

MAGIS—THE QUEST FOR 'MORE'

Discernment of Spirits with Young Adults

Ludger Joos

IN THE RUN-UP TO WORLD YOUTH DAY 2005 in Cologne, in collaboration with various Ignatian institutions and communities, the Jesuits organized a preparatory programme of their own: Magis 2005. About 2,500 young pilgrims from over forty countries took part. The aim was to offer the participants a space in which they could share spiritual experiences ('experiments') and thereby discover the Ignatian 'more' (Latin *magis*). For this they were divided for a week into internationally mixed 'experiment groups',¹ 84 altogether. Since then this form of organization, the 'Magis format', has been repeated each year. At an international level there were two more smaller projects in Germany in 2006, in Hungary in 2007 and 2010, in Cambodia, Indonesia and Australia in 2008, as preparation for the World Youth Day in Sydney, and in Kenya, 2009.² There was also a big Magis project for the World Youth Day in Madrid in 2011: 99 Ignatian experiments were carried out with 2,500 pilgrims, all over Spain and Portugal.³

Experimenting Spiritually—'More' than Having a Good Time

In 2005 most of the participants were involved in a pilgrimage project. They walked in their groups, 15–25 km daily, and had their important experiences literally 'on the road'. But even then there were already experiments in encounter. Some groups lived in institutions for the

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¹ See Ludger Joos, '[magis]—Das ignatianische Programm zum Weltjugendtag Perspektiven experimenteller Spiritualität', in *Geist und Leben*, 79 (January and February 2006), 68–72.

² For documentation and background on the Magis project and Magis format: see www.ignatianisch.de, accessed 14 March 2013.

³ See the Spanish organizer's website, www.magis2011.org.



Magis 2008 participants

disabled, others visited people in hospitals or care homes. In the following years there were also projects with the homeless, meetings with prison inmates, work in orphanages and projects for street-children.

Through these activities the young pilgrims come into contact in various ways with need and injustice. As a rule, they can usually make themselves useful somehow, or experience the pleasure of being accepted in a friendly way. But not infrequently they also find themselves in situations where they feel powerless. Of course you do not have to go to a shelter for the homeless or a slum to feel this. The setting of an international group in itself provides many ways of experiencing a sense of helplessness. You are dependent on people whom you hardly know and whose language you often do not understand. Misunderstandings and cultural tensions are built in, really—and at a time of life when good contact with people of the same age seems especially important.

But, clearly, all this is meant to happen. *It's all part of the experience!* was written in large capitals on the bright red T-shirts of the Magis participants at the World Youth Day in Australia. What kind of thinking underlies that? Why do the Magis organizers risk or provoke situations in which the participants sometimes experience rage, sadness and helplessness? Why is it not enough for them to have a good time together, make friendships and celebrate life? Simply because friendships remain superficial when those involved in them are not ready to share the

difficult things as well: the difficulties that burden my friend, those I have in myself. And what is true for friendship with other people is true for our relationship with God as well. We can only experience deeper fellowship with Christ when we take the needs of this world on ourselves, as he does. How else are we to understand when the gospel asks us to devote ourselves to what produces sadness, powerlessness, renunciation and other sufferings rather than strive to be spared all that?⁴ Conscious acceptance of hurts, renunciation and powerlessness really can help us to grow deeper in saving fellowship with Christ.⁵

Exercises and Experiments

The *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius are an excellent place to experience fellowship with Christ. They are fundamentally constructed in such a way that the exercitant has the best possible surroundings: silence and seclusion, no distractions, time for prayer, and many suggestions that encourage the exercitant’s imagination and inward reflection. Of course a not inconsiderable part of the Exercises consists in confronting painful insights as well, whether the shadow of sin in one’s own life or the sufferings of Jesus. However, all this is covered by a particular proviso: in what is known as the Principal and Foundation the exercitant is shown that the journey he or she has begun takes place under the promise of healing and salvation.⁶ The Ignatian experiments also begin under this positive sign, and here again the framework helps a person to make a good beginning. First of all the participants get to know their ‘nice’ sides. They are welcomed by the leaders of the experiment, and find themselves interested and involved. Anxieties and tensions are overcome through games to get to know one another and simple shared tasks. In devotions and celebration of the Eucharist the group places itself explicitly under God’s blessing and saving promise.

Both in the Exercises and in an Ignatian community experiment it is helpful in this first phase for there to be time to unwind after the hectic pace of everyday life or the stress of arrival. Walks, meditations and community singing are more helpful in this than any kind of presentation

⁴ As in the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:1 following, Luke 6:20 following, or the words on taking up the cross, Mark 8:34 following.

