

OUR LADY, LEAD US TO CHRIST!

Early Jesuit Devotion to Mary

Fredrik Heiding

IN THE GESÙ, THE JESUIT CHURCH in Rome, people come every day to one of the side chapels to pray. They sit in front of *Santa Maria della Strada* ('Our Lady of the Way'), a newly restored painting which is probably of the Cavallini school, dating from around 1280–1330. The portrait of Mary with the child Jesus has warm, quiet colours and is attractive in its simplicity. We can assume that Ignatius of Loyola and his first companions spent time in silence before this painting. *Santa Maria della Strada* is also the name of the first Jesuit parish and symbolizes in many ways the Jesuits' dedication to Mary. Mary had led them closer to Christ and thereby strengthened their community, both among themselves and with the rest of the faithful in the Church.

I am going to present the different, as well as the shared, experiences of Mary among some of the first Jesuits here. I hope that this will not be understood only as an internal concern of the Society, but also as relevant for all those who want to live Ignatian spirituality. I shall also maintain that it makes more sense to treat Mary as a person who really exists, and not just as an imaginative projection. The central concern in the presentation of Our Lady in the *Spiritual Exercises* remains community-building: Mary is not only *my*, but *our* mother, the mother of all believers.

Mary for the First Jesuits

People whom I have accompanied have quite often found particular spiritual fruit when, thanks to the Exercises, they have come to know the Mother of God better. Mary emerges, comes closer and becomes for many people a friend who has decisive significance for the process of the Exercises. She becomes an example of Christian life and points



The Madonna della Strada

towards Christ. This relationship with her becomes living and personal. Even though it may sound obvious, it must be emphasized that the Virgin Mary has different meanings for people today, just as she spoke in various ways to the first Jesuits in their time. Precisely for that reason it makes sense not to be limited to Ignatius himself in describing Mary's role in Ignatian spirituality, but also to touch on the diverse experiences of Mary among some of the other Jesuits of the first generation.

Mary comes up constantly in Pierre Favre's *Memoriale*. When he was in Speyer in 1540 he noticed how the Lord granted him a particular devotion to Mary, which was to mark his whole life.¹ It is notable that Favre often prayed to Mary that he might become a servant of her Son.² He saw himself as following Christ by means of Mary's help. During a mass Favre felt that 'new graces might be communicated to me for the purpose of knowing and loving Christ better through the intercession of his Mother'.³ Favre also turned to Mary when he had to struggle against a wandering mind and distractions

¹ Pierre Favre, *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre: The Memoriale and Selected Letters and Instructions*, translated by Edmond C. Murphy and Martin E. Palmer (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), *Memoriale*, n. 20.

² Favre, *Memoriale*, nn. 40, 41, 85, 86, 150.

³ Favre, *Memoriale*, n. 96.

in prayer.⁴ Anyone today who has difficulties in concentrating might follow his example.

In his office as Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Francisco Borja entrusted his decisions and the execution of his duties to the Mother of God.⁵ His Marian piety was apparent also in the celebration of the eucharist. He often experienced inner promptings during and after mass, and then entreated the Mother of God to be his intercessor.⁶ Throughout his life, furthermore, the rosary was a consoling part of his prayer.⁷ For Francisco Borja, in a typically medieval devotion to the passion, Mary is united with the sufferings of Jesus. During Holy Week he took care to 'go to the Mother of God and speak to her about what she was doing with her Son during this week, and weep with her'.⁸

Among the first Jesuits, Jerónimo Nadal is probably the one whose ideas were most original. In his work *Orationis observationes* ('Observations on Prayer') he established that Mary had united contemplation and action in a perfect way.⁹ The attitude conceived by Nadal, *in actione contemplativus*, 'contemplative in action', is perfectly expressed in Mary, he asserts. It is interesting also to read how Nadal had clearly experienced Mary's intercession as 'effective'.¹⁰ He could rely on her. Nadal had, further, applied the vision at La Storta, which was so consoling for Ignatius, to the whole Society of Jesus. I shall return to this later.

