

# THE CALL OF THE KING: CONVERSION TO JUSTICE AND PEACE

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**T**HE URGENT NEED for conversion of our world to justice and peace is evident. Newspapers, radio, television, special government reports, films, short stories, novels, biographies and much more, all bring us daily evidence of the extent of humanly-made suffering in the world. It is not only a matter of the conversion of individual hearts and minds. The task is more complex and the problem more intractable than that. Much of the suffering is not directly or deliberately inflicted though analysis shows that it may ultimately be traced to selfishness. The need is evidently for a reshaping of the structures, large and small, that govern our relationships with one another in the world and its history. That is, on the one hand, a technical problem, but also, on the other hand, a problem of attitude, values, goals, convictions and commitments, and therefore a problem of spirituality.

Unfortunately, there is a certain reluctance to recognize the problems of the world as theological and spiritual issues. Centuries of religious strife and persecution followed by centuries of enlightenment thought, have left us with the habit and inclination to view religious faith and practice as an entirely private matter—sometimes so private as to preclude discussion even with one's best friends. Yet it is clear that our individual spirituality cannot be authentic if it deliberately excludes public issues that are a matter of conflict of interests in which self-seeking opposes itself to compassion and justice.

The age in which we live has offered us immense technical competence. From the technical point of view there are few problems we could not solve if we were willing to make the necessary dispositions of power and wealth. It is in the political, not in the technical realm that we fail again and again to solve problems of world hunger, of refugees, of the spiralling armaments

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build-up, of unemployment, of increasing discrepancies between rich and poor, of dwindling natural resources and progressive poisoning of the environment. The problem in all these areas is unwillingness to sacrifice some self-interest for the common good. Putting it very bluntly, in terms of the issues named in the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises, the underlying problem for groups, as for individuals, is the inordinate human hunger for wealth, honour and power (pride). It is the task of christian faith and life to recognize the destructive workings of that inordinate hunger in all its many disguises, and to reverse it in the power of Christ's grace.

Conversion of the world to justice and peace involves a thoroughly new vision of possibilities and actualities in political, economic, social and cultural affairs. Christians seek that new vision in the following of Jesus, guided by meditation on the gospel accounts of his life and teaching. It is by observing and reflecting upon the attitudes, responses, initiatives, judgments and decisions, stances and relationships of Jesus, that we come to discern what the basic issues were for him. To know what the basic issues were for him is in turn to come to a progressively clearer vision of the character and dynamics of the redemption, and therefore to be able to discern what it involves in our own times and situations.

In the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius suggests a selection of incidents from the gospel stories (and offers a much larger selection in the appendix on the 'mysteries of Christ's life') which serve just this purpose. To follow Jesus through these scenes in one's meditations is certainly to become aware of a deep conflict of values: the restoration of the divine order in the world not through the powerful but through the humble or powerless; commitment to God's will not by imposing one's own perception of it on others, but by a continuous quest to understand in the obscurities of a sinful history; reversal of the distortions of the quest for wealth by chosen poverty; the recentring of the world on God's reign and not on self, in the acceptance of suffering in pursuit of that obedience to the will of God which is compassion and community. To follow Jesus through the gospels with the focus that Ignatius continually proposes is to see the issues that arise for Jesus himself as those of poverty, contempt and powerlessness.

The Jesus that we see in these meditations seeks solidarity with the poor by becoming poor among them. Ignatius emphasizes this from the meditation on the Incarnation, through the nativity scene,

the presentation in the Temple, the flight into Egypt, the life of obedience at Nazareth and the finding in the Temple. And he picks up the same emphasis in the meditations on leaving home, on the baptism by John, the retreat into the desert and the temptations, the call of the first disciples, the focus on the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, the walking on the water to come to the disciples, the preaching in the Temple, the raising of Lazarus and the 'Palm Sunday' entrance into Jerusalem.

However, his seeking of solidarity with the poor by becoming poor among them is certainly not the end of the matter in any of these meditations. In all of these scenes the stance of Jesus implies a criticism of the relationships, attitudes, fears and desires that oppress the poor. It is a criticism of the motivations both among the poor themselves and among those who oppress them from without. Indeed, as Ignatius sees it, the life and activity of Jesus all follow from that divine scrutiny mentioned in the reflections on the Incarnation—a scrutiny which finds human affairs in the world terribly, tragically awry.

