

# CULTURE AND CURRENT PRACTICE

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FOR THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE I am bringing together material that I have found helpful as well as my reflection on the past six years of directing the Spiritual Exercises. This material has to do with how people of our culture experience the Exercises and the relation of culture to the fruit of the Exercises. I suggest you view this article as a set of notes to help you reflect on your own directing or on receiving direction yourself. My notes will cover four points: 1) assumptions about society, 2) assumptions about the human person, 3) current practice of giving the Spiritual Exercises in Western culture, 4) some concluding observations.

## *Introduction*

Whenever one accompanies another in the making of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, the cultural influence on the exercitant's imagination is immediately evident. Also apparent is the difference between the exercitant's cultural background and that of the director. As soon as we speak of imagination, we are brought to focus on life experience. We cannot separate this constitutive element of our person from the influences which have been part of the cultural environment in which we grew: the communal, the social, the theological/philosophical/ psychological understanding of the human person, the Church in her articulation of faith and meaning. We give all of these influences some expression in our lives whether we recognize it or not.

A man who shares with me the story of his early childhood in the context of a deprivation of affectionate relationships helps me to understand something of the culture in which he was raised and prepares me for his understanding of his identity, for his perception of career. A religious woman who tells me her story of growing up in a large, closely-knit, politically-aware family helps me to recognize the ease with which she has entered into relationships and has worked with social awareness in various forms of ministry.

As directors of the Exercises, we need to be in touch with our own assumptions about society, about the human person, if we are to notice and understand the assumptions of the exercitant. As a reality check, we

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might ask ourselves: are my assumptions borne out in experience; how do these assumptions underlie my current practice in explaining the Exercises to another; are alternative assumptions needed and where can they be found? The lack of awareness regarding our assumptions, whether we are about to make the Exercises or accompany another in the making of them, can confuse not only communication between director and exercitant but can skew the inner dynamism of moving through the Exercises—be it in the healing, identity, call, or union with God mode.

But let us look briefly at the man and time in which the Spiritual Exercises were born. The Exercises seem to have been used effectively in the lives of people across cultures from the time of Ignatius to the present. Ignatius, like all of us, was influenced by the characteristics of the time in which he lived. The understanding of the human person, societal values and Church fired his imagination. Indeed, we may say that Ignatius' own imagination, constructed mainly by the culture in which he lived, gave itself expression in both his personal interior affective life and in his subsequent articulation of the Exercises.

Ignatius came into a Europe that for nearly 1400 years had been identifying itself as Christian. That was its self-understanding. The Church had long since become the most important institution in the land, and the image of the continent was that of a place under God. The unifying image could be called a sacred world-view. There was not a lot of pluralism. The cosmic order was more or less settled.<sup>1</sup> Life was static, unchangeable yet psychologically dynamic.

And so his was a slow moving, static world, predictable to a large extent, where the images of the past helped to prepare him to deal with the future. For example, Ignatius knew the stories of valour of knights. He knew what it meant to defend honour and kingdom. Following his conversion, when he found his value system to be shifted, he was able to trust these images from the past and he used them automatically to give and to urge a greater response of a different order for a kingdom also of a different order. It was through Ignatius' experience, during his convalescence and afterwards, of being able to discover the movements of different spirits, as he called them, that he was forced to recognize a life of interiority that went on within himself. Coming from this basic experience, the Exercises became articulated by a lay man for other lay men and women.

The Spiritual Exercises, set within Ignatius' imaginative cultural context, became a way of proceeding, not only because of their content but more importantly because of the graces of which they are the

vehicle. The Exercises can be perceived as a structure for discovering the life of the Spirit hidden within an individual's experience, as disclosed within one's imaginative personal relationships. Thus the Exercises can be understood as a guideline for reproducing the pattern of companionship with Jesus to the glory of God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. Within this frame, affective movements disclose and reveal the personal response to the will of God incarnate in the individual.<sup>2</sup> Contemplation, then, becomes the vehicle of self-discovery—the individual's perception of the world, relationships, self and God. How the individual imagines that complex structure and relates to each element within it discloses the role of an individual's affections in discerning one's intentional response to God. For example, a woman who images that structure as an ordered hierarchy may relate to each of the elements out of control in a perceived effort to preserve that order. She may, in all likelihood, disclose that same desire for control in her intentional response to God.

