

THE LIMITATIONS OF IGNATIAN PRAYER

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Therefore, this seems to be the message which God entrusted to Ignatius through the mystical favours with which He almost overwhelmed him: service through love, apostolic service for the greatest possible glory to God, a service given in generous conformity to the will of God . . . in order to follow Christ, the Leader who is ardently loved.¹

THUS DOES DE GUIBERT CHARACTERIZE the spirituality of Ignatius Loyola as a spirituality or mysticism of service in which everything is ordered to fruitful service. Actually, de Guibert simply re-formulates the insight of Francisco Suárez in the seventeenth century. For Suárez, the Society of Jesus desires in its members a specific kind of 'complete perfection'. Both the perfection in itself, and all the means of attaining it, are to 'serve for the perfection of the Society's neighbours'.²

In discussing the limitations of Ignatian prayer, it is, therefore, important to keep in mind that, for Ignatius, prayer is not an end in itself. It is rather subordinated to a larger goal: the service of the neighbour motivated by love of Jesus Christ.³ Such a finality itself already constitutes a limitation of Ignatian prayer.

In addition to this important awareness, some further observations are necessary if we are to engage in a fruitful discussion of the limits of Ignatian prayer. First we must distinguish the *gift* of prayer from *methods or techniques* of prayer. All prayer begins with God. It is the self-revealing action of God in which God reveals divine mystery to the person and also reveals the person to himself or herself. By one and the same light and grace one comes to know the love, mercy, goodness and forgiveness of God and comes also to understand more deeply the mysteries of one's own person. This self-revealing action of God is the *gift* of prayer. It is an activity that is as constant and abiding and loving as is God. It embodies God's desire for familiarity with each and all of us. It is a gift, freely given by God and absolutely unique to each human being. God accommodates the gift to the age and temperament, the gender and history, the culture and needs of each unique person. Though the same God is acting and revealing, the shape and contours, the fabric and

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flavour of God's revelation is specific to each person. My experience of God is not yours, though we experience the revelation of the same God. The *gift* of prayer, therefore, is personal and unique. Only I have my experience of God.

The *methods or techniques* of prayer, on the other hand, are available to many persons indiscriminately. They can be utilized by persons of varied background, history and temperament. They are simply strategies to bring to awareness the personal gift of prayer which has been given by God to each person. They embody structures and disciplines to help one notice, nurture and develop one's unique gift of prayer. Though often developed in a particular milieu or historical setting, these techniques have transcended their original ambience and helped persons in vastly different settings to collaborate with God's unique personal gift of prayer.

Such strategies as self-reflection, personal recollection, centring, intellectual meditation, imaginative contemplation, the prayer of the heart, repetitive mantras, personal reminiscence and many others create a kind of scaffolding which supports and strengthens the individual gift of personal prayer. Techniques like rhythmic breathing, use of icons or mantras and particular physical postures simply aid one in sustaining the personal gift of prayer.

Second, it is important to note what is meant by Ignatian prayer in this current context. Certainly, we do not mean the particular gift of prayer which was specific to Ignatius himself. This gift cannot be communicated to anyone else, since it was specifically his and without duplication. Jerónimo Nadal, one of Ignatius' first companions, described this gift of Ignatius as, 'in all things, actions, and conversations he contemplated the presence of God and experienced the reality of spiritual things, so that he was a contemplative likewise in action (a thing which he used to express by saying, "God must be found in everything")'.⁴

Rather, by Ignatian prayer we mean the techniques or methods of prayer contained in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola. This is an ordered set of strategies to assist anyone who is intent on familiarity with God, but under a particular modality. These are techniques and methods directed toward God and self-awareness in relationship to God, but with a very direct orientation to service of the neighbour. Ignatian prayer is, therefore, an organic, developmental complex of methods and techniques of prayer and self-reflection which discovers, sustains and strengthens a personal gift of prayer that finds fulfilment and fruition in the world and in service to others.⁵

Further, although Ignatius inherited some of these techniques and methods from a variety of traditions and spiritualities, he imprinted his own experience and personality on them. He organized and related the various techniques in an organic and developmental way which moves from very simple and primitive reflections to gifts of mature and unitive prayer. This is really the Ignatian genius of the Spiritual Exercises. The Ignatian quality of these methods and techniques shows itself in the developmental organization of the methods of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises.

