

THE IGNATIAN EXERCISES IN THE LIGHT OF STORIES ABOUT WOMEN

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THE INVITATION TO WRITE about women and the Exercises reached me as I was in the middle of giving a retreat. To my surprise, the theme suggested coincided with what I was doing at that moment: using gospel texts about women to give the Exercises. Consequently it will be from my own experience, and not from ‘much knowledge’¹ about the Exercises—I know that mine is very slight—that I have the temerity to tackle this subject. I shall try to ‘feel and relish’ from within something of the rich Ignatian wealth that is to be found in the new means available today.

It may be asked why I decided to select texts about female characters. Until recently, when giving the Exercises to women (mostly members of religious orders), I had followed the language and texts of Ignatius very closely. I handed on more or less what I had been given. Then I tried basing the Exercises on the Gospel of St John. Finally, I tried to prepare for them by following the urge I felt to deepen contact with women’s experiences. Did I really need to spend another year trying to identify with Zacchaeus, or the Pharisee in the parable, or the Prodigal Son and his brother, or even with Peter? Surely I felt closer to the woman suffering from the haemorrhage, or to the one who was bent double, or to Mary of Bethany or Mary Magdalene? Why is that during

The original Spanish title of this article, ‘Mujeres de ojos grandes’, was chosen for its euphony and borrowed from the title of a Mexican novel by Ángeles Mastretta. Literally it means ‘women with large eyes’, but implies also wide-open eyes, so perhaps ‘Women with Eyes Wide Open’.... Neither title sounds as good in English.

¹ See Annotation 2 (Exx 2).

centuries of spirituality so many women have had to struggle to overcome their *pride*, when what was really needed was for them to overcome their *timidity* to fulfil their proper role?

When it comes to choosing biblical texts for contemplation, it seems to me that gender is significant. In the past, more use has been made of texts that refer to men and men's ways. Stories about women are less well known. Yet an intimate understanding of the text is necessary if we are to find a point of entry where the Spirit can slip through and reach us. I had begun to feel the need to go more deeply into accounts of Jesus' meetings with women, to grasp how the women were transformed and to dwell upon the interweaving that took place between their physical presence and the living reality of Jesus. Then I had to ask how we could dispose ourselves so that this interweaving with his life might continue in us. In this way, the Exercises took on new dimensions, where affections and relationships became more important, and, in addition, bodily aspects were more integrated.

As I reflected more deeply on the gospel stories about women, I was moved to discover that what have been called the four 'imperatives' of adult life—the calls to identity, intimacy, generative power and integrity—are to be found successively at work in the process of the Exercises. They provide a path to greater depth and maturity, and I tried to follow these calls through the gospel women. The petition for *inner knowledge* (Exx 63) was there throughout as a guide, and the gospel texts had to predominate. So, for each day the name of a woman was chosen, in harmony with what was being sought. Here I shall select some of those names to illustrate the procedure, and I apologize in advance if I write as if talking only for women. In fact, I would like to bring alive that feminine dimension—the receptivity, warmth and creativity—that we all, men and women, carry within us.

There is a story about a professor, a laywoman, who went to work among the members of an indigenous tribe in Brazil. On one occasion she was speaking to a group and she said to one of the women, 'I have something to teach you'. The woman slowly looked at her and said, 'Surely it would be better to say that we have something to learn together'. In a similar way, we women have much to learn from the women who, along with Peter and John and Matthew, 'used to follow Jesus, and ... had come up with him to Jerusalem' (Mark 15:41). What was 'the order of procedure' (Exx 119) that they learnt from Jesus?

Women Surprised

On the First Day, in connection with the Principle and Foundation (Exx 25), we can start with two women: Martha from Bethany and Mary from Nazareth. Both find themselves *at home*. We enter the Exercises along with **Martha** (Luke 10:38–42). Like her, we also need to be at home and to know that our house is lived in. Bethany, *home of the poor*, symbolizes a place where food is given, food in the broadest sense: affection, relaxation, sensitivity, care, attention, presence and tenderness. These are the realities that we possess and which clearly evoke feminine characteristics of warmth and companionship. We can accept the invitation to enter; we can talk about how we happen to have come, how we are plagued by noise and bustle, how each of us lives in our own homes, and, most importantly, what sort of a dream God has for each one of us and what names He would want to give us. I can feel my home to be much loved, such as it is, and I can acknowledge the Guest who secretly dwells here.

Bethany is for Jesus an intimate, engaging place. He is pleased to be *welcome* in the house of these women, for he has a longing for company, hospitality and contact.