So, for Nadal, Mary is an intercessor in the classic sense. But in his experience she is also, in and for herself, a person worthy of meditation. The Son wants us—Nadal expresses this beautifully, but in Latin that is difficult to translate—to stay with Mary: 'It is pleasing to Christ that we should hasten to his Mother, just as if you may sometimes recognise that, where you approach Christ, he is referring you back to his Mother'.¹¹

⁴ Favre, *Memoriale*, n. 135.

⁵ MHSJ, Borgia, volume 5 (Madrid, 1911), *Diarium Sancti Francisci Borgiae*, 15 August 1565, 792.

⁶ *Diarium Sancti Francisci Borgiae*, 15 August 1565, 792.

⁷ *Diarium Sancti Francisci Borgiae*, 18 May 1566, 827.

⁸ *Diarium Sancti Francisci Borgiae*, 23 March 1567, 851.

⁹ MHSJ MN, *Orationis observationes*, nn. 301, 120: 'Hoc unum cum esset in virgine Maria perfectum, coniuncta est in illa perfecte contemplativa vita cum activa.'

¹⁰ MHSJ MN, *Orationis observationes*, nn. 85–87, 55; n. 253, 105.

¹¹ MHSJ MN, *Orationis observationes*, nn. 581, 184: 'Placet Christo ut ad Matrem suam accurramus, quasi si videas aliquando, ubi ad Christum ades, ipsum te remittere ad Matrem.'

It was common to the first Jesuits that they prayed the Hours of Our Lady, which was also prescribed in the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*;¹² the brothers, who could not read, were to pray the rosary.¹³ Consequently, Mary figured in the first Jesuits' daily prayer, and her high place in the newly founded order was also clear in the vow formula. The vows were made before the 'Virgin Mother and the whole heavenly court'.¹⁴

From Noble Lady to Poor Jewish Woman

What image of Mary did Ignatius have? And what role did she play in his life? These questions are certainly framed in a psychological and introspective way, and consequently lead our thoughts towards the inner psyche. The relationship between Ignatius and Mary has often been treated in this way, for example in the research of the evangelical theologian Gottfried Maron and the American Jesuit and professor of psychoanalysis William W. Meissner. Maron thinks that Ignatius saw before him a very noble lady who lived in a heavenly court. He produces many examples to underpin this 'aristocratisation of heaven', and ends the section on 'court mysticism' with the rhetorical question 'Is it not our images, is it not our world, that we throw up to heaven and populate—as a real projection in Feuerbach's sense?'¹⁵ Meissner goes a step further and considers that Mary became a substitute mother for Ignatius (his mother died in his early childhood).¹⁶ According to Meissner, Mary took his absent mother's place.

Both Maron and Meissner have undoubtedly offered a point of view worth thinking about. In the sources, especially in the *Autobiography*, there is abundant material that makes particular sense in a courtly-chivalrous context and offers within it psychological clues. One might think of Ignatius' vision of Our Lady during his convalescence in Loyola (*Autobiography*, 10); his vigil before Our Lady of Aranzazu (*Autobiography*, 13); his discussion with the Muslim on Mary's virginity

¹² *Constitutions* IV.2.3. [342].

¹³ *Constitutions* IV.2.B. [343].

¹⁴ *Constitutions* V.4.2. [535].

¹⁵ Gottfried Maron, *Ignatius von Loyola, Mystik, Theologie, Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2001), 78.

¹⁶ William W. Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 54–65; 241–242; 308–309.

(*Autobiography*, 15–16); and his vigil before the altar of Our Lady of Montserrat (*Autobiography*, 17). Courtly and chivalrous language also influences many passages in the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, as in Ignatius' *Spiritual Diary*.

Nevertheless, I want to modify and question both the courtly image of Mary and the purely psychological interpretation. At first God's grace might well have worked through Ignatius' idealized imaginings. This means that, even if Ignatius projected certain desires, we must not rule out the possibility that God formed him through these idealizations. Besides, the conversion stage in Pamplona-Loyola-Montserrat-Manresa, as the *Autobiography* tells it, in no way exhausts our theme.¹⁷

Ignatius' dealings with people in the later part of his life, his wise and sensitive leadership of the Society of Jesus as it spread itself all over the world, and his progressively balanced asceticism speak of affective maturing and of *discreta caritas*, discerning love. I consider that this spiritual development in Ignatius can be read in connection with his relationship with Mary. As Ignatius dealt with himself more humanely, patiently and realistically, Mary could also appear to him in a more human form. From being an idealized noble lady, she became the real, poor, Jewish woman. Just as the Franciscan spirituality of the Middle Ages presented Jesus of Nazareth as a human being, in Ignatius Mary's human characteristics can likewise be recognised. His later Marian devotion is anchored in reality. This can be observed in the Exercises, which allow us to meditate on the poverty of the



Madonna and Child, by Antonello de Messina

¹⁷ Maron and Meissner consult some other sources, but the emphasis is on the first chapters of the *Autobiography*.

