

# A FEMINIST REFLECTION ON IGNATIAN MISSION

By LORETTE PIPER

A TELEVISION INTERVIEWER ONCE ASKED Carl Sandburg, 'What is the ugliest word in the English language?' After a long silence, Sandburg replied 'The ugliest word in the English language is EXCLUSIVE!'

The word 'feminist', I confess, still makes me flinch a little; at least it did, until I came across Kathleen Fischer's description of feminism as:

... a vision of life emphasizing inclusion rather than exclusion, connectedness rather than separateness, and mutuality in relationships rather than dominance and submission. Feminism also entails the conviction that full individual development can take place only within a human community that is structured in justice. And so, feminism works for social change.<sup>1</sup>

That description of feminism holds particular meaning for me because of a brief and sudden grace which nonetheless changed my life by its incontrovertible authority. In that ten-year-old experience, I continue to find not only the beginning of my personal understanding of Christian feminism as conversion to solidarity, but also what I understand to be key traits of Ignatian mission, especially the notions of 'finding God in all things', becoming a 'contemplative in action', and struggling toward 'the faith that does justice'. Without awareness of the Ignatian process of discernment, as well as a deepening trust that God is indeed continually creating and inviting us to more abundant life, I doubt that I would have recognized this small epiphany which goes on shaping my ministry year after year. I return to it in prayer and reflection, hoping to come to that 'intimate understanding and relish of the truth' described by Ignatius in the Exercises.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of my work in inner-city Trenton, I and other women from the nearby wealthy suburb of Princeton started a pre-school programme for three- and four-year-olds in the neighbourhood, along with a high school equivalency class for their parents, mostly young single mothers. One of our first special events was a 'play day' with the fifth-graders from a private Catholic girls' school in Princeton.

As I watched the fifth-graders playing games and reading to the Martin House pre-schoolers, one of the suburban mothers who had generously volunteered to drive and chaperone the fifth-graders asked me to give her some background about the Martin House children. I told her what I was beginning to discover about their hand-to-mouth lives of poverty, violence, instability and family breakdown. This kind woman interrupted me with a comment I might have made a few months earlier: 'Well, I know that these children have all that really matters: all the love they need from their parents'.

In that instant, I felt that all the breath had been knocked out of me. I turned away unobtrusively and went up the shaky slanting stairs to my office. I closed the door and sat down on my creaky folding chair. An anger, which I like to believe was a participation in the anger of God, started to work its way up from my toes to the crown of my head.

I visualized the suburban mother's beautiful fifth-grade daughter downstairs. The wonders of the world waited for her: the best of schools all the way through her graduate degree, travel, the arts, access to all the glories of culture and science. Her phone will never be 'cut off'. She will always have heat in the winter and shoes to wear to church. Her meals are nutritious, and her medical care is reliable and effective. She knows every night where she will sleep. If she should ever be in trouble, she will always have someone to call. She will have many options for the use of her leisure time and for the training of her specific talents.

In a flash of illumination, I saw that it is never God's purpose that children anywhere should live the way our inner-city children live. I saw also that there are certain things that will not get done unless we learn how to do them. I thought of a family story about the prizefighter Gene Tunney and my grandfather. My grandfather asked him, 'Gene, does it really help to make the sign of the cross when you go into the ring?' 'It does,' said Gene, 'if you know how to fight.' Although I do not have to do everything, I do have to learn how to do something to hasten the coming of a world in which it is easier to be good, as Peter Maurin said.

Certainly love is the essential for human life; however, for many reasons in the inner city, love is not always available to children. Drugs, homelessness, imprisonment, the violence of poverty, illness, work schedules, or abusive family relationships sometimes keep the love that is truly there from reaching children. At that moment I realized that even if parental love were always available, I could not accept again the facile and cheap use of the word 'love' as an easy solution and a sop of appeasement to my conscience. It's not enough, not even the beginning of enough, in terms of justice.

This white heat was also anger at my own narrowness of mind and heart, my lack of creative Christian imagination, and my superficiality in refusing to step over destructive racial boundaries and socio-economic barriers. At that moment I also realized that there can be, for me, no ongoing revelation about God and self apart from ongoing inclusivity in mission. Ignatian mission and Christian feminism both summon us beyond charity to change, without neglecting the person in front of us.