In the presence of his friends in Bethany, Jesus most obviously brings into play the female side of his life. On two occasions, Jesus will call Martha, just as Moses was called before the burning bush, because the place where she is standing—her own house—is sacred and there is in it a fire that does not consume. Jesus calls her, telling her not to identify herself with her function or with her tasks, so that she can make progress towards her deeper self, leaving



Christ in the House of Mary and Martha, by Vermeer

to one side the dynamics of comparisons and instead daring to be fully Martha.

With **Mary of Nazareth** we discover that we are creatures both loved and capable of loving (Luke 1: 26–38). We have been created with the ability to choose what will bring us to greater love and free us from all other things, profiting from those things only *in so far as* (Exx 23) they help to that end. We can approach the mystery of our own lives: Ibn Arabi says that every human being born into this world is a unique and unrepeatable revelation of one of the hidden names of God.

We women carry in our own bodies a space sufficient for life to dwell within us, and that is our key to meditating on the Principle and Foundation.² Some of us will not be wives or mothers, but our bodies are aware of the processes, the rhythm and the cycles of life. We have bodies that are open to encounter, bearing the temporary signature of blood, and a capacity, both internal and external, to bear, to bring to birth and to feed new life. We can return to that Source which empowers us to form life, to carry it and to feed it.

Our body, gratuitously invaded by the possibility of being inhabited, possesses the wisdom to be a dwelling-place for life, a wisdom that forms ties and which, from our very entrails implies obligations with any habitable space: home, church, country, world, universe.³

Praise, service and reverence both expand and draw tighter. The whole body becomes a manger and a space open to receive grace.

Women Visited

We continue with the Principle and Foundation, because only from the deep experience of love received can we build our house on the rock and make it ready for others. The purpose of this day is to touch upon the area of our relationships and also upon our longing for intimacy.

Thanks to the women who appear in the genealogical tree of Jesus, **Tamar, Rahab, Ruth** and **Bathsheba** (Matthew 1:1–16), we too can find our roots. This is a time to honour the relationships that have built our own lives: with parents, siblings and other relatives. We can

² A beautiful expression of this thought comes in a poem by Gioconda Belli entitled 'Maternity', in *From Eve's Rib* (Willimantic: Curbstone, 1995), 21.

³ Georgina Zubiría, 'El cuerpo de la mujer y la ética', *Christus* [Mexico], 7 (1994), 17.

study them and recognise their place in our house. The relationships that have formed us are the network that allows God to move within us and to give us to ourselves. Jesus acknowledges his roots and accepts all that comes from his own family history, integrating all that is human, with its wounds and failures, its joys, its strength. He lovingly accepts his genealogy. Jesus too had family memories of both pain and joy, and we join our own with his.

Next we take part in the meeting of **Mary** and **Elizabeth** (Luke 1:39–45): we dwell on how the visitation took place and give thanks for the web of relationships that support our own lives. This is a time to pray through those relationships—to ask for insight into relationships that need to be cultivated and those that have become damaged and need healing.

We offer thanksgiving for the contacts that nourish our lives; we turn our hearts towards those who, in a significant way, have helped us taste the water of love within us. There is a harvest to be gathered and offered, rich pickings of tiny gestures of love and affection, of patience and attention, that have been given to us.

These two women are at different stages of their lives: Elizabeth already in the third, while Mary has hardly left the first and is entering on the second. One is sterile and old, the other young and celibate. Both are carrying a life that goes beyond them; both are conscious of the mystery that grows within them. Both, because they are pregnant,



The Visitation, by Master M. S.

find themselves outside the conventional, beyond certain social norms. Elizabeth is too old to have conceived and Mary became pregnant while not yet married. For both, there are not only feelings of joy, but also unsettling doubts as they embraced one another: 'What is going to happen?' and 'How will we manage?'

They lean on one another for support at this moment, in this situation, sharing recognition and encouragement. A bond is established, a mutual acceptance. They refrain from passing judgment in terms that society might or might not approve. They understand what it means for each of them that something new is growing within their bodies. Mary has come not only to help Elizabeth, but also because she needs the experienced older woman to say to her, 'Carry on! This comes from God!' She needs the encouragement and the blessing of Elizabeth; while for her part, Elizabeth needs to thank God for the dream that they both share and make possible.

