Has Christ been parcelled out?

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Spirituality and spiritualities

WRITING IN 1959 OF ST BEDE, Donald Nicholl noted that:

> It is most inaccurate to cite him, as frequently happens, as a representative of 'Benedictine spirituality', for there is not the remotest suggestion in his writings that he recognised any schools of spirituality – the very notion would smack to him of conventicles rather than of the Church.[1]

Yet the renewal of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius which began in the decade after Nicholl wrote has resulted in a whole tradition of spiritual guidance and direction which describes itself as Ignatian, considering itself to be a legitimate outgrowth of those Exercises. This article considers whether, or to what extent, it is legitimate to speak of an Ignatian tradition of direction in this way, given that the guidance Ignatius offers in the text is so closely tied to learning discernment within the very particular structure of an enclosed retreat. A similar challenge might indeed be offered to any school of guidance which appears to mark off a territory distinct from that of any other. Can that quest for truth which spiritual guidance serves be said to follow a Franciscan or a Dominican, a lay or a feminist, path? Or is dividing up spiritual traditions in this way the establishing of those 'conventicles' which Bede may well have been wary of, and which Paul attacks in the opening chapter of 1 Corinthians: 'All these slogans that you have, like "I am for Paul", "I am for Apollos", "I am for Cephas". *I* am for Christ! Has Christ been parcelled out?' (1 Cor 1:12)?

As a preliminary question, I will consider whether, even within an Ignatian framework, it is possible to extrapolate from the guidelines for that specific experience which is the full Spiritual Exercises to patterns of guidance taking place in a variety of other settings. The core of the article then asks what might be meant by 'Ignatian' spiritual guidance. How does this add to, or modify, what might be thought of as general good practice in this field? Parallels from other areas of Christian life and faith are offered as illuminating the question. Finally, a series of practical conclusions will be drawn.

How should guides who feel themselves to be rooted in a particular tradition approach those who seek their help but come from another school, or have no particular allegiance? Can we avoid establishing conventicles?

From the Spiritual Exercises *to spiritual guidance*

It is well-known that the *Spiritual Exercises* is not primarily a work to be read in its own right, but a handbook for one who wishes to guide others through a pattern of prayerful reflection that in its full form takes around thirty days.[2] The reflection is aimed at 'the regulation of one's life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment',[3] discerning the various interior movements (or 'spirits') which might influence one, and seeking to follow only those which are most true to the basic direction of one's life (it being assumed by Ignatius, at least for those who have proceeded beyond the exercises of the First Week, that this basic direction is likely to be God-ward[4]). It is not immediately self-evident that such a patterned reflection can be modified to be of use in other situations. Hints to assist in the making of a parachute jump may be of little use in indicating how best to climb down a steep cliff! Yet the text of the Exercises itself presupposes that the contents can, and indeed should, be modified in a variety of ways. So the nineteenth of Ignatius' introductory observations describes how to proceed with someone who is unable to set aside their everyday business, but can give perhaps ninety minutes daily to the task. The eighteenth speaks more generally of those who would benefit from some lesser programme.[5] Indeed, throughout the work there are constant recommendations to take into account the particular needs of those with whom the guide is working, to adapt the material to these needs.[6] Many of the forms of guidance which would describe themselves as 'Ignatian' today claim to base themselves on precisely these indications within the Exercises. It is thus undoubtedly legitimate to extrapolate from the full Exercises to other situations even though any particular claim for a true connection would have to be judged on its own merits.[7]

Such adaptations have mushroomed since the renewal of the Exercises already referred to. They range from embedding the experience within a wider pattern of study and reflection to make up the sort of sabbatical programme that might take three months or more, to parish-based 'weeks of guided prayer' in which people take perhaps half an hour daily out of busy lives to pray, and then a

single period in a week to reflect with another on what they have discovered.[8] Of particular interest to our present consideration is the tradition of ongoing spiritual guidance offered by those who have themselves benefited from the Exercises. Ignatius clearly presupposed that many of those who had made the Exercises would be in a position to offer them to others. So in the Constitutions which he composed for the Society of Jesus he writes bluntly of Jesuits in training: 'After they themselves have experienced the Spiritual Exercises, they should get practice in giving them to others'.[9] And he is known to have encouraged some individual non-Jesuits to make the Exercises precisely so that they could take them to others whom his few early Jesuits had not had time to deal with.

