IGNATIAN PRAYER AND INDIVIDUALISM

By THOMAS E. CLARKE

FOR THE PAST FEW DECADES I have found myself over and over making use of an intriguing statement in Thoreau's *Walden*:[1] 'I had three chairs in my house: one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society'. For me the three chairs symbolize a terse paradigm of how human life is constituted: through inwardness and aloneness; through companionship and relationships; and through engagement in the public or political processes which constitute what we call society.

Only gradually through these years has it dawned on me that the life of Ignatius Loyola after his conversion might, without undue stretching, be described with the help of this schema. Solitude was predominant at Loyola and Manresa, and on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, when he deliberately chose to journey alone so that he might experience what it meant to rely only on God. '. . . if he took a companion . . . he . . . would trust the companion and feel attachment to him. But he wanted to place that trust, attachment, and expectation in God alone.'[2]

Returning from Jerusalem, the pilgrim entered on a period when his significant journeys, in Spain, to Paris, thence on to Venice and Rome, were made in companionship, as the embryonic Company of Jesus took shape. Friendship and intimacy were the primary motifs of this period. Finally, Ignatius formed his company into the Society of Jesus and governed its corporate journey within the hierarchical Church, dialoguing with popes and monarchs for the public good of Church and society.

Three polarities

All this came back to me when I was invited to write on Ignatian prayer and individualism. I soon discovered that – again hopefully without setting up a Procrustean bed – the theme lends itself to the same triadic development. I want to suggest that individualism and Ignatian prayer can be helpfully discussed by dealing with three polarities: the self and the other; the individual and the community; the private and the public spheres of human life. If one extends the notion of individualism somewhat, all three of these tensions lie within the scope of reflection.

It was only after I had undertaken this article that I came upon a remarkable essay by John Staudenmaier dealing with precisely the same theme.[3] One of the things I learned was the wisdom of not leaping to a facile counter-cultural critique of contemporary individualism. Seeing it in its positive aspects as well as in its limitations invites one to look for corresponding values and risks in the Ignatian way in prayer.

The self and the other

A first area for relating Ignatian prayer to contemporary individualism has to do with the polarity between the self and the other. An appropriate entry point is the widespread characterization of our culture, especially in the United States, as narcissistic.[4] Christopher Lasch relentlessly pursues the ramifications of narcissism in several aspects of life today. Pathology, however, is always a distortion of or deviation from something true and right. Preoccupation with the self, psychological or spiritual, is in fact a betrayal and caricature of genuine self-awareness. Without love, esteem and care for God's image within, my caring for others will be flawed. Further, there are moments in the journey when we need to take the risk of focusing on the self, in a kind of moratorium on attending to the needs of others or to the larger good of society.

Two classic examples

This need has found classic expression in at least two major figures in the history of Christian spirituality. The young Augustine wrote in a dialogue with himself:

> I have made my prayer to God. *Reason.* – What then do you wish to know? *Augustine.* – All that I have mentioned in my prayer. *Reason.* – Briefly summarize it. *Augustine.* – I desire to know God and the soul. *Reason.* – Nothing more? *Augustine.* – Nothing whatever.[5]

John Henry Newman, in his turn, wrote of the time when he found rest 'in the thought of two and only two absolute and luminously self-evident beings, my self and my Creator'.[6]

That Ignatian spirituality accents the self calls for no extended proof. This solitary pilgrim, or wandering monk (as Jean Leclercq has described Ignatius) was led from the beginning to create an instrument through which individuals would be helped to lose and to find their unique selves. The Spiritual Exercises, as a paradigm for all Ignatian prayer, embrace this brand of individualism with all of its attendant risks. Examples abound. The second exercise of the First Week would

have me scrutinize the particulars of my sinfulness and compare myself in this regard with the angels and saints, with the whole of creation and with God. Who and what am I really? The cry of wonder of the same exercise over the forbearance of other creatures in the face of my shameful personal history of sin sustains this introspective focus. And it is as that unique, sinful self that I go before Christ crucified to wonder how he has come to such a sorry condition – *for me* – and to ask what I have done, am doing and ought to do for such a loving saviour.