These women provide an inestimable symbol, an intimation of the need we have to cherish dialogue across generations, and across all aspects of life, between different cultures and spiritual traditions. Such dialogue leads to communion. These women can inspire us to be thankful for the feminine capacity that we all, both men and women, possess in order to give form to the Mystery, and to kindle in us that inner life, whose intrinsic sweetness we can recognise. To my mind, the visitation can be a reminder of what can be done by the *anima* and the *animus* within each of us.⁴ The *anima* can be brought to life and has a special role. Isabel Guerrero has written:

There is a need for a more feminine type of leadership. The world will be a better place when leaders feel more at ease with what is female within them, the part that always has consideration for the whole group, that notices if somebody is reticent, if all voices have been heard.⁵

Elizabeth and Mary change their roles, each becoming midwife to the other, while remaining distinct as vital presences. They will help each other to remain full of hope and to get through the process of

⁴ In Jungian psychology the *anima* and the *animus* are the unconscious psychological qualities that an individual possesses which are characteristic of the opposite sex (Ed.).

⁵ *El País Semanal* (30 November 2008), 16.

giving birth. Through the new life being secretly formed in the womb, each inspires the other, as if singing in harmony, to bring to light something of God that had been hidden. Both will experience waiting and the pains of childbirth. For to give birth is not a single event; it requires contraction and relaxation, pain and pleasure, possessing and letting go, sadness and happiness, fear and confidence. It was a revelation to me how midwives refer to these different moments of giving birth, in that they point to moments and aspects of all our lives and our relationships. We can recognise ourselves in them.

The various images of the visitation that have existed over the centuries show us two women bound together, united in an embrace and a kiss, in one and the same happiness. Elizabeth and Mary bring out the best in each other. Their lived experience is one of thankfulness and liberation. They meet one another at the level of the soul, of what is most profound in each. They help us to question ourselves: ‘What sort of relationship do I want to have? Does it come from my ego or from my soul?’ Clearly, there are relationships that are more likely to be what ‘is more conducive to the end for which we are created’ (Exx 23).

Women Restored to Health

Which are the stories about women more suited for the First Week—as more likely to help us reflect on the effects of evil in our lives and in history, ‘That I may feel an interior knowledge of my sins and also an abhorrence for them’ (Exx 63)? Which help us to ask for the grace of being touched by the pain of the world? This is the time when we acknowledge our blindness and our clumsiness in letting flow through us the love that we are. It is a time to feel sorrow for the harm that we do—institutional, social, psychological and emotional—and to come face to face with God’s overwhelming desire to free us, to cure us, to reconcile us. This is the time to recognise God’s great mercy as never before.

In the account of the **Samaritan woman** Jesus leads us with great respect and sensitivity to recognise how fractured we are, how wounded and divided. We can see everything that obstructs the channels of our openness to others, and also the great desire of the Lord to unblock the way and to lead us down to the well of his mercy.

Two other women can help us: the **woman with a haemorrhage** (Mark 5:25–34) and the **woman bent double** (Luke 13:10–17). In their company, and along with so many we have known in the past—some



Christ and the Woman with the Issue of Blood, by Paolo Veronese

anonymous but others with names and faces that we remember—we allow ourselves to be touched and set free by Jesus. It was because of their disabilities that they were brought within the inner love of God. Because of those openings they felt themselves welcomed and loved.

For both of the women mentioned, life had become stagnant. The woman with the haemorrhage was actually losing her life: she was wasting away and had no strength to live; she felt cut off from others. The woman who was bent double could not look ahead, nor enter into any reciprocal relationship; for eighteen years she had had to bear a weight that was too heavy for her (guilt, or shame, or resentment?). Was there some inner aversion to something in their own lives that neither could accept? The bent female body was of itself a symbol and Jesus could interpret its meaning. To come to her aid, he ignored the taboo of the Sabbath, and the woman agreed to follow the risky path opened up by Jesus.

Both of these women show outward signs of having been marginalised as females, especially the woman with the haemorrhage. Her blood, which should have represented the gift of possible fecundity,

had become a blight and a cause of rejection by many. She is cut off from normal relations and finds herself condemned to isolation by social pressure. Both women have experience of the human heart, its intricacies and double-dealings, its dark layers, and of the destructive power of exclusion. Yet both will experience the healing power of God's touch through contact with Jesus. The heart can be restored, bones be made straight, and relationships be renewed. With Jesus, they touch and let themselves be touched, feeling healing and peace come to them. 'Who touched my clothes?' (Mark 5:30), asks Jesus. Perhaps we too can only live for that touch.