Contemporary practice in training guides in the Ignatian tradition almost universally proceeds by leading them through systematic reflection on their own experience of making the Exercises. This experience, with some training in basic listening skills or counselling techniques, and an awareness of the differences between what is appropriate in different kinds of guidance (for instance, that there is a 'closure' involved at the end of a week of guided prayer that is not called for in a situation of ongoing spiritual direction), is usually considered enough to enable someone to begin to offer guidance in a variety of the different ways already referred to. Stress on the advisability of continuing supervision, and the necessity of continued reflection on experience of guiding so that lessons can be learned, leads some way into ensuring that a desired continuing formation will take place.

Distinguishing marks of Ignatian guidance

We can ask, then, what it is that distinguishes the tradition of spiritual guidance calling itself Ignatian from other good practice. To answer this question it helps to have an idea of what might characterize 'good practice' in spiritual guidance in a way that is independent of any particular spiritual tradition. Part of an answer would be that it should include what counselling would regard as good listening skills, and, as noted above, training in the various techniques for this is now a regular part of the formation of spiritual guides. Again, the sort of non-judgemental attitude that is associated with some schools of counselling may well be thought advisable. Here, it should be noted, we have moved a long way from the kind of training that was formerly given to sacramental confessors in the Catholic tradition, where spiritual guidance was often accompanied

by the confessor judging (or perhaps, on occasion, helping the penitent to judge) the gravity of the sins which were the main focus of the exercise. A third aspect of this good practice could be a certain breadth of experience in the guide, such that he or she is able to offer materials or techniques for a range of experiences which the one guided may have had. Lastly, the observance of a professional code of conduct with regard to the guidance situation, covering such areas as confidentiality and supervision of the guide, is often held to be important, even if this code is not spelt out explicitly.

Some sense of this generalized good practice helps identify what a specific tradition, here the Ignatian, can supplement this with. Three possibilities might be considered. The first would be the employment of particular methods of prayer. Thus it would be possible to hold that communal celebration of the Divine Office, the *opus Dei*, is a characteristic of Benedictine spirituality, and contemplation of the Christmas crib a gift to the Church in general from the Franciscan tradition. Is there anything comparable from Ignatius? Two answers come to mind. Often the name of Ignatius is associated with imaginative contemplation, that reflecting upon an incident in the Scriptures that seeks to place myself within it, living it out as the story unfolds in the mind's eye and noting its effects upon me. However, within the Exercises themselves this is simply one form of prayer among others, contemplations of this kind being interspersed with more cerebral meditations, involving the mulling over of some truth of faith. This is usually the way that the key meditations which Ignatius himself composed, such as the Call of the King or the Two Standards, are presented. Moreover, the individual periods of prayer within the Exercises are situated in a framework that can recommend rhythmical recitation, and a slow pondering of the meaning of each word of a set text, as methods to be kept within a repertoire.[10]

It is more feasible to argue that if there is a specifically Ignatian prayer-form, that form is the examen, as detailed in paragraph 43 of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Oral tradition has it that Ignatius insisted that even if all other contact with prayer was lost, the examen should be maintained. And seen in the context of the Exercises it is clear why this is so. It is the form of prayer most suited to maintaining a disposition to 'the regulation of one's life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment', seeking as it does to continue the practice of a discerning search for the presence of God in daily life.

