

PERSON AND SOCIETY IN THE EXERCISES

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THE TASK OF INTERPRETING THE Spiritual Exercises from the standpoint of Christian social teaching has become easier and more rewarding in our time. Insights in the field of hermeneutics provide efficient safeguards against the twin pitfalls of fundamentalism and anachronism. We see more clearly now that not everything in the primordial documents enunciates an Ignatian value or principle, just as not everything in the Bible represents God's revealing word. Nor need we claim that every valid twentieth-century Ignatian perspective on social justice is implicit in what the saint thought or wrote. Our task is not to explicitate the implicit or, directly at least, to sort out substance and expression in this classic text. It is rather to facilitate a dynamic and creative conversation between sets of texts (or, more importantly, between two different kinds of spiritual experience which the texts articulate and mediate), knowing that the meaning of each and the sense of the dialogue remain always an unfinished symphony of past and present, an interaction between a relatively brief sixteenth-century manual for the guidance of solitary prayer, and a larger and more splendid modern analysis, evaluation, vision of the person in society. The present article is just one possible – and, I trust, plausible – structuring of such a conversation. How does Christian teaching on the person in society appear to at least one Ignatian eye? And how are the Spiritual Exercises illuminated when seen from the perspective of Christian social doctrine?

Christian social teaching

First, then, a sketch of Christian social teaching from the bias of my involvement in the Ignatian tradition.

1. It is a teaching whose roots lie primarily in the mystery of the creation of humankind (within the total creation) according to God's image and likeness, together with the mystery of the redemption of that same creation, radically flawed by sin, through the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Son of God and source of the indwelling Spirit.

2. As Christian social teaching, particularly in its Roman Catholic expression, has unfolded over the past century, it has drawn from this

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image-of-God symbol the implication of the *inviolable dignity of each person*, together with the *social character of personhood*, that is, the orientation of each person towards the common good and its communal pursuit.

3. Much of what is controversial in Christian social teaching has to do with the tension inherent in individual-community and individual-society relationships. In numerous contexts we are challenged to discern the best (or better) way of reconciling the dignity of individual persons with the legitimate claims of society and the common good. Many of these contexts are political, but the more prominent and recurring instances, it would seem, have to do with the private ownership of material goods and the right of private property.

Here is John Paul II's summing up of the tradition:

It is necessary to state once more the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine: The goods of this world are originally meant for all. The right to private property is valid and necessary, but it does not nullify the value of this principle. Private property, in fact, is under a 'social mortgage', which means that it has an intrinsically social function based upon and justified precisely by the principle of the universal destiny of goods.¹

The social character of personal gifts

The tradition invoked by the Roman pontiff has been preoccupied with the ownership of material goods and other resources outside the human person. An Ignatian perspective is more centrally interested in 'property' intrinsic to the person. Hence we may ask: Does the principle enunciated by John Paul II apply to *personal* gifts and talents, and above all to the central gift which defines God's image within the person, namely freedom? In other words, when I consider God's gifts to me as an individual person, in what sense am I free to dispose of them as I will? Are they really mine, and to what extent, and in what sense? This, it seems to me, is the key question linking Christian social teaching with the Spiritual Exercises.

Leo XIII, echoed by John XXIII, hints at least at a response to these questions:

This teaching can be summarized thus: whoever has been generously supplied by God with either corporal and external good *or those of the spirit*, possesses them for this purpose – to apply them equally to his own perfection and, in his role as a steward of divine providence, to the benefit of others.²

My own personal hope in this matter is that continued reflection on the social aspects of ownership will further develop this hint so as to

affirm more fully a call, even in justice (Leo seems to make it an obligation in charity, which he conceives as going beyond justice), for each person to place all personal talents and gifts and, most importantly, the freedom exercised in their disposal, at the service of the common good of humanity and the basic needs of the poor. 'You do not belong to yourselves', says Paul flatly to the Corinthians. 'You belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.' This profound linkage in belonging is essential if we are to understand the astounding statement with which Paul begins the chain of belonging: 'Everything (*ta panta* – the universe) belongs to you' (1 Cor 3: 21–23). We humans do not own God's creation, or our own talents or gifts, or even our freedom, in any absolute sense, or in the hardened sense of private property spawned by modern individualism. We are basically God's stewards of all that we have and are. We deal in the game of life from an inner freedom which is not our possession but a treasure entrusted provisionally to our care. What a revolutionary social principle! And, I hope to show, a basic point of departure for viewing the Spiritual Exercises from the standpoint of Christian social teaching.

