AS I WAS GOING TO LOYOLA

Patrick Baker

I HAVE BEEN ON MY WAY to Loyola for ten years now. The first step on the road, although I did not realise it at the time, was my decision to start seeing a spiritual director. I did not know that this director had trained in the Ignatian tradition and had no idea what to expect at first. But, as we journeyed together, I came to value her gentle companionship, so much so that I began to enquire about training in the Ignatian tradition myself. This led me eventually to the three-year course in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius and the Art of Spiritual Direction at the London Centre for Spirituality. Now, with the certificate under my belt, I am nearer my destination than ever. But will I ever arrive?

The journey has been an adventure, and not an easy one. When I think of where I started, I am reminded of that old joke about someone asking the way. 'Could you tell me the way to X, please?' asks the traveller. 'Well', comes the measured reply, after some false starts, 'if I were going to X, I wouldn't start from here'. 'Here' in my case was almost as far from Loyola as you could get.

Metaphorically, my spiritual roots are in Plymouth, one of the birthplaces of 'The Brethren', a movement which appeared in the mid-nineteenth century. Dispensing with liturgy, litany, priesthood and ritual, and throwing overboard all cargo deemed unnecessary, the Brethren set sail for the Promised Land in a simple craft, with the Bible as their sole compass. Like many denominations—including the Roman Catholics, as I discovered later—they produced their own editions of the Word of God. They did not tamper with the text, not much anyway, but included their own notes and guidance to prevent any deviation from True North. (It was only much later that someone alerted me to the danger of printing one's own thoughts and commentaries alongside

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J. N. Darby, founder of the Plymouth Brethren

scripture, thereby suggesting their equal authority.) Equipped with these navigational aids, which also included copious references linking together verses and passages from different parts of the Bible, any member of the Brethren could sail confidently to all parts of the scriptures.

The assembly—Brethren avoided the word 'church'—in which I grew up used the Scofield Reference Bible. This contained the editor's take on the history of the world, which he parcelled neatly into periods called 'Dispensations'. I believe there were seven of these—of course—and one of them, probably the one we are living in now, was the Dispensation of Grace. Ignatius would have approved. The Brethren had many fine characteristics: exhaustive knowledge of the scriptures, evangelical enthusiasm and conviction, simplicity, other-worldliness, skill at unaccompanied singing, vice-like handshakes, devotion to Jesus and a deep awareness of their culpability in his death, regular church attendance—especially at the Lord's Table—and an enviable variety of women's headgear. (As they had to remain silent, this was the only way that women could express themselves.) Other-worldliness also appears in the list of disadvantages, along with pride, distrust of all other Christians (especially Roman Catholics), hypocrisy (as found among most Christians), narrow-mindedness, lack of theological training and thinking, and paralysis of the emotions. Many assemblies are now defunct; others have transmuted into free evangelical churches, although their roots still sometimes show. Those assemblies that continue to exist tend to be the most tenacious and extreme, often situated in remote areas, and they operate almost like secret societies.

Deciding to leave the Brethren was a big step for me, partly motivated by the need to escape the shadow of my dominant father. In the process of exploring a move into the Church of England, I went to see my local vicar for a chat. I shall always remember him explaining the difference between the Brethren and Anglicans. 'The Brethren', he said, holding an imaginary Bible up close in front of his face, 'are like this'. Then, laying the imaginary Bible on his knees, opening his hands and looking ahead, he said, 'Anglicans are like this. They have the Word, but they also look out on the world.'

So I left. Despite my father's hostility to any denomination other than the Brethren, he had sent me to an Anglican boarding school, so the liturgy was not a complete mystery to me. The Brethren, of course, prided themselves on being 'liturgy-free'. In fact they relied on an unwritten liturgy for structuring their services, and 'accepted' phrases to form the bones of their extempore prayers. By contrast, Anglican liturgy has been created over many years, and scrutinised and checked for accurate theology; it had proved its worth and merited its place in the heart of the Church and in the hearts of worshippers. All it requires is an occasional revision, every two or three hundred years, to keep it running smoothly. I found the liturgy rich and refreshing. The sermons, too, ventured beyond the confines of pure gospel preaching. I still viewed my fellow worshippers with the suspicion inculcated by the Brethren and judged them 'nominal Christians'. But they were decent types, I had to admit, even if they did drink sherry.

