

FOSTERING A CONTEMPLATIVE STANCE

An Ignatian Exploration

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IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA was steeped in a theocentric world-view, an understanding of all reality as having God at its centre. The sources of this world-view were partly his medieval cultural and religious inheritance, and partly his mystical experiences at Manresa. Its clearest imaginative portrayal in the *Spiritual Exercises* is probably the Contemplation on the Incarnation (Exx 101–109). This has the aim of leading the exercitant into the Trinity's own loving gaze on the world and its people, seeing the world from its centre. This loving gaze reveals God's self. More immediately it reveals God's involvement in creation, and points to an even more intimate involvement through the incarnation of the Word. It is a dramatic story that unfolds within the contemplation and has God as its chief protagonist. But God is also the author of the plot and knows its ending.

For Ignatius the theocentric world-view was the only adequate way of understanding reality. In spite of what later thinkers (especially during the Enlightenment) argued, this world-view does not denigrate creation or humanity. On the contrary, it induced in Ignatius deep appreciation of the human person and of human values, as well as reverence for the cosmos. At Manresa Ignatius had received a profound insight into the mystery of creation:

Once the way in which God had created the world was represented in his understanding, with great spiritual joy: it seemed to him he was seeing a white thing, from which some rays were coming out, and that God was making light out of it.¹

¹ *Autobiography*, n. 29.

God loved creation into being. It could only be good—and humankind very good (Genesis 1:24–31). Some time later, on the banks of the Cardoner, Ignatius received further enlightenment:

And as he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened: not that he saw some vision, but understanding and knowing many things, spiritual things just as much as matters of faith and learning [*letras*], and this with an enlightenment so strong that all things seemed new to him.²

Having seen how God created the world, Ignatius is now given to understand the secrets of that world. He is enlightened about the realities of the human spirit, about the mysteries of faith, and about *letras*. What does he mean by *letras*? Since he distinguishes them both from ‘spiritual things’ and from ‘matters of faith’, he must mean secular learning, or culture, or what the sixteenth century knew as *litterae humaniores* (the humanities or liberal arts). It is quite extraordinary, maybe unique, that secular learning should be part of a mystical experience. Yet there it is, taking its place beside spiritual and faith-related matters, or interwoven with them.

Renaissance Humanism

When Ignatius moved on from Manresa into the intellectual world of Alcalá, Salamanca and Paris, and later into ecclesiastical circles in Rome, he found that much in his thinking was in harmony with Renaissance humanism. By then this was the most influential educational and cultural movement throughout Europe. But certain distinctions are needed here. However much Ignatius accepted Renaissance values in education, his core religious convictions (and devotional ways of expressing them) remained rooted in an earlier era—medieval Europe. He never moved from his theocentric world-view to take on the anthropocentric one of many (not all) humanists.

Yet within this theocentric world-view Ignatius gave full value to the human. To relate the dignity of each human person to a creator God does not lessen but, on the contrary, enhances that dignity. The human person is made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). What greater dignity can there be? It follows that nothing human is ever merely

² *Autobiography*, n. 30.



Humanist scholars in debate, by H. B., 1540

human. No human enterprise, however secular, is merely secular. We live in a universe suffused by grace. The destiny of the human person is not only self-transcendence but divinisation. And God's action of divinisation is never disrupted.

It is this blending of a medieval, theocentric world-view with an openness to Renaissance thought that gives Ignatius' vision its distinctive character. Most relevant here is the influence on him of the educational philosophy of the humanists. Ignatius took this on board and, where necessary, Christianized it. But I want to use the term 'educational philosophy' in a very broad sense in order to include not just his later commitment to education as a ministry, but his presuppositions in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Let me illustrate this last point.

William Bouwsma, writing about the Renaissance theory of education, contrasts it with the medieval scholastic system:

The scholastic curriculum had been primarily concerned with generating and systematizing the general, supposedly objective and immutable truths of natural philosophy (i.e. science), metaphysics,

and dogmatic theology. But what was described by the later fourteenth century as the *studia humanitatis* had a quite different focus. It was more concerned with individual human beings, with their changing thoughts, values and feelings, and with human interaction in society.³

The last sentence above readily evokes the mind-set with which Ignatius approaches the Spiritual Exercises. In giving them he is concerned,

- 'with individual human beings' (his focus on each person's unique relationship with God; the dynamic of one-to-one spiritual direction);
- 'with their changing thoughts, values and feelings' (his emphasis on the exercitant's inner movements; consolation and desolation; the use of the examen and review of prayer);
- 'and with human interaction in society' (once again the examen; but above all the election, which is presented as the exercitant's choice of a particular mode of being inserted into the world of people and events).

On one level this shows Ignatius embracing humanistic values, skilfully adapting them to his purpose and facilitating their development in others (exercitants). Nevertheless, throughout this process (with its inevitable focus on the human person) God remains at the centre of the supporting world-view. In the election it is God's will that is being sought. Everything else is evaluated in light of its relationship with God.