In what follows, I will simply highlight some assumptions, the effects of which we notice in people who come to Loyola House to make the Exercises. First, I begin with assumptions about society.

### ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT SOCIETY

*First assumption: our world and Ignatius' world are different*

My first assumption about society has to do with the vast difference between our world and that of Ignatius. Society is in a process of immense transition. Lonergan would describe this transition as a shift from a classical world view to a world of interiority. We might call it a shift from private enterprise to concern for the universe and all people; from private good to cosmic good. With this shift, all institutions are breaking down: family, economic systems, political entities, church structures, national boundaries. In the process, individuals are suffering hurt and brokenness. When society as a whole breaks down we can no longer rely on the images of the past to help us move into the future. But what we *can* trust is the faith methodology of dealing with issues as they come to us in the presence of Jesus in our midst. The Exercises are vitally important precisely in order to teach us that methodology.

Perhaps I can emphasize some of the effects of the breakdown of society by drawing attention to some of the differences between Ignatius' assumptions and the reality of our day. First, Ignatius assumed in giving the Exercises that the person had what we would call a healthy self-image. Today we see people who are hurting from being sinned against, with the result that they try to operate out of a self-image that the public

world expects while hurting interiorly from a badly damaged self-image. Second, he assumed the presence of a faith community. Today, we may not assume that those who make the Exercises have already experienced a real community of faith or have one to which they may return. Third, Ignatius assumed that a person could be taught to reflect on their interior movements. In our day, the director labours to help an individual to distinguish psychological reactions from spiritual movements, which are far more nuanced. Fourth, Ignatius assumed an awareness of one's feelings. At present, in a society that has encouraged the suppression of feelings for the sake of productivity and collaboration, the director strives to assist the exercitant to be in touch with his or her feelings for discernment.

*Second assumption: the modern world does not support daily faith-living*

My second assumption has to do with daily faith-filled living. We find today that a living faith is not supported by the surrounding world. Scientific technology has become a primary influence in our society. Technology has not only nurtured a consumer society but has influenced the human person in an unconscious manner. We need to be alert to the fact that technology, including the sciences of biology and chemistry, is built on a materialistic view of nature. To the extent that many of technology's tenets have become interiorized, we find ourselves living in competition with machines. Some of us are driven to more, only it is a different kind of more—more productivity, more efficiency, more material goods, more space in homes, more workshops, more classes for our children for more competence, more specialists for various illnesses, more spirituality. In many instances, it is a more that is not human, let alone Christian.

In talking about healing as an art, Ira Progoff<sup>3</sup> draws attention to the fact that while the development of resources and techniques for use in physical healing has been one of the major achievements of science in Western civilization, it may be that we require an approach to human experience that makes possible a step beyond the present conception of healing. In general, when we experience an illness, whether we feel it to be primarily physical or emotional, our main desire is to rid ourselves of its effects as quickly as we can. Healing in this context is primarily a means of eliminating something. When healing is successfully achieved by forces external to the integral process of the person's life—whether by modern medicine or by non-medical procedures—the net effect is to release the individual from the task of finding the personal significance of the illness or from entering into relationship with it. The impact of these technological advances is that we have become self-confidently secular.

