

The one who calls is also the one whom we serve. However, if a person agrees to serve, as Christ did in washing his disciples' feet, does this mean that Ignatian spirituality is directed towards action in preference to contemplation? In fact, to live and work apostolically at the heart of the world does not entail a neglect of contemplation. The engagement in service—for God and for the building up of the Kingdom, becomes the locus for seeking and achieving true union with God in the fullness of human life. Ignatius' *Spiritual Diary* reveals the mystical heights, but also how this man of action searched for God's will in concrete circumstances, here and now, on behalf of his brethren, in a world seen as the place of the greatest possible union between human beings and the Trinitarian God.

Ignatius underwent a decisive experience in the Chapel of La Storta, not far from Rome. As the saint was on his way to place himself at the service of the Pope, he had a vision of Christ carrying his cross, and of the Father close to him saying, 'I want you to take this person into your service'. Then Jesus accepted Ignatius and



said, 'I want you to serve us'. In this way Ignatius understood that 'God our Lord was putting him with Christ his Son'.³ His service would take the form of a life lived according to the pattern of the Gospels, 'under the standard of the cross ... in the highest spiritual poverty', and 'in suffering humiliations and insults so as to imitate ... more closely', Christ on the cross (Exx 147).

But how can each one of us receive the revelation of our own specific way of serving God?

Choosing God, Chosen by God

'The human person is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord' (Exx 23). This is God's plan for his creatures. But the plan does not work out unless each of us looks within ourselves to understand where the call to serve is leading. At issue is 'inner knowledge of the Lord' or 'inner knowledge of all the good received'. Ignatius often uses phrases of this type: 'I will reflect within myself to draw some profit' (Exx 114). It is necessary to look into oneself; to reflect the light issuing from the Word onto oneself; to taste the words of God, weighing them up and trusting in what they do within us; gradually to understand and desire what God wants.

One does not fulfil the will of God simply by joining a Christian society with devotions and duties whose accomplishment would guarantee one's personal salvation. In our secularised society, which distances itself from matters of religion, Christian faith no longer finds support in the social order. Both as individuals and as a Church we have reached a decisive turning-point: either our faith dissolves and disappears, or it finds a new dynamism through an increasingly personal relationship with Christ. The act of faith has acquired a crucial existential dimension. It is no longer enough to *say* that one is saved; to believe it, one must experience it.

This, then, is the 'task' to which the liberating path traced by Ignatius is leading. By means of the Exercises he invites us to experience what it is to choose God in the ordering of our lives. This choice takes flesh in a life with Christ for the salvation of all, motivated by the desire

³ Ignatius himself gives a brief account of this vision: see *Autobiography*, 96. A slightly fuller account, also used here, was written by Laínez, MHSJ FN, 2, 133.

'to be of benefit to souls' (*ayudar las almas*).⁴ The tenderness and the call of Christ will reveal to anyone searching for God that we exercise our ability to choose when we consent to be chosen by God. The Ignatian 'way' invites us to bring together this radical giving of ourselves to God with the search for the true mediating role of the Church. There is a delicate tension between one set of rules aimed at facilitating a personal discernment of spirits, and another set which enables us to live at the service of 'the hierarchical Church' (a phrase dear to Ignatius) in the here and now.⁵ Personal conversion will not take place unless we live our lives within the Church; but the reform of the Church takes place, and will only ever take place, through the reform of hearts. The conversion of the institution can never dispense with an interior transformation.

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The choice made by God consists primarily for Ignatius in the decision of the Incarnation:

How the Three Divine Persons were looking down upon the face and circuit of the world, filled with people, and how on seeing that all were going down into Hell, they decreed in their eternity that the Second Person would become human to save the human race. Thus when 'the fullness of time' came they sent the angel Gabriel to our Lady. (Exx 102)

And the *Spiritual Exercises* strongly emphasizes what the Divine Persons are seeing:

... to see in turn the various persons: first, those on the face of the earth, in all their diversity of dress and appearance, some white and some black, some in peace and others at war, some weeping and others laughing, some healthy, others sick, some being born and others dying, etc. (Exx 102)

The point is that one should share in the gaze of God upon God's creation:

⁴ The phrase occurs in the *Autobiography*, 54.

⁵ Rules for the Discernment of Spirits (Exx 313–336) and Rules for Thinking with the Church (Exx 352–370): among the latter the First Rule refers to 'our holy mother the Church hierarchical' (Exx 353).

... see and consider the three Divine Persons ... how they look down upon the face and circuit of the world and on all its people, living in blindness, going to their death and descending into Hell. (Exx 106)

It is from this vision—shared between ourselves and the Trinity—that the desire to work with the Trinity for the salvation of mankind is born. But this close attention to ‘the diversity of persons on the face of the earth’ brings about a further development. We become sensitive to the fundamental importance of factors such as language and culture to humanity. Piety and devotion are not enough: the Christian message has to be based on reason and culture. For the sake of this vision of faith, but also to ensure some success in the work of salvation, the love of God needs to be proclaimed in the languages and the cultures of our contemporaries. God is to be found and loved at the heart of a world



The Holy Trinity, by Botticelli

created by God but cultivated by human beings. God is not outside this world, nor alongside it, but at its heart, where God has always been from the beginning.

