

LAY PEOPLE IN THE IGNATIAN TRADITION

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THE RECENT UPSURGE OF INTEREST in Ignatian spirituality and in the understanding of mission or apostolate implied in it has been very largely a lay phenomenon. This is not surprising. The developments of the Second Vatican Council included two movements that would tend to bring about such lay involvement. In the first place, there has been a far-reaching rediscovery of the vocation of all the baptized to holiness and creative, co-redemptive action in the world. Secondly, Jesuits who have been the principal trustees of the Ignatian tradition were prompted by the documents of the Council, like other religious congregations, to return to the sources of the foundation in a quest to reappropriate the charism of the founder in ways adapted to our times. Awakening laity met Jesuits enthusiastic about the newly recovered understanding of the dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises as a directed, not a preached, retreat for people of all walks of life. From this new possibilities are unfolding.

Ignatius himself

Our traditional iconography and official canonization procedures have leant so heavily towards the promotion of religious vocations that with Ignatius as with others it has been all too easy to forget the significant events of his lay life. In his case this is particularly unforgivable because his great legacy, the Spiritual Exercises, was shaped in its essentials out of his own experience as a layman, even before he had begun to study theology, and therefore expresses his understanding of his calling as a baptized Christian, not as a priest or vowed religious. What is envisaged is total commitment to integrate all aspects of life in a gospel-based world-view, and to act on this effectively and with critical discernment in one's own situation – not as a specialized vocation for a select few, but as the normal life of a baptized Christian.

What is true of Ignatius in this respect in his own life and conversion, is also true of his apostolate and that of his earliest companions. They directed all manner of people through the Exercises, not only young men whom they hoped to include in their Company. It is true that they also bequeathed, from their experience, the caution not to push an

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exercitant further than that person was ready to go, even if it meant reducing the process to the First Week or turning it into a rudimentary catechesis. But none of this detracted from the high hopes that Ignatius and his companions had for lay Christians. In fact, some of the first generation expected some lay people who had made the Exercises then to 'give them' to others.

A tale of two Councils

Some of that early enthusiasm about lay participation in what the Companions were doing has emerged again in our time after centuries of heavy clericalization of Christian mission and ministry. In many ways the situation of lay Christians at the time of the Council of Trent and its aftermath was quite similar to the situation of the lay Christian today during the era of the Second Vatican Council and its aftermath. Then as in the early twentieth century many had come to be very passive and unthinking about their faith, relying on clergy and ritual as though external forces could bring about personal conversion. Then as in our time there was a confusion of mutually contradictory voices claiming authority. Then as now there were forces in society militating strenuously against gospel values.

In this setting, both then and now, the spirituality of Ignatius appealed to so many people of disparate experience and responsibility because it was an idea whose time had come. It answers the demands of Christian life and apostolate with its insistence on deep, disciplined reflection to get everything into proper perspective within the doctrines of the faith, with its guidance into affective and contemplative prayer and self-surrender to the Spirit, with its training in personal spiritual discernment, its resonant emphasis on love as being manifested in deeds, and much more. At times of confusion of values and disintegration of cultural focus and continuity, it is especially important that lay Christians be formed to make prudent and Spirit-guided discernments, and to do it with confidence in their own ability to hear the Spirit. The revival and wide diffusion of the Exercises has therefore been very opportune and carries great promise of fruitful continuity and expansion of redemptive tasks in Church and world that have for centuries been left all too conveniently to clergy and vowed religious. In this context, the dearth of such clergy and religious to fill the slots in the traditional ministries may be a special gift of divine providence for our time.

Ministries and ministers

The Ignatian tradition was, of course, transmitted through the centuries not only by Jesuits but also by several religious congregations

of women. This article considers only the traditional apostolates of Jesuits and present actual and possible lay participation in them for the practical reason that the present author is better acquainted with them. In any case these traditional apostolates have changed and adapted in the course of time and are certainly in the process of reformulation now. In the earliest generations there seems to have been a greater emphasis on the works of mercy, especially among the very poor and vulnerable, and there seems now to be a thrust back in that direction, taking into account the contemporary scope for larger scale social action requiring a synthesis of theoretical competence and pastoral action.

In several major fields in which Jesuits are now active, lay collaboration with Jesuits in their apostolates is extensive already and constantly increasing. Among these are: higher education, secondary school, the printed word and the media, social justice and peace activity, retreats and spiritual direction. In higher education particularly it has become evident that the increasing degree of specialization required calls for larger institutions and more trained people in them. Sheer lack of trained Jesuits to fill all the many positions, not to mention requirements of accrediting bodies and other external forces have meant the hiring of many non-Jesuit, sometimes non-Catholic and even non-Christian collaborators in order to carry on the task of these large institutions of higher and professional education.

What has happened in the universities and colleges has happened to an even greater degree in the secondary schools. There is a limit to the number of Jesuits who can be spared for any one institution, and there is an abundance of highly trained and competent lay people who are excellent teachers and are attracted to task of teaching adolescents. In the editorial work and production of periodicals there has long been lay co-operation, as in the apostolate of book publishing and authorship. In the field of the modern media wide collaboration is assured by the multiplicity and nature of the technical skills involved.

Perhaps the most interesting development, however, is the emergence of a trained laity in retreat work and continuing spiritual direction. In considerable numbers, people who have retired from the careers that gained them a family livelihood, women who have raised their families, single persons and childless couples who have time available, have gone through a sometimes lengthy spiritual formation and professional and theological training to put their life experience, wisdom and skills at the service of the Christian community in preaching, running and directing retreats, participating in teams for parish missions, and undertaking spiritual direction of others.