Love persons so much, not causes, not ideologies, not movements, not one system or another system, but love John and Mary, Jose and Maria. Love them so much that you don't stop at that personal level but work to change the structures that violate their dignity.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time I felt not guilt but overwhelming gratitude for all that I have been given: family and friends, spiritual, intellectual and material goods. The corollary of my gratitude was the realization that everyone else has the right to all that I have been given. I knew clearly that gratitude, not guilt, must be the basis for joining the struggle of those who lack the resources to live humanly. I knew that I was beginning a task that would last for the rest of my life: to discover ways, however small and partial, to share what I have been given and to join others who work for equal educational opportunity, affordable housing, universal health care and just access to decision-making power. I found God in the unlikely place of my own anger, in the experience of contemplation in the midst of action, and realized, as William Barry SJ has explained so clearly, that God's purpose is for me to enter into God's action of creating the inclusive community, in no matter how modest a fashion.

We do not build up the Kingdom of God; rather we discover it insofar as we discern how to align our actions with the one action of God which is the Kingdom of God. We discover it, in other words, when we love as brothers and sisters with the intention not to exclude any person in principle from our community and when we create the structures that make the universal community of all persons more possible.<sup>4</sup>

We began with a few women asking together, 'What do we do now?' Then we listened to people in the inner-city neighbourhood, as we gradually formed a community based on our shared sense of mission. Our friendship with each other deepened, not at first through personal sharing, but through asking each other the big questions that kept

coming up in our struggle to address inner-city problems of poverty and violence, questions like 'How can we be rich and follow Jesus?' Unselfconsciously we were crossing denominational boundaries in prayer and worship, ministry and advocacy. Over a period of six years we reflected together as we discovered a new world of cultural deprivation, economic defencelessness, woefully inadequate health care and transportation, educational and employment opportunities; all this twenty minutes by car from our suburban homes. Stepping over the border of suburban narrowness and isolation we began a 'noviceship' that changed our lives as single, married and religious women; spiritual direction, eight-day retreats, mini-courses in scripture and group spiritual direction emerged from our ministry together. Together we 'enlarged the space of our tent', as Isaiah puts it.

Another moment of grace nudging me toward solidarity and inclusiveness occurred during an eight-day retreat directed by a Jesuit friend. Being directed by this particular Jesuit was more important to me than the fact that I had to stay in a convent where sirens, noise, and the violence of the inner city never cease. However, the convent is next door to a very beautiful church and, on Sunday afternoon, seeking peace and quiet, I took refuge there, assuming it would remain empty. Settling down in a back pew, I closed my eyes as Hopkins' line floated up into my consciousness,

Elected Silence, sing to me  
And beat upon my whorled ear.<sup>5</sup>

A gentle rain had just begun. At that moment, in burst several homeless persons with shopping carts and plastic bags filled, no doubt, with all their earthly belongings. They sat and chatted quietly in the back of the church.

Then the front door burst open and a large, ebullient Spanish-speaking family quickly established themselves in the sanctuary to rehearse the music, complete with tambourines, maracas and guitars, for their latest upcoming baptism. Gradually, other people drifted in, young and old, Asians, Caucasians, a few African-Americans. A group of Altar Guild ladies prayed the rosary aloud. Some people lit candles, others made the Stations of the Cross, several people went to pray in the Lady Chapel. I looked up at the magnificent mosaic of the Apostles marching across the vault above me. I looked around at each saint's statue, and finally at the powerful and tender image of Jesus crucified behind the altar. Suddenly I started to laugh aloud or perhaps I just joined in God's laughter. The word that came to me was something like

this: 'Take your place in the family. Relax. Everyone is trying to do the same thing by whatever means: to get in touch with the Mystery, to make contact with Love and with each other, to get through the night, to be at home. Do whatever helps you to live the gospel. There's plenty of room in this house for everybody.'

