

LIVING AN IGNATIAN VOCATION

Margaret Blackie

I HAVE FOUND MYSELF PONDERING the idea of living an Ignatian vocation a great deal over the best part of the last year. It is not so much that this idea is a new one to me, but rather that I have finally found a place where I feel I am able to live out what I believe to be my vocation. Consequently, I have been trying to work out whether I can properly apply the term 'living an Ignatian vocation' to my life as it is at the moment. I think it is worth exploring the concept of an 'Ignatian vocation' and how one might go about living it because, as a single lay person working in secular society, my own life and sense of calling do not easily fall into the traditional categories which may be easily recognised as being a response to vocation. I have no calling to religious life and, while I am not married, I am open to the possibility that one day I might marry. As such, I am not committed in any definite way to a particular 'state of life'. I would, however, argue strongly that vocation is far more than can be delineated by how one chooses to use one's sexual energy. I hope that in exploring this territory through my own journey, I may offer others some landmarks for others in their own explorations.

What Does It Mean to Be 'Ignatian'?

The vast majority of my own spiritual formation and training has taken place in the Ignatian tradition, starting with a six-week retreat in daily life when I was 21, followed by making the Nineteenth Annotation retreat at 24 and topped off with four years of working at Loyola Hall, a Jesuit spirituality centre in the UK. I have given talks and courses on aspects of spiritual direction and Ignatian spirituality. However, none of this actually makes one 'Ignatian'.

I would certainly claim a fair degree of knowledge about the Ignatian tradition, but this, in itself, is not sufficient. To be truly Ignatian, one

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must 'live out of the spirit and spirituality'¹ of St Ignatius of Loyola. So the obvious questions emerge—what are the spirit and spirituality of Ignatius and how does one live out of them? It is clear that to examine these questions it is necessary to return to the writings of Ignatius. But exploring what is being said by some contemporary voices in Ignatian spirituality is probably also useful.²

The journey of the Spiritual Exercises is one in which companionship with Jesus is the primary and ultimate goal. The manner in which one lives out that companionship is the question of mission or vocation. These two ideas are not separable. If one has an established, dynamic relationship with God this will have implications for how one lives in the world. For Ignatius, while the First Week—the experience of the grace of being a loved sinner—is open to all, the full Spiritual Exercises may not be so widely applicable. I would suggest that the idea of an 'Ignatian vocation' must take cognisance of the dynamic of the full Exercises.

The additional material that one receives in making the full Exercises rather than simply the First Week is bound by two crucial meditations. The transition from First to Second Week begins with the Call of the King—a call to companionship and to service. 'Therefore, whoever wishes to come with me must labour with me, so that through following me in the pain he or she may follow me also in the glory.' (Exx 95) The full Exercises end with the *Contemplatio*, where the elements of service and relationship are reiterated: 'Love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words' (Exx 230). 'Love consists in a mutual communication between the two persons.' (Exx 231) I would argue then, that there are two pillars upon which an Ignatian vocation must be founded—companionship with Jesus and mission.

In *Heroic Leadership*, Chris Lowney draws on Jesuit tradition and the stories of early Jesuits to convey something of the essence of the passion and leadership which Jesuit formation continues to inspire.³ However, he explicitly writes his book for persons of any faith, or indeed of no faith at all. As a result, the book glosses over the central feature

¹ Brian O'Leary, 'Searching for Meaning Today: An Ignatian Contribution', *Review of Ignatian Spirituality*, 36/3 (2005), 15.

² O'Leary, 'Searching for Meaning Today', 15.

³ Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-year-old Company that Changed the World* (Chicago: Loyola, 2005).

of the Ignatian tradition—relationship with God. This relationship is fundamental to the whole process of the Spiritual Exercises. How is one to order one's desires if relationship with God is not the obvious priority? The indifference embedded in the Principle and Foundation is necessary to free ourselves from inordinate attachments so that we might love, serve and reverence God our Lord (Exx 23). Hence, to live an Ignatian life requires, surely, that I am a professing Christian. The graces of the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks are inextricably linked to relationship with Jesus, and it is difficult to imagine how one might live an Ignatian vocation in the absence of such a relationship. This is not to say that there is not much merit, value and grace flowing through the lives of those who are not Christian, but merely to suggest that the label 'Ignatian' has particular boundaries.