Above all what we have to do is to make our world more human. In a world disfigured by evil and suffering, the desire to serve God leads all who have set out on the Ignatian path to be very sensitive to the struggle for justice and to the preferential option for the poor, who have no choices themselves. On this point no exceptions are possible. One has to fight for what is human. The struggle for justice puts one uncompromisingly on the side of Christ, the one who is poor and the friend of the poor, against all injustice.

Joy at the Heart of All

It is in joy that one discovers and knows the will of God. This was Ignatius' fundamental conviction, because of what he experienced in his own person. But do we appreciate how daring he was?

Today our cultures are very sensitive to the world of emotions, feelings and affectivity in all their forms—to a confusing degree. But what is at stake in the *Spiritual Exercises* is an understanding of the way in which the true God gives Godself to the disciples of the Son and communicates with them. Ignatian spirituality invites each of us to discover by means of what is happening interiorly how to interpret the will of God. Joy and consolation provide us with a compass. The experience of a joy that comes from the Other, a joy sent by God, helps us to test the soundness and truth of the choices before us. And the contrary experience helps us to recognise what is false and inauthentic. Thus we can learn to read the tracks that God leaves in our lives.

We can only welcome this joy that comes from God as we should if we pay careful attention to the various interior movements of joy and sorrow that make themselves felt in daily reality. True joy signifies the gift of the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Those who live in the spirit of Ignatius learn to let themselves be guided by the gentle will of God in their innermost acts. They dare to trust the intelligence of the heart, listening interiorly to what the Spirit is suggesting in the feelings that come and go. Anyone who fails to see the importance of this principle deprives the work of Ignatius of its greatest value. Without the guidance of the Spirit, all that has been said about the call of Christ, and the love of Christ, about the service of humanity and the Church,

and about the choice of God fades into nothing. As Maurice Giuliani has pointed out in his magisterial article on ‘motions of the Spirit’, the guidance of the Spirit is essential: what is needed is to ‘feel interiorly, discern the meaning, and seek confirmation’.⁶ Only in this way can we choose between two options, both of which are good, but one of which will lead to a better life and a greater capacity to love.

The joy that comes from God is not easy to delineate or define, and frequently arises in unexpected ways. Such joy may be of many different sorts: from a bodily sense of vibrant wellbeing to the most delicate touch within the soul. This becomes clear from the relative concision of the official Latin version of the *Spiritual Exercises*:

One recognises that there is really spiritual consolation when, by some interior movement, the soul burns with love for her Creator and can no longer love any creature except because of Him. Again, when one sheds tears that provoke this love, whether they come from sorrow for sins or from meditation on the passion of Christ, or from some other cause which is rightly ordered to the service and honour of God. Finally, one may also call ‘consolation’ any growth in faith, hope and charity; and also any happiness which usually urges the soul to meditate on heavenly things, to feel zeal for one’s salvation, to remain resting in peace with the Lord. (Exx 316)⁷

It is because ‘love consists in mutual communication’ (Exx 231), and because ‘it is the Lord’s wish, as far as he is able, to give me himself’ (Exx 234), that God communicates by means of joy and lets us know God’s sweet will in this way.

In All Things to Search for the Thrice-Holy God

I have compared joy to a compass that helps us to understand God’s actions and to choose the right direction when we are looking for God. We must learn to search for and to find God in this way in all things and in every place, not just in obedience to the commandments—

⁶ Maurice Giuliani, ‘Les motions de l’Esprit’, *Christus*, 153 (February 1992), 83–92 (reprinted in Maurice Giuliani, *L’accueil du temps qui vient* [Paris: Bayard, 2003], 57–71).

⁷ This is a translation from the French of the *Vulgata* version made by André des Freux, a competent Latin specialist, in 1546 when the *Spiritual Exercises* were due to be presented for approbation to the Pope, Paul III. No complete English translation of this seems to be available. For the Latin text, cf. MHSJ, volume 100 (Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1969). The *Vulgata* tends to shorten the original Spanish.

important though they are for living a moral life—nor in receiving the sacraments—despite their necessity for maintaining ecclesial communion and personal holiness. A ‘right intention’ is the impetus for this search:

All should strive to keep their intention right, not only in regard to their state of life but also in all particular details. In which they should aim always at serving and pleasing the Divine Goodness for its own sake and because of the incomparable love and benefits with which God has anticipated us rather than for fear of punishments or hope of rewards, although they ought to draw help from these also. They should often be exhorted to seek God our Lord in all things, removing from themselves as far as possible the love of all creatures, in order to place it in the Creator of them, loving Him in all creatures and all creatures in Him, in conformity with His holy and divine will.⁸

What is said here specifically for Jesuits in studies can readily be applied, without reservation, to all who are baptized. To love God in all creatures, and to love all creatures in God: such is the path of life, whether in deprivation or in superabundance, on which the disciples of Christ dare to venture in the freedom of the Spirit.