In the key Second Week exercises of the Kingdom and the Two Standards, powerful social images provide both context and stimulus for a commitment that is full of personal generosity and holy ambition. Also, a deep sense of the uniqueness and value of the self is inherent in each preparatory prayer, in the repeated invitation to consider how the gaze of God – as Lord, Father, offended monarch, friend – is upon me as I begin the exercise, and is also in both formulated self-offerings, in the meditation on the Kingdom and the Contemplation for Gaining Divine Love.

At the same time the Spiritual Exercises do contain some inbuilt safeguards against indulgence in a narcissistic 'trip'. Ignatian prayer is innately dialogical in character, inviting to an enhancement of the self that is always supported and challenged by interaction with a significant other, whether human or divine. In the Ignatian retreat the daily conversation with the director is a sane safeguard against spiritual solipsism. In the ordinary course of life spiritual direction can serve the same purpose. The already mentioned insistence on praying always under the divine gaze, and the invitation to engage often in 'colloquy', are similar measures. It has been well said that the only healthy place for scrutinizing one's sins and sinfulness is within the embrace of a loving God who accepts me as I am.

Christopher Lasch depicts starkly some of the character traits associated with pathological narcissism: 'dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral cravings'.[7] The Spiritual Exercises may be seen as an austere but ultimately consoling liberation from such enslavements. The prominence in Scripture of the theme of shame and glory finds a loud echo in the exercises on the Kingdom, Two Standards and Three Modes of Humility. I exercise myself, and I pray for the grace not to be dependent for my self-esteem and self-love on acclaim coming from the world. And the God whose favour I do seek and find, as did Jesus in his baptism and transfiguration, is not the patriarch requiring subservience if I am

to avoid eternal shame. Rather, to the degree that the Spiritual Exercises form Christ in me, my concern to please God in all I do will stem from a free self which does what it wants and wants what it does.

In summary then, when Ignatian prayer is true to itself it will successfully risk, on behalf of the unique self that I am, the dangerous shoals of self-centredness, narcissism and solipsism.

Individual and community

The contemporary cultural context for setting forth this second aspect of individualism in Ignatian prayer has been eloquently articulated by Robert Bellah and several associates in a widely acknowledged study.[8] While they provide a diagnosis and some remedies for individualism only in the peculiar setting of the United States, their insights are valuable wherever in the modern world the polarity of individual and community has come undone. From the standpoint of several disciplines they document some of the ways in which the warming fires of community have been largely quenched by individualism both subtle and blatant. Now is the time, they imply with some nostalgia, to rekindle the flame of communality without which the noble strain of respect for the individual degenerates into a cruel and selfish society.

Those fully committed to the Judaeo-Christian heritage will resonate with this kind of language. It has long since become commonplace to trace in Old Testament history the development from a corporate to an individual accent in understanding the ways of God in relation to the people of God. Chapter eighteen of Ezekiel appears to be the pivotal point of this development. Readers of the Gospels and other New Testament books will discover both emphases, and sometimes, as in the Pauline metaphor of the body of Christ, they will find impressive integrations of the individual and the communal. The individual–community tension also provides an interesting perspective for examining diverse forms and successive periods in the history of religious life. As material, political, economic and cultural conditions changed, so did the shape of religious community. Examples are the emergence of apostolic forms after the long reign of monasticism and, in our own times, the still fragile growth of secular institutes. All forms have had to struggle to maintain the difficult balance between honouring individual dignity, responsibility and freedom on the one hand, and a respect for communality on the other.