The solidarity with the poor in the gospel accounts of Jesus always has another dimension. It is that of radical dependence upon God in gratitude, simplicity and confidence. Indeed it is that of total abandonment to the will of God, the other aspect of which is total dedication to the reign of God in human affairs. It is this total confidence in the power of God rather than in technical or bullying power which liberates Jesus, and eventually his followers, for a vision of human reality so new, so different, that it appears as sheer folly in the affairs of the world. It implies that what is right will triumph ultimately because it is right. It implies that the creator has not lost control of creation but works with redeeming power that transcends all tragedies. It implies that the possibility of conversion is in all human persons and in all human structures and institutions. It implies that total dedication to the cause of the redemption is justified because redemption by God is possible and is under way.

The gospels deal also with the issue of contempt. Jesus responds to those who suffer contempt, exclusion, discrimination, by the kind of solidarity with them which progressively brings upon him that same kind of contempt, exclusion, and discrimination. Ignatius anticipates this in the meditations on the infancy narratives, as indeed the gospel writers themselves did. It is unfolded further in the meditations on the public life and preaching. Here again, the

matter does not end with the identification of Jesus with the despised. That very identification is a critique of the respectabilities and controlling forces of human society. What we learn is that the Word of God spoken into the world clearly and with simplicity and concreteness, is held not in honour but in contempt, which suggests that what we usually know as honour is dishonour before God and not worth seeking. But we also see how ugly and how painful is the contempt that privileged and fortunate people heap upon the underprivileged on whom they trample in their quest for status and honour. Moreover, we find that this is more than the deliberate action of individuals; it has been institutionalized in political, economic and cultural structures of human society. The contempt which Jesus suffered is a revelation of what is really at stake in the quest for status in human society, and the attitude which he, as Word of God in history, took towards the exercise of privilege and the leverage of status and honour, shows what these things mean in the sight of God.

Perhaps the most subtle of the issues for Jesus revealed in the ignatian approach to the gospel meditations is that of powerlessness or humility. Unfortunately, we have trivialized the word 'humility' so that it carries connotations of self-denigration with a view to spiritual 'progress'—a strange variety of crypto-self-promotion. The meditations on the mysteries of the life of Jesus in the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises, offer a far more down-to-earth notion of humility. Humility is powerlessness. In the meditation on the Incarnation, Mary is described as humbling herself when she allows God's power to work in her, and in the Nativity meditation the Word of God is presented as made man in a humble condition.

The humility or powerlessness of Jesus is most meaningful when seen in the context of the history of sin, and especially of 'the first sin' as presented in the First Week of the Exercises. At the root of the whole order of sin is pride, understood in the basic sense of self-assertion in an independence that refuses to be held accountable. In human history such self-assertion necessarily means domination, injustice, oppression of others. Moreover, in human history such self-assertion tends to build alliances and to express itself in the structures of society, both large and small.

The humility of Jesus is his familiarity with the true human condition and his willing solidarity with the powerless in the social and political structures of the world. He chooses powerlessness

according to the usual understanding that we have of power, that is to say in terms of being able to compel people to one's own desires and advantage. Like all folk of humble origin and humble condition, Jesus is stripped (though by his own choice) of the ability to compel others in ways that counter and deny the divine role in creation and providence. His power is that of dependence on the Father, which is also the power of community in human affairs, that is to say the power generated by the agreement of consenting free persons. The humility of Jesus turns the course of human history around because it restructures human life in dependence upon and in accountability to the divine will. But this is concerned not only with the relationship of human persons individually to God. It is concerned also with the relationship of human persons to one another, respecting the order of creation in respecting the freedom and dignity and Godward meaning of other persons. All this applies not only in the one-to-one, face-to-face relationships but also in the large social, economic and political structures of the world.

To share the vision is not enough to bring about conversion in one's own life and in the world. It also requires personal and social involvement. It involves choices flowing not only from the question, 'What does it mean?', but from the far more exigent question, 'What does it mean for me?' These choices refer, of course, to one's immediate context in terms of family, career, life-style and so forth. But they also refer to the larger context of the social setting of our times. They refer to peace and justice, to solidarity with the poor and suffering of the city and the country and the world. They refer to a new kind of solidarity with the despised, with 'the enemy', with those who are socially invisible and 'don't count' because they are not 'our sort'. The choices also refer to basic solidarity with the human race and the human condition before God.

