

# PRAYER AND MISSION

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THE ISSUE OF THE INTEGRATION OF PRAYER and mission has been problematic for the Christian community for almost two thousand years. Beginning with Paul's injunction 'to pray constantly' (1 Thess 5:17) Christians through all ages have struggled with various ways to integrate prayer and mission, contemplation and action, engagement with God and apostolate. The attempts to integrate these two important realities have taken quite diverse forms: withdrawal from action to a life of solitude; exaggerated activism that maintains little or no prayer; contemplation in action which seeks to find God in all things.

Christians have reflected on this issue in every generation. Perhaps a brief sampling of this rich tradition will help give Christians of our age a new perspective on the integration of prayer and mission and the extraordinary insight that Ignatian spirituality can offer to this most important issue.

Origen was among the first to reflect on this issue in the early third century. In his brief treatise on prayer Origen speaks of one's entire life as prayer. He notes that 'one prays constantly . . . who unites deeds of virtue or fulfilling the commandments with prayer and prayer with right deeds'.<sup>1</sup> He elaborates this by saying that the entire life of a saint taken as a whole is a single great prayer and that what is customarily called prayer is part of this single great prayer.<sup>2</sup> In this he is both assuming and urging a rich mix of prayer and mission, of contemplation and Christian action. He highlights the need for such integration, but offers little insight into how to accomplish it.

Much the same could be said of Augustine who has been called the Doctor of Prayer. He never composed a specific treatise on prayer apart from *Letter 130*. Nevertheless, in his writings he develops a significant theology of prayer and its relationship to mission and action. He is probably the first to propose significant principles for reducing interior life and active apostolate to a unit.

The three principles he offers are simple and begin to resolve something of the tension between prayer and mission. In the first instance he emphasizes the primacy of the contemplative life of prayer, study, reflection and recollection – the life which he actually chose for himself at the beginning of his ministry at Hippo.<sup>3</sup> His second principle

encourages one to accept apostolate and mission when the needs of the Church demand it.<sup>4</sup> Thirdly he urges the necessity to preserve in action the enjoyment of contemplation or as he puts it the *dilectio veritatis*. In all of this he highlights the reality and importance of charity: 'The love of the truth seeks out the quiet of contemplation; the necessity of love accepts the activity of the apostolate. If no one imposes this burden on us, let us apply ourselves to the contemplation of the truth; but if it is imposed on us we must accept it because of the necessity of charity.'<sup>5</sup> Augustine's principles are clear but again they do not offer a practical strategy to implement them.

This tension between mission and prayer, contemplation and action continues into the High Middle Ages. We find it clearly stated in Bernard of Clairvaux who integrated these realities in his own person and attempted to offer some aid for others to do the same. In his lengthy collection of sermons on the Song of Songs Bernard gives us the key to the amazing continuity that he was able to maintain between contemplation and activity, prayer and mission. He states quite explicitly that 'the nature of true, pure contemplation is such that, while kindling the heart with divine love, it sometimes fills it with great zeal to win other souls for God. The heart gladly gives up the quiet of contemplation for the work of preaching.'<sup>6</sup> He indicates further that one returns quickly to contemplation after mission to others has been accomplished. Finally, he suggests that there is a circle of contemplation and action in which each nurtures the other, 'once one has tasted anew the delights of contemplation, one joyfully dedicates oneself to new works'.<sup>7</sup> Thus in Bernard we are beginning to see the synthesis of prayer and mission that shaped Ignatius of Loyola.