*Third assumption: different kinds of interiority*

A third assumption relates to interiority and its articulation. A reverse perfectionism exists in today's world which claims that interiority can be so known that you can eradicate all woundedness, or that interiority has to be known and understood prior to acting in the public world.<sup>4</sup> In former days, there was an external norm—for example, rules for abstinence and fasting, rules for making use of the sacraments, rules of modesty, etc. that led to an external perfection. The hope was, of course, that this desire for external perfection would become interiorized and in many it did. Now it is much more the interior perceptions that have become the norm with the result that we are meeting people who, in attending to their interiority, want to make sure they are perfectly healed before engaging in areas of life where that healing might be tested. That is another kind of perfectionism, another form of 'I can save myself'.

John Wickham SJ,<sup>5</sup> in looking at the 'cultural challenge of contemporary society', outlines the following four new features of our time, new not in the sense that they have been unknown to some perceptive members of earlier generations, but rather that they are distinctive today in their influence upon cultural society as a whole. The following is a summary.

1. Structural Awareness: a growing awareness that our giant social institutions are not sacred, i.e. they are not in the nature of things, but in process of change. They are not God-given (except in general terms which apply to all human cultures), but humanly devised. We are responsible. This is our rather puzzling situation: we devise the social structures which tell us who we are.

2. A New Interiority: a deepening and an intensification of inner self-awareness to a degree which creates a whole new sense of the human subject. A spiritual life may be cultivated in a secular sense in the arts, in sports, in social activities of many kinds, where intersubjectivity receives keen attention. The interpersonal realms of human experience, values and meanings become very satisfying to share. The very sharing often results in heightened activities of intersubjectivity for their own sake. And for many people this humanistic spirituality is replacing Christian spirituality and faith.

3. Disbelonging: a new term coined by John to describe a way of continuing to belong to groups while not accepting a good portion of the age-old institutional processes of that social body. This *disbelonging* means that one does not experience any feelings of obligation when leaders try to enforce regulations, any sense of guilt in acting otherwise, or any need to rebel or protest at this state of affairs. And yet in varying degrees disbelonging members continue to feel committed to the

community itself, e.g. people feel they do not have to leave the Church if they no longer believe in one or two of her accepted teachings.

4. Historical-mindedness: the sense that our personal being is always moving forward through time is widely felt today as an essential feature of human existence. It seems necessary to us to tell the story of the various phases we have passed through if others are to understand the present state of our affairs. Formerly, historical-mindedness meant simply that past events could be grasped only within their own movement of time. Today, the notion has been extended to ourselves—to the very sense of who we are, i.e. persons always moving forward through time. These features demand a serious faith-response.

*Fourth assumption: some implications for persons already oriented towards God*

My fourth assumption deals with the fact that the people who come to us today are already oriented to God. Those who make the Exercises are already converted from gross sin and evil. They come desiring to discover how they may better build the reign of God. The issue, then, is not so much sin as it is deception and the evil that comes out of different levels of deception. What follows are some considerations on these various levels of deception.

One wonders if the exercitant's attention ought to be drawn, in the First Week, not so much to sin, as Ignatius would have us do, but to the deception that leads to the refusal to love, to be grateful. If I pay attention to the deception, sin will automatically come up. To illustrate, if I am praying over my own sin history and I look at the deceptive decisions that I have made, I will automatically get into sin. If, on the other hand I am praying over the sin history of the group to which I belong and I look at bad decisions that lead to unjust structures, would it not be more fruitful for me to reflect not on the sinfulness of the unjust structures, but on the deception implicit in the decisions that lead to them? I do not remember the source, but I agree with the suggestion that in the triple colloquy of the third exercise of the First Week, the order of petitions be reversed, i.e. one ask Mary to intercede with her Son for three favours: a knowledge of the world . . . , an understanding of the disorder of my actions . . . , a deep knowledge of my sins . . . as a help for the exercitant to grasp, spontaneously, the relationship between one's personal sin and the sin in the world. I notice a tendency in some exercitants to pray with deep sorrow over their own sins and over the sins of the world, yet not recognize any connection between the two. There is deception here—the world and I are not integrally connected.