The woman with the haemorrhage is the one person in the Gospels called 'daughter' by Jesus. Because she was separated from any relationship, Jesus establishes with her the strongest bond that he has ever made: he calls her 'daughter', just as he himself felt called by the Father in his baptism. Jesus is baptizing this woman. For Jesus it is a generative moment: he can be a *mother* to others.

What healing powers come to our hands when they take on the form of the hands of Jesus! Ours too can be the ability to touch with good, to anoint, to kiss and to bless. Surely this is a most precious achievement for both men and women—though we women, perhaps, have greater ease of access here in establishing warmth and contact in our relationships. But men should not fall behind in the common need to create a theology of tenderness: 'with words, with hands that can also be called fondling and kisses and meals in common ...'⁶

It is good for us to work on this dimension: 'using the sense of touch ... embrace and kiss' (Exx 125). To touch Jesus and be touched by him, as in these women's stories, is an experience that can be most healing. It enables our hands to touch without hurting, and without grasping, others. One cannot help remembering here the woman who, breaking with convention, unexpectedly anoints Jesus (Luke 7:44). 'Do you see this woman?', he will ask Simon, as though to say, 'Have you seen how she has poured out her love for me, her tremendous love?'

⁶ Heinrich Böll, in Christian Linder, *Conversaciones con Heinrich Böll* (Barcelona: GEDISA, 1978).

Women Sent Out

Ignatius has this great intuition: we are *pardoned to be sent out*. And so we, as women, can enter upon the Second Week full of gratitude. Pardon transforms itself into mission. We are set free in order to set others free. Our feelings are those of a woman who has been raised to her feet; Jesus has approached her, has reached out his hand to her fragility, and has lifted her. Now her sole wish is to serve him, not out of a sense of obligation, nor to gain something, but out of sheer gratitude. There is nothing else we can do. Our gaze must now focus not on ourselves but on him.

We look on Jesus with the eyes of the **Syrophoenician woman** (Mark 7:24–30). Usually when we want to identify with Jesus we think of him as giving: he may be giving his time, his affection, his healing presence, or words of advice and encouragement, or words of denunciation when he sees the injustices and abuses committed. This was a very important facet of his life. But we are also going to contemplate him receiving, in the mutual interchange of knowledge and gifts that he had with some women. This Gentile woman, with her extraordinary dignity and humility, will open up for Jesus new vistas of fruitfulness within his own commitment. Here, Jesus not only gave help to a woman in need and to her daughter, but he felt the joy of receiving the gift that they, in their poverty, were giving him. This foreigner and pagan (who would have thought it?) taught Jesus to open himself ever more to God's newness and to the mystery of others. She opened in him a chink of inclusiveness that would gradually widen more and more.

The call to be fruitful is not simply a personal matter. I have been called, along with others, men and women, to follow and serve the Lord. How can I fully welcome this call, with my whole body, my psychology, my temperament and affections? Jesus wants to be the hub of my life and the driving force towards the Kingdom. He wants to anoint me with the same Spirit that he received (cf. Luke 4:16–21). I have to allow him to pour it out upon me: on my *feet*, so that I walk towards those who are outside or distant; on my *hands*, so I can touch in blessing those who have never been touched; on my *eyes*, so that I can see that at the heart of reality there is goodness and mercy; on my *mouth*, so that I may speak words that heal and raise up; on my *ears*, so that I can hear the cry deep within the others; on my *heart*, wounded and open so that the current of his love may pass through.

Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my will, my affections, my sexuality, my weakness ... All is yours. Dispose of it⁷

Women Dedicated to Others

Next comes the petition of the Kingdom meditation: 'to ask ... that I may not be deaf to his call, but ready and diligent to accomplish his most holy will' (Exx 91). Jesus reveals to us the gift of generosity by means of a woman, the **poor widow** (Mark 12:40–44)—the one who put into the treasury 'all she had to live on'. To look at someone in the way that Jesus looks is an education; it leaves us wide-eyed.⁸ The action of the woman is not noticed by many, but Jesus notices and praises. This nameless woman practises true mercy through her deprivation and poverty. She teaches us not to keep things, not to hold on to our occupations, or on to people, or on to what we have done or been at other times. She teaches us to be ready to let ourselves be carried wherever life requires of us, to have the courage to cast away our two coins, despite knowing how little they are worth. The reason is that such a gesture gives meaning to our lives, and makes fruitful the lives of others. We learn from this woman to live out our poverty, offering ourselves with outstretched hands and free hearts.