As we would expect, Thomas Aquinas was a major contributor to this conversation about prayer and mission, contemplation and action. He moves in much the same direction as did Augustine. He teaches that the works of the active life may sometimes hinder the life of contemplation. Still one can remain a contemplative person even while one is seriously engaged in apostolic activities.<sup>8</sup> He is also a precursor of Ignatius when he writes in his commentary on Romans: 'As long as one is acting in his heart, speech, or work in such a manner that he is tending toward God, he is praying and thus one who is directing his entire life toward God is praying always'.<sup>9</sup> He contends that such a person may merit more by the works of the active life than another by the works of the contemplative life 'if through divine love he or she consents to be withdrawn from the sweetness of divine contemplation to aid the neighbor'.<sup>10</sup> Again Aquinas is suggesting the importance of interiority and intentionality if there is to

be a workable coherence between prayer and mission. He sees this integration as possible but difficult and continues to prefer the contemplative life to the active life as did Augustine. Still, much of his experience and teaching looks toward the integration of prayer and mission which distinguishes Ignatian spirituality.

Much, of course, could be said about Ignatius and his contribution to this ongoing dialogue about the integration of prayer and mission.<sup>11</sup> We need only reflect on a few brief citations to get the flavour of his contribution. We find an evocative statement in his autobiography which he dictated to da Câmara between 1553 and 1555. Near the very end of that work Ignatius says of himself, 'He had always grown in devotion, that is, ease in finding God, and now more than ever in his whole life. Every time, any hour, he wished to find God, he found Him.'<sup>12</sup> Clearly he is describing an integration of faith, prayer and every other dimension of life, especially mission and ministry.

We find further witness to this kind of integration in his letter to Anthony Brandao early in June, 1551. Brandao has asked Ignatius about the prayer of those engaged in the *mission* of studies. Ignatius is concise and clear in his response. He recommends some ordinary exercises of piety: liturgy, vocal prayer and self-examination, confession and communion. He goes on to urge a kind of prayer which encounters God in all things:

Over and above the spiritual exercises assigned for this perfection . . . they should practice the seeking of God's presence in all things, in their conversations, their walks, in all they see, taste, hear, understand, in all their actions, since His Divine Majesty is truly in all things by His presence, power and essence. This kind of meditation which finds God our Lord in all things, is easier than raising oneself to the consideration of divine truths which are more abstract and which demand something of an effort if we are to keep our attention on them. But this method is an excellent exercise to prepare us for great visitations of our Lord, even in prayers that are rather short.<sup>13</sup>

Here Ignatius is not merely supposing an integration of prayer and mission: he is also presenting a way of prayer which actually integrates prayer and the entirety of life including the particular mission of those in studies.

In this letter to Brandao he is urging the kind of prayer which closes the Spiritual Exercises.<sup>14</sup> It is from the Spiritual Exercises and his own personal experience that Ignatius realized the profound possibility of finding God in all things. In this way he hopes that those who have made

the Spiritual Exercises will become increasingly adept at intensive spiritual living and will use all of life as an arena in which to encounter God.<sup>15</sup> His reflection on this integration of prayer and mission finds its clearest expression in the *Constitutions* when he counsels scholastics about prayer and their mission of studies. In a classic statement he reminds them that there will not be much place for mortifications during the time of studies.<sup>16</sup> What remedy, then, does he recommend for this situation? Let the mission become the prayer!

Their devoting themselves to learning, which they acquire with a pure intention of serving God and which in a certain way requires the whole person, will be not less but rather *more pleasing* to God our Lord during this time of study.<sup>17</sup>

It has been observed that this recommendation encompasses the Ignatian theory of apostolic spirituality, i.e. that one serves or pleases God at some times by focusing attention on God in prayer and at other times by working for God and one's neighbour through love.<sup>18</sup>

Ignatius' letters are full of this same teaching. He was constantly intent on seeking God in all things, i.e. the fusion of prayer and mission. He states this with extraordinary clarity and brevity in one of his letters: 'In the midst of actions and studies, the mind can be lifted to God; and by means of this directing everything to the divine service, *everything is prayer*'.<sup>19</sup>

What, then, does all this, particularly the Ignatian insight about the integration of prayer and mission, have to say to the contemporary Christian? How can it help one to integrate prayer and mission or to become a contemplative in action? What more can be said to resolve this perplexing dilemma?