What, then, are the limitations of Ignatian prayer, the methods and techniques of prayer suggested in the Spiritual Exercises? Are these methods and prayer techniques intended only for the young or relative beginners in the life of the Spirit or are they also helpful for those already adept at spiritual practice and prayer?

In the first place, almost all of the techniques of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises are forms of discursive prayer. This means, of course, that they encourage and support the action and activity of the person who is praying. Self-examination, meditation, prayer of repetition, familiar prayer of colloquy and imaginative contemplation of gospel mysteries are all techniques from the Spiritual Exercises which call for intense and complex activity by the person praying. They ask for activities of memory, understanding, imagination, reasoning, desire and decision.⁶ They put the pray-er in the forefront of activity. Certainly, these techniques and methods of prayer presuppose the antecedent, initiating and revelatory action of God. They also engage the very active and disciplined energy of the person who is praying.

Though each of these methods of prayer has a different finality and is structured to accomplish a different purpose,⁷ they all emphasize the personal activity of the one who is praying. This reality is of the essence of discursive prayer: it is active, cognitive, imaginative prayer. This style of prayer best describes the strategies and techniques of the Spiritual Exercises. This implies limitation in the Ignatian strategies of prayer. The methods of the Exercises would be ill-suited for a person whose gift of prayer was more passive or non-discursive. Ignatian prayer would be counter-productive for such a person.

Clearly, discursive prayer represents the kind of prayer that most people use at the beginning of their personal journeys of faith. It is the style of prayer that most men and women learned on their parents' laps and which they develop through their adult lives, i.e. an active, reasoning, meditative and/or imaginative style of personal prayer.

Ignatius himself recognized this fact in his own experience and in his relationships with others. Early in his own pilgrimage while at Manresa

he remarked that God treated him just as a schoolmaster treats a child whom he is teaching.⁸ He obviously considered himself a beginner in prayer and utilized methods and techniques of prayer appropriate to such a person.⁹ He exercised himself very actively in prayer of self-examination, meditation, imaginative gospel contemplation and prayer of repetition. The active and energetic nature of Ignatian prayer is well illustrated in the Third Week of the Exercises. There Ignatius urges the one praying 'to set to work with much energy and force myself to grieve . . . laboring in like manner over the points which follow'.¹⁰ As he recounted his experience at Manresa many years later, he recognized the initiating, revealing activity of God. In the actual experience at Manresa, however, his prayer was initially active and discursive and these are the methods and techniques of prayer that he organizes in the Spiritual Exercises. To these he introduced his early companions.

Ignatius also realized this in his relationships with others. Though the Spiritual Exercises are predominantly discursive, they exhibit an inherent flexibility which allows them to be adapted to a very wide range of persons. The introductory observations at the very beginning of the book describe various kinds of persons and indicate how the techniques and methods of the book are to be adapted to various persons.¹¹ These observations clearly describe persons of widely varying temperament, age and religious disposition. The categories of persons mention in detail everyone from absolute beginners on the spiritual journey to men and women of considerable spiritual awareness who have already developed to some extent their particular and specific gifts of personal prayer. Though the Exercises do recommend prayer that is predominantly discursive and therefore inherently limited, the methods and techniques still remain accommodated to persons who have a deeper and more cultivated life of personal prayer, self-reflection and self-awareness.

