

‘WORK AS IF EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON—WHO?’

By J. P. M. WALSH

PEOPLE FREQUENTLY OFFER as a workable spiritual maxim the saying, ‘Work as if everything depends on you, pray as if everything depends on God’, and sometimes cite it as an adage of St Ignatius Loyola. On the face of it, the maxim makes sense. It seems to respect the autonomy of the natural order and the dignity of human effort, while taking into account the necessity of divine help in those efforts, and the primacy of the supernatural.

The popular form of the maxim is also congenial to certain instincts in us: to focus on our own efforts, to act as if things are all up to us, to reduce God’s working in our lives to a prepositional phrase: ‘with God’s help’. I play my part, and God plays his. Sometimes the maxim is used in such a way that it is virtually interchangeable with the bromide, ‘God helps those who help themselves’.

That the saying accords with vaguely Pelagian instincts, however, does not mean that it is without merit; properly understood, it would indeed reflect Ignatius’s thought as known from several sources. Six texts are especially germane.

The first of these, frequently cited,¹ is Pedro Ribadeneira’s formulation in his *De modo gubernandi*:

In the things of the service of our Lord which he undertook he made use of all human means to come out well with them, with such care and efficacy as if on them depended the good outcome [of those undertakings]; and in such wise trusted he in God and was dependent on his divine providence as if all the other human means he took were of no effect.²

The contrast or duality involves working at things and trusting in God. Ignatius applied his efforts ‘as if’ their success depended on the means he took; yet his trust in God was total, ‘as if’ those

means counted for nothing in bringing his efforts to a successful conclusion. In the terms of the maxim cited: he worked as if it all depended on him; he trusted in God as if it all depended on God.

Other texts reflect the same weighing of factors: use all proper means, take them seriously, give them their due importance; yet trust God absolutely, for success depends on him, not on the means used. In Ribadeneira's life of Ignatius, he tells how the saint wanted to instruct a certain nobleman, who seemed to Ignatius to place too much importance on his own role in furthering the work of the Society:

[2] I want to speak plainly to this lord, and tell him that for more than thirty years God our Lord has taught me that in things of his service I have to take all means [that are] proper and possible; but in such wise that my hope does not have to rely on the means which I take but in the Lord for whom they are taken. And that if his lordship desires to do us a favour and be one of those means for the divine service, we will take him with a quite total willingness; but that he has to understand that neither in him nor in any other living creature will our hope rely, but only in God.³

Take all means, but put hope in God, not in them. Ribadeneira recalls the same incident and the speech it gave rise to, in his *De actis P. N. Ignatii*:

[3] . . . for thirty years our Lord gave him to understand that in things of his holy service he ought to use all the worthy means possible, but after to place his confidence in God, and not in the means, and if among those his lordship wished to be one, the Society would embrace him as such; but in such wise that he would know that its [the Society's] hope would not rely on the means, but on God, on whom it relied.⁴

To instruct one who failed to understand that trust in God is crucial, Ignatius is trying to relativize the importance of the means the Society uses. Still, the text could be read to say that one does one's best and then (*después*) leaves the matter entirely in God's hands.

A different emphasis is found in another passage in Ribadeneira's *Life*:

[4] One who saw him undertake things above his powers judged that he did not govern himself by human prudence, but that he

relied on divine providence alone; rather, in putting them into effect and carrying them forward he used all the means possible to finish them; but this he did with such prudence that the hope of succeeding with them [the undertakings] he did not place in the human means, which he took as instruments of the sweet providence of God our Lord, but in the same God alone, who is author and worker of all good. And with this, as he desired that the thing succeed for him, he continued in the greatest peace and spiritual joy.⁵

Here Ribadeneira's starting point is Ignatius's trust in God. It was total, so much so that an observer would gather the impression that this was a man who did not use ordinary human prudence. Of course, Ribadeneira goes on to say, he did: 'in putting them into effect and carrying them forward he used all the means possible to finish them'.