Feminism and ecologism

4. Today the cutting edge of Christian social teaching must surely include what two major movements, feminism and ecologism, are contributing to social consciousness. For present purposes I would single out their common accent on relationality and context. In the broad spectrum of feminist viewpoints, one position, drawn from research on developmental differences between women and men, distinguishes a masculine drive towards achievement and a feminine concern for relationship and bonding. Though vulnerable to the charge of stereotyping, this position can be understood as pointing to a polar opposition in each person, male or female, which corresponds to the distinction in Christian social teaching between the dignity and rights of the individual person and the claims of community, society and the common good. Psychologically, ontologically and ethically, individual dignity and the social character of personhood are a seamless robe. One of the ways in which the women's movement stands as a sign of the times is its challenge to a rampant individualism which owes much to the dominance of males in shaping socio-economic and political life.

The 'new cosmology' and similar ecological positions reinforce this paradigm by their insistence on situating each individual entity within larger and larger ecosystems on a planet conceived by some, in the Gaia hypothesis, as a massive organism, and within an evolving cosmos

engaged in the ceaseless process of self-transcendence. Here too a polar opposition between the uniqueness of each individual creature and, on the other hand, the mutual circumincession of all cosmic beings, helps to set the individual–common good polarity within a cosmic framework.

How do such feminist and ecological viewpoints affect Christian social teaching in its development? Minimally they call for an emphasis on communality and the common good. Beyond that, they may suggest that our traditional formulations of the virtue of justice, with their accent on individuality and distinctness (e.g. *sum cuique* – to each its own), need to yield to definitions in which relationship, solidarity and context are better acknowledged. Or, alternatively, they may recommend a closer integration between the social virtues of justice and love, a paradigm in which justice appears as love's respect for the uniqueness and otherness of the other, and love appears as the orientation of justice to communion.

Summary

Summing up, then, we have made three basic points:

First, Christian social teaching, based on the affirmation of God's image within the human, has featured a polar opposition between the good of the individual and the common good.

Second, where this polarity is expressed in the matter of ownership and property, an Ignatian perspective suggests that the primary instance consists not in external goods but in our inner personal endowments, and most centrally in the freedom by which we dispose of all goods.

Third, feminist and ecological insights call for a decided tilt from the excesses of individualism to a renewed accent on relationship, solidarity and context.

How can these three observations be brought to bear on a creatively faithful re-reading of the *Spiritual Exercises*? What accommodations, indeed what transformations, might enlighten retreatants and directors in the living praxis of Ignatian prayer? The following paragraphs offer a partial response.

What social doctrine can do for the Exercises

In general, there are two contributions that this understanding of Christian social doctrine can bring to the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*. First, it can intensify and deepen the realization already inherent in the Exercises that the human person is radically and totally God's possession, God's 'property'. In the deepest ontological sense, we are the people that God claims as his or her very own. The traditional

insistence on stewardship with respect to material good, extended to the inner goods of the person, can reinforce that total surrender to God which is the heart of the Exercises.

Second, because Christian social doctrine, especially as it touches on economics, situates the believer in the world of matter, it can penetrate the experience of the Ignatian retreat with a deeper awareness of the immanence of the human within the cosmic. Though Ignatius was not without a sense of the human situation as a cosmic situation, he was too much an heir of the sharp differentiation of spirit and matter to have anything like the sharpened ecological sensibility now emerging in Christian spirituality.

What the Exercises can do for social doctrine

The Exercises in turn can do two things for our grasp of social teaching. As we have already indicated, they can challenge those who study and develop that teaching to find the central issues regarding ownership and property not in the so-called iron laws of economics as these work outside of human beings, but rather within the persons and communities whose gifts and talents are the primary instances of property and ownership. Basically, the economic question, as well as the ecological question, centres on the freedom of the human person.

Second, engagement in the Spiritual Exercises can bring the conviction formed by the study of social doctrine to a level of deep commitment that might otherwise not have been reached. Ignatius' own words in the Second Annotation apply here: 'What fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savoring them interiorly'.³ The serious study in faith of Christian social teaching is already by itself a spiritual exercise. But when it is interwoven with the deep solitary experience of the Thirty-day retreat or with the Nineteenth Annotation retreat, its transforming power is immeasurably enhanced. Like Ignatius in his provision for six distinct *experimenta* (experiences) for Jesuit novices, formation for Christian life and ministry might well consist of several distinct but related experiences, including exposure to social teaching, insertion in some Third-World situation, participation in some structured effort to achieve socio-economic and political change and, as the personally integrating element, engagement in the Spiritual Exercises.

The Principle and Foundation and Contemplation revisited

It would be possible to bring the present conversation to most of the principal exercises, the various rules, and the dynamic movement of the

Exercises. Here we limit ourselves to two polar exercises, the Principle and Foundation at the beginning and the Contemplation to Attain Love at the end. The former statement may be viewed as rendering the *ordo justitiae* inherent in the universe as created by God. The Contemplation, on the other hand, witnesses to the ultimacy and centrality of the *ordo amoris*. Justice, which may be described as more masculine in character, seeks clarity, structure, differentiation. It calls us to 'do the *right* thing'. Love, more feminine in character, seeks relationship, harmony, communion. It summons to what is *good*, indeed to the *common good*.