I suggest three realities that are lodged in Ignatian spirituality and that resolve the tension between prayer and mission. I refer specifically here to imagination, desire and action.

In the first instance Ignatian prayer and mission is driven by imagination. Ignatius is particularly concerned that through the imagination a person should be drawn in love.<sup>20</sup> I mean the kind of activity that is hinted at by Shaw in *St Joan* in a brief exchange between Joan and Robert. Joan says that she hears voices telling her what to do and that the voices come from God. Robert tells her that the voices come from her imagination and she replies, 'Of course, that is how the messages of God come to us'.<sup>21</sup> It is this kind of imagination, I believe, that Ignatius has in mind in the contemplations of the Spiritual Exercises. The Exercises actually engender a purification and transfor-

mation of the imagination from a kind of rather crude picture-making and day-dreaming to a redeemed and Spirit-enlivened awareness. The imagination becomes a deepened ability of the human spirit to reach beyond one's parochial restrictions and limitations and enter more fully and actively into a world of faith, hope and love. Imagination develops a deeper ability to enter emphatically and compassionately into the world of the other and see life-giving and hopeful possibility. Ultimately as Howard Gray SJ puts it, imagination is the self-transcending heart, the power of a human being to go beyond his or her world and weakness, prejudice and folly and enter into the greater world of the other.<sup>22</sup>

Apparently, it is from such imagination that true mission is born. Certainly, the Thirty-Second General Congregation of the Society of Jesus was convinced of this. In its document on mission in the Society they specifically mention the contemplations of the Spiritual Exercises as the genesis of contemporary mission. The Congregation notes that fidelity to mission will deepen when we contemplate our world as Ignatius did his, that we may hear anew the call of Christ dying and rising in the anguish and aspirations of men and women.<sup>23</sup>

It is a truism of artistic endeavour that one cannot create until one really imagines the work to be done. The power of imagination endows the artist with the vision and energy to complete the projected work of art. The same is true of mission and apostolate. It is the gospel-filled imagination that generates the vision and affective energy to visualize the mission and work generously for its completion.

It was by imagination that Ignatius at Loyola, Manresa and La Storta conceived great deeds for the kingdom of God – a mobile mission to every man and woman whatever his or her condition. Similarly, it will be by such contemplative imagination that contemporary Christians will find the necessary vision and energy to actuate God's reign in our world. Revitalization of imagination is therefore a most important strategy to integrate prayer and mission.

Cardinal Newman notes at the beginning of his *Apologia* that it did not please God to save humankind by logic. He means by this that understanding, without affect, desire and action, is fruitless. To accomplish any enterprise of value demands strong desires and powerful affections, if one truly is to persevere when the project becomes difficult. It is, therefore, at the level of deep desire that prayer and mission are most deeply integrated. This is clearly the reason why Ignatius puts so much emphasis on praying for what one desires during the experience of the Exercises.

Desire is, as we know, a strong inclination or attraction to some object along with intense and positive affect. The value quality of desire is

drawn from the value of the object, while the power of desire comes from the intensity of affect.<sup>24</sup> However one defines desire, it is clear that desires generate energy and power for great enterprises. They often direct the person toward significant decisions which are actually creative of the person for good or ill. They ground extraordinary dynamism and vitality in pursuit of the human project and the endeavours which constitute mission.

Generally speaking, people do best what they really want to do. They bring their best talent and energies to the projects and activities which respond to and activate their deep personal desires. Therefore, for fruitful and effective mission, it is of paramount importance that people bring to conscious awareness their deepest desires, particularly those developing in and around the images in their prayer.

It is here, then, that prayer and mission are most closely integrated. The images that occur in prayer, in contemplation and in quiet reflection give birth to deep and strong personal desires. These images nurture creativity, generosity and courageous magnanimity. The desires which flow from such prayer abide in consciousness. They shape the sense of personal vocation and mission and the mission, in turn, intensifies and animates the desires. Mission becomes the deep satisfaction of the strong personal desires developing out of prayer and contemplation and desires become the secure underpinning and vital *élan* for mission.

