

# THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS AND THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

By JOSEPH SOBB

THERE IS a humorous postcard available for sale around Perth which has an outline of the whole of the Australian continent. Many details of Western Australia (over one third of the land-mass) are clearly identified — archaeological, horticultural, mineral and such like. Everything east of longitude 130° however, is marked simply 'largely unexplored'. Distance, both in time and in space, may lend enchantment but it can also tyrannize us. Distance is an apt symbol to express the way our world has become at once smaller, for now instant communications link the most widely scattered countries, and at the same time more complex and overpowering, since we are conscious of the immense wealth of cultural and theological traditions which forms the inheritance of the human family today. Exploration is a risky undertaking, not least because discovery may radically alter one's understanding and perception of even most cherished truths.

When St Ignatius, Inigo, described himself as a pilgrim, he offered a valuable insight by which the Spiritual Exercises can be interpreted in each age. For one who makes the Exercises and for one who directs another in them, the encounter with Ignatian spirituality can usefully be described as a pilgrimage. The objective of this article, therefore, is to focus on the issue of the Spiritual Exercises in the context of modern theological changes, especially the development of pluralism in theology, for this is one of the ways our age is most distanced from earlier times, and a distance of which we are probably more conscious today than ever before.

## *Background briefing for the journey*

This is not the place, obviously, to rehearse the context of Inigo's upbringing, conversion and mature development during the last years of the fifteenth century and the early decades of the

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

sixteenth. It is important, however, to single out what I may loosely term theological presuppositions or contexts out of which I see Ignatius (and the notes of the exercises he jotted down) operating, in order to provide a framework for this discussion.

In every generation of the Church's life there have been abuses and controversies, great dreams and grand delusions, women and men with profound insight, humility and faith. The Church of Ignatius's time was, clearly, not a monochrome picture. The reformation conflicts would give the lie to such a story. Yet it was, fundamentally, a European Church (if the anachronism may be pardoned) which identified the East as either schismatic (Orthodox) or infidel (Islam); in either case, the East was a world at war with the West. Because ordinary life was pervaded by the 'Church', the structures of theology and society were intertwined and often integrated. Religion was accepted as a social cohesive force as well as a personal encounter with the transcendent. The reformation did not radically alter this perception of reality, at least in its early stages.

Secondly, the 'unity of Christendom' existed side by side with the spectacle of Christian nations in violent and often internecine conflict. Chivalry, loyalty and the exaltation of military valour figure prominently. Shakespeare's great hero, Talbot, in *Henry VI*, describes his own son's death:

Dizzy-eyed fury and great rage of heart  
Suddenly made him from my side to start  
Into the clustering battle of the French;  
And in that sea of blood my boy did drench  
His over-mounting spirit; and there died  
My Icarus, my blossom, in his pride.

Death was courted yet feared; often on one's own doorstep, yet it was dealt out ruthlessly in fields of battle, and in the market places of the cities. The ornate funerary monuments of popes and kings and knights bear witness to the 'strong smell of death'.

Thirdly, learning was esteemed in the culture, and even basic literacy seems to have been a goal frequently pursued if not always attained by many ordinary people. Ignatius himself felt the need for furthering his own education after his experiences at Manresa and in the Holy Land, and later placed great emphasis on the intellectual formation of the Jesuit. Doubtless, other factors could

and should be cited, but these: the relationship of Church and society, the relationships among christian states and beyond, the strong sense of mortality, and the flowering of a 'new learning', do provide a context for enabling us to discover and appreciate Inigo's theological vision and its limitations, and authentically to encounter the Spiritual Exercises today in the light of our own limitations at the same time. Both for uncovering the questions and problems which arise today concerning the Spiritual Exercises, and for addressing them, the motion of journey and discovery can be a useful hermeneutic.

*The Spiritual Exercises as theology*

When I first made the thirty days of the Spiritual Exercises, almost thirty years ago, as a jesuit novice, I certainly was not conscious of their theology in any explicit way. The general style and structure had been established in missions and sermons common throughout most australian parish churches, and the processes seemed to be merely a matter of further examples, elaborated or extended, of what I had known previously. Partly this was due to my own lack of reflection, but probably most of all because, in so many ways, the Spiritual Exercises conformed to theological patterns I was already familiar with which had been fundamentally unchanged for centuries. Twenty years later, I made the thirty days of the Spiritual Exercises again, and this was obviously a very different experience. Apart from every other consideration, two facts need to be mentioned, for they seem to me most significant. Firstly, the decrees of the Second Vatican Council were by then over ten years old; and, secondly, I had been studying theology in the meantime.