At about the same time as my move into the mainstream Church, I was also experimenting with the charismatic movement. With its emphasis on baptism in the Spirit, speaking in tongues, and the supernatural generally, it ventured boldly into areas which the Brethren had fenced off either as 'Applicable Only to the Early Church' or as 'Danger: Beware Unexploded Emotions'. The trouble with the charismatic movement, in my experience, was that it promised more than it could deliver. When the magic formula for divine healing did not work, for example, no one was willing to put his or her hand up and admit it. Instead, they had recourse to excuses such as 'not enough faith', or some other handy get-out clause. Nevertheless the new life and spirit that invigorated the charismatic movement has spread across many denominations; many Christians

seem to have an appetite for the extraordinary, the larger than life, visions and miracles.

So, by the time I started out on the road to Loyola, I had accumulated a lot of baggage, not all of it needed for the rest of my journey. Prayer? That was a matter of telling God what to do, with the rider 'if it be Thy will'. The Bible? Something to get into your head. Salvation? Follow the set of rules to tick the box. Feelings? Not to be trusted. The body? What body? I was also something of an explorer: I had bravely left my spiritual home, driven partly by a divine discontent and partly by a desire to find the Holy Grail, preferably before anyone else found it. Later on I discovered that St Ignatius also suffered at one time from this madness, wanting to out-Francis St Francis until the fever passed.

I cannot honestly remember why I started going to spiritual direction. I had trained and worked as a counsellor, and had experienced helpful therapy in a difficult period of my life. With this experience, I think I imagined that spiritual direction would be therapy with a Christian dimension. In a way, it was. But as I and my director travelled together, I began to find God's light reaching parts of my life that it had not reached before. I had kept things in compartments; now the divisions began to break down. Books such as *Taste and See: Adventuring into Prayer* by Margaret Silf and *God of Surprises* by Gerard Hughes encouraged this new way of seeing.[1] And, in the gentle company of my director, I explored new ways of praying, and new approaches to the scriptures.

I explored new ways of praying, and new approaches to the scriptures

Although I still could not make out the shape of this new world, I hungered for more. So I applied for the course at the London Centre for Spirituality. I had not gone far down the road before I began to struggle. I had an inbred suspicion of Roman Catholics, was mystified by mystics, and knew nothing about St Ignatius. Reading 'St Ignatius' Own Story', as told to Luis Gonçalves da Câmara, did not help much, mainly because of Ignatius' strange habit of referring to himself in the third person. Then there was the language barrier created by frequent allusions to Spanish words and phrases.

[1] Margaret Silf, *Taste and See: Adventuring into Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1999); Gerard W. Hughes, *God of Surprises* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985).

When we began to explore the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, I kept tripping over strange expressions and phrases, such as the Three Classes of Men, Three Kinds of Humility, Three Powers of the Soul, the Application of the Senses, Indifference, Colloquy, even Triple Colloquy (but no Double?). As for praying to Mary, or to any of the saints, that was just too much for a Low Church Protestant, and Ignatius' insistence on 'repetition' sounded like mumbo-jumbo. The reference to 'Directories' in some of the articles and commentaries was off-putting too, as I could only think of telephone directories. With these initial difficulties, it was no surprise that when one of the tutors asked us, not far down the road: 'What do you know of Ignatius so far, and do you like what you know?' I answered—to myself—'Not very much, and I do not warm to the man'.

However, help came from some of the accompanying texts, such as *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* by Michael Ivens, *Stretched for Greater Glory* by George Aschenbrenner,[2] and the companion volumes to the Exercises by Joseph Tetlow, John Veltri and David Fleming.[3] For the most part, these authors spoke with clarity and insight, although I did stumble over Aschenbrenner's flowery style and tire of his extended use of nautical metaphor. Then there were curious words, such as 'momently', invented by Tetlow (although I knew what he meant). Strangely, the more I dipped into other authors' notes on the Exercises, the more I began to appreciate the precision and brevity of Ignatius' text. Although I was grateful for the explanations at times, I began to wonder if they were not, on the whole, obscuring the original. They were a bit like the elaborate treatment sometimes given to poems, which would, no doubt, cause their authors astonishment, indignation or sheer hilarity.