Thus, it is essential for contemporary Christians to enter prayerfully into the inner world of their desires. Exploration of this inner world of desire deepens prayer and sustains mission. The bridge between prayer and mission is fashioned by the desires which flow from both and sustain both. It is, thus, this arena of desires that is the contemporary locus for discernment of spirits and examination of consciousness. Such discernment and self-examination develops a powerful nexus between desires, prayer and mission and resolves in an integrated fashion the tension and/or polarity between prayer and mission.<sup>25</sup>

There is a third reality or strategy embedded in Ignatian spirituality which is of immense help to contemporary Christians if they are to integrate prayer and mission in a meaningful fashion. It is the strategy of decision and action. Ignatian spirituality is a decision-making and action-oriented spirituality.<sup>26</sup> The Ignatian insight *par excellence* is that one meets God in choosing and doing. Spirit-filled imagination, as we have seen, engenders magnanimous desires. Choice and action put flesh on desire and incarnate mission. Mission becomes the subject for new contemplation and reflection and so the circle grows and grows, as choice and action return one to prayer and discernment.

We shape ourselves by decision and action. Even as one's personal fundamental option is grounded in and flows from imagination, desire and will, it is made real in the world by choice and action. In the final analysis, desires are validated and confirmed when they are enfolded by choice and action. In this sense, it is true to say that one *is* what one *does*. Beneath and beyond the images, thoughts, feelings one has about oneself, the real self is constructed, revealed and communicated by action. In this sense, too, action becomes the largest criterion for self-reflection for it encompasses one's feelings and thinking, desiring and willing, prayer and mission. It is an all-embracing category and thus the best entry into the fullness and riches of the self.

It is for this reason that Ignatius insists on careful attention to *action* in the contemplations of the Exercises.<sup>27</sup> Contemplating imaginatively the Christ of the Gospels and his *action* develops deepening awareness and insight into the motives, values, desires and priorities of Christ. It is precisely this focus on the action of Christ that begins to shape in one the 'mind of Christ'. The values and priorities that ground authentic mission are objectively presented to us in the life and action of Jesus. Identical values and priorities develop in the human psyche by contemplating Christ's actions and then by doing likewise.

The only way to get to know Jesus is to follow after Him in one's own real life; to try to identify oneself with his own historical concerns; and to try to fashion His Kingdom in our midst. In other words, only through Christian praxis is it possible for us to draw close to Jesus. Following Jesus is the precondition for knowing Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

Thus it is that decision and action become the truest locus for a constant encounter with God. One accomplishes – really does – the will of God by action that flows from and solidifies the fundamental option to know and follow Christ in the real world and historical situations in which one lives.

Though it may be something of an overstatement, Roger Haight's reflection remains nevertheless true: 'In the end prayer alone does not and cannot constitute a real union with God. But, in the end, action alone, in the sense of doing or practice, can and does constitute a real union or separation from God.'<sup>29</sup> The point is that practice and action act as a bond that seals union with God in actuality. Familiarity, intimacy and real union with God became real and dynamic through choice, decision, action and mission.<sup>30</sup>

The tension between prayer and mission, contemplation and action, activity and reflection is a perennial one. It cannot but affect contempor-

ary Christians in a post-modern world. The contributions of Ignatius and Ignatian spirituality remain important and valuable. Becoming simultaneously contemplative in action by seeking God in all things offers a relevant strategy in this tension even for post-modern Christians.

The Ignatian strategies of imagination, deep desires, and confirming decisions and action form a humane and wholistic pattern to encounter the living God in both prayers and mission. The gospel-grounded and Spirit-enlivened imagination at work in prayer generates profound desires within a person for great and generous enterprises – mission to further the call and work of God in the world. The power of these desires energizes one to action in which God is known and possessed in the most real way possible. Choice and action reawaken the imagination and deepen and confirm the deepest desires of the person. Thus the cycle is intrinsically integrated. The tension between prayer and mission is resolved in the mutually enhancing pattern of prayer, imagination, desire and action. Prayer envisions mission and mission enhances prayer. Each is incomplete without the other; each is richer and more precious because of the other.