I would argue that idea of mission is also important in an Ignatian vocation. Mission is usually associated with being sent somewhere. And, indeed, for the vast majority of those who live an Ignatian vocation within the context of a religious order such 'sending' really does occur. So how does mission work when one has nobody to whom one is obedient? Is it possible to have a mission? I cannot answer that unequivocally. I understand the position of those who see mission and obedience as being inextricably linked. However, I do believe I have stumbled upon my life's work. As such it is not tied to a particular role or job, although my current job has afforded me the space that requires me to ask these questions. I believe that in some sense I am being obedient to God and that I have been commissioned by God to undertake this work. This is not to say that I will perform my work any better than a colleague who does not experience such commissioning. Nonetheless, the internal experience, and the only language that seems to fit, is that of mission and vocation. In this sense mission is closely related to one's sense of purpose. Mission is the living out of vocation.

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Service and Community

It is perhaps a false distinction to separate mission and service. Indeed to carry out one's mission one must serve. But the distinction is one both of time and of extent. 'Mission', in the sense in which I have used it here, encompasses a greater span of time and encapsulates how one is in the world. Service may be an appropriate part of living out one's

vocation, but it does not necessarily hold the sum of it. One can serve without a strong identification of vocation. While Ignatius is unequivocal about the importance of service, he is far less clear about what exactly counts as service.⁴ He uses the term over 100 times across the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Jesuit Constitutions*, but never takes the time to define it.

For David Fleming, service in the Ignatian sense is rooted in response to a loving God. He comments on two important aspects: following is itself service and the service takes place in relationship. The commitment to seeking God, and discerning and attempting to respond to the promptings of the Spirit, is service in itself. I believe this point is important, because it cuts through a great deal of the 'what counts' debate. By this reckoning all that matters is that one lives one's life by active discernment, allowing God to call where God will and following to the best of one's ability. This sense of following as service is congruent with my own experience.

When I made the *Spiritual Exercises* I was in the midst of doing a PhD in chemistry. While making the Exercises I experienced a strong call to ministry, in particular to spiritual direction. This led me to the Loyola Hall Jesuit Spirituality Centre, where I ended up working as a spiritual director for four years. Much to my surprise, in my final year at Loyola Hall I found myself strongly desiring to return to chemistry, a discipline I thought I had left behind. The ease with which I re-entered academia after an impossibly long hiatus seemed to be confirmation of the call. Now, nearly four more years after that re-entry I have a permanent academic post.

Initially, in leaving full-time ministry, I struggled with the lack of obvious 'service'—particularly working as a postdoctoral research fellow, where studying in a microcosmic field of expertise is one's primary focus. And yet, now, having found a direction for my research, I find myself living out of a strong sense of mission. This means that a great deal of my occupation now seems much more obviously to be of service, to others and to God. Furthermore, my consciousness of this element of service in itself encourages me to be more generous.

Many of my colleagues do not know of my interest in Ignatian spirituality. I make no attempt to hide it, but at the same time, I do not

⁴ David Fleming, "'Here I Am': Ignatian Ways of Serving', *Review of Ignatian Spirituality*, 38/3 (2007), 98.

often initiate conversations around it. I am no evangelist and I am sure few would recognise my role as one of witness. Yet, I believe that I have been called to be here by God and therefore I am serving. In terms of the Principle and Foundation, chemistry seems to function as one of the things created by God which brings me closer to God. For today, therefore, it is worthwhile to pursue chemistry because it does seem to be the arena in which God is calling me to serve.

The second aspect of service that Fleming addresses—‘to serve is to be in relationship with others’—holds particular interest for me at this stage.⁵ As part of my exploration into living an Ignatian vocation, I spent a good deal of time considering making some form of formal vocation commitment. As a layperson and a single person, in the absence of any specific named community, exploring the manner in which I could make such a commitment and what it would mean exercised me for almost a year. I am a strong introvert and have moved around a great deal in my life. In addition to this, while I have a number of close friends, I see almost all of them individually. As a result I have no obvious ready-made community within which to make such a commitment—at least, not a community in any traditional sense.