⁵ On the meaning of readiness for suffering in the spirituality of the Exercises, see Stefan Kiechle, *Kreuzesnachfolge. Eine theologisch-anthropologische Studie zur ignatianischen Spiritualität* (Würzburg: Echter, 1996).

⁶ Exx 23: ‘The human person is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul’.

(especially when it would have to be translated into various different languages).

The second phase is characterized by more challenging experiences. The participants do not stop at sharing the nice side of life with one another. While in the Exercises this phase begins with the examination of one's own life-story and then the life of Jesus, the members of an experiment-group turn to a common challenge. Once they have got used to the new community, their task is to open themselves further to what is unfamiliar. Now unpleasant things and stresses have to be accepted. The participants have to engage themselves actively in what happens. Whether the group is setting out on a pilgrimage or starting an encounter project, each person must go beyond his or her 'comfort zone'. If, at the beginning, the participants still tended to be 'receivers', who allowed themselves to be directed by the group leaders, now they become more and more 'subjects' of the experiment, who share in planning the daily timetable and the activities.

To open themselves further to what is unfamiliar

But here also there are always quiet times for personal prayer and the sharing of experiences. For only when there is time to take note of inner movements is it possible to work on what they mean: 'seeking and finding God in all things' does not mean loading anything and everything with pious interpretations or constantly talking about God. On the contrary: it is much more about becoming attentive to the moods, feelings and thoughts that arise in me in view of my experiences. When I take on this 'listening' attitude, I can understand what God wants to reveal to me. When I am attentive to the reality in which I live, I can also discover God's will for me, and make appropriate decisions.⁷ Our life is, basically, a chain of smaller or larger decisions that we have to make. Each day I have to decide how and in what order I will do which things. And then, of course, there are bigger decisions to be made: the choice of my profession, my way of life; the choice of a partner. The discernment of spirits is a way of proceeding, to prepare for decisions so that they can be made 'more' (*magis*) in harmony with God, or—in Ignatius' language—so that they offer *greater glory to God*. But how does that work?

⁷ How important attentiveness to the movements of the soul is for Ignatius is shown as early as the Sixth Annotation, when he says that the exercitant should be questioned on how he is making the exercises if these movements are entirely lacking. See also Exx 6.

Inner Movements Are Messages

Our souls constantly receive promptings from outside—words, experiences, encounters. These set off ‘inner movements’: feelings and thoughts. To a certain extent we can influence both: we can avoid uncomfortable situations and bring about pleasant ones. We can also suppress unpleasant thoughts and seek to think ‘positively’. But we do not have full control either over influences from outside or over our inner movements. On the contrary: moods, feelings and even our own thoughts often seek us out secretly, like uninvited guests. We have to deal with them, whether we want to or not.

This is easy to do when it is a matter of feelings such as love, sympathy, joy or happiness. We know that these are gifts, and it is relatively easy to keep the inner door open and be grateful. But it works differently with unpleasant feelings and thoughts. Then we would rather bolt and bar the door. Many people have great feelings of guilt if they experience hate or anger or jealousy. They pass judgment on themselves. But these feelings are certainly not to be evaluated morally, and say nothing about the integrity of those who experience them. Jesus himself felt anger and rage as he drove the traders out of the Temple.⁸ Why should we assume that he did not find hate or envy in himself? All these feelings only become bad and disturbing if we give ourselves over to them uncritically. For although we are not the cause of what springs into our head or into our heart, we are certainly responsible for how we deal with it. One possibility is simply to identify with these inward movements and allow oneself to be completely led by them. Then it is very likely that our moods and whims will lead us through life by the nose, and we shall do great harm.

But we can also take note of our feelings and streams of thought with a certain detachment, and seek to understand them more deeply. Then they are no longer fated events or compulsions, but become messages to us that have a meaning—or, to use an image, letters that we can open and read. For example, I receive a letter marked ‘rage’, or ‘powerlessness’, and sense at the same time that there is also a certain potential bound up with this inscription. Rage releases a great deal of energy, while powerlessness rather inhibits it. Now, in the spirituality of the Exercises, the point is to take note of these inward movements and to allot them an appropriate

⁸ Compare Mark 11:15 following.

place. To use an image once again: we open the envelope and see what is inside. Where does this feeling really come from? Do I know it already from other contexts? Where does it lead me?

Then, on this basis, I can decide whether to let an emotion have free rein or whether it must be taken in hand and calmed down. The significance of an inward movement is not always clear right at the beginning. Even rage or hatred, which we immediately want to suppress as human weakness, can have important functions in our lives. If I am threatened by a stranger on the street, it can be of great significance that I find enough rage to be able to defend myself—to cry out, for example. What is true of spontaneous reactions in limit-situations such as this, however, applies also to deeper and more lasting emotions. Were not rage and indignation, for instance, important emotions, that drove the prophets to open their mouths and denounce the sinful attitudes of the powerful?