Another testimony from one of Ignatius's contemporaries, Gonçalves da Câmara, makes the same point in much the same terms:

[5] The father, in the undertakings he took, many times appeared not to use any human prudence . . . ; rather it appeared that all that he did [was] founded on trust in God alone. Rather, just as in taking on those [undertakings] it appeared that he went above human prudence, so in following them out and seeking the means to carry them on he used all prudence, divine and human. It appeared that anything he undertook, that first he dealt with God about it; and as we did not see that he had dealt with him about it, we were astonished how he undertook it . . .⁶

Again, the starting point is the observations of those around Ignatius. All they saw was his trust in God. It appeared so absolute that ordinary prudential judgment seemed to have been ignored. Yet Ignatius did use prudence, 'divine and human': he 'followed out' his projects and 'sought means' to carry them on. But having said this, Gonçalves da Câmara goes back to the astonishment observers felt, and the saint's trust in God that inspired it. Only after the successful outcome of a project did it appear how Ignatius had 'negotiated' the matter with God. That 'negotiation' had been first (*primo*).

We might note that text [3] speaks of trust as something that comes 'after' (*después*) the use of all possible means, while text [5]

describes the realization Ignatius's contemporaries came to, that the saint 'negotiated' his project with God 'first' (*primo*), that is, that trust was the starting point of his efforts.

Perhaps we can mediate between these accounts in the following manner. Those around Ignatius continually experienced amazement at his boldness; they attributed it, correctly, to his trust in God. These people had to be properly instructed. They were seeing only part of Ignatius's way of proceeding. The accounts are concerned to correct the impression people gathered. In fact, they insist (as Ignatius himself doubtless insisted) that, far from ignoring human prudence and careful weighing of suitable means, Ignatius bent every effort to find all possible ways to carry forward to a successful conclusion the undertakings his zeal for God's service led him to begin. This corrective insistence accounts for the emphasis we noted in our texts [1], [4] and (to a lesser extent) [5].

A different starting point would lead to a different emphasis. The nobleman to whom Ignatius wanted to address the remarks Ribadeneira recorded did not realize that human means are of lesser moment than trust in God. He overestimated their importance, and especially the importance of the help he was offering, and so needed to have things explained to him. Such a person required the lesson recorded in texts [2] and [3]: of course we use proper means, but they are not finally what we rely on.

If these testimonies present the question with an emphasis on one factor or the other, depending on what corrective consideration was needed, Ignatius himself offers an apparently even-handed treatment in a letter to Francis Borgia, dated September 17 1555:

[6] I consider it an error to trust and hope in any means or efforts in themselves alone; nor do I consider it a safe path to trust the whole matter to God our Lord without desiring to help myself by what he has given me; so that it seems to me in our Lord that I ought to make use of both parts, desiring in all things his greater praise and glory, and nothing else.⁷

The desire to serve God for his greater glory leads to a choice. The choice involves reliance or trust; or rather it precludes certain kinds of reliance. One does not rely solely on means; one does not rely solely on God. Ignatius excludes reliance on means-in-themselves, but insists that means are important. Ignatius excludes reliance on God-and-nothing else, but insists that reliance on God

is important. Indeed, reliance on God involves the willingness to avail oneself of what God has given. That is, means are to be used precisely because one entrusts a matter to God. One relies on means because one relies on God, and God has given those means.