Mother of God, as well as in the letter that Ignatius wrote to his brethren in Padua:

We can also see God's high regard for poverty in the way that his specially chosen friends—particularly in the New Testament, beginning with his most holy mother and his apostles and continuing through the centuries down to our own time—were for the most part poor.¹⁸

Anyone who reads the *Spiritual Diary* from the years 1544 and 1545 notices how Our Lady was constantly present in Ignatius' prayer life. In the question as to whether the Society of Jesus should accept payment for its apostolic work, which was difficult for him, Ignatius turns repeatedly to the Mother of God. The *Spiritual Diary* is therefore a witness to how the question of poverty for the Jesuit order was clarified through Mary's intercession. Further, if we can believe the reports of his brother Jesuit Pedro de Ribadeneira, who is on occasion somewhat tendentious, Ignatius expressed the opinion that he would have been glad to be of Jewish descent, since that would mean a physical kinship with Christ and Mary.¹⁹ Ignatius wanted to get to know Mary as she really was, and he was allowed to experience how she stood by him. It is surely right to be aware that projections play a part here. All the same, if Ignatian spirituality is reduced completely to pictures and representations, much is lost. It makes much more sense if Mary is perceived as a person in her own right, beyond the realm of imagination.

Mary in the Spiritual Exercises

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, has written illuminating texts on Mary in the Exercises, on two different levels.²⁰ In the Exercises Mary's attitudes and actions in salvation history are contemplated—that is, what happened once in Palestine, and its consequences for the whole cosmos. Kolvenbach calls this the 'narrative' level. But there is also the 'performative' level, on

¹⁸ 'To the Members of the Society in Padua, from Juan de Polanco, by commission', 7 August 1547, in Ignatius of Loyola, *Letters and Instructions*, edited and translated by Martin E. Palmer, John W. Padberg and John L. McCarthy (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 204.

¹⁹ MHSI FN 2, 476.

²⁰ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, 'Our Lady in the Spiritual Exercises', in *The Road from La Storta: Peter-Hans Kolvenbach SJ on Ignatian Spirituality* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000), 33–45.

which the direct encounter between God and the exercitant takes place. Mary also takes part in this liberating encounter, through which a new history will be written. Salvation takes place here and now with Mary's help. In the Exercises, narrative and performative levels are present throughout the four Weeks. But neither the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* itself nor a presentation of the four Weeks, however gripping, can recall or replace the living contact between Mary and the exercitant. The performative level must be experienced.

The third way of prayer (Exx 258–260), that is, rhythmic prayer, belongs to the forms of prayer that Ignatius gave to the exercitant quite early in the Exercise process. Ignatius instructed the people in Alcalá de Henares to pray the *Ave Maria* in a contemplative way with the help of breathing. There is historical documentary evidence for this in the court files of the Inquisition in Alcalá for the year 1527. The Inquisition wanted to examine Ignatius' pastoral activity in this town. Maria de la Flor, one of the pious women whom Ignatius had accompanied in a simple form of the Exercises (see Exx 18) gave evidence of Ignatius' way of doing this. Among other things he had indeed recommended the *Ave Maria*, said rhythmically: 'In saying the Ave Maria, one should meditate on "Hail Mary" in one breath; then "full of grace" and meditate on these words'.²¹

This precious, fundamental prayer of the Church was used, then, in the opening phase of the Exercises, according to the model of the third method of prayer. It can also be helpful today in the practice of spiritual direction to use such prayers right at the introduction of Ignatian prayer. I would rather not enter into discussion of the so-called 'contemplative phase' of the Exercises here. It may be enough, in this regard, to point out that the third method of prayer is not to be placed exclusively in the final phase of the Ignatian Exercises. Ignatius' direction in Alcalá shows that the third method of prayer (*Ave Maria*, particularly in Exx 259) can equally well come into question for beginners.²²

²¹ MHSI FD, 335: 'E que quando dixese el AbeMaria, que diese un sospiro e contenplase en aquella palabra AbeMaria; e luego gracia plena, e contemplar en ella.'