Initially as I explored the idea of vocation commitment I simply discounted the aspect of community as unimportant to me. But through the process I have come to recognise that relationships are crucial in my life and that I do have a group of individuals who serve as my community, even though most of them do not know each other. It bears no resemblance to community as it is usually understood, but given my particular personality and history, recognising this odd grouping as my community helps me to recognise that relationships are a crucial



⁵ Fleming, “‘Here I Am’”, 102.

element of service. Service is not simply about what I do, it is also about the relationships I build in the process of following.

In embedding service both in following and in relationships, Fleming emphasizes that God is to be found in all things.⁶ One's service of God cannot be distinguished from one's daily living. However, this is not to say that the mere process of living one's life is *necessarily* service. To carry out any task of one's life, however pastoral in nature, may not be service of God if one is not seeking God and taking time to discern. The detail of *what* is done is less significant than the orientation of one's life around the central tenet of relationship with God. To be clear, this central tenet is not to be measured by the experience of closeness to God or spiritual consolation but by the priority that one gives to the importance of relationship with God.

Indifference and Desire

The whole purpose of the Spiritual Exercises is the right ordering of desire in order to deepen relationship with God. This does not require that all desires barring the desire for God be quietly quashed, but rather that we pay attention to our desires in order that we may discern which desires lead us towards God and which lead us away. 'Desire ... is the essence of Christian spirituality.'⁷ It is desire which leads into deepening relationship with God. If a desire is basically a good desire or, at the very least, it will not obviously cause harm to others, it may not be immediately obvious whether this desire will lead one towards God or not. It requires discernment. Furthermore, desires which may lead one person towards God may lead another in quite the opposite direction. Desires are not something of which to be suspicious. Rather they are an important part of what it means to be human and as such they provide important information for our development. Not only will desires lead us to make particular life choices, but in accepting the desire and sitting with it, we allow ourselves to be shaped by it.⁸

Perhaps one of the most helpful aspects of Ignatian spirituality is the dynamic that emerges between desire and the grace of indifference.

⁶ Fleming, "Here I Am", 98.

⁷ Michael Ivens, 'Desire and Discernment', *The Way Supplement*, 95 (Summer 1999), 31–43, here 31.

⁸ Ivens, 'Desire and Discernment', 32.

The normal English meaning of the word ‘indifference’ is totally unhelpful here. It implies an absence of desire, which is not what is intended by the Ignatian term. Indifference is the grace that comes when I am able to choose God above all else. For Michael Ivens, the desire for God’s will above all else creates the inner space in which indifference can operate.⁹ Then I am able to recognise and own my desires, and yet be willing to go whichever way God directs. There have been a few key moments in my life when I have experienced this kind of indifference. I have known which path I most desired, and simultaneously have been perfectly at peace with either possible outcome precisely because I knew that, whichever way I went, I would be journeying on with God.

For the purposes of exploring vocation, I think the juxtaposition of desire and indifference has yet another nuance. It is important, when one finds one’s vocation, that one invests some passion in the tasks associated with living out that vocation. However, at the same time, the manner in which one lives it out may change over time. So it is important to sit lightly to any particular manifestation of one’s vocation. Circumstances change and the ideal job which allows one to adequately express one’s vocation may not be the ideal job for ever.

Discernment

The process of discernment is crucial to the Spiritual Exercises. Any spirituality which engages with desire necessarily involves discernment. If the core message of the Exercises is the importance of relationship with God, discernment provides a practical tool to undertake the reordering of one’s priorities. Every prayer period, every conversation with the director of the Exercises, and every general examen are infused with the practice of discernment. Noticing where the heart and mind are being drawn, and paying attention to which spirits are at work is a fundamental component of Ignatian spirituality. Ignatius’s writings speak time and again of the significance of this practice. I would argue that it is impossible to separate Ignatian spirituality from the practice of discernment.

⁹ Ivens, ‘Desire and Discernment’, 33.

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Discernment is not simply a tool to be used to focus and develop one's prayer life. The inclusion of the Election material in the Second Week of the Exercises ensures that the process of discernment is inextricably linked to the living of life, from the minutiae of the daily grind to major life-shaping decisions. It is through the practice of discernment that one really does begin to discover God in all things, and that one becomes a 'contemplative in action'. As we seek and begin to find God permeating all aspects of life, it becomes less and less possible to separate one's 'spiritual life' from one's 'real life'. To be Ignatian, one must be discerning.