Both the Church and I had been (perhaps unwittingly) on a journey, and the gradual change in scenery had meant that it was only in hindsight that I began to realize where I had come from and how different it really was now. In other words, I was experiencing the Exercises in a theologically changed way.

In the Spiritual Exercises, theology is both explicit and implied. The structures of the 'Weeks', the topics included, and the processes suggested all present a theology, admittedly not complete, not *ex-professo*, yet a theology which elaborates an explicitly christian and catholic faith: a view of God and the world, of Christ and the believer in the community. Concepts such as sin, prayer and God's

love are clearly theological, while expressions such as 'the interior knowledge of the Lord who for me has become man, that I may more love and follow him' are equally clearly theological. The Exercises do not claim to be a theological treatise of course, and Ignatius's dealings with the Inquisition interestingly reflect both the deeply theological nature of the Exercises and the overt disclaimer of any systematic statement of a theology.

To remain on this level, however, would be superficial. What is not said or included is also significant. Perhaps the most notable omission is in reference to the hebrew scriptures (or Old Testament). Apart from Adam and Eve in the first exercise of the First Week, there is no real attention to or use made of the treasures to be found in these scriptures. Psalms are to be 'praised' in the rules for thinking with the Church, and the 'ten commandments' are used to illustrate the first method of prayer. The opening up of the Old Testament over the past few decades signals a most notable change in the theological climate.

Even in his use of the New Testament writings, Ignatius pays scant attention to the great works, such as Paul's Letter to the Romans of which, granted the reformation context, he could scarcely have been unaware. Whatever may be said of these omissions, they cannot be minimalized for they presuppose a theology which is in marked contrast to modern theologies with their biblical framework and expression. Ignatius's letters to women manifest a man of broad interests and appeal. Yet in the texts of the *Spiritual Exercises*, we really cannot discover any hints of what could be termed today 'feminist theology', nor perhaps should we expect it. Since his time, theologians have recognized more the vital 'feminine' element which must be accepted and integrated. Other examples could be proffered. The purpose of this analysis is not to prove a point, but rather to illustrate what would be generally accepted, and so provide areas to focus discussion and handling of this situation.

### *The Spiritual Exercises and theology*

One of the most endearing of the characteristics that Ignatius wrote into the *Spiritual Exercises* is the sense of the uniqueness of individual need and response. Despite a structure which seems constraining and which, in later times, has been far too rigidly enforced, he could still invite the person to make a colloquy 'asking

according to what I feel in me'. A basic presupposition (summed up in his opening statement) seems to underline this attitude: the person could be trusted.

In addition, both director and exercitant approached the Exercises from fairly common theological standpoints. It would not be accurate to presume that these were unconscious or unexplored. The sixteenth century hardly allowed one to live in a theological neutrality. On the other hand, people of differing outlooks in that century did share many theological perspectives. In our century, the scene does not appear to be so easily expressed. Within the Catholic Church, for example, liberation theology is fiercely disavowed and just as vehemently espoused. Making the Exercises becomes a vastly different experience for such people since their theology of God, Church, world etc., arises from conspicuously diverse perceptions and experiences. It is daring (perhaps dangerous) to attempt a summary of any human enterprise, since our own background, with its memories and its hopes, its illusions and its fallacies, cannot but influence us in such an attempt. These reflections, then, have been intended merely as a means of initiating discussion rather than directing its movement.

One further dimension may be adverted to at this point in order to conclude this survey. More than ever before, we are conscious that there is a pluralism within the Church expressed in forms of worship, structures and concerns such as justice and peace. These are born from a pluralism in theology and themselves in turn enhance and develop such pluralism. It is also true to say that the existence of this pluralism is deplored by some and seen not as a positive sign, but rather as a sign of decay or loss of direction. Without much doubt, Catholics (and indeed members of the other christian communities) have been living in a Church largely unchanged since, and uniform with, the Church of the post-reformation. It is worth recalling, for instance, that, less than fifty years ago, the use of Latin in the liturgy was seen as expressive of and vital to the unity of the Church. The theology of Church which this expressed drew its main inspiration from the Letter to the Ephesians rather than the Letters to the Corinthians.