²² Franz Jalics has maintained: 'The third method of prayer (Exx 258–260) is envisaged for people who have already interiorized the full Exercises, including the Contemplation to Attain Love' ('The Contemplative Phase of the Ignatian Exercises', *The Way Supplement*, 103 [May 2002], 25–42, here 33). But the court files from Alcalá cannot support this thesis argued by Franz Jalics.

In the First Week the exercitant is invited to recognise the brokenness of the world, and his or her own weakness and failure, but above all to encounter the generous and merciful God. In one of the exercises, he or she is to enter into dialogue, in fact into a triple colloquy (Exx 63): the first with Our Lady, the second with the Son, the third with the Father. It is as if we can scarcely endure this reality with its need for salvation, and are incapable of talking about it with God the Father directly. Ignatian pedagogy proposes to confront this unpleasant reality first of all with the Mother of God. This must not necessarily be interpreted to imply that Our Lady is gentle, mild and indulgent in contrast with a strict, demanding and irascible Father. Ignatian pedagogy can also be understood in the sense that the human person needs Mary, who is at the same time Mother of God, as a human partner in dialogue. The structure of the triple colloquy will be maintained, in any case, during the coming weeks, so that both joyful and difficult things can be spoken of with Mary, the Son and the Father.

At the end of the First Week the exercitant can feel, with complete trust, that he or she, as a sinner, is not only loved but also called to follow Christ. In the exercise on the Call of the King—at the beginning of the Second Week—this sensitivity is to be refined, to recognise how Jesus Christ, the eternal King, is calling. The exercitant tries hard to pay attention, to listen carefully. What does Jesus' voice sound like? He or she shows readiness, by making an offering, to want to follow Christ. Once again, holy people support the exercitant. The offering will be spoken 'in presence of Thy glorious Mother and of all the saints of the heavenly court' (Exx 98). The readiness to live like Christ calls for courage and on occasion even foolishness, and it is precisely the Mother of God and the saints who have accepted God's will, which is sometimes beyond people's understanding. Let us recall how Mary overcame her anxiety: 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God' (Luke 1:30). The exercitant gathers courage and goes on trustingly, because Mary and the saints have done it before.

Ignatius places Mary's 'yes', through which the redemption took place, in a cosmic context. The wonderful Contemplation on the Incarnation keeps both the global perspective and the local situation in Nazareth in view (Exx 101–109). God, who surpasses even the all-embracing universe, will be united with what is small and can be

grasped. From the eternal, heavenly viewpoint God, three in one, considers how to save the world. The Church Father Cyprian of Carthage (200–258) formulated this decision in a striking way: ‘Christ wanted to be what man is so that man could be what Christ is’.²³ For Ignatius the precise physical conditions were important, for already in the First Week the ‘corporeal place’ where ‘Our Lady is’, is taken as an example for the imagination in the exercise (Exx 47). In the contemplation on the Incarnation, then, ‘the house and rooms of Our Lady’ are noted with all the senses (Exx 103). The exercitant sees Our Lady and the angel, hears what they are talking about, and contemplates what they are doing (Exx 106–108).

At the end of the meditation there is to be a colloquy, either with the three Divine Persons, with the Incarnate Son, or with ‘our Mother and Lady’. It is useful to note here that this colloquy is about something very immediate. It is about our Lord, ‘so lately incarnate’ (Exx 109).²⁴ When this expression is used by Origen, for example, the great theologian of the third century (c.185–c.254), or Meister Eckhart (c.1260–c.1328), it is in the sense that God is repeatedly born again in us human beings. The Word is made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, and becomes incarnate, in a derived sense, in every person. According to Meister Eckhart God is always being born, in us too.²⁵ This theological concept can easily be linked to a conviction held by the Church Fathers which is relevant to our theme, namely, that Mary is the Mother of all the faithful. Such Fathers of the Church as Augustine (354–430) and Isidore of Seville (c.560–636) have supported this conviction, and twentieth-century Jesuits such as Henri de Lubac and Hugo Rahner have taken the same line: Mary is *our* Mother.