This text at first reading may seem to present trust in God and reliance on human means in simple juxtaposition, as the two factors that are involved in the service of God. But it, like the previous texts, has to be read in context. Its purpose is cautionary. It does not say (like the maxim quoted at the beginning of this article), trust God and work wholeheartedly, for both are essential. Rather, it says, avoid the kind of reliance on human means that would exclude reliance on God; avoid the kind of reliance on God that would exclude reliance on human means. And, as we have seen, Ignatius makes reliance on means a function of trust in God. Far from simply juxtaposing the two elements, as if they were indeed two, he as it were folds the use of means into trust in God. The text therefore subtly undercuts the understanding of trust in God and use of means that the standard formulation presupposes ('Pray as if everything depends on God, work as if everything depends on you'). From this point of view, texts [1], [4] and [5] take on an added dimension. We saw in them an insistence that trust in God by no means removes the need to use human means—that 'corrective' emphasis Ignatius's followers seem to have needed to hear. In light of the letter to Borgia, these texts can be read as insisting further that one misunderstands trust in God unless one sees that trust in God incorporates the use of means. Similarly, texts [2] and [3] can be read to say, it is not enough to use human means: one has above all to rely on God as the true and ultimate source of success. Read in the context of Ignatius's caution to Borgia, however, texts [2] and [3] present the use of means as something that makes sense only if one relies on God: one misunderstands human means unless one sees that their use is a function of trust in God.

In Ignatius's thought, then, there is no question of simply juxtaposing two elements, nor of balancing them or holding them in tension, as if they were indeed two separable elements. It is rather the case that use of means is an indispensable part of trust in God. But how so? In what sense does trust in God 'incorporate' reliance on means?

An answer to this question may come from consideration of another saying attributed to Ignatius, which for almost three hundred years has been found paradoxical, even frustrating.⁸

Sic Deo fide quasi rerum successus omnis a te, nihil a Deo penderet. Ita tamen iis operam omnem admove quasi tu nihil, Deus tamen solus omnia sit factururus.

So trust God as if the success of things depended entirely on you, not at all on God. Yet so bend every effort as if you [are going to do] nothing and God alone is going to do everything.

This is indeed 'counter-intuitive' (as people say). One's instinctive reaction to its second half is to ask: are we then just to sit back and wait for God to act? Mutterings about 'tempting God' and quietism follow, succeeded by a puzzled exasperation.

That the saying is provocative—that it runs counter to our instinct about what makes sense—suggests that it may express a profound and crucial truth. Just as the history of biblical exegesis and of homiletics reveals a constant tendency to blunt the force of Jesus's sayings and parables, so the Ignatian maxim has been domesticated into, or supplanted by, the purportedly inoffensive and 'sensible' form: 'Pray as if everything depends on God, work as if everything depends on you'.

What, then, does Ignatius mean?⁹

A path to understanding the maxim begins with the word *fide*, 'trust'. Ignatius is focusing on a disposition: trust in God. This trust is envisioned in a situation: I am intent on the happy outcome (*successus*) of a project, or more generally of things in my life and work. In that situation what is to be primary is trust. What would such trust be like? What is the quality of that disposition, and of the choices that flow from it? Here two interpretations are *a priori* possible.

(1) My trust in God should be so absolute, even instinctual, that when I face a task I am able to move on it with ease, assurance and mastery. God is not a *deus ex machina* who will supply for my inadequacies, nor to be invoked as such. I set about my task without hesitancy or anxiety, because I trust God. The casual observer would marvel at how confidently and expeditiously I approach my task, like a championship athlete stepping up to the starting line, or a great musician, entirely focused on what she is about to play, serene and composed. The source of that assurance? Trust. (Perhaps the observations of Ignatius's contemporaries quoted in texts [4] and [5] above are relevant here.)

If this trust, as antecedent disposition, is operative, it follows that when I actually turn to carrying out the task I will be freed to bend every effort, unhesitatingly. My focus is on the work, not

on me, because I know that all is in God's hands. There will be no anxiety or crippling self-consciousness. A certain spirit of playfulness will be involved. This will be an adventure, and I can only step back and marvel as God comes through. God is doing everything. That is what Ignatius is telling me I should expect.