During the three years of the course, I also went on a retreat—a new experience for me—and launched into the Spiritual Exercises in daily life, the Nineteenth Annotation. As we travelled further into the interior of the Exercises, liberating truths began to emerge from the mist, and Ignatius himself became very human. As Joseph Tetlow

[2] Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998); George Aschenbrenner, *Stretched for Greater Glory* (Chicago: Loyola, 2005).

[3] Joseph A. Tetlow, *Choosing Christ in the World* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1999); John Veltri, *Orientations*, volume 2 (Guelph: Loyola House, 1998); David L. Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996); .

describes in his article 'Fundamentum', I began to appreciate that Ignatius was not 'a forbidding personality, icily chaste, intellectually certain beyond challenge, preoccupied with obedience and endowed with iron-willed self control', but someone who 'felt fire in his belly … lived a life of towering joy … had astonishing religious experiences …. His eyes glinted in glee and sometimes in high passion …. He felt at home with every kind of person and spent his time talking—notably with drifters, women, scholars, the rich and powerful.'[4]

The Annotations, in which Ignatius outlines the approach to his Exercises, agree with this picture of the man. He emerges from them as someone who values 'intimate understanding and relish of the truth' rather than 'much knowledge' (Exx 2). He advises directors to show tolerance and understanding of their directees and to fit the material to their abilities and circumstances (Exx 4, 18), to encourage a spirit of generosity towards God (Exx 5), to be gentle and kind (Exx 7), yet not a pushover or a colluder (Exx 12), to maintain a balanced and open-handed attitude, and above all to allow the Creator to deal directly with the creature (Exx 15). This last point is so important, so refreshing, so different from some other forms of spiritual nurturing, so willing to trust God and people, that to me it is the key to Ignatius' whole approach. It also proves that Ignatius was under no illusion that he was actually God, although his disciples may sometimes be tempted to believe so!

Apart from immersing us deeply in the Spiritual Exercises, the course gave us plenty of opportunity to explore ourselves and our relationship to God. Here I unearthed a distressing image of God as a large, dark figure looming over me. My image of the church was no more enticing: a drab, black building with all the charm of a Nissen hut. And I was in the picture as a small lost boy. That was early on, and as I grew into Ignatius' way of praying these images began to change.

Two friends asked me recently what the course had done for me. The answer I gave on both occasions was that I was learning to know that God loved me. In saying this I felt impossibly naïve, as if every Christian worth his or her salvation knew that as a matter of course.

[4] Joseph A. Tetlow, 'The Fundamentum: Creation in the Principle and Foundation', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* (September 1989), 1–30, here 10.

But, from the response I got from the two people who asked me, I have discovered that this is not so. Other sources have confirmed this too. For example, in his book *The Restless Heart*, Ronald Rolheiser says:

> A couple of years ago, I went on a retreat. The director, a very experienced guide, began the retreat with this simple instruction: *For this whole week, all I'm going to do is to try to teach you to pray so that you can open yourselves up in such a way that sometime—maybe not today, but sometime—you will hear God say to you, 'I love you!' Because before that happens, nothing is ever completely right with you—and after it happens everything is really all right*.[5]

Who am I to quibble with someone so experienced in spirituality?

This is where Ignatius' starting point for prayer has proved so helpful. To imagine yourself standing in the presence of God, who is eager to meet you, waiting even, and beholding you with such love, is uplifting, a wonderful place to be (although only virtual at times)! The second step, again an Ignatian practice, is to ask for a specific grace—not a vague 'if it be Thy will' but something concrete, something you desire, and something anchored in actual words—and more, to keep going until you receive it. At first this seems presumptuous, but it fits with the image of God. Using the imagination in prayer, too, has been immensely helpful in bringing stories from the Bible to life: to enter the story yourself, take a part, and have a conversation with Jesus or one of the other characters. This practice is echoed in the 'Colloquy' made at the end of the prayer time. Ignatius says in Exx 54,

> The colloquy is made by speaking exactly as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant speaks to a master, now asking a favour, now blaming himself for some misdeed, now making known his affairs to him, and seeking advice in them.

All this was very strange at first, and I approached the technique full of doubt. Was I not opening myself to the vagaries of my own imagination? If I had a talk with Jesus and he said something to me, how could I possibly know that this was something I could rely on? It was all to do with the heart rather than the head, or perhaps the heart

[5] Ronald Rolheiser, *The Restless Heart: Understanding Loneliness* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), 169–170 (italics mine).

alongside the head, whereas before I had been used to staying completely in my head. How often in the past had I listened to clever expositions of the scriptures which were really nothing more than displays of the speaker's exhaustive knowledge of the Bible? How does it help, for example, to know how many times the word 'leaven' occurs in the Old Testament? On reflection this falls into the category of 'much knowledge' rather than 'intimate understanding and relish of the truth'.