A second candidate for that which distinguishes Ignatian spiritual guidance would be precisely this orientation towards discernment. There is a strong presupposition within this system that God calls each person to action, and action of a particular kind, the details of which only they can carry out. The purpose of the guidance offered is thus to recognize that call, and having recognized it to carry out the action called for, removing any barrier, internal or external, that might stand in its way. This is not to say that the guidance is only of use to those called to a more active, as opposed to contemplative, life. The action called for is as likely to be prayer as worldly activity, and most likely still to combine elements of both. But Ignatian prayer is never an end in itself. The final prayer of the Exercises starts with a reminder that 'love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words',[11] and the adequacy of the response to the love of God which one receives in prayer is judged most accurately in one's subsequent deeds.

A third way of understanding what an Ignatian background can offer to general good practice in spiritual guidance would look to its understanding of the pattern which a spiritual life follows. A classic outline of this life would describe three successive 'ways': the purgative, in which the individual is freed from sin; the illuminative, in which he or she is enlightened by God with insight; and the unitive, through which one becomes ever more closely joined to God. The Ignatian paradigm is different, being laid out in the four 'Weeks' of the Exercises. The First Week outlines separation from God and its consequences; the Second invites the forgiven sinner to ever closer union with God in Christ; the Third Week tests that union in following into the passion; and the Fourth confirms all that has gone before by catching it up into the glory of the resurrection. These movements are held to be fundamental and recurring features of everyone's spiritual journey, and have patterns of guidance suitable for each stage. So it is prudent to ask, when guiding in an Ignatian tradition, where within this framework the person I am dealing with is, since it is through situating them that I am best enabled to know how to proceed.

In short, then, Ignatian spiritual guidance can be understood as aiming at helping people to recognize and respond to the call of God in their lives. It offers, in the examen, a method of prayer suited to this; in its teaching on discernment, a series of techniques that enable one to proceed more surely; and in its understanding of the 'Weeks' which underpin the Exercises, a framework and process

within which those guided are invited to recognize their own journey, the more accurately to situate and orientate themselves. As the guidance continues, it will, however, appropriate whatever will serve its purpose, and thus draw on methods and materials which may have had their origin in many different schools or spiritual systems. And there is no room for imperialism here. A wide-ranging understanding of the Ignatian patterns of guidance such as is outlined above will have to acknowledge that other paths, Benedictine, Franciscan, lay or feminist, will be able to claim an equally wide outlook.

Parallels of coexisting traditions

Three parallels from elsewhere in the life of faith may help understand how traditions of spiritual guidance can coexist without impairing the single quest for truth. The first parallel looks to those religious orders and congregations which are among the most obvious manifestations of the different schools of spirituality. If I feel myself called to be a follower of Christ, I will be drawn to a consideration of how I should spend my life to live out this call, in the concrete circumstances I inhabit. For a number of Christians throughout history, this has involved feeling drawn to the 'religious life', a vowed commitment patterned after that of one or other of the great founders of spiritual traditions. To come to a decision at this level is not to belittle other forms of commitment (in marriage and the family, for example). Nor does opting for one order or congregation disparage the others. Rather there is a match of who I come to know myself to be, with my particular gifts and limitations, with the way of life which this group espouses. I, and they, recognize an affinity between my temperament and the charism of the group. Thus individual Christians may find themselves 'at home' being guided in an Ignatian, Dominican or Franciscan tradition, without needing to ignore, downplay, or feel threatened by, the existence of other forms.

A second parallel might be seen with the different redactions of the gospel which have been handed to us in the canon of Scripture. It is commonly acknowledged now that each evangelist worked with the material he (presumably!) had available concerning the life and teaching of Christ, shaping it to speak to the needs of his own time, community and content. So Matthew appeals to those with roots deep in Jewish Torah (see, for example, Mt 5:17–19), while Luke would bring his 'good news to the poor' (Lk 4:18). All are 'true'

(the guarantee the canon offers) and all together are needed to represent the richness of God's work in Christ. Something similar can be said of the diversity of materials to be found in the Old Testament. But just as each work was constructed for a particular milieu and its concerns, so each may speak more fully now to a particular group or interest. It is no mistake that liberation theology, for instance, draws heavily on the Gospels of Mark and Luke, and on the Exodus story. Again, a variety of schools of spiritual guidance is to be welcomed as capturing something of the wonderful diversity of God's dealings with human beings and their response to God. Any sacrifice of this to a Procrustean single 'quest for truth' is to be avoided.