Christology in the Exercises

Even a cursory reading of the *Spiritual Exercises* reveals how explicitly christocentric they are. For Ignatius, being christocentric is simply another way of being theocentric. His personal christology is, in theological terms, a high christology, a christology from above, beginning with the pre-existent Word who becomes flesh. This is the core of the Contemplation on the Incarnation. But, in the gospel contemplations that follow, it is the humanity of Jesus that becomes the starting point. A person holding a low christology would have no difficulty in praying as Ignatius suggests.

Take a simple example: in the first prelude to the Call of the King, the exercitant is asked 'to see with the eyes of the imagination the

³ William J. Bouwsma, 'The Spirituality of Renaissance Humanism', in *Christian Spirituality II: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, edited by Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 236.

synagogues, villages, and castles through which Christ our Lord passed as he preached' (Exx 91). The image is of a human person (Jesus of Nazareth), among people in human locations (synagogues, villages and castles), performing human acts (walking and preaching).

It is through looking at and interacting with this human Jesus in a contemplative way that the exercitant is led, by means of a discernment process, to make an election. This is itself a profoundly human act, totally dependent on human freedom. Subsequently, in the contemplations of the Third and Fourth Weeks, whether the divinity hides itself—as during the passion (Exx 196)—or manifests itself—as in the resurrection appearances (Exx 223)—this (hiding or manifesting) always takes place in and through the humanity of Jesus.

Can we bring these different aspects of Ignatius' thinking together? I have suggested that from being steeped in medieval culture and piety, and from his mystical experiences in Manresa, Ignatius' world-view is always theocentric. Creation, including humanity, comes from God and returns to God. The destiny of the human person is not merely self-transcendence but divinisation. And it is in Jesus that there is realised in a pre-eminent way the reality that to be fully human is to be divine.

Ignatius, therefore, shared with the humanists a high esteem for everything human. They loved to quote the Latin playwright Terence's aphorism: *Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto* (I am a human being; I consider no aspect of humanity as foreign to me). To be human during the Renaissance was a cause for celebration; to be fully human was the goal of life. Ignatius acquiesced in this so long as the human was being fêted not in itself alone and not apart from God. For him the real value of the human was precisely that it is immersed in God. The human is the field of God's activity, and Christ's humanity is the privileged instrument of God's redeeming action.

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Furthermore our humanity, too, can become an instrument in God's hands, totally at God's disposal. The person preparing to make the Spiritual Exercises is urged to offer 'all their desires and freedom to him [God] so that His Divine Majesty can make use of their persons and of all they possess' (Exx 5). And, in the *Constitutions*, Ignatius writes of the Jesuit being an *instrumentum coniunctum cum Deo* (an instrument closely united with God) (*Constitutions* X.2–3 [813–814]). Again, the instrument is the human person in all his humanity, and God is the artist.

A Contemplative Stance

Ignatius' theocentric world-view led him to adopt a contemplative stance in his own life and to cultivate such a stance in others. Throughout the Exercises, Ignatius is preparing the exercitant to become a contemplative person. Even though we maintain that the election is the goal of the Exercises, we can see that they are also a school of contemplation, or an internship in contemplation. Indeed the election, or decision-making in the Ignatian mode, only happens in the context of contemplation. I shall return to this point a little later. But before that I want to look at the exercise in which the contemplative dynamic is most obvious, the Contemplation to Attain Love (Exx 230–237). Its outline is familiar:

- First, I am invited to ponder on God's gifts: those I share with others (creation and redemption), and those that are unique to myself. Most of all 'how he, the same Lord, desires to give me even his very self, in accordance with his divine design'. Hence I am moved to give myself to God. 'Take, Lord, and receive ...'
- Then I reflect on God's living within his gifts: in every aspect of creation, in the humanity of Christ, in myself (who am made in the image and likeness of God, and so, appropriately, am God's temple). 'Take, Lord, and receive ...'
- After that I mull over God's working for me in and through his gifts: God activates and energizes everything in an ongoing creation. 'Take, Lord, and receive ...'
- Finally, I open myself to the wonder of all these gifts descending from above, *de arriba*, 'just as the rays come down from the sun, or the rains from their source'. Here Ignatius evokes an awareness of my personal qualities and virtues participating in the analogous qualities and virtues in God, and (at least implicitly) of my own total being participating in the Being of God. Again, in response, I pray: 'Take, Lord, and receive ...'

Each of these four points aims at opening exercitants to receive contemplative graces. Yet these are to be anticipated, not only while the persons are actually making the Exercises, but day by day throughout the life that lies ahead of them. These graces are to lead the exercitants to a deepening contemplative stance, constantly increasing their ability to discover God in every aspect of creation, and in every event in their

unfolding personal history. In turn this growth leads to an ever-clearer theocentric world-view, while also fostering a greater integration within the person.