**God is
repeatedly
born again in
us human
beings**

The meditation on the Nativity is another very precious exercise (Exx 110–117). With the conviction that Mary is Mother of all the faithful, this meditation can become even richer, and penetrate the soul more deeply. Mary sees to it that my faith grows, and that I can

²³ Cyprian of Carthage, *De idolorum vanitate*, 11. Quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, volume 4, *The Action*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 246.

²⁴ The original Spanish text runs ‘Señor nuestro, así nuevamente encarnado’.

²⁵ Meister Eckhart, ‘The Eternal Birth’, in *The Works of Meister Eckhart*, volume 1, translated by C. De B. Evans (London: Watkins, 1956), 20–25.

stake everything on the Child's promise. However generous this may be, we may not forget that Mary's strength, even her power, comes from her vulnerable and poor circumstances. The exercitant is to meditate on how Mary, Joseph and a maid (whom Ignatius adds) are 'labouring, that the Lord may be born in the greatest poverty' (Exx 116). Often in works of art the Virgin is presented as beautiful and awe-inspiring, so that the reality of poverty almost disappears. In contrast with that, Ignatius recalls how poor Mary really was, as was shown above in the letter to his fellow Jesuit in Padua. The exercitant may experience that his or her faith is a gift from Mary, who could give almost nothing other than herself. The Mother of all the faithful gives what cannot be bought: her own person.

During the Second Week Ignatius allows the exercitant to meditate on several more mysteries of Jesus' life, in which Our Lady is prominent. Now and then Ignatius points to the gospel and expands on certain details. In one of these expansions Jesus takes leave of his Mother, as his public life begins (Exx 273). But the Gospels are silent about this. These and some other details are to be ascribed to Ludolf of Saxony and his *Vita Christi*. Is it not rather touching that Jesus thinks of his Mother before he goes into public life?

In his interpretation, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach undertakes a thoroughly creative reading, in which he names what is *not* so clear in the Spiritual Exercises. And indeed it is noteworthy how in the Third Week, in Jesus' passion, Mary stays in the background.²⁶ It is true that the colloquy with the Mother is to be made (Exx 199); and the exercitant is to 'consider the loneliness of Our Lady, whose grief and fatigue were so great' (Exx 208), and Mary at the foot of the Cross is part of this (Exx 297). All the same, an independent meditation on the sorrowing Mother is not proposed. So it can easily happen that the spiritual director overlooks Mary's role in the Third Week. The impression remains that Jesus is terribly alone, at the point when even 'the divinity hides itself' (Exx 196). But, inspired once more by Ludolf of Saxony, in the Fourth Week, on the resurrection, Our Lady is prominent. The Risen Lord reveals himself to his Mother (Exx 218–225).

After his ordination as priest Ignatius waited a whole year before celebrating his first mass. During it he prayed that the Virgin 'might

²⁶ Kolvenbach, 'Our Lady in the Spiritual Exercises', 38–39.

place him with her Son' (*Autobiography*, 96). This happened in a little chapel near La Storta, outside Rome. According to Jerónimo Nadal's interpretation this grace, which Ignatius received there, is granted to the whole Society of Jesus.²⁷ This precious gift of being placed with Christ can certainly be granted to all who make the Exercises seriously. The Mother of all the faithful is generous enough. To be able to receive this gift, we probably need a decision as to whether Mary really is living now, or is to be understood purely as a product of our imagination.

Fredrik Heiding SJ is a Swedish Jesuit. He has spent the last couple of years at Campion Hall in Oxford, and just submitted a doctoral dissertation ('Giving Ignatian Exercises at Ecclesial Frontiers') at the University of Oxford. He is now based in Uppsala, Sweden, where he works at the Newman Institute and for the journal *Signum*.

translated by Patricia Harriss CJ

²⁷ Herbert Alphonso, 'La Storta', in *Diccionario de espiritualidad Ignaciana* (Bilbao and Santander: Mensajero/Sal Terrae, 2007), 1091–1110.