Discernment is, in essence, uncomplicated:

Simply by allowing their particular desire to come into contact with the true desire for God which is the norm of all other desires, a self-aware person may reach a manifestly right discernment—whether positive or negative—without needing recourse to any further processes.¹⁰

The *practice* of discernment is a little more complicated. The act of accepting a desire and discerning the desire is risky. The outcome of the discernment may require action that is unappealing and so the very process of discernment may prove challenging. Sometimes it takes a while for one to reorientate oneself into a position where true desire for God prevails before the real discernment process can occur.

I have recently experienced the joy of having a truly discerning spiritual director. Sometimes her pause and comment caused me to rethink in quite creative and stimulating ways, at other times I found myself resisting and dismissing her suggestions. Nonetheless, such active mutual discernment is a powerful tool, and I am convinced that my journey has been enriched by it. It is hard to comment on one's own life, to ascertain whether I have been discerning truly or not. However, I will say that I have been very surprised by some of the choices I have ended up making. That in itself is insufficient evidence. However, I have tried to be discerning, and I have found the interior freedom to make choices that were not immediately appealing. In many instances these choices have turned out to be incredibly graced, which gives me some hope that my way of discerning has some efficacy.

¹⁰ Ivens, 'Desire and Discernment', 34.

So to live an Ignatian vocation is to commit to the practice of discernment. Not only to practise discernment as an individual, but to allow my individual discernment to be scrutinised by another. The 'other' in this case may be a community, but at the very least should be a spiritual director. It is too easy to overlook elements operating in one's own life. A discerning other is an indispensable companion.

Vocation

I believe vocation is a powerful term. Identifying and committing to a particular vocation is not to be taken lightly, and certainly not to be done prematurely. Vocation is not something one crafts for oneself; it is something one responds to. 'Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear.'¹¹ There have been attempts over the years to identify a true lay vocation. For many this vocation has been sought by the 'nunk' route,¹² a kind of lay emulation of the life of religious, most typified by some kind of withdrawal from society. A true lay vocation cannot be this. Occasional withdrawal for retreats may well be necessary, but any life which requires a substantive or frequent withdrawal from community and family cannot be a lay vocation. Whatever the context of the person's life, the lay vocation must be characterized by engagement with others.

Vocation is not simply about what one does, or about how one prays. It is more than a sense of calling to a particular career. It is fundamentally about whom one is and how one interacts with the world and with God. It is intentional. It is a considered response to a sense of calling. In responding to the call and choosing to follow, the whole of one's life and sense of identity are affected.

One element which is absent from this form of vocation is obedience. In the life of a layperson there simply no equivalent to the obedience of a professed religious: the nearest approximation would be relationships in which one is held accountable for one's intentions and actions. Whether one can live an Ignatian vocation in the absence of obedience is perhaps a moot point. The second element is that of continuity of

¹¹ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (Hoboken: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 6.

¹² The term 'nunk' was coined in the 1950s by Carol Jackson in the journal *Integrity* to refer to those who tried to find meaning by emulating the life of a monk or nun. It was frequently characterized by a withdrawal from family in order to focus on spiritual endeavours. The word has been independently invented by several others, including Raimundo Panikkar, with different meanings.

occupation. While a vowed religious may change role many times in his or her lifetime, the vocation to religious life remains constant. For a lay person, there is no external 'bigger picture'. The commitment is simply to the pursuit of God and to follow where God calls. As such, the sustainability of any commitment a layperson may make to his or her vocation could well be called into question. To what does the layperson commit and how is such a commitment discerned by the community? At this stage I have no answers to these questions. However, I would hope that, given time and a sufficient number of people committed to a lay vocation, answers will emerge.

The thoughts and ideas expressed here are not the fruit of a brief spell of enthusiasm. I have been working out my own understanding of vocation for over a decade, and I have been wrestling with the idea of committing to a vocation for over a year. I do believe that there is space in the Church for a proper lay vocation, which is separate from, but not necessarily mutually exclusive of, marriage. Others have explored similar notions before, but my attempt here has been to look at that within the bounds of Ignatian spirituality. I have had enough conversations with laypeople who have been seeking in a similar vein to think that perhaps it is time to begin the public debate. These ideas, if they are to be valuable at all, need to be argued over and refined. My hope in putting my thoughts on paper is that others will dare to think of their lives in similar terms.

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