When I reflect on solidarity, equality and inclusiveness as key concepts of feminism, I am apt to think of Mrs Bamjee's memory. Mrs Bamjee is a character in Nadine Gordimer's story, 'A chip of glass ruby'.<sup>6</sup> She is a homely, conventional Moslem wife and mother, living in the Transvaal town where she has always lived. For me, Mrs Bamjee's life is an embodiment of the feminist insight that the personal is political. For her, the political is also personal. She is as devoted to the liberation of black South Africans as she is to justice for her own Indian people, and as she is to the detailed and loving care of her own large family. Protesting the law requiring black South Africans to carry passes, Mrs Bamjee 'was up until long after midnight, turning out leaflets. She did it as if she might have been pounding chillies.' When the Special Branch finally knocks on the Bamjees' door in the middle of the night to take her to prison, Mr Bamjee feels martyred and very angry with his wife. A few days later, his married daughter comes to wish him happy birthday, in obedience to her mother's wishes. The mystified Mr Bamjee replies to his daughter's greeting,

'What importance is my birthday, while she's sitting there in a prison? I don't understand how she can do the things she does when her mind is always full of women's nonsense at the same time – that's what I don't understand with her.'

'Oh, but don't you see?' the girl said. 'It's because she doesn't want anybody to be left out. It's because she always remembers; remembers everything – people without somewhere to live, hungry kids, boys who can't get educated – remembers all the time. That's how Ma is.'<sup>7</sup>

In Mrs Bamjee, I find encouragement toward autonomy and interdependence. She reminds me of Jesuit Peter Henriot's useful description of discipleship today. Father Henriot speaks of the three dimensions of human experience, all of which must be taken into account simultaneously: the individual, the interpersonal and the public. The first two dimensions may be somewhat familiar territory, but the third dimension offers particular challenges, especially for women. Women know something about finding God in themselves and others, in prayer and in service. Women's necessary attentiveness to physical rhythms, to details of daily routine, and to the concrete needs of their families and

communities prepare us to find God in all things, to be attuned to God's action in every human experience.

Many of us, however, struggle with the third dimension, looking for ways to change 'sinful structures' and to recognize 'graced structures'; to join in the process of social transformation, rather than to stop with the comfort of offering direct relief.

It seems to me that there can be no genuine Ignatian mission apart from Ignatian spirituality and no Ignatian spirituality apart from Ignatian mission. If today we can no longer leave out the third dimension of discipleship, then we would benefit from much more widespread practical implementation of Father Henriot's vision:

The spiritual life of a Christian is marked by a true integrality only if the public dimension of his/her existence is attended to. This will mean incorporation of contemporary socio-economic-political insights into spiritual counseling and retreat directing, much as the insights of psychology have been incorporated.<sup>8</sup>

My own experience, as well as my privileged observation of many other women's lives, has shown me that women are able to enter into the process of Ignatian spirituality and mission at one of its most distinctive gates, 'finding God in all things', and that they are delighted to do so. Recently I asked a middle-aged mother of four young children how she found time and space to keep her commitment of an hour of daily prayer during the Retreat in Everyday Life. With radiance in her voice, she replied, 'At night, when they are sleeping, I listen to my children breathing'.

In her professionally elegant suit, Susan leaves her high-powered corporate job to meet me at noon once a month in a lovely local park. We put on ugly sneakers, munch on sandwiches, and talk about how God seems to be acting in our lives, savouring the changing seasons as we walk. Susan had been meeting only frustration in her desire to put her considerable talents for leadership, community-building and organization to good use in her parish. When her husband's health suddenly changed for the worse, Susan's return to the workplace was not only a necessity but a liberation and a discovery of her real mission at this season of her life. The quality of her presence often challenges and influences attitudes and relationships in her office, particularly in the areas of truth-telling and mentoring younger colleagues. Susan's car is her monastery during her quiet, early morning drive, as the sun rises over a nearby lake. At that moment, Susan says, God gets in the car and they start the new day together.

At the beginning of an eight-day retreat last summer, one retreatant who is a wife, mother, ordained minister and hospice chaplain, remarked, 'You know, my mother never sat down. And she never leaned back. Today I sat down and I leaned back'. In contrast to her life history, this retreatant's startling, new image of God was a reclining chair, overstuffed and ultra-comfortable, at least for the week. For the first time, she became aware of a God who cherished her, supported her and rejoiced in her rest and pleasure. Retreats for women today can offer the opportunity to re-examine and revise our understanding of how God is present and acting in our everyday lives and relationships, to come to new clarity of self-definition, and to listen more easily to our particular call to conversion. Women on retreat can come to see who and how they are in a situation as free of customary restraint and obligations as is possible, in this life anyway! Quiet and freedom from pressures sharpen our outer and inner senses and the real questions gradually become clear.