Another level of deception which I notice in many bears some connection to this last point, of grace being truncated, as it were, in some

people. It is almost as though grace has nowhere to go—it is cut short. Persons who desire to grow in intimacy with the Lord often put undue emphasis on failings, perceiving them to be a major block to their continued growth. For example, while being in an imaginative relationship with Mary during the infancy narrative the exercitant experiences Mary as tender and loving towards him. He feels guilty in feeling comforted in this way because he does not want to blame his mother. Yet he acknowledges that he experiences hatred for her from time to time, but knows he should not. As long as he remains caught at the level of feeling guilty about his recurring feelings of hatred towards his mother, he never drops to a deeper level where he faces that he was sinned against as a child by an emotionally abusive mother. Nor does he open himself to healing and grow through a forgiveness that is compassionate. Nor will he work against sinful structures in society in which children are neglected. I suggest that he is stuck at what I call an ethical level of awareness, i.e. norms of Christian behaviour as distinct from living a spirituality that takes seriously the moods, the impulses and the urges that arise spontaneously within us.<sup>6</sup> If one remains at an ethical level of awareness, the grace being received will not be interpreted as a call to incarnate the gift given in the arena of one's suffering. The additional sadness in this situation is that the man tends to see the acknowledgement of the 'shoulds' and 'oughts' in his life as a kind of virtue. Instead, it seems to me, it only makes his belief in the lie (that he was and is bad) more deeply imbedded and he acts out of a false identity in his relationship with God. As long as the exercitant can be held in deception, the 'enemy of our human nature' need never fear that the individual will work for change in the world. That is an evil that comes out of deception.

### ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE HUMAN PERSON

My assumptions about the human person are focused around the individual and their relationship with God. In spirituality in general and in Ignatian spirituality specifically, there are a number of theological assumptions that we operate from and hardly ever question. These assumptions are at the heart of the Spiritual Exercises. Among them are: God is present with me in each event in my life; my history has significance and meaning; God desires to communicate to me through my history; I have to go over and over my human experience in order to discover its meaning; God works for me through my history. All this is so, I believe, because of the incarnation and the resurrection. The incarnation says that materiality is real and has meaning in God's eyes.

The resurrection says that materiality has eternal meaning, that human events in the past take up new meaning in the eternal present.

*First assumption: the human person comes to an awareness of identity through relationships*

My first assumption, then, is that the human person comes to an awareness of her or his loved identity in relationship to other people. Through others, they come to a recognition of what is going on in their own interiority and of being loved.

Sadly, many of us are convinced that we exist first as separate, isolated individuals who then form selective relationships with others.<sup>7</sup> We find it hard to recognize the communal web that is so integral to our life. Is this the reason why some people, who enter into the contemplations with an openness to Jesus and his action in the world, are not motivated enough to incarnate grace, given in the moment in the world in which they live, into social and public involvement?<sup>28</sup> Is it that the one praying does not carry an awareness of her whole life-world into the mystery so that the Lord in the power of the mystery may enter dynamically into the life-world of the one praying? In our world where spirituality has become subjective and is taken into the public world primarily as a sharing of one's story, ought the fruit of one's prayer to remain subjective and privatized? I think not.

*Second assumption: the human person comes to us in many parts*

My second assumption is that the human person comes to us in many parts: conscious and unconscious, private life and work/social life, with relationships of some complexity, each delineated by time, space and the particular 'part' in the individual which they influence. Ignatius did not have this person of many parts to work with. He did not have the conscious and the unconscious delineations in his day. It is only in modern times that we have discovered the unconscious, but because of the privatized world and industrialization, we live two different lives. In a simpler society your work life and your private life and your community life were all one. In a more complex world, your work life and private life become separated. Then as religion becomes separated from the public world, your private life of religion and values becomes separated from your ethic of living. To be a full human person all of these parts have to become integrated—in the private world, in the public world and between the private world and the public world. The Exercises should help us in this integration. No doubt further integration takes place the more the unconscious is opened to God's Word. But a



question remains concerning the lack of significant impact in the public world.