Ignatius takes no chances that the retreatant might miss the immediacy of the gospel call for personal involvement, for he frames the gospel meditations of the Second Week with meditations characteristically his own, which he places at the beginning and the middle and the end. They are skilfully constructed and have lost neither relevance nor power in the passage of the centuries. By proposing the Kingdom meditation at the beginning, Ignatius places the entire week within the frame of reference of a worldwide crisis situation. We all know that the choices and decisions that

we make in situations of crisis tend to be clean cut and unqualified, and that we tend to act upon them without reckoning or resenting the cost in renunciation or effort. The Kingdom meditation assumes that the world as it is can by no means be taken for granted, as God-given and divinely intended. It can only be seen as an immense battleground of opposing forces with different loyalties. Jesus is the King who calls for followers to share the hardships and burdens of the campaign, because there can be no standing still and letting things take their course. It is war-time and there can be no 'business as usual'. It is 'all-out war' and there is no room for partial engagement or for enlisting in the reserves. The crisis is upon us now.

There are, of course, many reasons that would lead Ignatius to this perception in the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century. But there are certainly just as many reasons, if not more, to accept this view of the world in the present crisis of world hunger, armaments race, nuclear threat and racial violence, not to mention enormous imbalances in material resources which are enforced and maintained by brutal use of force. The world around us is certainly the world of Christ's campaign to reconquer. The Kingdom meditation not only strikes a note of urgency in the call to enlist in the struggle but it suggests a worldwide context for that struggle.

Lest this call should lack concreteness, Ignatius follows it up with the meditations on the Two Standards and the Three Classes of Men, both placed in the middle of the Second Week. The meditation on the Two Standards continues the symbolism of the Call of the King and makes a contrast that might be seen as an interpretation of the gospel story of the temptations of Jesus in the desert. The issue of loyalty is the understanding of the interrelated and inseparable character of the three factors in each position, and the clear choice made on the basis of that understanding. Here the issues Ignatius has brought into focus in the gospel meditation become inescapably explicit. Lucifer's call is to the pursuit of riches, honour and pride and to the propagation of that pursuit among the peoples of the world, until they are horribly ensnared in the self-defeating destructiveness of it. Christ's call is to help all human beings, by a detachment that is prepared for actual poverty, by courting contempt rather than honour, and seeking humility rather than pride.

These choices are personal but they are not simply a matter of the private life of the individual. To choose either way is to

implicate others also. To be committed either way is to seek alliances, co-operate in policies and structures, build systems that support the effort and sustain the position. To move in either direction is to have a social impact. To be neutral is impossible. To opt for the standard of Christ in private while acquiescing in the standard of wealth, honour and pride in public is an idle fiction liable to be unmasked in tragic ways when a crucial choice presents itself (as in the time of the Hitler regime, or in times of racial tension).

In spite of this, most of us are adept at evading the issues somehow most of our lives, and Ignatius proposes another meditation to reveal the 'games people play'. In the meditation on the Three Classes of Men, we meet the people who manage to avoid the real issues in life by chronic postponement, and the people who somehow manage to persuade themselves that they are committed to the cause and detached from the obstacles while making sure no actual renunciation is involved. In both, of course, we meet ourselves, and never more clearly than in matters of social justice and in the reconstruction of the social order for peace and freedom and dignity for all. In the third class we meet Jesus Christ, who acted with perfect detachment from self-interest because of the overwhelming magnetic force of his commitment to the coming reign of God in the human race.

But in the third class we also meet our own potential in the grace of Christ—the potential to grow in grace to the full stature of Christ, completing the work of his 'body', his people, the Church. It is in the 'third class of men' that we meet the real possibility of restructuring the world in peace and justice, because this is the class of martyrs—martyrs in blood, political martyrs (who are willing to subordinate their careers to their ideals without compromise), economic martyrs (who are willing to decide and act for the common good and the relief of the oppressed by sacrificing opportunities for self-enrichment), social martyrs (who will maintain solidarity with the oppressed, the despised, the 'enemy', at the cost of losing friends and respect and support).

For good measure, Ignatius confronts his retreatants once more at the end of the Second Week with the issues that he sees emerging from the life and teaching of Jesus. In the meditation on the Three Modes of Humility, the now well-established triad is again presented under a slightly different aspect. Ignatius invites retreatants to consider the three 'modes' or degrees of humility before

choosing a way of life. It is clear that by this he means a vocational choice, but the reflection is, as a matter of fact, relevant also before casting one's vote in an election, before making the kinds of choices of lifestyle and standard of living which we are all called upon to make from time to time, and before making policy decisions in business, professional or political matters.

What is at stake is a progression from minimal to maximal commitment to the cause of Christ. The minimum is never seriously or knowingly to act against the will of God in grave matters, no matter what profit is to be gained and no matter what disaster is to be averted. It can be said confidently that while many people accept this standard in their private lives, there is a tendency to set it aside as irrelevant in matters of public policy, national defence, industrial operations and bargains, and in all those matters in which the decision to act is not the responsibility of one single individual but the outcome of complex corporate procedures. Perhaps we need to become more sharply aware that shared responsibility is nevertheless personal responsibility, and that the ethical demands of God in our lives do not end at those junctures where our activity becomes public.