There are other principles of accommodation and adaptation in the Spiritual Exercises that deserve our attention. Early in the Second Week, Ignatius recommends accommodation to the age and/or weakness of the person.¹² Again with real sensitivity Ignatius recognizes the limitations of the techniques and methods of the Exercises and still adapts these limited instruments to the needs of the person who is praying. He makes similar accommodations and adaptations at other significant junctures of the Exercises.¹³ In all of this Ignatius seems completely aware of the limits of the methods and techniques of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises. He also sees them having an inbuilt flexibility and adaptability which allows them to facilitate prayer for a rich variety

of men and women. Though limited in their scope, the planned flexibility and adaptability of the Ignatian methods of prayer is one of the richest facets of the Exercises.

Certainly, the Exercises are extremely helpful for those who are at the beginning of the spiritual life. Their discursive and ordered nature offers clear and significant assistance to all who are intent on developing their rudimentary gifts of personal prayer. They provide a kind of spiritual primer for many such persons. The history of the Society of Jesus certainly demonstrates this fact. Statistics available from the early Society in Italy indicate that between 1540 and 1565 about eighty per cent of those admitted into the Italian provinces of the Society of Jesus were between the ages of eleven and twenty-five.¹⁴ Almost fifty per cent of these candidates were under twenty years of age. Even in a culture where length of life was considerably shorter than in ours, these candidates for religious profession were of a rather tender age. Many, in fact, were no more than mere children. In the General Examen, a kind of manual for candidates and those who interviewed them, Ignatius clearly indicates that all candidates after entrance are to make the Spiritual Exercises in their entirety.¹⁵ He clearly saw that these methods and techniques of prayer and the religious awareness and discipline which they developed were well suited to rather young candidates of the Society of Jesus. The manual of the Exercises did provide a very apt schooling in the ways of prayer typical of the Society of Jesus. They developed and supported gifts of prayer which found fruition in apostolic service grounded on close familiarity with the person of Jesus Christ.

Even with such young novices, Ignatius was notably sensitive. Though he indicates that they should all make the Spiritual Exercises in their entirety, he also accommodates this direction to the age and spiritual experience of the novice. He explicitly states this in the third part of the *Constitutions*, which deals with the formation of novices. There he recommends very personalized accommodation to each novice so that, if one proved incapable of the entire Spiritual Exercises, 'such exercises as are suitable for his capacity should be given him, that by them he may aid himself and serve God our Lord'.¹⁶ Implicit in all of this is his realization that some people may not be helped by the limited and discursive methods of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises. Though he states this principle in regard to neophytes in the spiritual life, it is also applicable to those who are more advanced in prayer and spiritual discipline and practice. The prayer of the Exercises in its limited active, discursive mode would be ill-suited for such persons.

A second limitation of Ignatian prayer deserves our attention: this is the almost entirely Christocentric dimension of the Spiritual Exercises.

The Christ figure of the Gospels dominates the Exercises from beginning to end. Every important consideration or transition in the Exercises revolves around the person of Christ. The constant petition of the Exercises is 'for an intimate knowledge of the Lord who was made man for me, that I may love him more and follow him'.¹⁷ The fulfilment of this petition is the overriding intention and thrust of the Exercises. It is this Christocentrism which creates the colour, taste and fabric of the Exercises.

Though it is very difficult to prove or demonstrate, there is an axiom in human experience that is very much at play in Ignatian prayer. What is this axiom? We become like those with whom we consciously choose to associate. Teenagers become like their peers; children become like their parents. Spouses begin to resemble one another and colleagues emulate each other if they consciously choose to value and associate with one another.

It is this axiom that grounds the Christocentrism of the Spiritual Exercises and the techniques of Ignatian prayer. These methods and techniques of prayer place one in close association with the person of Jesus Christ for at least five hours a day for an extended period. One is exposed to the values and viewpoint of Christ. One enters imaginatively into the likes and dislikes, the anger and fear, the predilections and invitations of God incarnate. Such association is gradually but really and deeply personally transformative. Contemplative association with the person of Jesus gradually re-shapes or reforms the person increasingly into his likeness.

Though for many people this Christocentrism of the Exercises is one of their most endearing features, it is nevertheless a limitation of Ignatian prayer. For many reasons it is not congenial to a wide variety of men and women in our contemporary culture.