From this standpoint, what might be said about Ignatian prayer? The particular aspect here chosen, in keeping with Thoreau's second chair, is that of prayer in common in Ignatian traditions. The plural is

used advisedly, as the tradition in question is broader than the practice of Jesuits. Besides the numerous congregations of women religious and a few men's groups which share the Ignatian charism, Marian Congregations (now the Christian Life Communities) and other recently established groups such as the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and Jesuit International Volunteers in the United States have had to deal with the difficult task of finding appropriate ways to pray together.

At the risk of seeming to disparage the past and over-simplify history, we might say that Jesuits were generally more successful than most Ignatian congregations of women in ridding themselves of monastic remnants in their life-form in general and in ways of praying together in particular. For us, prayer in common, apart from the eucharist (which I consider to be societal, not group prayer) was reduced to the recitation of 'litanies', which, before they withered away a few decades ago, had become a tedious and mindless fulfilment of requirement, at least in the United States. Women religious, on their part, were saddled with an obligation to recite a reduced version of the divine office or the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Recent decades have seen a remarkable and complex renewal and adaptation regarding forms of communal life among both religious and laity. Prayer in common among women and men religious has been largely demonasticized. New and more subjective forms such as 'faith sharing', '*révision de vie*' and the like have shifted the style of community prayer to the more subjective and interpersonal. The insight that mutual self-revelation with God is fostered and expressed best through the mutual self-revelation by members of the same group has yielded rich dividends in strengthening the bonds of community and reducing isolation and individualism.

But is there anything distinctively Ignatian about such a development? Not necessarily. Still, those steeped in the Ignatian tradition will inevitably bring to such prayer experiences some of the salient traits of their heritage. Such group prayer will be predominantly apostolic and not monastic in tone, even as it draws upon the richness, for example, of the tradition of praying the psalms in common. It will also, directly or indirectly, contribute to the discerning decisions by which apostolic community is continually actualized and occasionally reborn. From the standpoint of both form and regularity, it will know how to accommodate to life-styles in which the need for a spirit of mobility and openness to change and interruption are characteristic. If it is truly Ignatian it will have a strong ecclesial quality. Today this last feature requires that it be able to resonate with the scandal of division and alienation which

afflict the Church in our day. If there is any place where our grief over the wounds we suffer and inflict in the Church should find consoling expression, surely it is when we pray together. And finally, our group prayer will reflect our deliberate commitment to the service of faith and promotion of justice on behalf of the poor by expressing a basic solidarity with all who suffer from any form of injustice. Remembering how much Ignatius himself made of intercession, we cannot but take our yearnings for peace and justice into the times when we pray together.

Private and public

Thoreau's third chair has to do with society, with those human constructs and configurations which, supporting or threatening the welfare of individual persons and their relationships, powerfully influence the course of history. The cultural entry point for this part of our reflection is the rediscovery in the past three or four decades of the public or societal dimension of the gospel. Political and liberation theologians have reminded us that, through the secularization of society in the era of the Enlightenment, faith, religion and spirituality became 'privatized'. The process of 'deprivatization' is one of the more important characteristics of the spirituality that has emerged since the Second Vatican Council. The Thirty-Second General Congregation of Jesuits, as it has influenced other Ignatian communities, was a landmark in this regard.

To what extent do we find in the *Spiritual Exercises* and other primordial Ignatian documents a recognition of the importance of society for spreading the gospel, and, more pointedly, for the prayer of Jesuits and others? The Spiritual Exercises themselves contain some clear indications that Ignatius was sensitive to the larger dimensions of the struggle for enlightenment and freedom. The scenarios of the Kingdom, Incarnation and Two Standards require the retreatants to set their personal discernment within the framework of the cosmic struggle of light and darkness. The Rules for Thinking with the Church call retreatants to examine and reform, if needed, their attitudes and behaviours regarding 'our Holy Mother, the hierarchical Church'. Jesuits in Ignatius' time and in subsequent generations could hardly be expected to work from the insights which Marx and modern sociology have provided regarding the interactions of consciousness and structures. Their apostolic practice, nevertheless, reveals an intuitive feel for public power both within the hierarchical Church and within the royal courts where political strategies were intertwined with evangelization of the

nations. The suppression of the Society in the late eighteenth century also witnessed darkly to the presence of Jesuits in places of public power.

And so those in the Ignatian tradition who today engage in efforts to reform or subvert societal structures which hinder the spread of the gospel are acting in continuity with their roots and their tradition. Then and now, of course, the risks of enmeshment in constricting and even worldly endeavours need to be ackowledged. Ignatius warned against our taking sides on issues controverted among Catholics. His successors today, following the lead of a perhaps over-anxious Vatican, have had occasion to set limits to our involvement in controversial political issues. It remains true, however, that the Ignatian charism, in its several communitarian and institutional embodiments, requires a commitment to the public good of the Church and civil society.

But what does this entail so far as Ignatian prayer is concerned? The principal place where Ignatian prayer meets society is within liturgical celebration, especially in the eucharist. For liturgical prayer of its nature is societal prayer. As its etymology indicates, liturgy has an essentially *public* character (*leitourgia*: public worship). In the ritual experience of word and sacrament the gathered community listens and responds to God's call to pursue the common good of the Church and of human society.

Here, as in personal and interpersonal prayer, it is not always easy to distinguish what is Ignatian from what is simply Christian. Nor is it necessary. What we have in common with other traditions is more important than what is singular. Still, especially in Jesuit parishes, colleges and retreat centres, and in other locales which have been influenced by the Ignatian charism, it is possible to name some characteristics.

One is a spirit of accommodation to cultural contexts. The memory of the Chinese rites and the Paraguay 'Reductions' is doubtless at work whenever we choose to bend the rules for the benefit of *this* celebrating community. The same spirit will prompt the Ignatian preacher to a large measure of freedom with respect to exegetical and homiletical accommodation to the needs of the local congregation. Such freedom, a feature of Jesus' own ministry, will surely characterize Ignatian public prayer, particularly in this time of cultural turmoil and transition. Such a willingness to accommodate and to find new forms, for example forms which acknowledge the equal dignity of women, stands in tension, of course, with another Ignatian attitude: the spirit of ecclesial obedience expressed primordially in the Rules for Thinking with the Church.[9]

Praying in solitude, with companions, and in the societal prayer which is the eucharist, the Ignatian companions of Jesus will experience both the difficulties and the rewards of keeping these three arenas of prayer somehow integrated. Mindful both of the positive values and of the shortcomings of contemporary individualism and the individualism of the Ignatian heritage, we may better appreciate how the God whom we image is infinitely one in and through the uniqueness of three persons.

NOTES

[1] H. Thoreau, *Walden and other writings* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p 208.

[2] *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and selected works* (New York: Paulist, 1991), p 82.

[3] John M. Staudenmaier SJ, 'To fall in love with the world: individualism and self-transcendence in American life', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits* 26 (May 1994), pp 1–28.

[4] Christopher Lasch, *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations* (New York: Warner, 1979).

[5] John H. S. Burleigh (ed), *Augustine: early writings* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1953), pp 26–7.

[6] J. H. Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua* (Penguin Books, 1994), p 25.

[7] C. Lasch, *op. cit.*, p 74.

[8] Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

[9] Staudenmaier's essay, already mentioned, is focused on the private/public split in late American capitalism which tends to make us 'responsible adults in the private world and passive conformists in the public order' (*op. cit.*, p 15). He contrasts this with the dynamic of the Ignatian Exercises: 'In the First Week I follow Jesus to the broken and violated places of my own life in order to be liberated. In the Second Week I begin to follow Jesus where he calls me to the broken and violated places of the larger world' (*op. cit.*, p 22). Staudenmaier notes that the crucial exercises of the fourth day of the Second Week, on the Two Standards and the Three Classes, are followed immediately, on the fifth day, by the contemplation of Jesus' departure from Nazareth, a movement from the private to the public.