During the course of a lifetime, we all have the chance to experience, deep down, what will lead us most surely to a fuller life. What makes such a life possible is to know how, at certain moments, to choose between life and death. We are urged by God so often in the Bible to choose life and to refuse death; and Ignatius’ ‘way of proceeding’ keeps very closely to this divine ordinance. It allows us to bring our whole existence together and creates order in our lives, despite the emotional confusion and disorder that surround us, despite the short-sightedness of developed societies and the frenzy of consumerism. It helps us to welcome the promise of a life that takes flesh—in the Church—in choices that make the world more human.

**Choices that
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Moreover, this spirituality can lead to another way of giving unity to one’s life: through Trinitarian prayer. I have mentioned Ignatius’ focus on Christ. However, shortly after his conversion, he had an overwhelming experience of God’s most holy Trinity while taking part

⁸ *Constitutions*, III.1.26. [288].

in a liturgical procession. This experience took a musical form: three notes making a single chord.⁹ From then on, his life would turn more and more towards the divine Trinity, and become more and more immersed in it.

We too are called to live in the harmony of the Holy Trinity, focusing intently on the joys, sorrows, disquiet and attractions that spring from the intercourse of the Three Persons. This Trinitarian dimension was decisive for Ignatius. The Spirit of the resurrected Christ turns towards the Father and at the end of the Exercises makes us ask for the grace: ‘for interior knowledge of all the good I have received so that acknowledging this with gratitude, I may be able to love and serve His Divine Majesty in everything’ (Exx 233). This loving acknowledgement allows one to offer oneself to the Lord in order to labour in his Creation: ‘Give me the grace to love you, that grace is enough for me’.¹⁰ The One who has loved us is the Father, from whom all comes, and in whom all converge. He joins us to the mission of Christ and to Christ’s offering in the dynamism of the Spirit of life. Such is the reality of the Trinity for St Ignatius and for the First Companions, notably Pierre Favre.

But this does not take place without training in spiritual discernment in order to offer ourselves for God’s work. We need to be schooled in feeling and tasting interiorly, and this cannot be achieved alone. We need the help of someone else—either the person who gives us the Exercises or someone who is a companion in our daily life. By trusting obedience to this other, the journey towards God can be brought to completion. The *word* is at the heart of this journey: the Word of God, which we listen to and which allows us—once it has worked upon us profoundly—to find in turn the words to speak to God; and the words spoken to our spiritual companion, describing our struggles and joys. Such is the matrix of the ‘spiritual conversation’ which spreads outwards from this experience.

The spirituality of Ignatius, precisely because it deals with joy, leads naturally to a profound Eucharistic devotion. Because I acknowledge all that God is doing for me and for others, the act of thanksgiving comes

⁹ An account of this event is given in the *Autobiography*, 28.

¹⁰ Legavre gives a shortened version here of the prayer in the Contemplation to Obtain Love; the more usual translation is, ‘give me your love and grace—that is enough for me’ (Exx 234).

automatically, linking me to the offering that Christ made of his life. The Eucharist becomes the place where we each testify to the joyful offering of our lives for the Church and for the world. Communion in the body and blood of Jesus within the ecclesial community sets us free from our own subjectivity and enables us to open ourselves to the universal body of Christ.

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For several years now, the Ignatian family—Jesuits, sisters in various religious communities, members of Christian Life Communities, and the many people who take part in Ignatian retreats—has taken as its own the narrative of the *Autobiography*, the *Reminiscences*. Thus, fortunately, the image of Ignatius the ‘soldier’ has been replaced by that of the ‘pilgrim’, as he liked to call himself. We have learned to give greater importance to his search for God, which took him on the journey to Jerusalem, Salamanca, Paris and Rome. However, we undoubtedly need courage to face up to the *Spiritual Diary*, that short notebook which opens up the mystical life of the saint. One of the challenges is to free ourselves from a sort of poorly assimilated Ignatian ‘grammar’ which is excessively mechanistic and restrictive. The *Spiritual Diary* has the virtue of helping us to appreciate how Ignatius prepared himself for the encounter with God. It teaches us how to let ourselves be led whither we do not know, to see there what we do not wish to see, by the One who desires passionately to be joined to God’s creation. There is an element of joyous uncertainty in the pursuit of that Other, who is God. Ignatius, lovingly seized by God, discovered this truth. Like St Paul after his conversion, Ignatius sought to take hold of Christ, just as Christ had taken hold of him, on the road of death and resurrection that leads to the almighty God and to God’s glory.

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