There can be little doubt that the integration of prayer and mission is a difficult enterprise. It would not have bedevilled humankind for so long were it not so. Most attempts to integrate these realities have been inadequate. They have too often led either to actionless withdrawal into prayer or exaggerated action devoid of prayer. The dynamics and strategies of Ignatian spirituality do offer a practical and effective way to effect a real integration of prayer and mission.

Life reflected on in prayer is a stimulus to prayer . . . prayer based on scripture and on the life and mission of Jesus helps us to be sensitive to the concerns of Christ in the contemporary world, to evaluate it as God does and to become engaged in that world for the sake of the Kingdom of God. And this circular, integrating movement can be a feature of our Christian experience irrespective of whether we are lay people, clergy or religious, single or married, and irrespective of age or status.<sup>31</sup>

It is the way of Ignatius and Ignatian spirituality to move toward a balanced, integrated and integrating rhythm and pattern of prayer and life, prayer and mission, so that one expands into and enlivenes the other and vice versa.

This is what the Christian tradition envisions in life and mission that is prayerful. This synthesis is at the very heart of Ignatian spirituality and promotes the deepest integration of prayer and mission.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Origen, *On prayer* (Classics of Western Spirituality, translated by Rowan A. Greer), p 104.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> Possidius, *Vita Sancti Augustini*, 3, 1–2.
- <sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 48, 2.
- <sup>5</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 19, 19.
- <sup>6</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons* 57, 9.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Summa theologiae* II, 182.3
- <sup>9</sup> *Commentary on Romans*, Ch. I, lect. 5.
- <sup>10</sup> *Summa theologiae* II, 182. 2.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf Frank J. Houdek SJ, 'Jesuit prayer and Jesuit ministry; context and possibilities', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 24, no 1, (January 1992).
- <sup>12</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *Autobiography*, 99.
- <sup>13</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *Letter 1854*, *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu* series 1, vol 3, 506–13.
- <sup>14</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, Contemplation to Attain Love, Exx 230–237.
- <sup>15</sup> G. Cusson, *Biblical theology and the Spiritual Exercises*, pp 326–332.
- <sup>16</sup> *Constitutions*, 340.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*; cf also *Constitutions*, 342 for the regimen of integrated prayer which he suggests for scholastics.
- <sup>18</sup> George E. Ganss SJ, *Ignatius Loyola* (Classics of Western Spirituality), pp 458–59.
- <sup>19</sup> *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu*, series 1, vol 6, 91.
- <sup>20</sup> David Lonsdale SJ, *Eyes to see, ears to hear*, p 89.
- <sup>21</sup> I am indebted to Howard Gray SJ for these reflections on Christian imagination.
- <sup>22</sup> Howard Gray SJ, 'Our obligation to seek disciples', undated vocation talk in the Archdiocese of Detroit; also cf William Lynch SJ, *Images of hope*, p 23.
- <sup>23</sup> GC 32 Document 4, 63–68; cf E. Deward Kinerk SJ, 'Eliciting great desires: their place in the spirituality of Jesuits', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 16, no 5 (November 1984), pp 10–13.
- <sup>24</sup> Kinerk, *op.cit.*, pp 2–5.
- <sup>25</sup> Kinerk, *op.cit.*, pp 20–24.
- <sup>26</sup> *Spiritual Exercises* 2.
- <sup>27</sup> *Spiritual Exercises*, 108, 116, 194.
- <sup>28</sup> Jon Sobrino SJ, *Christology at the crossroads*, translated by John Drury, p xiii.
- <sup>29</sup> Roger Haight SJ, 'Foundational issues in Jesuit spirituality', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 19 no 4 (September 1987), pp 39–40.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 40–41.
- <sup>31</sup> Lonsdale, *op.cit.*, p 96.