

Finding God in All Things: A Spirituality for Today

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Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the largest Catholic religious order, the Jesuits, has been attracting widespread attention this year, the five hundredth anniversary of his birth. Ignatius's legacy goes far beyond the founding of the Jesuits—he launched a distinctive style and tradition of spirituality that is particularly apt for our time. . . .

The Spiritual Legacy of Ignatius

In their basic form, the Spiritual Exercises [of Ignatius] consist of a silent retreat of about thirty days in which four or more hours are given each day to certain prescribed meditations. In an alternate form, the Exercises are spread over a much longer period of time and are done while a person follows his or her ordinary occupations, making time each day for one period of meditation.

For young people trying to discern their particular vocations in life, for people at a crucial juncture in their lives who can make themselves free for thirty days, and for those training to direct others,

complete withdrawal from everyday life to some quiet retreat house seems to be a suitable plan.

But there are many people who can derive great profit from the experience who could never get away like that. For such people, the extended part-time retreat has special advantages of its own. Resolutions and conversions made in withdrawal from one's ordinary life may look very different when regular activities and contacts are resumed, while those made in the everyday context of life are likely to be more realistic and therefore firmer.

When Ignatius set out the pattern of meditations for the *Exercises*, he took the content from the basic structure of Christian beliefs as rooted in the Bible, especially in the gospels, often concretized in imagery drawn from the traditions of his childhood. The material is divided into four sections called "weeks." The first week is focused on the theme of creation, including reflections on the nature and consequences of various disruptions of the harmony of creation and the focus and balance of human life by sin.

The second week consists of meditations on the hidden life and public ministry of Jesus, including some very colorful and dramatic meditations geared to recognizing and adjusting one's own stance of discipleship. The third week consists of meditations on the passion and death of Jesus, and the fourth week is given to the events of the resurrection.

Besides offering the subject matter in brief comments and sending the retreatant back to the texts of scripture, Ignatius describes different ways of praying and has the exercitant explore ways of prayer most suited to that individual.

But perhaps most characteristic of all, the whole process is geared to consciousness raising of the individual (though that term does not occur in the text) to be alert to one's own motivations and inclinations, and to learn to discern what is the voice of the Holy Spirit of God and what is the voice of a spirit that is counter to God's Spirit, a spirit of destruction and disorientation. For this, Ignatius thought, it was necessary to be sensitive to the light of the Holy Spirit in prayer so as to make appropriate discernments in uncharted situations.

These *Exercises* have been at the foundation of the training of Jesuits. They have shaped the way this congregation of vowed, celibate men (most of whom are priests) has run its many schools, has carried on a practice of spiritual direction of laity, has carried out missions and pastored local churches, and has engaged in social justice issues in far-reaching and radical ways.

In a similar way, the *Exercises* have been basic in the formation and spirituality of a number of congregations of religious women. Through the Jesuit schools, they have shaped many generations of young boys, and through Jesuit colleges and universities, generations of intellectuals, male and female. In their schools and in their parishes, Jesuits have invited laypeople into groups called “Sodalities” (now known as Christian Life Communities) for spiritual formation, support, and apostolic outreach, and have served as spiritual directors.

In his early apostolic outreach, Ignatius would direct several people in a town through the Spiritual Exercises. He would then expect some of them to direct several others each so as to spread the influence as far as possible. In the course of generations and centuries, more tradition has built up and more training and experience are expected of directors. A living tradition has been created for which the text is just a rough guideline. Each generation shares in the cumulative wisdom garnered from the prayer, reflection, and life experience of all the foregoing participants.

Out of this living process comes a vigorous, optimistic, world-affirming spirituality, committed to service but critical at all times of what is or is not really service for the reign of God in the world.

Grounded in Gratitude and Reverence

Because it is based in the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatian spirituality is grounded in intense gratitude and reverence. It begins with and continually reverts to the awareness of the presence and power and care of God everywhere, for everyone, and at all times.

This sense of a wholly integrated universe, society, and personal life is one that certainly still existed in the Spain of Ignatius's youth, but was rapidly disintegrating for most people in his mature years. In his youth he lived in a culture in which intimacy with God, and a sense of belonging and being protected, could still be taken for granted, requiring no special effort or attention on the part of the individual.