*Third assumption: decision-making is crucial in aiding this integration*

My third assumption deals with the fact that conversion is not just something that happens to you. It is a movement that helps you, forces you, disposes you to see life in a new way, to live a new way, to be in a new way. Conversion leads to decision. Conversion is ultimately a decision. Such decisions are not made unless the total person is involved. And these decisions are not made unless they are consciously made. Therefore we give the Exercises in such a way as to stress the whole person and we give the Exercises in such a way as to help people to make decisions.

### CURRENT PRACTICE

To speak about current practice of giving the Exercises in Western culture, I must speak out of my own experience at Guelph. Many other retreat houses in North America are responding to current trends in similar ways. Still others are making different adaptations of the Exercises. The way of giving the Exercises at Guelph has developed from the mid-sixties to the present day. The year 1969 was the first time a team of Jesuits under the direction of John English SJ gave the Exercises, as a team, to a large group of people, one on one, in the silent atmosphere of a retreat house. In the seventies, the team became aware that some people could not make the Exercises because they had a false image of God. They came from a legalistic background and could not grasp what Ignatius means by mortal sin. In addition, because of the way they were brought up in the family and in the Church, they showed certain Pelagian tendencies of guilt, perfectionism and the deep-seated conviction that they had to earn God's love. The team recognized the need to help retreatants discover the true image of God who is the benevolent One, the One who is compassionate, the One who is forgiving, the One who is with us in our life.

It was then that Guelph designed the Disposition Days at the beginning of the long retreat in order that retreatants could enter into the First Week as Ignatius presents it. In addition, aware that often exercitants had no one back home who would understand their experience, the team developed Appropriation Days for the precise purpose of giving the exercitants the opportunity of articulating their experience to others who would understand the experience and in order that they might truly own their experience. While scripture was used to support

the Exercises, the team found that they could give the text itself. They also found that in using the text itself, new translations and new adaptations were not as important as the ability of the director to direct the exercitant in his or her unique experience. Because the text often was a source of annoyance to the exercitant, it often surfaced the exercitant's real and operational images.

The text of the Exercises, therefore, helps the individual to enter into the foil relationship of their lives, to clarify their values. In other words, the text, as a foil, reveals strong contrasts among certain desires/tendencies in the exercitant and therefore renders gospel qualities more obvious. It is the exercitant who becomes the discernor in all of this and in the matter of cultural differences, it is the exercitant who articulates the cultural leap for the director. The better the exercitant articulates this, the better the integrative experience.

The Spiritual Exercises can be received according to a healing, identity, call, or union with God mode (called by the commentators, the school of prayer).

#### *The healing and call modes*

Because of the abusive or dysfunctional backgrounds out of which people come, we find many retreatants today experience the Spiritual Exercises in the healing mode. At times, someone will move very quickly into the Second Week out of the healing mode into the call mode. This means that the exercitant's attitude by the time of the Second Week is focused on how she can better serve God. Her generosity and her Christian identity are such that she may need the Rules of the Second Week because she is so lovingly generous. She has been sufficiently healed that she no longer looks for comfort and love coming from the Saviour, but is desirous of returning love for love in the building of the reign of God.

In fact, many do not make that healing-to-call transition. They remain in the healing mode for most of the Spiritual Exercises journey. For these people, as they enter the Second Week of the Exercises, they often experience healing of their childhood wounds and they experience healing in the relation with parents, friends, life. Even when they are praying the colloquies of the Two Standards or of the Third Degree of Humility, they are basically asking to put up with the suffering and insults of life, with the wounds of their culture, rather than looking for a way by which they can imitate through their service Jesus insulted. The Second Week Rules are often not necessary. The notion of deception, however, may need to be kept up front. Here, it is the deception not

under the guise of good but under the more subtle deception of their inordinate attachments or their skewed programming from the past.