It is interesting that the Principle and Foundation does not speak of freedom, but of indifference, presented as a strategem, whereas the Contemplation is centred on the gift of freedom. Justice serves to *detach* from what violates truth and right order. Love *attaches* to the beloved. In the Exercises we find a reversed version of Teilhard's dictum that attachment must precede detachment. Between the Principle and Foundation and the Contemplation lies the vast ocean of experience of the mystery and the mysteries of Christ.

The Principle and Foundation looks at created *things* as means to an end. Pinard de la Boullaye has proposed that in this regard it echoes the Augustinian distinction of *frui* and *uti*, a distinction which runs the risk of 'thingyfying' creatures endowed, as Teilhard and Thomas Berry insist, with inwardness and subjectivity. The Contemplation in contrast views all creatures rather as gifts to be exchanged in the *admirabile commercium* of Lover and beloved.

How can the points we have noted in Christian social teaching throw light on these contrasting poles of the Spiritual Exercises? First, they can put flesh on the abstract bones of the Principle and Foundation. That flesh takes the form of an understanding of justice and particularly of ownership which is 1) primarily concerned with the 'property' of inner personal resources and particularly of the freedom by which all property, interior or not, is disposed of; 2) insistent on relationality in the deployment of inner and outer resources. Such a re-reading of the Principle and Foundation can help us avoid the dichotomies to which, in the course of history, the tradition of the Spiritual Exercises has been prone: the dichotomy between persons and 'things', which tended to violate the inner dignity and subjectivity of other creatures of earth; the dichotomy of 'privatization', which left the performance of justice outside of one's spiritual relationship with God; and the dichotomy between personal growth and the active fostering of the common good of society.

Thus understood, the Principle and Foundation addresses a call of utter austerity. The conversion which it inaugurates entails that there is

no inner talent or resource, not even my power to choose, which is mine to dispose of apart from the exigencies of social justice. Whether I am a plastic surgeon, a butcher, a homemaker, a therapist, whether I am engaged in shopping, in watching television, in gaining an academic degree, I am simply not free to make significant decisions apart from consideration of what will make the earth a better place for all its species. I am not my own. The radicality of the challenge is stark indeed. The resulting *tantum quantum* requires, for individuals and especially for communities committed to the path of faith and justice, at least a rudimentary social analysis which discloses just where the precious resources of personal freedom are to be invested.

Love, gift and freedom

Similar observations may be made with respect to the Contemplation to Attain Love. It too has a sober abstractness which is both an advantage and a challenge. Seldom has a great saint spoken with such coolness about love. The flesh which a renewed understanding of Christian social teaching can here provide has to do with the three interwoven concepts which form the unity of the Contemplation: love, gift and freedom. Because the divine Lover who bestows the gifts (and the Self-Gift) and calls to a grateful return of love in freedom is *Creator*, is *God*, love, gift and freedom on the part of the beloved lose the very character of 'property'. What we return to God never was ours in the first place in any univocal sense. When we creatures echo the words of Jesus to the Father, 'All that is mine is thine, and all that is thine is mine', our radical creatureliness makes an infinite difference (Jn 17: 10).

Further, Christian social teaching as we have described it makes explicit that the great Lover who, as Ignatius says, dwells and labours and is sacramentally intimated in each gift, exchanges the gifts of love always within the framework of human and cosmic relationships. Karl Rahner's fresh formulation of the unity of love of God and love of neighbour, especially when it is extended to other subjective beings of the planet besides humans, offers a congruous theological expression of what is here being said. Anyone who has struggled to understand Christian social teaching on ownership – a struggle which also has the character of play – will come to the Contemplation's playing with love and gift and freedom with a more intense realization that *all*, including the freedom which is both source and fruit of love, is radically and totally gift, given not for possession, but for grateful stewardship.

NOTES

¹ *Sollicitudo rei socialis* n. 42 in Walsh, M. & Davies, B. (trans): *Proclaiming justice and peace. Papal documents from Rerum Novarum through Centesimus Annus* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), p 424.

² *Rerum novarum* n. 22 in Walsh & Davies, p 25. See John XXIII in *Mater et magistra* n. 119 in Walsh & Davies, p 102. I am indebted to Phil Land SJ for these references.

³ *Spiritual Exercises* n. 2 in Ganss, G. et al. (trans): *Ignatius of Loyola. The Spiritual Exercises and selected works* (New York: Paulist, 1991), p 121.