

A CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE WITH THE RULES FOR ALMSGIVING

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THE LAST TIME I TAUGHT a course on discernment of spirits drawing on the teachings of several different mystics at the graduate level, I was intrigued and moved by the account of one of my students, Tom,¹ about his experience with the Rules for Almsgiving among the Rules for Discernment of Spirits in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* (Exx 344–351). It was my first experience of someone actually engaging and praying with this set of guides, and my student's paper, along with his account of sacrificial giving as a central spiritual practice in his life, made me wonder why this theme is rarely treated in Ignatian literature and not routinely experienced as an integral part of the Spiritual Exercises. It seems to me that in the contemporary context, when many more lay men and women, as well as non-Jesuit clergy, are making some form of the Spiritual Exercises, this set of rules is extremely relevant today.

The only commentaries I have found on these rules are in Michael Ivens' *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*² and in David Fleming's *A Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises*³ (which reframes them as 'Guidelines for the Christian Sharing of One's Wealth and Possessions'). Ivens offers a careful historical understanding of the original context of these guidelines for clergy, which were particularly addressed to those whose responsibilities included distributing ecclesiastical revenues in alms to the poor. This historical situation raised questions about distributing church funds to relatives, friends and acquaintances, and whether or not

¹ Tom collaborated with me in writing this article but wished to remain anonymous for a variety of reasons. I am grateful for his participation and have changed his name to protect his identity.

² Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises: Text and Commentary. A Handbook for Retreat Directors* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 238–241.

³ David Fleming, *A Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises: A Companion to St Ignatius' Text* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1980), 83–85.

any amount might be reserved for the cleric's own needs. It seems to me that this range of issues continues to play out today in terms of how funds collected by Churches or other charities are actually spent and whether the administrator personally benefits from them in any way.

Fleming, on the other hand, interprets these guides as 'simplicity of life and being thrifty in our use of our world's resources'. Following Ignatius, both Ivens and Fleming emphasize that the impulse towards life-reform and reflection on our relationship to wealth are positively motivated by following the example of Jesus and making necessary modifications related 'to office and position in ... society' (Exx 344). These 'rules' then, promote a positive motive rooted in love of God and discipleship of Jesus in giving alms to the poor, and offer an ascetical process of 'considerations' designed to minimise or eliminate 'disordered attachments' prior to distributing alms. These remain realistic and helpful practices.

In the consumer cultures of the developed world, might not many men and women benefit from reflecting on their relationship to financial resources and fruitfully engage in serious discernment about charitable giving and the amount and proportion of resources one should appropriate and allot to oneself, regardless of the source of these funds (Exx 343)? In a

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world of exponential human growth and the pressure that that puts on the planet's resources, there are ecological reasons for embracing simplicity of life for the sake of the planet and for the sake of future generations. Equally compelling is an understanding of the gospel imperative to a form of downward mobility that recognises the violence and impoverishment of the bottom half of society throughout the world for the sake of fewer and fewer in the top portion, who continue to accumulate great wealth at the expense of everyone else. Dean Brackley, in his discussion of 'Downward Mobility as the Way of Christ', describes the pressing worldwide need for solidarity:

To combat world poverty and environmental decay, we need to make this the Century of Solidarity, especially international solidarity. As elites extend their power through globalised markets, finance, and communications, the response can only be to globalise the practice of love More than anything else, we need 'new human beings' who identify with the poor majority of the planet—including people in rich countries who know about trade, finance, and human rights law and can help address the complex causes of misery. Many such people are stepping forward, especially from colleges and universities and

from the churches, with their unique potential to connect people across borders and a wealth of experience on the ground.⁴

Brackley's interpretative clues from his own experience working with poor persons in El Salvador and our class discussion on the rules for discernment of spirits provided the context that led Tom to work deeply with the Rules for Almsgiving. Although Tom was not 'making the Exercises' in a retreat setting, the class provided material for reflection and required prayerful reflection and application of the Ignatian approach to discernment to a real-life issue.

Tom's Account

I signed up for Dr Ruffing's Discernment of Spirits class in the fall of my final year of seminary. I was nearly fifty when I heard a call to the priesthood, after a successful 23-year business career. I had also inherited some money from my parents when they died. I did not consider myself one of Brackley's 'elite' until I visited Haiti for the first time, in 2006. Prior to that visit I considered myself comfortable, but not rich. After seeing the lifestyle of the Haitians, and how many of them live on \$30–60 per month (or less), I realised that I am among the world's elite. Throughout my business career I tithed 10 per cent of my income, giving to the Church and other institutions that work for social justice. Paradoxically it was during seminary, when my income was zero, that my giving increased. Just prior to taking Dr Ruffing's class I donated \$150,000 to build 38 homes for Haitian families that had been displaced by the 2010 earthquake. I had been working in a small village near the epicentre, and these families desperately needed permanent housing.

