

Ignatius of Loyola: Theology as a way of living

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‘What Ignatius gives us is not a scholastic or academic theology; it is not a theory, but a theology that is lived and experienced. In this sense, too, our theology becomes a daily action, shaping and making our lives.’ To celebrate the Feast of St Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, on 31 July, James Hanvey SJ exposes the theological vision manifested in the Spiritual Exercises and in Ignatius’s life.

There have been many books written about Ignatius of Loyola and many more about his Spiritual Exercises. Few have been written about his theological vision. Hugo Rahner begins to open up this dimension on Ignatius for contemporary students in the 1950s, yet Hans Urs Von Balthasar’s observation that Ignatius as a theologian has still to be appreciated continues to be true. This is understandable because Ignatius is not a formal theologian. The Spiritual Exercises are a sort of practical, experiential theology that leads to a converted and consecrated freedom in action, not a treatise on Christology, ecclesiology, grace and nature. The same is true for the Constitutions of the Society and we can see how much this theology is his life in Ignatius’s letters and Spiritual Diary. Everything in these writings reveals an immanent living theology which is applied to the realities of persons, places and circumstances. Hence, the danger in trying to extract a formal theology lies in forgetting that it is a lived theology first. However, the other danger is that we forget that Ignatius has an objective vision which is tested within the tradition of the Church.

Neither the Exercises nor his other writings sanction a pure subjectivism which is the danger in the contemporary vogue for therapeutic spirituality. Here, strongly influenced by psychoanalytic and person-centred practice, the subject’s self-referential



experience is the dominant hermeneutic. The risk in so much of the contemporary ‘Spirituality industry’ is that it becomes secularised anthropology, whereas Ignatius always offers an uncompromising ‘theology’. Understanding this is important for correcting another misinterpretation of Ignatius, namely, voluntarism. Where this has been part of Jesuit spirituality and culture it has owed more to the prevailing rationalism and suspicion of

strongly affective and mystical dimensions of Ignatian spirituality than it has to an authentic appropriation of the sources. The Exercises, and indeed the whole example of Ignatius’s life, certainly expect the subject to spare nothing in the service of God and his Kingdom, but this flows from an inexhaustible gratitude for what one has received from the Divine Majesty at such cost. The determined ordering of all one’s energies in the service of Christ, and the desire to participate as completely as possible in the work of salvation require a disciplined asceticism of love for God and for neighbour, but this ‘freedom’ is far from the indifference of a stoic self-mastery, though it may teeter on the brink of this distortion.

The subject’s life, the interior drama of desires and freedom, and the struggle and the discipline of realities that both circumscribe us and offer new possibilities are all present, but Ignatius sees them in relation to God who is actively present at their centre.

The whole work of the Exercises is to give us a new point from which to see the world in all its astonishing diversity and especially to see the way in which the Son is present in its midst, 'labouring and working' for its healing. That work is to bring all things under the sovereignty of the Divine Majesty so that all created things, and especially the glory of God's creation, the human person, can enjoy the plenitude of life.

God as the source of our freedom to be and to act

In this sense, the world for Ignatius is radically theocentric. But it is precisely because we are so completely and radically grounded in God, 'Our Creator and Lord', that far from restricting or losing our freedom, we come to possess it. In contrast with the many forms of freedom that are offered to us, it is a freedom which allows us to be 'disposed' in the redemptive work of Christ and the building of the Kingdom. Such freedom comes through our search and desire for it, but it is always a gift. It is not the freedom of the autonomous, self-made and self-making individual of contemporary culture. It is not the liberation of the Enlightenment or Modernity or even Postmodernity. Rather, it is a freedom which can only be discovered in relationship of 'handing over', of precisely not belonging to self but living in and through the other who is Christ and the 'other' that we discover in the form of a world that needs to be healed – this incarnate, redemptively active Christ who is 'in' our world.¹

It is signalled at the very beginning of the Exercises in the notes of annotations, where the idea of a 'retreat' – a withdrawal and seclusion – is the material expression of our desire to gain favour in the sight of the Divine Majesty, that we may be more disposed to service of our Creator, and be united with Him.² In the Principle and Foundation, the grace of this relational freedom is also described as an active grace which encompasses every aspect and circumstance of our life.³ It becomes an unchanging prayer which orientates every prayer of the Spiritual Exercises: the exercitant prays that all his or her 'intentions, actions and operations may be purely ordered to the praise and reverence of His Divine Majesty.'⁴ It is a stunningly simple but profound prayer. It is the prayer of our whole life, placing us under the sovereignty of God and His Kingdom.