A single, retired woman in her sixties was praying before a crucifix, having come a little early for our appointment. In her praying, she saw Jesus turn his face slowly toward her; astonished, she saw that his face was without features, just a smooth piece of wood. Sheila told me that in fact she herself felt invisible to everyone. People never seemed to know she was there. No one seemed to want to be really present to her, despite all her kindness and good works. She felt like a boring work-horse, taken for granted as an ever-ready volunteer in her parish and with her family and friends. Her heart's deepest desire was for intimacy with Jesus and with others. We agreed on several small strategies, necessary risks and initiatives; we also agreed that Sheila would try some new ways of praying, using her particularly gifted active imagination in Ignatian contemplation. During the next two years, when Sheila returned to the image of the blank face of Jesus, she saw that his features were beginning to emerge. At the same time she was beginning to experience herself differently; she deepened her sense of self, of her true desires, her strengths and weaknesses, and her artistic powers, as well as her awareness of oppressive influences in her past life. Today, Sheila chooses her ministries with freedom and joy, especially seeking out lonely and disabled persons, and she has met the challenge of breast cancer with equanimity and courage. As Karl Rahner wrote, 'The experience of self *and* the experience of God . . . constitute a unity; the experience of self is the condition which makes it possible to experience God'.<sup>9</sup>

An environmental lawyer whose faith, courage and sense of self have been affirmed and deepened by several years of spiritual direction,

retreats and faithful reflection on her experience, found herself ready to take a major risk. Despite the possibility of losing her job, and the disagreement of some colleagues, she chose to work for change in the legislation which allowed corporations that polluted local rivers to pay relatively small fines. Through her persistence, the financial penalties were increased, so that offending corporations were forced to change their destructive methods. Formerly a 'nice Catholic girl', this woman now seeks the common good as the political consequence of her personal spirituality.

During the last several years especially, my experience of Ignatian spirituality and mission, in the form of the eight-day directed retreat and the Nineteenth Annotation with women of various denominations, backgrounds and professions, is that of a dynamic moving toward personal and social transformation, a dynamic which could become a powerful leaven in the ongoing renewal and reform of our Churches. As women grow in freedom, confidence and sense of self, corresponding to new intimacy and empowerment in their relationship with God, creativity and energy is released. Middle-aged and older women now seem especially ready for more: more intimacy with God and others in freedom from fear and self-doubt; more meaning, joy and abundant life in their faith communities, and a more passionate commitment to living the gospel in the complexities and ambiguities of our world today. My hope is that women of colour and women who struggle for the resources necessary to live a human life for themselves and their families will not be excluded from this aspect of Ignatian spirituality and mission.

I will never forget the Australian sister and retreat director whose chosen ministry was cleaning houses, along with other sisters in her local community, to earn the money needed to provide eight-day directed retreat 'scholarships' for inner-city women who otherwise could not take advantage of such an opportunity. She must have asked herself the question, 'Why was I not born into the terrible poverty of Calcutta or into crack addiction in the Bronx, or into a life of repression in Guatemala?' And she must have heard the answer welling up within her, 'You were, you were'.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Women at the well - feminist perspectives on spiritual direction* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, ed Louis J. Puhl SJ (Chicago IL 60657: Loyola University Press), p 2.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Henriot SJ, homily (Rome: 29 October 1984).

<sup>4</sup> William Barry SJ, *God's passionate desire and our response* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1993), p 109.



<sup>5</sup> 'The habit of perfection', *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (ed Robert Bridges, Oxford University Press, 1948), p 46.

<sup>6</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *Selected stories* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), p 37.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 47.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Henriot SJ, 'The public dimension of the spiritual life of the Christian: the problem of simultaneity' (4) from *Soundings: a task force on social consciousness and Ignatian spirituality*.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Experience of self and experience of God' in *Theological investigations III* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), p 124.