What is gained by this wider participation in the apostolates mentioned is enormous and very precious. Certainly there is the broader spectrum of life experience in which Christian faith and spirituality are reflected – the experience of living Christian life in environments that are not necessarily supportive; the ordinary hassles of earning a living and supporting a family, the conjugal relationship with its long-term challenges of fidelity, mutual support and forbearance and its many promissory moments hinting ultimate communion with God in ecstasy; the long learning of parenthood with all its satisfactions, exhaustion and anxiety; the hazards of living without a community safety net vulnerable to unemployment, loss of income and home through sickness or tragedy, and so forth. That all this should be reflected is certainly a great gain. It is also significant that there are not so many role models of laity taking initiative and leadership in apostolic activity.

Can the laity really do it?

At first blush it looks as though the ministries and missions undertaken by the Jesuits in the past are continuing smoothly with increasing numbers of lay collaborators and decreasing numbers of Jesuits. However, in many cases the question arises whether in this changing proportion the Jesuits are taking too much for granted. While a school, college or university was conducted mainly by Jesuits there was a tacit understanding among them based on long years of spiritual formation, theological as well as other professional studies, commitment to live by the same Constitutions, familiarity with the history of the Order and of the institutions, participation in rethinking the contemporary adaptations of various apostolates according to the General Congregations, and much else that was held in common and perhaps not sufficiently noticed or appreciated. Because of this common heritage and frame of reference a focus and direction was maintained more or less spontaneously. This can no longer be assumed as the proportion of Jesuit and lay collaborators changes, more particularly if many of the latter are outside the Catholic or even the Christian tradition. It cannot be denied that especially in more prestigious positions and in more prestigious institutions, many apply for professional employment without any thought of this as collaboration in a Christian apostolate. Moreover, evaluation is by the technical or professional demands of competence and performance.

A special strategy is called for if the institutions are not to be slowly secularized into purely professional activities without Christian philosophy or perspective. It seems urgently necessary that clear philosophies

of education, of research, of social action and so forth be formulated and promulgated within the institution, and among those who apply to teach, study, do research or work there. Unless there is a general understanding and acceptance of the goals and intentions of the institution by all concerned, those goals and intentions are not likely to be realized. But beyond this general assent it is necessary to have a 'critical mass' of lay collaborators who are personally and deeply committed to the spirituality and apostolic vision that has shaped the institution, and who are ready to carry it on into the future.

This 'critical mass' does not come from wishful thinking. With all the good will in the world, the lay collaborators still need spiritual formation, historical and practical information, some theological education and some communal forum and community support if they are to carry on the tradition in appropriate and reliable ways. It used to be rumoured that the making of a Jesuit took seventeen years of arduous application to the task. One could hardly expect to replace any of them with instantly produced substitutes, nor hope that some laity would eventually grow into the role by osmosis without having to pay any special attention to the matter.

However, except in the case of those collaborating in retreat and spiritual direction ministries, there has been relatively little attention focused and relatively little time and effort spent on identifying those willing to become part of the 'critical mass' to carry the Ignatian tradition, and on offering them a spiritual formation based on the Exercises and some continuing spiritual direction, nor on passing on the traditional wisdom and lore, nor yet on a basic theological education. Fortunately this is changing. More and more of the Jesuits themselves who are active in these apostolates and institutions are becoming aware of the gap and of the good will among sufficient numbers of lay collaborators to close that gap. More and more of the laity are expressing a certain hunger and yearning to be on the spiritual inside of the project to which the institutions are committed. It is a matter of some urgency to close the gap before it becomes unbridgeable because the ratio is too unfavourable.

Ignatian laity on their own

Given that the original inspiration of Ignatius arose out of the experiences of a lay life and began as focus for a Christian life as such, there is always the interesting question whether lay people, besides practising an Ignatian spirituality in their own lives, can create a tradition and channels to pass it on. During the centuries of assumed lay passivity always requiring clerical leadership and supervision, this

question did not arise in a practical way, but with the reassertion of the apostolate of the baptized it takes on new dimensions.

Early in the apostolate of the schools, Jesuits tried various confraternities or sodalities as vehicles for lay commitment and supportive communities. These eventually spread to include adult participants who made specific commitments to daily meditation, vigorous sacramental life, works of mercy or types of social action in their particular milieux. These sodalities survived through the centuries but, like so much else in the lives of the Catholic laity, tended to leave increasingly more initiative to their clerical chaplains, and to dwindle into more individualistic styles of piety. In the earlier half of the twentieth century there were repeated efforts to revive them under various names to encourage what was then known as Catholic Action and to bring the laity more into the larger mission of the Church in the world. Not until the Second Vatican Council, however, was there official acceptance in the hierarchic Church of a more robust theology of the laity.

In their present form the Sodalities have been reanimated under the name of Christian Life Communities. The formation and spirituality of the members is based upon the Spiritual Exercises. While expressing and enabling a vigorous lay apostolic life in some countries, the movement is still struggling to find its proper role and function elsewhere where there is a tendency to be preoccupied with rules and organizational structures. In the spirit of Vatican II, the groups aim to function with lay initiative and responsibility to form and recruit their own members, discern their proper apostolates, and conduct their own meetings, maintaining contact with one or more Jesuits and inviting a Jesuit, if possible, to celebrate eucharist with them.

This kind of tradition and community support is built slowly, especially when there is a history of lay passivity and of the reduction of Christian life to 'receiving' the sacraments, 'keeping' the commandments and 'saying' one's prayers. There is immense good will but little established habit of a more vigorous discerning and prophetic presence in the world.

Prospects and promises

It is clear that we are still on the threshold of a great awakening of the Church to the Spirit, such as was envisioned in hope and courage by Pope John XXIII. The Council passed the documents but we are yet to discover how to implement them in their depth and breadth. There is no doubt that Ignatian spirituality and sense of mission in the world has a significant role to play in this as a way of forming a more alert, committed and enterprising laity.