(2) The second possible interpretation of the saying is quite different from the first. What should be the quality of this 'trust' that is so crucial? To get a sense of that, imagine being faced with a task and being told, 'This is entirely up to you. Your abilities are what will determine its outcome. God will not be involved. You're on your own.' If one has any self-knowledge, the appropriate reaction will be terror. I will be overwhelmed with a sense of inadequacy, of a huge burden being imposed that I can in no way shoulder, of a cosmic aloneness. I will be filled with despair. In that grim situation, all I can do is—trust: trust not in me but in God.

What follows from that—the way in which I set about carrying out the task, and carrying it through—is much the same as described earlier. The freedom from anxiety, the playfulness, the sense of adventure, the eager anticipation of God's marvellous and constantly surprising working—all these free me up to 'bend every effort'.

The interpretation of the saying, then, depends on how one understands trust and the way trust is generated. In the first interpretation, trust is something I have, an antecedent and habitual disposition, and bring to bear on what I have to do. In the second interpretation, trust is something triggered by a sense of inadequacy and a despair of my own resources. To show what that is like, Ignatius proposes a picture that cuts to the heart of the dynamic of human agency. What if you were entirely on your own? What if the unbeliever's experience were deepened, its focus on the self and its rejection of God's involvement brought into stark relief, and that became your own experience? If your choice then, in the face of that awful prospect, were to be trust, well, that would be trust indeed, without any hedging or equivocation or pious prepositional phrases.

I said that these two interpretations of the Ignatian maxim are *a priori* possible. Which of them would Ignatius be comfortable with? To answer this question, I propose consideration of what seems to me to be a central text in Ignatius's writings, a paragraph

in a letter to Francis Borgia. In it he gives a vivid account of his own experience of human agency and of cooperation with God.

Borgia, still the Duke of Gandía, has written to Ignatius certain laudatory comments about how the Society of Jesus cooperates wholeheartedly with God in the divine work. Ignatius politely thanks the nobleman, and takes the occasion to offer remarks on what he knows of such cooperation—remarks that put the Duke's observations in a different light. Here is a translation, with the original text. Emphases are added.¹⁰

. . . many times
the creature places
obstacles on its part
to what the Lord
wants to work
in its soul,
as your lordship says,
and much good.
And not only before
by this working
one receives
graces, gifts and tastes
of the Holy Spirit,
but even *when they have come*
and been received
(and the soul has been
visited and consoled,
rid of all darkness
and its restless worry,
adorned with such
spiritual goods,
made entirely happy
and entirely in love
with things eternal
which for ever
in endless glory
must last),
we end up distracting ourselves
even with thoughts
of little moment,
not being able to keep
such a heavenly good.
So that
before there comes

. . . *muchas ueces*
ponga la criatura
impedimentos de su parte
para lo que el Señor
quiere obrar
en su ánima,
como V. Sría. dise,
y mucho bien.
Y no sólo antes que
en el obrar
se reciban
gracias, dones y gustos
del Spiritu Santo,
mas aun venidos
y recebidos
(siendo la tal ánima
visitada y consolada,
quitando toda scuridad
y inquieta solicitud della,
adornándola de los tales
bienes espirituales,
haziéndola toda contenta
y toda enamorada
de las cosas eternas,
que para siempre
en continua gloria
an de durar),
venimos á desatarnos
aun con pensamientos
de poco momento,
no sabiendo conseruar
tanto bien celestial.
De modo que
antes que venga

such grace and working
of our Lord,
we place obstacles,
and, *after* they come,
[we do] the same,
with respect to the end
of keeping it.
And, though Your Lordship
speaks of such
obstacles,
to abase himself more
in the Lord of all,
and more to raise up those
who desire
more to abase ourselves,
saying that this Society
does not impede that
which the Lord wants
to work in it,

...
I, for my part, am convinced
that *both before and after*
I am all obstacle;
and from this I feel
greater happiness
and spiritual joy
in our Lord,
for not being able
to attribute to myself
anything
which appears good.
I know one thing,

...
there are few
in this life
—nay, I will go further:
there is no one—
who is at all able
to figure out or judge
how much he himself is an
obstacle
and how much he hinders
what our Lord
wants to work in his soul.