Spiritual Discernment

Naturally, not every rage is ‘holy anger’. And even apparently harmless brainwaves can lead us astray. It is a question of ‘discernment’—that is, unlocking their real message. Both in the Exercises and in the experiments, participants receive promptings that arouse inner movements in them. In the Exercises this happens mainly through silence and the material offered for meditation. In the experiments the promptings come through the intense common life of the group and their shared activities. It is essential in both cases for there to be time and space to look into these inner movements and interpret them: in the Exercises especially in personal conversation with the spiritual director; in the Experiments through the evening sharing-sessions (‘Magis circles’). The participants recall what they have experienced in the past few hours and share with each other the impressions that have been left in their hearts. In this, of course, spiritual discernment takes place. The account itself is, like the notes in a spiritual diary, a processing of what has happened. The spiritual director’s sympathetic ear, or those of the listening circle, makes present God’s own sympathetic ear.

The fact that someone is listening attentively makes a more intense approach to one’s own experience possible. Narrators are not alone with their inner movements, they find themselves in a larger interpersonal reality with them. Face to face with a trustworthy listener they feel more precisely what effects an inner movement is producing in them. Is the



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movement dragging them down or building them up? Is it paralyzing them or giving strength for positive development? Is it closing them down, or allowing them to open up and thereby enter into a deeper encounter with Christ? This last aspect is particularly important in pinpointing the direction of an inner movement. The decisive criterion is in fact whether a thought or a state of soul *rather* tends towards loving fellowship with Christ and his Church or *rather* creates indifference to it or even cuts it off. In the latter case Ignatius speaks of an inspiration from the ‘bad spirit’.⁹ If the spiritual movement from this direction is very stubborn and brings the soul over a long period into ‘dangerous waters’, it needs very special loving attention, patience and persistence in prayer.

In a specific decision to do or not do something, the most important criterion is to feel peace and inner confidence while reflecting or narrating. This criterion of harmony between mind (deliberate speech) and soul (feeling, willing) is, however, fundamentally authentic when one feels it in speaking and praying to Jesus. Ignatius calls the experience of harmony in talking with Jesus Christ ‘consolation’ (*consolatio*); a disharmony in the heart, on the other hand, is ‘desolation’ (*desolatio*).¹⁰ How important this friendly conversation is can be seen in the Exercises in the significance that Ignatius attaches to the so-called *colloquium*. At the end of each

⁹ In the Seventeenth Annotation Ignatius distinguishes between thoughts that come from ‘the good spirit’ and those caused by ‘the bad spirit’, Exx 17.

¹⁰ Compare Exx 6 and 7.

meditation Ignatius invites us once again to a face-to-face conversation about what has been experienced.¹¹ And in particularly important parts of the Spiritual Exercises he recommends us to turn not only to Jesus but also to the Mother of God and to the Heavenly Father.¹² If despite sharing in personal prayer, with the spiritual director, or in the group, no clarity emerges, Ignatius advises that no far-reaching decisions should be made. For as long as we are caught up in feelings and thoughts that have not yet found their place, our decisions stand on feet of clay.

Exercises and experiments are opportunities for us to learn to deal attentively with our inner movements and to experience them as a journey with God. While the Exercises are more appropriate for people seeking silence and solitude, the approach in the experiments is more playful and social. The focus is first of all on the discovery of something new, and on meeting and working with strangers. The particular attraction of the Magis-format for young people lies also in the fact that it leaves the participants plenty of room for involvement and for their own creativity, and the experience together has a certain ‘event’ character.¹³ Both, however, are basically about practising empathy: with ourselves, with the people we meet, and especially with Jesus Christ. If we are in empathetic contact with all three dimensions of our reality, we can discern the ‘spirits’ more certainly in daily life as well, and make better decisions. All the same, pleasant and difficult things will always be mixed together. For both are parts of life: the suffering and brokenness of the world and of our own lives as well as carefree joy in what is pleasant and good. But before all stands the great sign of Christ’s promise, which we encounter in every experience and which will lead us into his healing fellowship.

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¹¹ So, for example, Exx 54.

¹² Compare Ignatius’ instructions on ‘making a good choice’, Exx 168–189, and the threefold colloquy, Exx 180 and 183.

¹³ Compare Andreas Gautier, *Spiritualität und Event. Eine empirische Auswertung des ignatianischen Programms zum Weltjugendtag 2005 mit einer theologischen Reflexion* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007).