What is startling, however, is not the fact of change, but its acceptance. Despite the disadvantages and losses (real and imagined), despite the sincere desire of some to return to the former way as better than the present ways, it is impossible not to marvel

at the way members of the Catholic Church have taken to and rejoiced in the freedom of this pluralism. Opponents may castigate it as secularist, modernist or merely fashionable 'doing one's own thing', yet right through the catholic community a strongly developing sense of 'local' Church can be recognized. Theologians (professional and street) may argue their views strongly, but it is the very climate of pluralism in theology which permits this to happen. In his 'Rules for thinking with the Church', Inigo discreetly acknowledges the different theologies of the 'positive' and 'scholastic' schools. Thus we need to avoid any over-simplification of the situation in his age. In practice, however, the catechism statements that 'The true Church is the society of all the bishops, priests and faithful under the one visible head appointed by Christ; the true Church is the Holy Catholic Church' summed up the theology of Church. The sense of serene self-possession expressed in such statements captures a past uniformity of theology which, with nostalgia and unease, we may look back to, but which no longer exists for most christian men and women.

### *Making the Spiritual Exercises*

At the beginning, I stated that the theme of distance expressed symbolically the experience of looking to ignatian times and theology, and to the Spiritual Exercises which grew in them, from the standpoint of our own present with its own theology. I also suggested the theme of journey and discovery. So far, this reflection has been a journey to discover some of the implications of the distance, to notice some of the contours of the landscape, and to establish some reference points in order to clarify issues and help those engaged in the Spiritual Exercises today.

It is, perhaps, a commonplace these days to describe the experience of making the Spiritual Exercises in terms of a journey or pilgrimage. Undoubtedly, as a personal journey of faith, such terms are both stimulating and rewarding. But there is a further dimension of this imagery that is helpful when the topic of the Spiritual Exercises and theological pluralism is being discussed. When the people of Israel came to write their story, they took the Exodus-event as radically expressing their experience of God's covenanting love. In the despair and pain of exile, the prophet, whose words are now preserved in the book of Isaiah 40-55, conjured up a vision of renewal and restoration in terms of an

exodus, more dramatic than that from Egypt. 'No need to recall the past', he says. The oracles of restoration of another great exilic prophet, Ezekiel, emphasized again and again that Israel and the nations would see and know that YHWH had done great things. To journey is to discover, to change, to become renewed, refashioned.

### *Changes and continuities*

Sometimes, our changed theological perceptions and expressions are presented as something to be dealt with or solved in some way. Attempts may be made to reconcile the different theology or theological emphases of Ignatius's time with our own, in order to make the Spiritual Exercises more consonant or less jarring. Just as the book of Deuteronomy took Israel's past experience of God's covenanting love on the edge of the land of promise and developed its own theological insight for Israel in the time of exile, we can learn to accept both ignatian theology and our own so that a new understanding is forged. This can be, I suggest, a most fruitful and dynamic process for us and for the experience of the Spiritual Exercises. The Church of the late twentieth century is seeking a new balance between the ideals of unity and diversity. In ignatian times, the divisions within the Church, within the unity of Christendom, tended to be resolved in terms of uniformity. Our own times have seen a much stronger emphasis on healthy difference. The role of religion or the Church can be taken for granted no longer. Yet the search for meaning in a world of armed peace and official oppression, of immense affluence and dehumanizing deprivation continues frantically. The language of community has never been so prevalent, but the experience of alienation is just as frequently expressed.

The crises of the sixteenth century were unique, as are those of our century. Yet there is a common thread. God, in Christ, was seen by Ignatius as the giver of the world through which and with which the exercitant was called; a Church renewed, in those who had themselves undergone conversion, was seen by him as the only effective way the gospel could be proclaimed. The same God, in a Christ refracted through differing cultural insights and theologies, is still to be known. Respect for the integrity of every individual human being, and the creation of structures or institutions which enhance this are part of a theological world-view which the Spiritual Exercises can still nurture. Last year's bombing

of a 'peace-boat' in New Zealand by an 'authorized' French squad represents a modern (if, perhaps, more frightening) version of the conflicts of christian Europe in the time of Ignatius.

The quest for peace and justice marks our era in its own fashion. Our recognition of the possibility of global confrontation adds a dimension, however, unknown to Ignatius. Yet even at this point there is both congruity and growth in the theological arena, a common concern along with a new insight. Modern theology, with its variety of approaches to the whole question of violence and the environment, is our attempt to enter into the real human situation as it is found both on the large-scale national and international level, as well as on the level of individual personal involvement.