As I said earlier, my journey to Loyola has not always been easy. As I went along, I noticed some fellow travellers heading down a path called 'Universal Salvation'. Although I had loosened the hold of the 'Us and Them' mentality with which I had set out, I was not ready to discard it altogether. Nor did I think this a route approved by Ignatius, which was comforting. Then there was the 'cloud of unknowing' that materialised along the way. It completely blotted out the landmarks I had been relying on and left me disorientated. But as I wandered around in the fog, I heard voices reassuring me that it was quite all right to feel lost, even a sign of progress, for was not God ultimately a mystery? This was a new thought, but it made God seem much bigger than before, and I quite liked that.

A niggling thought was another source of anxiety. It went like this: is not all this interior work, this 'examen' of myself, this focus on my relationship with God, this idea of retreating, this navel-gazing, rather self-indulgent? What has happened to missionary zeal—the urgency of penetrating the jungle of unbelief, of taking the gospel to the darkest corners of the earth so that at least some of the benighted heathen can be saved? 'Saved to serve' was one of the slogans I grew up with. For me this meant that God wanted me, not so much just for myself, but because God wanted to use me to reach others. Somewhere in the equation I had always sensed a missing element. As I spent time, in the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises, being with Jesus in his life on earth, I began to get a grasp of what this was. Before Jesus sent his disciples out in mission, he spent time with them. They lived together, day in, day out, much more intimately than we ever can. Even then it took them three years or so to get to the starting line. This confirmed the thought that time spent in getting to know God—and oneself—better was not self-indulgent but essential preparation for the journey ahead. Proclaiming the love of God to others without having first experienced it for oneself is a miserable task.

Basilica of St Ignatius in Loyola

So, where to now? Shall I go all the way to Loyola? I have wondered about that, and I suppose the next step would be to become a Roman Catholic. This is an attractive thought, especially as I am struggling in my present church situation. But even some Catholics, including Ignatius himself, experience frustration in their Church. So if that is not the way to the Holy Grail, what is? I cannot bring myself to abandon all that I have accumulated as I have travelled in the footsteps of Ignatius. It has been an eye- and heart-opening experience and I have been wonderfully enriched. I have not been changed completely, I am afraid, but perhaps there is no need to be ashamed of who I am and where I started.

So, I remain thankful to the dear old Brethren for the good things they gave me. I have said some rude things about them, which may contain some truth. As it says in 2 Corinthians 3:6, 'The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life'. The attraction of the letter is that it is precise, so you know exactly where you are with it. Even better, you can dictate to others where they ought to be. The Spirit is more elusive, as unpredictable as the wind, as Jesus said. But I feel sad that a movement which started so promisingly ended up dying.

I am grateful to the charismatic movement for breathing new life into me when I most needed it. I shall never forget the thrill and rush

of that injection of the Spirit. I enjoyed the highs, but I have become aware of the danger of overdosing and addiction. These days, I prefer a steadier regime, a varied diet; perhaps I am just getting old.

And I am grateful to the Church of England for welcoming me and allowing me just to be, and for broadening my mind. I shall probably stay for a bit longer as it turns out. I would be glad to share some of the exciting things I have learnt about prayer, about ways of reading the Bible, about coping with darkness, and about spending time with God. But I realise that there are other Anglicans who know more about these things than I do, so I do not wish to come across as a know-it-all.

Most of all, I thank St Ignatius. I do not know how he managed to create his Spiritual Exercises and I found them off-putting and puzzling at first. But I have come to appreciate the tremendous understanding that he had, all those years ago, of God and humanity. And I know that these Exercises are not just theory; they came straight from his own experience. So I am grateful that he was open to all that God wanted to do with him, and that he wanted so much to share it with others. At first I found Ignatius too impossibly holy to concern himself with ordinary people. But what I have grown to like, even to love, is his humility, and indeed his humanity. He has shown me how to sit there with open hands, waiting and trusting to receive. If I do not ever make it to Loyola, it has still been a wonderful journey. And I am sure he would be delighted and not dismayed to hear that I am still on the road.

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