\$150,000 is a great deal of money to me, about 6 per cent of my total net worth. I was afraid to give this much money away, knowing that I did not have the potential to earn it back in my chosen profession as a priest. But the joy and sense of peace that came over me in the months and years following this gift have been indescribable. The money has been part of a larger missional ministry to the community where these homes were built. I gave the homes in Haiti anonymously; they are an outward and visible sign of God's generosity and grace. I also continue to visit the village several times per year.

⁴ Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 103.



Around the time that I read the Ignatian Rules for Almsgiving, I went on a retreat during a spectacularly clear autumn weekend. I sat next to a flaming red oak tree that was perfectly reflected in the still lake, and I meditated on the four Ignatian Rules for Almsgiving. The first rule says that the love that moves me to give these alms should descend from the love of God. Second, if I imagine a stranger whom I have never met, how would I want him or her to distribute their alms? Third, if I imagine myself on my own deathbed, how do I want to remember my own almsgiving? Finally, on the Day of Judgment, how will I wish that I had given away money to others?

I imagined that flaming red oak as a burning bush telling me that my almsgiving was just beginning. I was receiving an insight that was beyond my usual way of thinking, since I rarely think about my deathbed or Judgment Day. I formed a five-year plan for how I could give at these same levels, and how that would bless the community in Haiti over time. I could give money to build a church in the community. I could support a microcredit programme. I could help build a school and children's home. All of these efforts would, with God's help, continue to grow and flourish in this same village for the rest of my life. The flaming red oak provided me with a vision of the fruits of my sacrificial giving after twenty or thirty years. I imagined how this giving would bless the families in this Haitian village, and how it would bless my family and me.

Giving at this sacrificial level is not something that came easily. It has taken years of practice and preparation to have the courage to give away hundreds of thousands of dollars. My giving habits began in my early twenties. I had just got my first job with a corporation selling photocopiers. It was the early

1980s, and I was making relatively good money as a young man. I was following the path of most people in the world, what Brackley calls the 'Babylon Project, or the anti-reign'. Like most people I sought money, power and prestige. Fr John, my rector, suggested that I consider tithing. Since I had never really made any money before it seemed like a sensible and relatively painless plan. God had blessed me with more income than I thought possible for a 23-year-old, so why not give back a percentage?

It took me a few years to work my way up to the 10 per cent tithe level. I began by giving 4 per cent to the Church. The next year I gave 6 per cent, then eight. By 1987 I was tithing, and I have given at least 10 per cent of my income every year since. Over the past 25 years I have never felt lacking for money. I have never felt that the money I gave was wasted, or that I have had to sacrifice because I gave it away. In fact the opposite is true. Giving has become for me one of my life's greatest pleasures. The money I give to the Church and other organizations is the first item on my budget. I have adjusted my lifestyle and needs to fit the income that remains after giving.

Brackley says that the Babylon Project is in conflict with the Jerusalem Project, the Reign of God. That has been true in my own life. I wish I could say that my path from the Babylon Project to the Jerusalem Project was direct and smooth. It was not. For much of my life, particularly during my business career, I felt at war with myself. I resisted a full surrender to God by thinking I could have it all, both money and poverty. I wanted power and humility. I realise this now sounds silly, but the way of the world is like a strong tide that carries us along. I needed to become a stronger swimmer, swimming towards God, swimming away from my insecurities and fears, and swimming away from the world that resists salvation. In the process I nearly drowned in a sea of alcohol and drugs. In fact it was not until I got sober, until I felt God's redemptive love through the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, that I could more fully surrender to God's will.

The challenge for me now is to share this joyous ministry with others in ways that invite others to give. Money is one thing my parents taught me never to discuss with others. Each person's financial affairs are private, they said. There are good reasons for this philosophy. Money can corrupt friendships through resentment or jealousy. Inequitable financial status can change the power dynamics in a friendship, particularly if one friend begins to feel superior or inferior to the other. With regard to giving, however, I feel as if I have discovered a pearl of great price (Matthew 13:46), and that I must share it with others. I am discovering that the key to an abundant life is to

give abundantly to others. This is possible for everyone, no matter what their net worth is. Abundant giving is proportional, as the gospel story of the poor widow who gave two copper coins reminds us (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21: 1–4). A person on welfare who makes only a few thousand dollars a year can give 10 per cent. But this means that a person who makes hundreds of thousands of dollars a year can also give 10 per cent. Imagine how the world might change if more high-income people gave 10 per cent of their income to the poor as their first fruits to God!

One thing I have learnt while working with the poor in Haiti is that disparity is more disheartening than poverty per se. The poor feel poorer when they see that others have more. And this is not just true for the poor. When my wife and I started our ministries as priests, we moved into a lovely apartment on the campus of her church. The apartment was connected to the sanctuary, and it was part of a beautiful gothic stone building. We felt like we were living in a castle! We had heat, window units for air conditioning, hardwood floors and a lovely kitchen. We were perfectly happy with our living circumstances, until we saw the apartment of her co-worker. They live in a refurbished mansion just next door to us with floor-to-ceiling windows, a much nicer kitchen, central air conditioning, a deck and a beautiful garden. Suddenly we felt deprived.