The continuing power of the pneumatic or charismatic movement is important here. In what is characterized as the Age of the Spirit, a more Spirit-centred prayer has won the allegiance of many contemporary Christians. Though the person of Christ remains important for such Christians, their prayer and spirituality is dominated by the person of the Holy Spirit. For them Ignatian prayer is too limited and therefore less useful than other prayer forms or techniques.

The emergence of feminist consciousness has led countless women to seek more feminine images of God, and modes and styles of prayer more accommodated to the feminine psyche. Maternal images of God, the feminine figure of God as Wisdom, forgotten biblical women or heroines of the Christian tradition have an ever deepening allure for

many women who are intent on sustaining and cultivating their unique and specifically feminine gifts of prayer. With a kind of connaturality they gravitate to these distinctively feminine images and symbols. They also have developed styles of prayer that more engage the body, the emotions and the intuition and that are viewed as better adapted to the feminine temperament. To them too the more masculine symbols and techniques and the Christocentrism of the Exercises are uncongenial.

Finally, we must consider the introduction of eastern spiritual discipline and practice into our contemporary western culture.¹⁸ The thrust and intent of such practice is ordinarily toward passivity in prayer and toward the gradual elimination of thought, image and symbol from the consciousness of the person praying. The methods and techniques of such practice are ordered to an absolute openness to the initiating action of God without any intervening or mediatory image, thought or symbol. For people inclined to this more passive quality of relationship to God, the discursive and active methods of Ignatian prayer and its Christocentrism are significant limitations. For them the modes of Ignatian prayer are seen as obstacles rather than aids to their personal gift of prayer.

These limitations are built into the structures and methods of Ignatian prayer. As discursive modes of prayer, they are of little help to those whose personal gift of prayer is more contemplative and non-discursive. Their high Christocentrism can be and often actually is uncongenial and non-conductive to the prayer of a broad spectrum of prayerful Christians, e.g. Spirit-centred people, many women, and many who seek to incorporate eastern spiritual practice and discipline into their own spirituality.

Even with these limitations there are two important further points to notice about Ignatian prayer. First, though intrinsically limited, the strategies of Ignatian prayer can open one to the more simple and more contemplative gifts and techniques of prayer. Their order and structure gradually become more simple, more affective and more intuitive. Ignatius constantly urges such simplification in prayer. He supports and encourages prayer that leads to the inward sense and taste of things.¹⁹ He emphasizes the need to rest (*reposar*) when one finds the grace and mystery that one is seeking.²⁰ He urges experience which allows the Creator to work directly with the creature.²¹ He is intent on prayer which increases devotion and the person's capacity to find God in all things.²² His own experience showed him that the prayer of the Exercises had led him to significant gifts of personal contemplation, both acquired and infused contemplation. He encouraged the use of these methods to develop something of the same gifts of prayer in those who used them. A reflection of de Guibert certainly confirms this point:

These observations explain the repetitions, resumptions and other ways of tending toward an ever growing simplification of prayer. They indicate how the soul can be led step by step to pause at length on some thought where grace causes it to have greater nourishment; in other words, how it can be led gradually to a true contemplation.²³

In other words, Ignatian prayer, though limited, has the inner potential to develop the deeper personal gifts of contemplative prayer. These Ignatian strategies are ordered to the reality of contemplative prayer. They have been used by many men and women to develop very important personal gifts of contemplative prayer.

Secondly, Ignatian prayer remains a vital and viable prayer in our contemporary world. It has been noted that contemporary life is marked by a pervasive and unreflected penchant for therapeutic individualism.²⁴ This reality exhibits three interrelated facets: first, an egocentrism which sees the self as the only valid judge of belief, value and commitment; second, a deep-seated mistrust and cynicism about both the values and responsibilities of inherited traditions and any kind of actual interdependence with family, loved ones or peers; third, a mesmerizing inclination to achieve self-knowledge and to change behaviour so as to escape one's dysfunctional dispositions.²⁵

In this cultural context is there some way for the contemporary Christian to live in faith without a naïve withdrawal from the reality of our contemporary culture? Does Ignatian prayer offer any suggestions or direction here? Indeed it does.