None of this excludes the rich insights into the dynamics of the human psyche and our relationships which are illuminated in the contemporary human sciences. It does mean, however, that we come to understand ourselves and our world – social and material – through God, not apart from Him. Implicitly, therefore, Ignatius will always challenge our latent or implicit secularisation. This is why, though the Ignatian vision and practice has an extraordinary freedom to engage with the whole of human reality, it needs always to be vigilant and rooted – in affect, intellect and acts – in God.⁵ Without this groundedness, even the gift of freedom becomes the occasion of a conversion to the secular i.e. the world in which I am the centre, that I endeavour to create either without reference to God or where I use God to legitimate my creation.⁶

I think Ignatius learned this in his experience at Loyola during his convalescence when he began to understand the captivity and allure of worldly dreams. It would have been easy to 'baptise' them but not fundamentally change them in a neat transference from the earthly to the heavenly King. Alert to this danger, he discovered the evangelical tools of service in the rules for discernment, especially of the 2nd week of the Exercises, and the profound, searching examination and call of the 3rd mode of humility, which should surely be the interior norm of every member of the Society and the touchstone of the daily examen.⁷ These exercises embody a deep and constant inscription of the way of Christ that shapes our actions as well as our desires. In them, the meaning and the form of power is transformed. They describe the strange new world of God's activity, not ours; each day they teach us about the apocalyptic struggle for the Kingdom and the true nature of Christ's Lordship. Ignatius gives us the means of living in a world in which God 'labours and works' for our salvation, upholding it and working for its good.⁸ The source of our action is not a naive, humanistic optimism but a profound, Christian realism. What these tools give us is not a scholastic or academic theology; it is not a theory, but a theology that is lived and experienced. In this sense, too, our theology becomes a daily action, shaping and making our lives. The 'lived theology' of Ignatius is our living the reality of the Incarnate and Resurrected life in our history. In this sense it is, of course, the active life of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the dynamic and open horizon of

Ignatius's vision of the world and the desire to be sent into it is a profound experience of the Spirit and its mission to reconcile all things in Christ (Col 1:13-20). In this way, Ignatius's lived theology is the grace of entering into the dynamic salvific economy of the Triune God; our learning to live in and express the *Amor Amans* – the Love Loving – that is God's self. This is the heart of the apostolic life.

Prosaic language and the mysticism of experience

The writings of Ignatius betray little poetry or rhetoric. They do not have the intellectual fluency of a speculative theologian, the engaging personal élan of a Teresa, or the '*Lámparas de fuego*' (lamps of fire) that one catches even in John of the Cross's theological commentary on his poetry. For Ignatius, language itself is not the experience; it is merely an instrument to communicate reality. Ignatius does not offer us a literary mysticism. There is no esoteric vocabulary which only the initiated can decipher and interpret. Ignatius is not a fluent writer but it is not only this: he knows words can excite and draw us into their own world. They have a special resonance and weight but only because they are firmly rooted in a vivid and normative experience. So we find an oddly limited and repetitive vocabulary that is worth attending to in two ways: first, it is ostensive in the sense that it points to an experience; it names the theological-spiritual landscape that Ignatius knew and mapped. It strives after a minimalist accuracy, partly out of respect for the reality, and partly not to draw attention to itself. Second, it is always concrete and grounded. It names, locates and orientates us whenever we encounter it. In its own way, it is the language of sincerity and directness – there is no rhetorical dissimulation – and, paradoxically, its combination of minimalism and concreteness, precisely because it disciplines speculation and description, produces a sense of dynamism and encounter. It is essentially a language of living relations and processes; a language of the heart's deepest desires and the intellect's ordering of them into expressive, incarnated truth. In the sparest way, it expresses the engagement of the whole person situated in the external and interior worlds.

Its restraint also serves another purpose: it creates space for us. It allows us to make these words our own through the experiences and relationships they direct us to and allow us to have. It is not that

Ignatius is only 'a tongue-tied mystic'; he uses language to point us to the concrete reality of encounter from which language should not distract nor create its own relationship. His words are not the words of a narcissistic author which direct us back to the authorial centre and control. They are governed by an apostolic pedagogy. Ignatius gives us our freedom; his words do not take us over and they always open up the experience, they allow us to reencounter it, they never substitute for it. The words are always a means, never an end. I think a clue is given in instruction to the Director in the Spiritual Exercises. His or her task is to test the truth and facilitate it but not get in the way, not to draw attention to him or herself.⁹ This creates a new style in which the speaker is only a facilitator. From it we learn how to make language itself an apostolic instrument rather than a rhetorical display.