A third parallel could not have been offered in this way at the time when Nicholl wrote, but is to be seen as a fruit of a fuller ecumenism. The different Christian denominations can in part be understood as safeguarding for the totality of God's people aspects of what it means to commit oneself wholeheartedly to the quest for God. A Catholic stress on sacramentality is complemented by a Protestant emphasis on the Word. In a British context, Methodism could appeal to the poor of the Industrial Revolution while Anglicanism explored most fully what it means to try to mould and influence the state. Each is now able increasingly to learn from and value what the other can bring. But more especially for our purposes, it has generally been understood that you cannot be an 'abstract Christian'. One starts out as a Roman Catholic, a Presbyterian, or a Baptist, and subsequently is able to reach out to those of other denominations. Even today, when this is perhaps less clear, ecumenism arguably works most effectively when it brings together those deeply rooted each in a particular tradition. So too with the traditions of spirituality encountered in guidance. From my roots in the Ignatian way, I can reach out to others and learn from the particular emphases which they safeguard; there is no 'abstract' or 'all-embracing' neutral spiritual stance from which I can dispense my guidance. I may even recognize an element of providence in my starting-point. Without choosing the tradition in which I am raised, or in which I have a first deep meeting with the divine, I am nevertheless able to come to see God's hand at work in it, bringing me what I need in its proper time.

Guide-lines for guides

We may then consider some indications of how guides who are conscious of being rooted in a particular tradition should approach those they may seek to guide. The following brief points attempt to do no more than to draw out the implications of the foregoing:

The guide's tradition should be acknowledged

An ever-deepening knowledge of one's own tradition, and its particular emphases and strengths, is a *sine qua non* for any guide. Certainly there is no advantage in feeling ashamed of, or apologetic for, having been nurtured by a particular background. Rather it is by entering deeply into it ('drinking from one's own wells', in the phrase used by Gustavo Gutierrez) that one sees more clearly what it has to offer others, and, too, becomes more aware of where it needs to be supplemented by other approaches.

The guide should not seek to impose his or her tradition on the one guided

I must resist the temptation to shape all those who come to me into other Jesuits, or even 'Ignatians'. This will not always be easy, since I am inevitably going to value the methods and content of the tradition which has helped me. However, the fundamental aim in guiding is to enable the other person to see what will help them respond to God more fully. This is at least as likely to involve affirming them in whatever is most productive in their present path, as offering suggestions from my own experience, actual or learned.

Some knowledge of other traditions is to the guide's advantage

This is so for two reasons. Firstly, the one I seek to guide may be drawing more or less explicitly on one of the traditions other than that I am rooted in. A basic knowledge of that approach will help me to understand them more accurately. Secondly, as has been noted above, different traditions may be understood as safeguarding or 'specializing in' particular aspects of the spiritual journey. So those who find themselves experiencing that part of contemplative prayer often called 'the dark night of the soul' may be helped by being pointed towards Carmelite explorations of this experience.

All talk of traditions may well be implicit

As a Jesuit, it is to be expected that almost all of my spiritual guidance will have a recognizably Ignatian tinge. There is no need, however, to be referring to Ignatius and the Exercises at regular intervals. Indeed, such a course is likely to prove off-putting, par-

ticularly to those with little background in formal spirituality. Adding to your business card 'Dominicans a speciality' may be judged inappropriate! An insight of contemporary counselling accords with Ignatius' teaching on 'spiritual conversation': addressing myself to the concerns of the one I accompany, using their terms, and reflecting back to them their feelings, will be much more productive than shaping their words to my categories.