Then we return once more to Bethany and to both the sisters at the same time: **Mary** and **Martha** (John 12:1–7), these women who here offer a *eucharist*. In this scene there is no longer rivalry, but instead collaboration and complementarity. When we look at both of them we are able to see something greater than each as an individual. I believe that Jesus wanted to reflect in his own life what he saw being done by these women something of what they did for him.

The death of Lazarus became a *hidden blessing* for all four of them. After they had experienced extremity together, and after they had acknowledged their pain and embraced the sorrow, the bonds between them were strengthened and the intimacy that they could express became greater. Although the disciples had spent a great deal of time with Jesus, none of them did for him what these two women did. Nobody else offered him gestures of so much love. They are completely

⁷ Compare Exx 234.

⁸ See note on the title chosen by the author.



Noli me tangere, by Hans Holbein the Younger

alive to his truth. They accept what is going to happen and they minister to him: Martha serving at table and Mary's hands caressing and anointing his feet, a gesture which Jesus permits but Judas condemns and Peter finds difficult to accept.

'To love and serve ... in all things' (Exx 233) is a phrase that Ignatius repeats, constantly stressing the dimension of totality. It is impressive to see how real this principle becomes in the figure of Martha, in whom love and service coalesce. For the Lord, explaining his perfect love, says, 'I am among you as one who serves', and the portrayal of Martha in this scene simply says, 'Martha served' (John 12:2). She teaches us that *to serve* is not something we add to our lives, or that depends on some merit of our own: service is the normal development of our true nature. The tree, once firmly rooted in the ground, loves the seed that is brought with time to maturity, and welcomes with surprise the fruit that burgeons, but which it has to release and allow to fall. Service is what our life naturally brings forth when we live it in depth. To serve is to pour ourselves out, because the movement of love

disposes us to do so, provided we consent. And the more we offer, the more the heart overflows and accepts. The joys are greater, and the sorrows as well.

Martha and Mary give practical expression to their friendship and they do for Jesus what later he will do for his disciples at the moment of farewell: they serve him at table and they wash his feet. Jesus allowed them to act thus so that he could do the same for others. His will was to take the *actions of women* and transform them *in memory* of his own life. It is important to note that in this account the two women do not speak; with them love finds its expression 'more by deeds than by words' (Exx 230).

Women Supported and Blessed

For the Third and Fourth Weeks we are helped along by the **women looking on from a distance** (Mark 15:40–41), by the **mother**, Mary (John 19:25–27), by the **women who bought spices** (Mark 16:1–8), and by **Mary Magdalene** (John 20:1–18), the first person to *discern* the action of the Risen Lord. There is no need for me here to add what can be left to the imagination and good sense of my readers.

At the end of one retreat that I had the good fortune to give in Bogotá, Colombia, an elderly sister said to me, 'Where were all these women hidden? I have never made a retreat so full of life!' I could see what she meant. It was not the retreat as such, but the accounts of the women that had helped her, more than on other occasions, to make contact with what she was, with her true existence, with the place where the Lord became closer and more personal for her.

I believe that for men, too, Exercises that mention numerous accounts of women can also be very enriching, suggesting nuances and freshness and bringing alive the sensitivity and the richness of the *anima*. They allow us all to come face to face with questions of compassion, service, intimacy ... along lines that are more complete and integrated. Something of the *sensus Christi* can be lost if we fail to do this.

What most intrigues me, as I look back over this account, is the thought that Jesus himself may have gained in his life from such reflections connected with women. He too may have deepened his experience of God as he gained 'interior knowledge of all the great good' he had received (Exx 233) in contact with women. He may have

learnt how to devote himself, how to wash feet, and how to serve at table, not from some rabbi, priest or legal expert, but from Martha and Mary, who showed him the way by doing these things for him. Perhaps he remembered the Syrophoenician woman as he said, 'This is my body, which is given for you' (Luke 22:19); or the poor widow, who taught him how to give away everything that he needed to live, when his time came to give up all in the broken mystery of 'blood and water' and silence (John 19:34).

Jesus recognised himself in such gestures, and he learnt from these women God's *order of procedure*. That is why I like to think that Ignatius, five centuries after leaving us such a precious legacy, would now wish to remove his remark (fruit of the times and conventions in which he lived) concerning the action of the enemy: it resembles that of a woman in a quarrel with a man (Exx 325). Instead today he might prefer to write: 'Men, especially some of you, be not afraid! The friend comes like a woman.' Great new possibilities these days are brought by women for everyone—creative possibilities, offering an abundance of life still undiscovered.

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translated by Joseph A. Munitiz SJ