This may help us understand why reading Ignatius is an odd experience. The imagery is spare, direct, clear, concentrated and strong. It is rarely abstract and always personal. The habitual ways in which Ignatius speaks of God – 'The Divine Majesty', 'The Creator and Lord', 'The Eternal King', 'The Divine Goodness' – are not primarily metaphysical titles or abstract categories. They are the linguistic sites of a personal relationship, the fountains of an ever-present, experiential encounter. Such spare language and imagery remains remarkably consistent in all his writings and we can glimpse its glowing affective intensity in texts like Ignatius's Spiritual Diary. We find it again in the Constitutions, where we stumble over language which is so familiar from the Exercises but well embedded into their baroque structure. We could easily dismiss this as some sort of automatic linguistic piety or genuflection. It is not, however, a naïve language but one that is personal and self-aware; it is performative. When we come across those titles of 'The Creator and Lord', the 'Divine Majesty' etc., or we are invited to consider things before this God whom we have come to know in such names, the language serves to locate us in an experience. We are reminded and relocated within the fundamental orientations of our life of service. The primary relationship from which we live is invoked. We are called to integrity of decision and action by being made accountable to the God we meet in the relationship of redemption and salvation. In other words, it is a language of accountability before the King in whose service we are enlisted.

Such a complex text like the Constitutions is dynamic and experiential. It lives out in its structure the preparatory prayer of the Exercises; it is always orienting itself to God. Having mapped out the place where we should be – in discernment with our superiors, in our studies, building up the unity of the Body etc. – it invites us ‘to keep always before us, first, God.’ What it discloses is a way of seeing the world and God’s action in it that is at first curious until we understand what it is attempting to do. We can stumble over images which clearly come out of a pious, religious, medieval imagination, but we are not on some quaint, historical tour. Rather, we find ourselves in a dynamic world of creative process and drama; the words and the structures are all struggling to do justice to the God who is salvifically active in all things; who has summoned us into his world, the energy and *kairos* of the Gospel. In this sense, we inhabit a landscape that is both old and completely modern in its breadth and conceptuality. In other words, as we have already observed but now grasp in his characteristic voice, Ignatius is alive to the luminous energy of the Divine economy.

Some key themes

There are many aspects of Ignatius’s vision and practice that merit close study. His understanding of the Trinity or the Incarnation, the struggle of the Kingdom of the Enemy and the Kingdom of Christ, or the Rules for Thinking with the Church, have in various ways received attention. It would require much greater scope than this limited essay affords to treat these themes and others as they deserve. There is one aspect, though, which has not received much attention, yet in part it may account for the modernity of Ignatius’s thought. It is the extraordinary relational way of thinking and seeing that marks the Ignatian vision; the refusal to distort these into some logical form or process and the determination to try to comprehend the vitality of our interconnectedness. It is a wisdom but it is not detached. Rather it is an ‘active wisdom’ that is alive both to the unity and the creative diversity of our relational realities. This relational way of seeing things is undoubtedly grounded in his own mystical experience of a Trinitarian God: a God who chooses to be intimately related to the world as both Creator and Lord. The relational structure of Ignatius’s theology is immediately apparent in the Spiritual Exercises, the Spiritual

Diary, the Letters and the Constitutions, even when parts may have been written by his secretary, Polanco.

The human person is never considered except in and through a nexus of relationships. We are never allowed to stand outside these relationships on our own; there is no sovereign self, exercising a contemplative grasp of the whole from some vantage point outside the material, historical and existential process of life. Indeed, it is part of the illusion of sin to think that we can exercise such independence. In fact, Ignatius understands that sin is itself a web in which we are caught whether it be in the primal history of the Fall of the Angels or in the active malignity of evil that seeks to delude and ensnare us, ‘so that no province, no place, no state of life, no individual is overlooked.’¹⁰ This is not just a colourful medieval mystery play in which we are given a part. It is an engagement with the ‘*mysterium iniquitatis*’ that cannot be reduced to a projection of our own subjective woundedness. We can only begin to understand the extent of our entrapment – epistemological as well as psychological and existential – when we allow ourselves to stand in our relationship to Christ. Christ suddenly casts a light that exposes the way in which evil spins its own relational reality; it has a history, it creates its own determining structures from which we cannot break by our own strength or intelligence. In this, Ignatius takes us into the apocalyptic understanding of the Gospel, but he never allows us to stand lost outside of the saving relationship with Jesus, our Saviour and Lord. It is a mark of our healing when we come to appreciate the truth of our dependence, our connectedness. But this connectedness is a living experience of being sustained and cared for, of being upheld and carried even when I want to deny or break away from this truth. Our ‘conversion’ is one of mind and will when we come to understand all creation – natural and supernatural – ‘interceding... for me’.¹¹ That action of intercession is not a trivial act – it is the movement of life itself, of being which expresses its goodness in this act of life-giving generosity even when I wound it.