Perhaps if we were to accept this fully we would not be inclined to see such a large leap from Ignatius's first mode to his second. The second degree or mode requires indifference to wealth, honour and life itself to such an extent that there is no question of acting against the will of God even in less serious matters for any gain or any protection whatever. Consideration of what a community would look like that truly lived like this on a national or international scale staggers the imagination. On a city-wide, nation-wide or world-wide scale, this would be dynamite under our present intractable problems of peace and justice and universal access to means of decent livelihood. Perhaps the most serious obstacle to this at present is the fact that few or none really believe it is possible to introduce such principles into public policy. We do not really believe that Christ has conquered the principalities and powers.

If the second degree is dynamite, what is to be said of the third? The third degree exists where the followers of Jesus, to be more intimately one with him, deliberately choose his kind of poverty, his kind of rejection, his kind of folly. Perhaps we have been too quick in the recent past to equate this with a calling to the vowed religious life. It would also apply to people like Florence Nightingale



and Dorothy Day; to the Quakers who won the right of conscientious objection to military conscription at the cost of execution as traitors; to the women of Greenham Common; to Steve Biko in South Africa; to Martin Luther King and many of his followers who were imprisoned and beaten and harassed for the cause of justice; and to many unsung heroines and heroes in our city slums and in refugee camps and other places of suffering around the world. In any of the genuine struggles for peace and justice there are people who have deliberately chosen to be poor and despised and considered as fools—people who have chosen that kind of humility which is powerlessness in face of violence.

It is certainly not surprising that so many of the disciples of Ignatius should be among those who do this today—among those who struggle for justice for refugees and for the hungry and for the oppressed. It is not surprising that the followers of Ignatius are to be found among the 'liberation theologians' and among those engaged in fostering grassroots christian communities by a deeply spiritual and entirely practical 'conscientization' movement. It is not surprising because the teaching of the Spiritual Exercises moves so explicitly in this direction, especially in those particular meditations of the Second Week in which Ignatius makes clear what he sees as the issues of the redemption for Jesus himself.

Ignatius writes of ways of making choices, of times that are opportune and of ways to seize those opportune times. These guidelines for making choices are applicable not only to individuals in decisions affecting their personal lives, but to communal action for social justice and the alleviation of mass suffering. In those countries which have extensive networks of basic christian communities, this appears to be happening. Ignatius writes of times when there is a clear divine attraction, and that does seem to happen sometimes in acute crisis situations for movements and groups. He also writes of times when understanding and knowledge are attained by 'discernment of spirits', and the testimony of the movements among the poor in the Third World often seems to indicate that this happens among groups who pray together and share the fruits of their prayers with simplicity and generosity. But the advice that seems most appropriate for groups acting for social justice and peace is that for making choices in 'times of tranquillity'.

If groups and networks of groups move towards decisions on goals, policy and strategy according to the rules for such choices

in times of tranquillity, they will most surely become an effective force for justice and peace. To do so is to set the end of our created existence in view, shaping means to the end and not the end to the means; to cultivate detachment from all individual and group self-interest in the matter; to pray for enlightenment and empowerment together; in that spirit to consider the value and possibilities of alternative courses of action, on the best information and analysis available; and to come to a reasonable decision. This, of course, is the kind of deciding and acting that is envisioned by 'liberation theology' and by those engaged as Christians in liberation movements.

There are other suggestions of Ignatius that may be particularly appropriate in revolutionary situations. These are: to be sure before making choices or commitments that it is really the love of God which motivates them; to consider how one might advise and judge other groups in similar situations; to try to consider from the perspective of one's death-bed and from the perspective of God's final judgment what we might look back upon with peace of mind and joy of heart; and to decide accordingly. Of course, all this is projected as though all choices were open. In the situations in which most people struggle for a more just and peaceful and compassionate world, the options are severely limited because action for change involves large scale co-operation, and most of those willing to work for social justice are nevertheless not ready to accept the call of Christ in the way Ignatius delineates it. That, of course, is one reason why the Exercises do not end with the Second Week but move on to the Third and Fourth. The call of the King is not to a triumphalist sweep to victory but to a far more difficult and arduous campaign. But the focus and the tools for discernment offered in the Second Week provide a powerful dynamic towards justice and peace in the world.