The imaginative gospel contemplation of the Spiritual Exercises does allow one to move from personal need to the needs of the world. These contemplations develop a spirituality in which a person experiences that he or she is beloved of God. One comes to know mercy, forgiveness, love and affection from the living God, and affection from others provided by God for one's well-being. With such a sense of connection one can transcend the prevalent culture of therapeutic individualism and develop a deeper capacity to embrace and love the human condition in its actuality. One also finds the moral integrity and courage to escape egocentric and parochial needs and concerns and to enter more fully into God's redemptive processes in the world.²⁶ Thus does Ignatian prayer remain vitally important for Christians in the cultural conditions in which we live.

Ignatian prayer is a complex variety of methods and techniques of prayer outlined in the Spiritual Exercises. These methods and techniques are limited in their scope. They are almost univocally and thoroughly Christocentric. Because of these limitations, they are not

easily adaptable to every person attempting to use them. Even with these significant limitations, their intrinsic flexibility and the spirituality of service which they develop make them notably valuable in the contemporary world.

NOTES

¹ Joseph de Guibert SJ (trans William J. Young SJ), *The Jesuits: their spiritual doctrine and practice* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1964), pp 180–181; cf also pp 178–179 where prayer and union with God are seen as means to the greatest possible glory of God.

² Francisco Suárez SJ, *De religione Societatis Jesu*, I, 2, no 10, *Opera omnia* XVI, 565 (Paris, 1860).

³ Hugo Rahner SJ (trans Francis John Smith SJ), *The spirituality of St Ignatius Loyola* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1890), p 12: 'The Ignatian ideal of the *Spiritual Exercises* is contained in the four words *señalarse más en servicio* – to distinguish oneself more in his service'.

⁴ Jerónimo Nadal SJ, *In examen annotationes*, in *MHSJ*, MN V, 162.

⁵ David Lonsdale SJ, *Eyes to see, ears to hear* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), p 87: 'The structure is meant as a means of liberation . . . by which each person can find his or her own personal way of praying. Ignatius' methods . . . are intended to set people free to find the way of praying that suits them individually, and experience shows that, rightly used, they do this powerfully.'

⁶ Exx 1, 24–26, 43, 45–54, 101–109, 118–119.

⁷ William A. Barry SJ, *Finding God in all things* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1994), p 132: 'In meditation we reflect on the mystery with which we are presented. In a contemplation we hope that we will experience God's own presence'.

⁸ Ignatius of Loyola (trans William J. Young SJ), *St Ignatius' own story* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1980), p 22.

⁹ Barry, *op. cit.*, p 135: 'In other words these experiences occurred when he was still young in the spiritual life'.

¹⁰ Exx 195.

¹¹ Exx 18–20.

¹² Exx 129.

¹³ Exx 133, 162, 205, 209, 227.

¹⁴ St Ignatius Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, translated with an introduction and a commentary by George E. Ganss SJ (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), p 129, footnote 2.

¹⁵ Ganss, *Constitutions*, 65, p 96.

¹⁶ Ganss, *Constitutions*, 279, p 162.

¹⁷ Exx 104.

¹⁸ Cf Anthony de Mello SJ, *Sadhana, a way to God* (first edition, India, 1978).

¹⁹ Exx 2.

²⁰ Exx 76.

²¹ Exx 15.

²² Ganss, *Constitutions*, 250, 258; cf footnote 5, pp 155–156. *Letters of St Ignatius Loyola*, trans by William J. Young SJ (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959), letter to Anthonio Brandão, pp 240–241.

²³ de Guibert, *op. cit.*, p 564.

²⁴ John M. Staudenmaier SJ, 'To fall in love with the world', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 26, no 3 (May 1994), p 2. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), *passim*.

²⁵ Staudenmaier, 'To fall in love', p 2.

²⁶ Staudenmaier, 'To fall in love', pp 26–28.