Retreatants who have been severely sinned against in their childhood and who have carried shame for most of their lives, when they have been healed, often succumb to discouragement and renewed feelings of shame if at some later date something happens to bring the memory back. It seems that the miracle-image of one being healed and 'leaving their crutches at a shrine' is not valid for their experience. They will say, 'I thought I had worked through all that'. What they fail to recognize at the time of healing is that the event is not taken away; the memory is not taken away; the neurological responses are not taken away. But, rather, the event, memory and patterned responses no longer have the same power over them. I have often suggested to retreatants who have fallen back, to return to their experience of being healed in the past (Exx 324). When they do this, we recognize together that the past need not have the same power over them.

### *Identity mode*

Linked with the healing mode or sometimes standing on its own is the identity mode. When the question of identity stands on its own, I find that one's identity comes to be recognized first as that of a sinner, then that of the loved sinner, then as disciple, friend and companion of Jesus. If linked with the healing mode, the identity often being sought is that of the child—who is the little person within? God may choose to reveal that to them through their imaginative relationship with Jesus during the contemplations of the hidden life.

### *Union with God mode*

One who makes the Exercises in the union with God or school of prayer mode desires a deeper union with the Lord. For the most part, the exercitant's journey will be marked by a growing intimacy with God, by a growing acceptance of his or her humanity, by embracing the cross, by a strong desire to surrender to God's work within the individual.

My brief descriptions of the modes may leave the impression that a person makes the Exercises in only one mode or that the movement to a different mode is done in a step by step progression. This is not so, of course. However, the awareness that exercitants may make the Exercises in different modes or in a combination of modes can be helpful for directors to interpret what is going on in the exercitant as well as to know how to proceed in the most helpful manner possible.

### Conclusion

In our modern age, spiritual direction no doubt is becoming complex as any other field of endeavour. People are developing specialities and these specialities are working their way into the understanding of our work of spiritual direction. One could give many more matrices and many more ways of understanding the cultural influences, e.g. there is the culture of different countries and its influence on the spiritual director and the directee; there are the different conversions<sup>9</sup> within each culture—the affective conversion, the moral conversion, the intellectual conversion, the socio-political conversion, the psychic conversion<sup>10</sup> which all come to play here. Or there are the different levels of faith development and how they differ from culture to culture. When all is said and done, all these understandings, all these matrices, all these ways of deeply understanding human behaviour with the speciality behind it have to be let go of as one is listening to the person in front of one because when one listens from the heart to another person who speaks from the heart, in the deep faith the Holy Spirit is present. Then something of a spiritual direction nature happens and everything else must be considered secondary.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Barnes, Ronald: *Proceedings: symposium on Ignatian spirituality* (Loyola House, Guelph, Canada, 1991), p 30.

<sup>2</sup> Langstaff, Keith: Lecture Series: *The Spiritual Exercises* (Loyola House, Guelph, Canada), 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Proff, Ira: *Finding the meaning of illness* (Dialogue House, National Intensive Journal Program, New York NY).

<sup>4</sup> Veltri, John: Lecture (Loyola House, Guelph, Canada 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Wickham, John: *The communal Exercises*, Part B Directory, 2nd edition, (Ignatian Centre Publications, Montreal, Canada, 1991), pp 131–134.

<sup>6</sup> King, Thomas: *Symposium on Ignatian spirituality* (Loyola House, Guelph, Canada, 1991), p 68.

<sup>7</sup> Fischer, Kathleen: *Reclaiming the connections* (Sheed & Ward, Kansas City MO), p 1.

<sup>8</sup> Wickham, John: 'Ignatian contemplation today: the public dimension', *The way of Ignatius Loyola*, ed Philip Sheldrake (SPCK, London and The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis MO, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> See Gelpi, Donald: 'The converting Jesuit', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* (St Louis MO, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> See Doran, Robert M.: *Theology and the dialectics of history* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Canada, 1990), pp 43–63.