*la tal gracia y obra
del Señor nuestro,
ponemos impedimentos,
y, después de uenida,
lo mismo,
para en [el?] fin
de conseruarla.
Y aunque V. Sría
hable de los tales
impedimentos
por más baxarse
en el Señor de todos,
y por más subir á los
que deseamos
más baxarnos
diciendo que esta Compagnía
no impide á lo
que el Señor quiere
obrar en ella,*

...
*jo para mí persuado,
que antes y después
soi todo impedimento;
y desto siento
major contentamiento
y gozo spiritual
en el Señor nuestro,
por no poder
atribuir á mí
cosa alguna
que buena paresca;
sintiendo vna cosa,*

...
*que ay pocos
en esta uida,
y más hecho,
que ninguno,
que en todo pueda
determinar, ó juzgar,
quánto impide de su parte,
y quánto desaiuda
á lo que el Señor nuestro
quiere en su ánima obrar.*

Ignatius is describing his own experience. One places obstacles—*impedimentos*—to the working of grace. Before a divine visitation, one places obstacles. When God works in one's soul, and consolation comes (the description of consolation is often cited in connection with [316] of the *Spiritual Exercises*), one turns away, as it were, from the consolation, distracting oneself with trivial thoughts. So that, both before and after, we place obstacles.

This is not the experience of a man who 'has' trust in God. There is no antecedent disposition to rely on God. The only antecedent disposition Ignatius would claim is a readiness to put roadblocks in the way of 'what our Lord wants to work in his soul'. It is a persistent disposition. Barely has consolation been experienced than one's soul and consciousness are taken over by the same resistance, that tendency to place roadblocks. 'Before and after, I am all obstacle': *soi todo impedimento*.

From this self-description it appears unlikely that the first of the two interpretations of the maxim discussed above, without more, would be congenial to St Ignatius. He is a man who knows his own capacity for infidelity, the utter absence of readiness to trust in God. To put it strongly: his is the experience of the unbeliever, left alone to his own resources, 'as if the success of things depended entirely' on him. That nightmare experience is what generates trust. Trust comes out of despair and helplessness. That is the experience of a 'mortified' person.

We saw above how that absence of self-reliance—that trust in God—can free one to work wholeheartedly, in the expectation that 'God will do everything all by himself'. I see an analogy here with what Ignatius goes on to describe to Borgia: happiness and spiritual joy. The very consciousness of his habitual disposition to place obstacles yields great consolation. He is unable to attribute to himself any good, and that makes him happy. So: 'God is going to do everything all by himself'.

And here we come to a paradox indeed. If the first moment is despair at the utter inadequacy of one's own resources, and that gives way—as a second moment—to the decision to trust God totally, then that trust will permit the ease and assurance my first interpretation sketched. The impression Ignatius made on those around him was one of ease, boldness and assurance: as if he disregarded prudence (texts [4] and [5]); as if the success of things depended entirely on him. His companions were astonished by the depth of his trust. I suggest that his trust was deep, and absolute,

because he was a mortified man. The relationship of trust and masterly assurance, of mortification and careful attention to all possible means, is a dialectical one. Martelet has the *mot juste*: 'circumincession'.¹¹ I believe that Ignatius's 1545 letter to Borgia, with its insistence that consciousness of one's resistance yields joy and consolation, points to the centrality in the dialectic, or circumincession, of that awareness. It is not that one 'has' trust so much as that one can say, 'I am all obstacle'.