Towards the end of his own life, Ignatius made ‘a sort of formal declaration’ (to Gonçalves da Câmara), saying that he had been ‘... always growing in devotion, i.e. in facility in finding God, and now more than ever in his whole life. And every time and hour he wanted to find God, he found him.’⁴

This is the horizon that beckons us forward, that draws us onward. But note that finding God in all things is not the starting point for Ignatius but the outcome of a life spent searching for God—a life of contemplation. Neither is finding God in all things *our* starting point, but our goal. This grace requires much purification, enlightenment and, almost certainly, suffering before a person is sufficiently sensitised to receive it. If we claim prematurely that we are able to find God in all things, it is more likely that what we are finding is not God but the self. Or, in other words, we are finding a god made in our own image. Such an experience is demonic rather than divine. Hence the crucial need for discernment, especially as taught in the Rules for Discernment of the Second Week—those more subtle rules that help unmask the demon who appears as an angel of light (Exx 329–336).⁵

Contemplation and Decision-Making

The path towards a contemplative stance may well be most overtly marked out in the Contemplation to Attain Love, but it runs through the whole of the Exercises. For example, the contemplations of the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks are not only contemplations of the life of the historical Jesus and of the risen Christ. Through the resonances that the gospel mysteries evoke in those who enter into them, they become contemplations of the exercitants’ own lives as well. Ignatius keeps insisting that the exercitants ought to reflect on themselves and draw some fruit from what they see and hear (contemplate) in prayer. If we are encouraged by Karl Barth to study theology with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other, we are encouraged by Ignatius to pray with the Bible in one hand and our life experiences in the other.

⁴ *Autobiography*, n. 99.

⁵ See the trenchant critique of the contemporary usage of the slogan ‘finding God in all things’ in Franz Meures, ‘The Spiritual Exercises as Biography’, *The Way*, 47/1–2 (January and April 2008), 185–199, at 197–199.

In fact this may not even need a conscious decision on the exercitants' part. For if the dynamic of the Exercises is working well, this assimilation of our concrete human lives with the life of Christ will be happening spontaneously. Our contemplation will be, in Walter Burghardt's felicitous phrase, 'a long, loving look at the real'.⁶ We will be approaching the mysteries of Christ's life and our own with the same contemplative gaze, from the same contemplative stance. In this way a kind of mutuality occurs by which we observe Christ's life experience through the lens of our own, and our life experience through the lens of Christ's.

All of this is the *sine qua non* for a good and sound election. Our world and our life constitute the raw material for any election while Christ, his life and teaching, constitute its paradigm and standard. These two realities need to be brought together and allowed to interact. This is the role of contemplation—that compassionate, loving gaze that embraces, at one and the same time, both God revealed in Christ and ourselves made in God's image and likeness. Such contemplation is the only way



God and Adam, Chartres Cathedral, thirteenth century

⁶ See Walter Burghardt, 'Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real', *Church*, 14 (Winter 1989), 15.

by which our eventual decision will be made under the guidance of the Spirit, uniting us more closely with Christ and so bringing our lives into harmony with the will of God.

When Ignatius introduces the topic of the election he writes: ‘While continuing our contemplations of his [Christ’s] life, we now begin simultaneously to explore and inquire: In which state or way of life does the Divine Majesty wish us to serve him?’ (Exx 135). Note the word ‘simultaneously’. This translates the Spanish *íntamente* (jointly or together). It emphasizes that we are not to leave aside the gospel contemplations in order to concentrate on the practicalities of the election. The gospel contemplations are themselves integral to the whole process. They are to continue at the same time (simultaneously) as we seek to discover God’s will in the matter of the election. We continue to focus the same contemplative gaze on the person, teaching and actions of Christ as we focus on our own selves and our particular concerns at this point in time. We might say that the election, for however long it needs to last, is an interplay of contemplative and decisional prayer. Or, to adapt a sentence that I came across in another context, the process is one of thinking about our life ‘in the crosshairs of crisis and contemplation’. We can all too easily be drawn to attend to the crisis while neglecting the necessary contemplation.

A Contemplative Approach to Life

We have already touched on the need for an ongoing contemplative stance, or a contemplative approach to life, even when the Exercises are completed. While we may hope that this will become habitual, even intuitive, for most people it remains a difficult and daily challenge. Within the Exercises everything is geared to nurturing and deepening this attitude. Our horizons are enlarged and our sensibilities sharpened within the solitude. Exercitants may even persuade themselves that it is easy to find God! But what happens when this internship is over, when they leave this privileged milieu? How can they foster the gift of contemplation that was received rather than lose it, disregard it or dilute it?

Among the helps available the first is regular spiritual direction, in which another person of faith acts for us in an analogous way to the one who gives the Exercises. A major part of this person’s responsibility is to keep drawing us back to ‘the one thing necessary’. This will be to maintain our attention on God in Christ, to continue to be theocentric in

our world-view, and to become increasingly contemplative in the concrete circumstances of our lives.

The second is a commitment to what we now call the consciousness (or awareness) examen. Since George Aschenbrenner's seminal article in 1972,⁷ the examen has been mostly presented as a delicate tool for sustaining a contemplative stance in life. Among the many new insights offered in recent writing on this topic, the most significant is that the examen is itself a contemplative prayer. By using it daily our apprenticeship in contemplation continues.⁸

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⁷ George A. Aschenbrenner, 'Consciousness Examen', *Review for Religious*, 31 (1972), 13–21.

⁸ This article is based on part of my 'Foundational Values in the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius', in *Milltown Studies*, 33 (1994), 5–21. Adapted with permission.