I share this first-world problem to illustrate that the real problem in the world is disparity. The poor become more aware of their circumstances when they see 'the rich'. Conversely, we 'rich' become aware of our abundance only when we spend time with the poor and understand what their lives are like. I have been to Haiti fourteen times, and I return from each trip with a new appreciation of my abundance and relative comfort. God has blessed me, and sometimes I need to be reminded of that.

For much of my life I created barriers to the suffering and inequality in the world. For eleven years I lived in Boulder, Colorado, an affluent university town which is 90 per cent white. On returning from a trip to Haiti in 2008, one of my fellow missionaries, a physician, told me that he believed his choice to live in Boulder was a racist act. He may be judging himself harshly, but his sentiment is valid. Whenever I engage in behaviours that physically separate me from others who have less, I am participating in institutional inequality. For much of my life I was blind to this, since nearly everyone else was doing the same thing and celebrating it. But for me, the systematic unfairness causes an ache in my soul. I could not continue to separate myself through competition and comparison. I began to see my own salvation and personal well-being tied to my love, acceptance and support of the poor.

Right now I am in the fourth year of the five-year plan. This year my wife and I gave \$100,000 to build a church sanctuary for this village. Since the earthquake, church attendance has doubled. For the past ten years the church community has been worshipping in a school classroom, and it is now just too small. Our money built the foundation and columns of a church that will hold 500 people.

Giving money is just one way that I have been 'downwardly mobile'. God has now blessed me with a job serving as the priest of a Haitian congregation in an inner city. Most members are not nearly as poor as their brothers and sisters in Haiti. They are second- and third-generation immigrants to the USA who, like me, struggle with the tension between Babylon and Jerusalem. Many of them have been economically successful. But by focusing on their own economic success, they have lost touch with the needs of the poor. I believe God has called me to serve them so that I can share my own struggle with Babylon and Jerusalem, and help them claim their own agency as Christians. I also am there to serve with humility and cooperation, aided by the fact that I serve them in languages—Haitian Creole and French—that are not native to me. Differences of class, culture, language and race have forced me into humble cooperation with my congregation.

Sitting next to that flaming red oak on that autumn day gave me a vision of how my giving could bless a village in Haiti. I never imagined how much I would be blessed by this gift. The list of gifts is too long to mention, but it includes a sense of peace, joy and purpose in my life, and authentic relationships with Haitians. God willing, I will be visiting and serving this same village until the day I die.



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A poor neighbourhood devastated by the Haitian earthquake

God blesses us in ways that I often forget or take for granted. My sacrificial giving reminds me that God has blessed me so that I can be a blessing to others. That, I think, is the reason I was put on Earth.

Further Reflections

Tom's account of his experiences with charitable giving suggests how fruitfully engaging Ignatius' themes in the *Spiritual Exercises* that touch on wealth and right relationship with material reality can be. Tom responded to this moment of grace initiated by the Rules for Almsgiving with previous experience of Ignatian retreats. His narrative situates him as already committed to tithing. He had also already become personally involved with a particular community in Haiti and was impelled to develop a relationship with that community as well as being drawn to serve an immigrant Haitian community in the USA.

His unique narrative offers a glimpse into a process of deepening discipleship of Jesus that includes not only a choice of sacrificial giving but also a choice against racism and for personal solidarity with Haitian people. He describes the joy and the peace that accompany the freedom around wealth and material goods that can be one of the fruits of the *Spiritual Exercises*, in this instance in the life of a clergy couple and their unique expression of discipleship in the whole of their lives.

While all people who engage with the *Spiritual Exercises* in one of their many forms may not respond as Tom did, it seems that the Rules for Almsgiving might be very fruitful for many people. The original context of how a cleric or a deacon distributes funds designated for the poor certainly still applies to similar situations today. The Rules stimulate reflection on honesty, generosity and ethical responsibility in fiduciary matters. This responsibility requires using designated funds for the purposes for which they were given—not to benefit oneself or others not designated to receive them.

But there may also be more. Those with some 'wealth' might want to consider the kind of giving, and to whom or what causes, to which they might feel called. How might these 'guides' for discernment stimulate reflection and openness to greater sharing of resources and even solidarity with those so often invisibly exploited in our current economic system? How do the economics of the reign of God figure in the life of those making the *Spiritual Exercises* in such a way that discipleship of Jesus deepens in this area of their lives?

As Tom points out in his reflection, it is not so much actual material wealth that creates discontent, but recognised disparity. Breaking through this illusion to gratitude and joy is one antidote to feelings of scarcity—that sense of not having enough. If those making the Exercises recognise what they actually have that they may not need, and begin to take into account the real needs of actual persons or groups of persons who have less than they do, might they discover that they have enough to share? And might the sharing and the solidarity result in greater freedom, joy and peace?

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