Moral theology's dialogue with medical sciences, and the differing responses it evokes, might bewilder rather than comfort someone in search of 'the' answer. Death and life are urgently present questions in ways particular to our times, as they were in Ignatius's times. Then, as now, there was the ferment of exciting and new thinking as well as the intoxication of fresh insights and experiences. Ignatius embraced this context, including its theology, in his own personal journey and in the Spiritual Exercises. In the Catholic Church there has always been a strong tradition of education. This has to a large degree been expressed in attending to the education of school-aged girls and boys. Today, the scene has shifted. Adults have come to recognize that faith is not the mere retention of what 'we were taught at school', but rather that it is a growth in life, a deepening of adult and human responsiveness to the christian gospel, Jesus. More and more they are joining in activities which take seriously the pursuit of this understanding. To learn about the faith now means to search into the mystery, to seek the significance of the Word of God in the scriptures, and to share with others, being supported by and supporting them in the common pilgrimage.

To open up the Spiritual Exercises to adults in this way is to accept the gifts that advances in theology have to offer. It implies that we be willing to live with ambiguity so that the scriptures are freed to touch an individual's heart. The very diversity of experiences is a constant reminder of the richness of the God who gives himself to everyone.

Further, the wave of 'new learning' implies a theology of discipleship. The exercitant and the director are not in a relation-



ship of inferior to superior, but are together as disciples in the common task — following the way of Jesus. The one Spirit given to the whole Church is not the monopoly of any one member. We approach the Exercises, therefore, as learners, fellow-learners. Such an attitude releases us from insisting on a theology which is in some way the theology of Ignatius or the Exercises.

In this situation, our endeavour is to take hold of a style or spirit similar to Ignatius's, open and free to the context in which he found himself, and move according to that spirit rather than the letter. To use the thirst for knowledge of people today, their own concerns and visions, is central to Ignatius's style, so that we can let go of the details through which he expressed his theology.

Without doubt, those coming to the Spiritual Exercises in our time do so with a theology in many respects vastly different from Ignatius's times. As well, they come with differing theologies among themselves. Two factors are helpful in this situation. The first is that, through the scriptures, we can discover a unity of experience and expression which does not rely on uniformity but on the Spirit. In John's gospel, the Spirit is promised by Jesus both as foundation of unity and assurance in distress. Our age seeks for the former and is deeply conscious of the latter.

Secondly, we can let the differences meet. The exercitant and the director, by allowing the other to share the insight and hope, the understanding and response which constitute a theology, can give space to the other for growth. This is not a theological debate, of course, but a mutual exchange and unveiling. Respect demands integrity but not subordination since both are disciples of the one Christ. It can prove healthy and stimulating for both to hear attentively since this is part of the process of discovery. A sense of unease in the other's theology (explicit or implicit) offers a valuable opportunity for discernment and progress. Pain, of course, may be a part of this meeting — even, perhaps, the pain of being unable to reconcile differences.

### *Conclusion*

It would be misleading to restrict theology to the professional theologians. They articulate and stimulate the Church as it seeks to be enriched in Christ in all knowledge (as Paul puts it) and grow together as Christ's disciples. Every member of the Church, as well, indeed, as those who are not members of the christian

community, do bring a theological context to bear in any encounter with the Spiritual Exercises. Yet if distances are not to become barriers, we need to integrate the diversity of theologies and diverse theologies into our spiritual life — personal and corporate.

Three themes have been explored which may help in achieving this integration. There is, firstly, the freedom to recognize and accept our present as well as our past, to realize that Job's final response to YHWH is symbolic of ours too: 'By hearsay did I hear, but now with insight have I seen'. Secondly, viewing the encounter of diverse theologies as a journey in the company of fellow-disciples can liberate us to respond generously to the Spirit. The Spiritual Exercises, though presuming a theology, are also liberated in this way, neither exercitant nor director being bound to follow Ignatius slavishly. Finally, behind the ignatian patterns lie a grasp and concern for the times in which it took root. Grace is a present gift and Ignatius seems to have perceived this. The levels of relationship and inter-relationship within his society and the Church, the awareness of violence and conflict, and the pursuit of learning can all be mirrored in our theological questions also. That our responses are different is a healthy sign since change and development rather than stagnation mark a healthy body. That our responses are diverse is a hopeful sign since it betokens a power of the Spirit for unity in service and in truth.

Becoming open is also becoming vulnerable. Yet in this are we also becoming more christian for we believe that God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself and that we are God's fellow-workers, followers of Christ's way. Thus distance is made the stuff of discovery, of new hopes, of fresh courage, a pilgrimage into the mystery of God.