By the time Ignatius was guiding other people through the Exercises, the culture did not automatically convey such a sense of intimacy with God, so that the individual had to make a deliberate effort to cultivate it. That, of course, is very much the case in our own culture, in which people can live most of their lives without ever being confronted with the question of the ultimate meaning and purpose of their lives.

There are two primary types of prayer and relation to the divine in Christian tradition. The first, known as *via negativa*, tries to encounter God by leaving senses, imagination, and intellect behind to meet God in the darkness and silence of pure presence without content. The second, known as *via positiva*, tries to encounter God through the appreciation of what God does in creation.

Ignatian spirituality emphatically chooses the latter as the predominant and ordinary type intended for most people. In that choice lies a directive to cultivate visual and other sensory imagination in prayer—contemplating scenes from the gospels by entering into them in imagination to play a role and to come to a relationship of warm affection with Jesus and his family, friends, and followers.

The process seeks to bring about a sense of the attitudes and responses that Jesus would take in situations that do not actually arise in the gospel narratives but do arise in our lives. Nothing is more central in Ignatian spirituality than this sense of intimate companionship with Jesus, and the total service that follows from such intimacy as a matter of both gratitude and family loyalty.

A Cultivation of Critical Awareness

A second significant factor in Ignatian spirituality is the cultivation of critical awareness of what is right and wrong in one's own life and attitudes, one's society and culture, and in specific situations. To many people of our own time, no matter how well disposed in Christian faith, the idea of repeated meditations on sin, day after day, is repugnant. The idea so pervasive in our culture that one should always look on the positive side, and that guilt is a manifestation of neurosis, can easily make Christians uncomfortable with the very idea of sin.

Yet what happens in the first-week meditations on sin is the subtle but effective cultivation of imagination and consciousness. To reflect on the classic stories of the sin of the fallen angels, the sin of Adam, and catastrophic destructive acts in history is not only to experience horror and grief, but also to know the disappointment over what might have been and has not been realized. Combined with the conviction of the unfailing power and loving care of God, and leading into reflection on the meaning and impact of the events in the life of Jesus, these meditations on sin are also an invitation to imagine the world and one's own life becoming quite different.

What is rediscovered in the Ignatian approach to spirituality is that the traditional Christian doctrine about the sin of Adam, also called original sin, is not a message of doom but one of hope. It declares that the world as we have it is not the best we can hope for, nor the world that God intends, but a badly broken and distorted one which can be restored and can be immeasurably better and happier than it now is.

Empowerment to Responsibility

Ignatian spirituality contains within it a strong sense of empowerment to accept and exercise responsibility in the work of redemption that is still going on in the world. There is much emphasis on the surrender of the will and all the faculties to God—not in a passive sense but

rather on the model of an *hidalgó* such as the young Ignatius, dedicating (and in that sense surrendering) his freedom, strength, skills, and faculties to the service of his Lord. It implies, therefore, maximum ingenuity, diligence, and creativity—all at the single-minded service of the Lord's cause.

The *Exercises* are geared, among other things, to the experience and recognition of grace in one's own life. They have an implied understanding of grace not as divine action alongside of human freedom and action, but rather as divine action empowering human action, divine freedom liberating human freedom. In Ignatian spirituality individuals are taught to expect and to recognize their own empowerment by grace.

The pattern of this is very much like that which we find in testimonies of the Christians of the first and second centuries. These Christians wrote that Christ had done two things for them: He had illumined them and he had empowered them. The empowerment had to do with the clarity with which they now saw everything because of the illumination by Christ.

In our own times of introspective and psychological awareness, it is easy to recognize this process happening. The more clearly we see ourselves in the light of creation, sin, and redemption, the more encouraged and empowered we are to act in consort with Christ in the transformation and salvation of the world.

A Commitment to Action

Directly connected with this is the fourth characteristic of Ignatian spirituality: the focus and insistence on action. This appears as a theme with many variations. Loyalty is expressed in service. Love is appropriately manifested in actions rather than in words. Repentance means action for change. Serious conversion to Christ means commitment of all one's resources—material and personal—expenditure of all one's energies, steady focus of one's attention.