What Ignatius opens up for us is the unity between the act of creation and redemption and the gift or grace of participation. He invites us to understand our connectedness as gift and through that to express our own restored connectedness in gratitude – which is a loving reverence and self-gift. That work of inter-

cession belongs to all created things in their goodness but it also discloses that it is a profoundly relational mark of being itself. Even more than this, it participates in the salvific economy of the Triune Life. It locates me in a community: it is the community of creation and also of the Church – the concrete community in which I live in history but the community that also intercedes and carries me – the ecclesia of the heavenly court that also ‘labours and works’ for my salvation and the restoration of creation. There is an intimate and profound ‘communio’ here between the Church and creation which is discovered in their salvific mission and being.¹²

When I begin to understand and sense that this grace lives in all things, then I am ordered in a joyous self-emptying of loving service to the world. Already, I have begun to see that at the heart of all these relations is Christ. To follow him is not to leave the world, but to enter more completely and intensely into its life, its woundedness, its struggle against emptiness, falsehood and death. To step into this new world of relationship and commit myself to it is not to restrict my freedom but to discover it. But it is only discovered in and through the Person of Christ. Again, this is no abstract or theoretical relationship or possibility, but one that is real, concrete, personal and immediate. The relationship that I am called to is that of ‘companion’; it is one of love that ‘labours and works’ with Him to restore all the broken relationships which prevent life. It is not an exaggeration to say that the whole of what Ignatius (and the Society of Jesus) understands by mission – notwithstanding the ocean of words that has been expended upon the theme – is contained in the Gospel of John:

God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that through him the world might be saved. (John 3:14-17)

It is because we live that experience of Love and are drawn into it through our relationship with the Son, that we become the bearers of the message of life to the world in the words and deeds given us by the Spirit, who is the Lord and Giver of Life. Indeed, for Ignatius our whole life is to be sent, to participate in this mission of the Spirit. It is the Spirit that is at the

heart of all our relationships and orders them in this dynamic of reciprocity – the response we make to God’s self-gift in our ‘take and receive all.....’¹³

The final great active moment in which Ignatius asks us to find ourselves is the Contemplation to attain the Love of God at the end of the Exercises.¹⁴ It is not contemplation in the sense of an intellectual exercise; it is a performative act of loving self-gift. Only in that offering, in which we are both giving and being given being – the graced indwelling kenosis of the Spirit of Love (Jn 14:21; 15:8-17) – can we really experience the life that is God’s life, the life that is the life of all life. Yet the Contemplation to attain Love is not only the end to which all our Exercises have been leading, it is also the daily reality in which we live. There is a sense in Ignatius, something we have learnt through the Exercises, that to live in this God, to be taken in His mission to the world, is also to go on growing. Indeed, there is a relationship between our practice of the ministry and works of God’s love in the world and the deepening of our capacity to receive this life in ourselves. Here, living this grace increases our capacity and aptitude for it and there is no limit to this growth. With this comes a growth in our ability to judge or discern things correctly because we come to see them more and more in relation to God and His salvific plan. Our mind and heart become healed and our will becomes strengthened and attuned to do what is right – what generates that new life of the Kingdom. Love ‘sets things in order’; in loving we come to develop a ‘compassio’ with the things of God.¹⁵ This is the source and shape of our mission and the gift of discernment. We have already indicated the relational nature of wisdom in Ignatius, but now we can recognise that it comes as gift of the Spirit active in our lives: not just understanding but of knowing how to love. It is the Spirit, the astonishing grace-filled generosity of God, that continues to pour into our hearts (Rom 5:5).

So, Ignatius understands that theology is this: not a speculative endeavour of the intellect but a life that lives in Christ; a love that comes to be – in deeds and not words – for the life of the world.

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¹ Cf. Gal. 5.1; 13-24 which is critical for understanding the freedom sought in the Spiritual Exercises (Sp. Exx.). It is a freedom which comes as a 'grace' and is the work of the Spirit signifying the new life of Christ. It is a creative, generative freedom, ordered to the works of love, especially the service of neighbour, and notice, too, how for Paul it becomes the touchstone for discernment. The Pauline criteria also help us to correct what might be a tendency to see the effects of consolation and desolation largely in terms of the interior life of the individual. Paul makes it clear that the 'fruits' of desolation and consolation often go beyond our own individual inner life to have consequences on the community and the life-giving potential of our relationships. There is also recognition of the problem of 'freedom' and especially of its works within the Exercises. This has to do with disputes with Protestantism. Cf. §369.

² Sp. Exx. Ann. § 20. Note the progressive deepening of the movement described. This threefold pattern of the grace desired, which is ultimately the grace of being with Christ in his redemptive work, is repeated in several different forms in the course of the Exercises cf. §95-98; 104; 135 ff. Esp. 147; 165 ff.

³ Sp. Exx. §23.

⁴ Sp. Exx. §46.

⁵ Sp. