JESUS IN THE HEART'S IMAGINATION

Reflections on Ignatian Contemplation

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IN ANY DISCUSSION OF IGNATIAN PRAYER, some attention is usually given to the systematic use of the imagination, to 'picturing a scene' as a kind of meditation practice, especially in the highly structured prayers of the Spiritual Exercises.[1]

Throughout the Exercises, St Ignatius instructs retreatants to use their imaginations in a variety of ways: to picture various things happening and to picture themselves in various situations. In one exercise, for example, he invites us to picture ourselves on our deathbed, reviewing the course of our choices in life; in another exercise, he invites us to look down from heaven to earth with the Holy Trinity, seeing humankind in all its struggle and longing.

Ignatius called this practice by different names: 'composition of place', 'contemplation' and 'application of the senses'. How are we to regard this 'picturing' practice today? This is our first question.

In the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks of the Exercises, however, this inward imagining has mainly to do with the Gospels – with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The main subject, then, of this Ignatian contemplation in the context of the Exercises themselves is really Jesus and the apostolic testimony – the story of Jesus as it is told in the New Testament, the story of his life and of his messianic mission, and the self-bestowing word of God that is enfleshed there.

So a second question arises. In spite of the great complexity of contemporary New Testament studies, the intense contemporary discussion of the historical Jesus and his teaching, the scepticism that meets almost any claim to know something about this Jesus, does this practice of prayerfully 'imagining Jesus' still have some significance for us today?

And interwoven with these imagined gospel scenes are a series of contemplations, considerations and prayers that involve the retreatants themselves – how they live, what they do, what they care about, and what they discern God asking of them in response to the gospel.

These 'key' exercises are centred on the question of what we should invest our hearts in and what we should do with our energies. They connect the Jesus-story to our own stories in a very intimate way, opening the Jesus-story on to our own present moment and our own future hopes and dreams. They explore the deepest desires and wishes of our hearts, leading to an important decision about how we should live our lives. In the ideal case, for Ignatius, they would mediate to a retreatant readied by grace a vocation to the service of 'the Divine Majesty' in 'the apostolic life'.

So a third question must also concern us here. What, then, is the connection between 'imagining Jesus' and this praxis that Ignatius called 'the apostolic life', which Jerónimo Nadal said was modelled after the ministry of St Paul?

After all, there is nothing uniquely Ignatian about this process of picturing something to yourself. When I was a child, I often sat with my parents in our living-room at night and listened to the radio with them, especially to dramatic programmes. They were mostly murder mysteries and stories about police detectives, and with no instruction, and without reflection, I often pictured to myself the scenes that we were listening to, so that, now – strangely – my memories of these programmes include *visual* elements, traces of how I had imagined their characters and locations.

I suppose it happens spontaneously with us that we 'fill in' the visual picture when we listen to stories being told or enacted – we *envision* them in some way, we make them over in our minds. And something similar happens when we read a novel, or sit alone with old memories on a porch swing, or rehearse an after-dinner speech in our fantasies, or eagerly anticipate the visit of a friend. In these cases the imaginary seeing may be accompanied, of course, by imaginary hearing, feeling, smelling or tasting, as well.

By envisioning the situation to ourselves as vividly as possible we make it more alive, arouse more real feeling, and impress the situation more firmly in our memory and expectation. Schoolchildren are taught this method of enlisting their inner senses in their studies in order to intensify their concentration. Through this deliberate imagining, we sharpen and deepen our attention and shape and educate our affections.

Nor was there anything especially original in Ignatius' employment of imagination in *prayer*. This inward envisioning of gospel scenes was already, by Ignatius' time, an old-established practice. We find something like it as early as the twelfth century – in Aelred of Rievaulx –

where it is already associated with a new depth of world-affirmation in Catholic spirituality. Instructions for picturing the scene as if it were happening could be found in the *Life of Christ* by Ludolph of Saxony, which Ignatius read on his sickbed during the time of his conversion.

It is not the technique itself so much as the underlying attitude it reflects that is important for understanding what is distinctive about the 'Ignatian vision'. This prayerful imagining is the sign of a basically positive assessment of created reality, of the world of the senses. Reflecting the work of a 'kataphatic', 'iconic' or 'analogical' imagination, it is the mark of a world-affirming spirituality.

This positive regard for image and fantasy is also reflected in the interiors of the early Jesuit churches, the pedagogy of the early Jesuit schools, the 'memory palaces' of Jesuit scholars, and the Rules for Thinking with the Church in which Ignatius urges us to praise, among other things, stations, pilgrimages, jubilees, the lighting of candles in churches, the ornaments and buildings of churches, as well as sacred images themselves.

This unabashed enlistment of the senses in the service of faith and devotion, what Johann Baptist Metz has called 'invoking grace in the senses',[2] is the expression of a fundamental attitude toward life which may be described as 'incarnational', or as a 'sacramental' vision of reality, or as the reflection in practice of a profound conviction that God truly can be found 'in all things'.

Rather than looking for God in a flight from materiality and the realm of the senses, then, it suggests that matter itself is holy, and that things themselves in the very suchness of their being may become diaphanous with God's presence. This is the kind of religious sensibility we find in Aelred of Rievaulx's theory of friendship, for example, in Ignatius' Contemplation to Obtain Love, in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, or in the spiritual writing of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin:

> By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us and molds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers . . . As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world, to which we brought the boredom and callousness reserved for profane places, is in truth a holy place, and we did not know it.[3]

What Ignatius contributed to this Catholic tradition was the use of this deliberate imagining in a highly structured experience of prayer and discernment – leading to the election of a course of *action* in the world. What he wanted was to be 'contemplative in action'. And it is

this, I think, which provides a clue to the real originality of the Ignatian attitude. Within the context of a world-affirming spirituality, a path of 'manifestation' and 'theophany', Ignatius introduces a critical and historical dynamic, a 'prophetic' dimension: the discernment of a concrete summons of God's Spirit within the heart to a redemptive, a world-transforming enterprise.[4]

The more general importance of Ignatian contemplation is rooted in these larger issues: one having to do with 'theological anthropology', with the human need for living symbols and vital symbolic mediation; another having to do with Christology, the way the appearance of God's gift of fullness of life in Jesus comes to be grasped in the inmost heart of a believer; and a third having to do with the integration of 'manifestation' with 'proclamation', or, better, of the mystical with the prophetic dimensions of Catholic faith, and the emergence in the Ignatian tradition of a world-transforming 'mysticism of action'.

It is only a mysticism which views imagination in a positive light that can itself envision particular historical circumstances and entertain specific possible responses in action – that can carry forward in the fullest sense the eschatological vision and messianic mission of Jesus.

These are the concerns I have meant to emphasize in choosing the title, 'Jesus in the heart's imagination'.

The heart's imagination and its habits

This inner faculty of imagining – of picturing a situation – is important for us and important for human self-understanding in our time.[5]

Symbols are the life-blood of conscious animals, the necessary compensation for our instinctual vagueness and 'world-openness'.[6] All our experience is mediated by meaning through a stream of words and images. It is this symbolizing process of the psyche which makes possible the fuller range of human practices.

Even at its deepest level, the psyche itself may be conceived of as a flow of images, an ongoing construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of meaningful form. As Robert Jay Lifton has written:

> In human mentation we receive no perceptions or stimuli nakedly, but inwardly re-create each exposure or encounter in our ongoing struggle toward form . . . The *image* is the more immediate link between nervous system and environment.[7]

What shapes our 'souls', in other words, are these images, metaphors and stories: the habits of our imaginations.

During much of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by contrast, this thing we call 'imagination' was viewed with much

suspicion by many influential people. The autonomous, rational self, disinterested observation and the moral will were the major character ideals of Enlightenment culture. From the Calvinist wing of the Reformation, through various kinds of rationalism and empiricism, to the rigours of the positivist temper and the logical mind, images and imagining were often attacked, ridiculed and trivialized.

Because of the role imagination played in the Spiritual Exercises, however, its significance impressed itself on many Jesuit writers and on many people influenced by Ignatian spirituality. Ignatius' use of this technique, rooted in a visually oriented sixteenth-century Catholic culture, assured a respectful attention to fantasy and image in most of the Jesuit tradition. In the emerging world of modernity, with its preference for abstraction, universality, certainty and timelessness, this positive regard for image and imagination was often 'counter-cultural'.

But attitudes in the wider culture have changed dramatically over the last two centuries, attitudes toward images, metaphors and symbols, as well as toward dreams, narratives, poetry and rhetoric. Poets, novelists and painters have made imagination central to their understanding of artistic creation; many philosophers since Kant have made imagination central to their views of the human person; and many twentieth-century psychologists and psychotherapists have made imagination central to their theories of the psyche, its sufferings and its healing.[8] Even historians, physicists and economists now sometimes acknowledge its role in their own disciplines.

Part of what we find significant today in the 'inner picturing' of the Ignatian tradition, therefore, is its tension with a dominant strain of 'modernity' and its resonance with important contemporary intellectual and cultural developments. It points to resources in the Catholic tradition with which to make a positive response to the cultural situation sometimes described today as 'postmodernity'.[9]

We find that this 'ongoing struggle toward form' in our psyches sometimes gets bogged down, however, or turns in a strange direction, gets trapped or falls apart. The images – the habits of the heart's imagination – linking some particular nervous system and some particular local environment sometimes freeze in place and no longer serve to disclose the truth of the situation. Sometimes a person's accustomed way of imagining the meaning of life collapses suddenly in the face of a crisis. Sometimes whole groups of people lose themselves in suicidal fantasies; and sometimes a whole people will be seized by feverish images of fury and hatred. The imagination may be a place full of good *or* evil spirits.

In other words, the primary imagination, of an individual or of a people, may require criticism, therapy, repentance, revitalization. In this process, however we conceive of it, the intentional use of the imagination can play an important role.

Ignatius' own use of imagining in prayer makes it clear that for him imagination was more than merely imitative or reproductive. Within the given framework of a contemplation, each individual will picture the scene differently and allow the fantasy to play out as if 'on its own'. The retreatant both posits the scene and observes it at the same time: it comes from without but it connects with something coming from within. It reproduces a gospel situation, but the imagination is itself productive of details, new possibilities and unexpected outcomes – outcomes that reveal something about the depths of the retreatant's heart.[10]

Every act of imagining, in fact, involves an element of *play*, an expression of freedom and innovation, a creative use of existing resources. If images and words impose themselves too adamantly on consciousness, the result is literal-mindedness, conventionality, and in the extreme case, some kind of 'neurosis', what Søren Kierkegaard called 'an excess of necessity'. If inner urges and desires, on the other hand, overwhelm the resources of available words and images, the result is idiosyncracy, ungrounded fantasy, and some kind of 'narcissism', what Kierkegaard called 'an excess of possibility'.[11]

A healthy imagination must learn to move in the middle ground between environment and nervous system, fact and desire, the achieved and the newly emergent. In the same way, a healthy tradition must continually re-imagine the fullness of meaning of its central symbols and focal practices.

The 'soul', we could say, is a place where the self is always, spontaneously, trying to imagine what is real. This flow of inner images organizes our attention, shapes our action and reveals the condition of our hearts. The roots of this ongoing imagining come to consciousness in our dreams, fantasies and free associations, and reveal something about the hidden depths of the psyche. When we consult our hearts and pay attention to our actual feelings, therefore, we learn something about these deeper habits of our imaginations.

It is through the imagination that we learn about the condition of our hearts; and it is through the imagination that it is possible to re-educate our hearts and attune ourselves more fully to God's movement in them.[12]

Jesus in our hearts' imagining

In the Spiritual Exercises, however, these imaginings are always forms of prayer, undertaken with a conscious attitude of reverence for God's presence and of supplication for particular graces. The specific character of the education of our hearts intended by them is 'eschatological' and 'messianic'.

Beyond whatever might be said about the imagination in a more general way, therefore, the Ignatian use always involves 'picturing to oneself' as a gesture of worship, a way of reaching out to the holy mystery which encompasses our lives. Ultimately, we are trying, in all this imagining, to imagine the truth about ourselves and God.

The focus of this envisioning in the Exercises is the memory of Jesus in the Church and the story of Jesus as it is told in the Gospels. In these narratives, God breaks into our soul-life in the person, the kingdom-preaching, the ministry, the death and resurrection of this Jesus. By picturing these stories, we release the Church's memory of Jesus from its distance and seclusion in the past and allow it to mediate a personal encounter with the Jesus alive today in God.

This contemplation of the Gospels is a way of trying to appropriate their revelatory and redemptive meaning, their God-disclosing power, at a deeper and more personal level. Through this practice, we are trying to imagine what Jesus was really like, how it all happened, what we ourselves might have thought and felt had we been involved in the sacrament of his earthly existence.

These questions continue to be of great interest to our contemporaries. Books about 'the historical Jesus' continue to arouse widespread and animated discussion. These books, though sometimes contentious and ideological, can often be sources of real nourishment and needed correctives for our imaginations.[13] But they remain, religiously, 'dead letters' unless they are taken up into a prayerful re-imagining and a prayerful communal remembering of this Jesus.

It is possible to know many things about Jesus, about the Gospels, about form-criticism, redaction-criticism, tradition-history and the application of sociological and literary-critical theory, and yet still to have no feel for what was happening in this event, for what some people were discovering in this Jesus, and for what this discovery might mean for us today. In *The Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus says:

> When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you dwell in poverty, and you are poverty.[14]

We all have heard of 'the children of God'. What remains is to realize that we ourselves are actually these children, that the language of the Gospels is, even now, actually about *us*.

By trying to imagine, concretely, what this Jesus might have been like, we bring ourselves, our own life-worlds, our own fears and longings, more fully into the picture. By imagining Jesus with our whole hearts we may come to know ourselves in the way that Jesus knew himself.

The Church's teaching about the incarnation is itself meant to be an education for our imaginations. The concrete, particular human being, Jesus, is the ultimate, the irrevocable word of the living God. God's love does not call us away from concreteness and particularity, therefore, but always calls us back to it. Rather, God's love shapes our longing and imagining to the forms of enfleshment and historical life, teaching us how to love real people, and promising wholeness – fullness of life – even for our bodies: 'on earth even as in heaven'.[15]

Thus this envisioning of Jesus in the heart's imagination seems a practice deeply relevant to a postmodern sensibility: in the way it acknowledges the constitutive role of the imagination in all cognition; in the way it involves the whole person – sense, imagination and affection, as well as thought and will; in the way it affirms the need of specific and living traditions; and in the way it affirms the conviction, in Michael Downey's words, 'that particularity and wholeness are not irreconcilable but are dialectically inseparable'.[16]

The ways of affirmation and negation

In an essay I have already mentioned, entitled 'Meditation: its spirit and techniques', Claudio Naranjo distinguished three fundamental types of meditation which he called 'the way of forms' (or 'concentrative or absorptive meditation'), 'the negative way', and 'the way of surrender and self-expression'.[17] Let us return, now, to this subject of 'the negative way'.

In any discussion of Ignatian contemplation, some attention will usually be given to the tension between this practice and the wordless, imageless contemplation associated, for example, with Evagrius Ponticus, or *The cloud of unknowing*, or St John of the Cross. Even though this 'negative' or 'apophatic' tradition is old, honourable and continuous, many contemporary Christians view it suspiciously and may even think of it as 'Eastern'. Practitioners of this tradition return the compliment by conceiving of the prayerful use of images as something like the foothills of serious meditation, to be left behind as one ascends the mountain.

In fact, both traditions are well represented in the history of Catholic Christianity. It cannot be that we are now supposed to choose between them. In part their differences can be explained by differences of temperament, of cultural formation, or of personal history. Both kinds of sensibility are also present in the histories of Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. This challenges us to move beyond suspicion and antagonism, to develop concepts large enough to encompass these contrasting practices.

Catholicism has always made room for silence, solitude and renunciation, for the work of an 'apophatic', 'iconoclastic' or 'dialectical' imagination. Still, it seems to me that Catholic Christianity must always come back, finally, to words, gatherings and affirmations, to the human being as *imago dei*, to the sacramental sensibility, to faith in an incarnate Word. Of all the great religious traditions, Catholicism places the greatest emphasis on the authenticity of mediation, on bodiliness as a bearer of ultimate meanings, and on symbols that actually effect what they represent: 'real presence'.

Nevertheless, this sacramental vision of reality is not without its own dangers. The path of manifestation and theophany can be degraded, can turn into superstition and magical thinking, into passivity and numbness – in the face of deadly routine, or even in the face of massive injustice. In order to say 'Yes' with wholeness of heart to the mystery of our existence, it is sometimes – *usually* – necessary also to say 'No': 'No' to violence and oppression, 'No' to cruelty and indifference, 'No' to hypocrisy and greed, 'No' to every kind of idolatry, and 'No' to all the ways in which these things are institutionalized in our societies. This 'No' to sinful structures is also a 'No' to the compulsions and obsessions of our egos.

A mysticism which does not despair of earthly circumstances, but which remains grounded in bodiliness and dares to hope for God's reign to come on earth as in heaven, must somehow incorporate into itself the interruptive, pattern-breaking and re-imagining activity of the prophetic consciousness. There must somehow be a foundational kind of world-affirmation and a strategic kind of world-renunciation: a union of the mystical and prophetic impulses in Catholic faith.

Ignatian contemplation is a kataphatic practice. Its appeal will always be, primarily, to people who insist that, because of the incarnation, the way of images can take you all the way to the highest mystical stages. But in the context of the Exercises, these imaginings are connected with desires, situations and projects. Through them, what God

desires to do in the world, a desire that is fully manifested and embodied in Jesus, becomes the vocation and mission of living, breathing men and women in our own time.

By bringing together the cause of Jesus and the stirrings of our own hearts in a mysticism of action, the Exercises point beyond the impasse of prayerful fantasy and 'centring prayer', toward a recovery of the 'eschatological' and 'messianic' dimensions of the way of Jesus, the reintegration of mystical and prophetic vision. Because it is Jesus we are trying to imagine, the path we follow must be 'all-yes' and 'not this, not this' at the same time.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, James Walsh, 'Application of the senses' in *The Way Supplement* 27 (Spring 1976), pp 59–68. Cf Philip Sheldrake, 'Imagination and prayer' in *The Way* (April 1984), pp 92–102. On the history of this method of prayer, see Linda Spear, 'Prayer with images', *The Way* (July 1973), pp 236–244.

[2] Johann Baptist Metz, 'Toward the second Reformation' in *The emergent Church*, translated by Peter Mann (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp 48–66, especially pp 51–56.

[3] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The divine milieu: an essay on the interior life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p 89.

[4] See the discussion by Paul Ricoeur, 'Manifestation and proclamation', *The Journal of the Blaisdell Institute* 12 (Winter 1978), and the development of these ideas in David Tracy, *The analogical imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp 193–229. On the critical, historical elements see especially Walter Brueggemann, *The prophetic imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); on the 'prophetic' function of the arts, see Herbert Marcuse, *The aesthetic dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

[5] See, for example, the representative discussions in Stephen Happel, 'Imagination, religious' in Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane (eds), *The new dictionary of theology* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1987), pp 502–508; Sally Ann McReynolds ND, 'Imagination' in Michael Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), pp 531–535; and the articles by Christopher Bryant, Mark Searle and Michael Paul Gallagher in the special issue on 'Imagination and images' in *The Way* (April 1984), pp 83–91, 103–114, 115–123.

[6] The term is taken from the work of Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen. See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp 47ff.

[7] Robert Jay Lifton, *The life of the self: toward a new psychology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), p 74.

[8] See especially James Engell, *The creative imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981); J. Robert Barth SJ, *The symbolic imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic tradition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977); and Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). See also Edward S. Casey, *Imagining: a phenomenological study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976) and Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished man and the imagination: toward an ontology and a rhetoric of revelation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968). On imagination in the context of psychotherapy, see, inter alia, William F. Lynch, *Images of hope: imagination as healer of the hopeless* (New York: Mentor-Omega Books, 1965) and Mary M. Watkins, *Waking dreams* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

[9] See, for example, Michael Downey, 'Postmodernity' in Michael Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality*, pp 746–749. For sympathetic Catholic receptions of the discourse on postmodernity, see especially David Tracy, *Plurality and ambiguity: hermeneutics, religion, hope* (San

Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) and Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the postmodern divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[10] In an influential essay entitled 'Meditation: its spirit and techniques', Claudio Naranjo distinguished three fundamental types of meditation practice which he called: (1) 'the way of forms' or 'concentrative or absorptive meditation', (2) 'the negative way', and (3) 'the way of surrender and self-expression'. The Ignatian contemplation seems to me to combine a 'way of forms' with a 'way of surrender and self expression'. In the final section of this essay we will come back to 'the negative way'. See Claudio Naranjo, 'Meditation: its spirit and techniques' in Claudio Naranjo and Robert E. Ornstein, *On the psychology of meditation* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), pp 1–132.

[11] In his *Sickness unto death*. See the discussion in Ernest Becker, 'The psychoanalyst Kierkegaard' in his *The denial of death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), pp 67–92.

[12] On these matters, see especially Mary M. Watkins, *Waking dreams*, cited above, and, more recently, David Freedberg, *The power of images: studies in the history and theory of response* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[13] See, for example, Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the language of the kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, translated by Hubert Hoskins (New York: Crossroad, 1979); Amos N. Wilder, *Jesus' parables and the war of myths* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*, 3rd edn (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992); Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: a new vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); John Dominic Crossan, *The historical Jesus: the life of a Mediterranean Jewish peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); and James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver (eds), *Images of Jesus today* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994).

[14] *The Gospel of Thomas*, translated by Marvin W. Meyer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p 23.

[15] See, for example, William F. Lynch, *Christ and Apollo* (New York: Mentor-Omega Books, 1963); on the Ignatian vision, see pp 28ff, 65ff, and *passim*.

[16] 'Lamentably, modernity has made of them rivals and competitors.' Michael Downey, 'Postmodernity' in Michael Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality*, pp 748–749.

[17] See n 10, above.