One very important consequence of this is the gradual elimination of the profane margins of one's life. But in Ignatian spirituality this does not mean that one no longer engages in worldly responsibilities or in social, economic, and political affairs. What it does mean is that engagement in such affairs ceases to be profane, which means outside the range of the religious commitment. All the secular activities of life are brought into the faith commitment and are therefore brought under scrutiny and evaluation in the light of what is revealed in Christ about the meaning and purpose and true orientation of all creation.

This approach applies not only to the immediate contacts of one's life, but also to social structures and policies at all levels of human society. This commitment to the integration of all aspects of life, therefore, does not allow a separation of politics and economics from religious values and judgments.

Redemptive action for justice and peace in the public affairs of the human race threatens the disproportionate privilege of many who call themselves Christians, probably in good faith, but think that this pertains only to their individual private lives. While the vigorous opposition to social justice and peace activities in the public realm may be in good faith, it is not disinterested.

The commitment to action and to public responsibilities often meets an objection of another kind. This is the view that contemplation is at the heart of religious faith, and that contemplation and action are incompatible with one another. Contemplation is certainly at the heart of faith, because contemplation means an attitude of receptivity, attention, and awareness of divine presence and guidance. This is beyond question.

However, Ignatian spirituality refuses to see contemplation as being in opposition to action or incompatible with it. It was said of Ignatius himself in his mature years that he seemed to be contemplative in action. What is seen as incompatible with contemplation is greed, possessiveness, acquisitiveness, cruelty, indifference to the needs of others, pride, self-assertiveness, and preoccupation with oneself and one's public image. But hard work, preoccupation with serving the needs of others, and so forth, are seen as opportunities to be contemplative in action.

A Revolutionary Spirituality

All of the foregoing leads to the final characteristic of Ignatian spirituality as countercultural and revolutionary in a nonviolent way. Much of the reflection in the *Exercises* is geared to an effort to share the vision of Jesus and understand what he was and is trying to do in the world and its history.

The meditations are very clear in their implication that the task that Jesus received from God is not to save souls out of the world, but to save the world, to refocus and reintegrate all creation by drawing the human race back into its proper relationship with God—and therefore proper relationships within the human race and all the created universe.

Such a perspective judges everything in terms of what we can know of the divinely intended outcomes. Such a vision leads to radical judgments about the way we are conducting the affairs of human society now. Such a vision certainly does not allow one to take for granted wars; poverty; famines; injustices; marginalization of ethnic, racial, linguistic, or economic groups; or other unnecessary sufferings or deprivations.

One cannot simply say that this is how it is and how it will always be because the world is like that—in the context of the *Exercises*, that is plainly untrue. It is untrue because God does not intend that kind of arrangement of human society in which so many are excluded. These sufferings are not divinely made but humanly made. God has not abandoned creation but reaches out at all times and to all peoples with possibilities and grace for redemption—not, according to the gospels, a redemption confined to life beyond death, but redemption of all aspects of human life in this world which we help to shape for good or for ill.

By these insights and criteria, radical change is not only possible but necessary, not only to be wished for but to be worked for in practical ways, not only an option for the remote future but a challenge in our present. These attitudes are formed in the meditations on the passion and death of Christ and those on the resurrection.

Meditation on the passion and death of Christ has often been proposed as an invitation to accept the way things are. But what is implicit in the Ignatian approach is contrary to this, because it invites attention not only to what Jesus suffered physically, but to the discernment process that Jesus went through and the action to which it led—which in turn provoked bitter persecution. This leads to an appreciation of the radical nature of the positions Jesus took in his own times and to the real impact of his teaching on political and social structures in the long run.

Readiness and confidence for personal discernment is a key element of Ignatian spirituality, and it is one that is particularly important in our times. It implies training, as well as constant attention in prayer in evaluating actions by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, working for an attitude of detachment from self-interest in making decisions, and trying at all times to enter into the mind and intentions of Jesus.

When someone does this and gains confidence, tempered by humility, that person has a basis for countercultural decisions, creative initiatives, and difficult undertakings. But unless an individual has the focus and the confidence for discernment in uncharted situations, that person is likely to be a passive obeyer of codes and commandments, not responding to the most important commandments of all: to love God with heart and soul and to love one's neighbors as oneself.