In this age of self-help and self-esteem, such an emphasis is jarring, but it is central to Ignatius's spirituality. The particular examen consists precisely in the practice of noticing one's weakness in some area. I am continually to focus on my lack of faith, or trust, or charity, noting how little I expect of God, how easy I find it to judge others or to speak ill of them or to resent them. I total up the evidence hour by hour and day by day. This practice goes against the grain, of course. I want to 'feel good about myself'. The resistance we feel to focusing on our spiritual need is itself the best measure of that need. But Ignatius promises that the outcome of that radical honesty about oneself will be 'happiness and spiritual joy'. If you humble yourself you will be exalted.¹²

In his *Ways of imperfection: an exploration of Christian spirituality*,¹³ Simon Tugwell illustrates this theme—that radical honesty, entering fully into one's lack of faith and lack of love, is the condition and occasion of consolation, of knowing the saving power of God. Tugwell's discussion reveals that such an approach is not peculiarly Ignatian but rather the common coin of authentic spirituality. One example, from these latter days, may serve. In the autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux,¹⁴ we hear remarkable echoes of Ignatius's 1545 letter to Borgia:

I felt how weak and imperfect I was and gratitude flooded my soul (p 149).

... the more one advances, the more one sees the goal is still far off. And now I am simply resigned to see myself always imperfect and in this I find my joy (p 158).

I am not disturbed at seeing myself *weakness* itself. On the contrary, it is in my weakness that I glory, and I expect each day to discover new imperfections in myself (p 224).

I note especially the remark recorded on her death bed:

'Oh! how happy I am to see myself imperfect and to be in need of God's mercy so much even at the moment of my death!' (p 267)

The relationship of trust in God and use of human means is not a simple one, and yet it is. Begin with the particular examen—radical honesty about our resistance to what God wants to work in us—and all follows: trust in God, the ability to make the best use of the best means, the experience of God powerfully at work in our working.

NOTES

¹ For example, in Jules J. Toner S.J., *A commentary on Saint Ignatius' rules for the discernment of spirits* (St Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982), p 158.

² *De modo gubernandi* 14 (FN III, 631). Cf Ribadeneira's *Collectanea* 18 (FN II, 418): 'In those things which he desired to accomplish for the glory of God, he tried all paths, but in God, not in them, he reposed his hope. (*In iis quae ad Dei gloriam ipse cupiebat efficere, omnes vias tentabat, sed in Deo, non in illis, spem suam collocabat.*).

³ *Vita Ignatii* V 9 (FN IV, 845, 847).

⁴ *De actis* P. N. Ignatii 108 (FN II, 391-92).

⁵ *Vita Ignatii* V 11 (FN IV, 883-850).

⁶ Gonçalves da Câmara, *Memoriale* 234 (FN I, 663-664). Ribadeneira's *Collectanea* [18] (FN II, 418) expresses the same astonishment: 'He put into effect many things whose rationale seemed to us amazing, because we would not know what purpose it envisioned. When we saw the outcome we were amazed at his prudence, this man who had foreseen so shrewdly things that were hidden from view and still to be'. (*Multa instituebat quorum consilia, quod quo spectarent nesciremus, admirabilia nobis videbantur. Cum videbamus exitum admirabamur prudentiam ipsius, qui occulta et futura tam solerter prospexisset.*).

⁷ *MI* I, 9, 626.

⁸ The saying first appeared in a collection of sayings called *Scintillae Ignatianae* published by G. Hevenesi in Vienna, 1705.

⁹ The discussion that follows is meant to complement the interpretation given by Hugo Rahner S. J. in *Ignatius the theologian* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), pp 25-28. Cf also Gustave Martelet S.J., 'La dialectique des Exercices', *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 78 (1956), p 1060. John Lafarge S.J. devoted a chapter of his *An American amen* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958), pp 138-43, to this form of Ignatius's saying.

¹⁰ 4 *MI* (*Epistolae* I), p 940. The letter dates from late 1545.

¹¹ 'La dialectique des Exercices spirituels', p 1060.

¹² Cf the exploration of this theme in William P. Sampson S.J., *The coming of consolation: how God gets through to us* (Westminster, MD: 1988).

¹³ Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1985.

¹⁴ *Story of a soul: the autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux* (tr John Clarke O.C.D.; Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976).