Appropriate Ignatian direction

Even with the above guidelines, one might still be tempted to ask 'When *is* spiritual guidance in the Ignatian tradition appropriate?' Three kinds of answer can be given.

Firstly, if I am one who has myself been formed in the Ignatian tradition, as noted in the last guideline mentioned above, I will almost inevitably draw on aspects of that world-view in any guidance I offer. Providing that I am conscious of this, and of the possible distortions it can lead me to that should be avoided (such as, for example, tending to value activity more highly than a more passive contemplative approach), it seems to me to be both unavoidable and of little importance.

Secondly, when working with those who themselves wish to appropriate the Ignatian tradition, guidance explicitly in this mode would seem to be appropriate. Thus a candidate for an Ignatian religious order, or a member of an associated lay movement (e.g. the Christian Life Communities), would benefit from being guided in a manner that draws explicitly on Ignatian principles and materials.

Thirdly, if the analysis made earlier in this article, suggesting that two elements which are particularly Ignatian are the prayer-form of the examen and an orientation towards discernment, was correct, instances where these were judged useful tools might call for Ignatian patterns of guidance. One such instance would be the situation where a major life-choice had to be made, and it is therefore no surprise that this is precisely the situation that the *Spiritual Exercises* address. Which is not to say, however, that other spiritual traditions have no particular wisdom of their own to offer to a decision-making process.

Avoiding conventicles

'May they be so completely one that the world will realize that it was you who sent me' Jesus prays towards the end of John's Gospel (Jn 17:23). To establish a conventicle is the opposite of this, to draw

into a cosy huddle that establishes its identity by shutting out a wider world. The question this article has addressed is whether acknowledging oneself as standing within a particular tradition when offering spiritual guidance must commit you to the second of these approaches, with the danger that the one guided will not be enabled to follow the Spirit wherever the Spirit leads. Or can it leave you open to serving the cause Christ prayed for, moving out from whatever tradition has first fostered your encounter with God to join with others coming from different spiritual paths? Undoubtedly to label myself Ignatian, lay or feminist, *can* be done in such a way as to exclude others – Bede would be right to distrust this. But it can also be to open the gifts that I have received to them, so that they can make use of what they need and in doing so offer something of themselves to me in return, something that in time may transform me, whatever label I wear, whatever tradition I am rooted in.

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NOTES

1 Donald Nicholl, 'St Bede' in *The beatitude of truth* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), p 17. Conventicles: a secret or unlawful religious meeting.

2 Exx 4.

3 Exx 21.

4 Compare the Rules for Discernment of the First Week, Exx 313–327, with those of the Second, Exx 328–336.

5 For a detailed contemporary application of these adaptive principles, including guidance on how to offer Eighteenth and Nineteenth Annotation retreats, see Joseph Tetlow SJ, *Choosing Christ in the world* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1989). Cf also John A. Veltri SJ, *Orientations: Volume II* (Guelph: Loyola House, 1981).

6 See, for example Exx 71, 89, 129, 133, 162, 199, 205, 209 and 228.

7 For a description of a faithful adaptation to the needs of an inner-city housing estate, see Martha Skinnider, 'The Exercises in daily life' in Philip Sheldrake SJ (ed), *The way of Ignatius Loyola* (London: SPCK, 1991), pp 131–141.

8 Although not a great deal has been written about these 'weeks', a good practical introduction is *A week of accompanied prayer – handbook for co-ordinators* (second edition, 1997), compiled by Isabel Gregory and Mary Rose Fitzsimmons HHS, and available from 18 Lyme Cross Road, Huyton, Liverpool, L36 8EU, UK.

9 Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus,* translated by George Ganss SJ (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), paragraph 408.
10 See the 'Three methods of prayer' of Exx 238–260.
11 Exx 230.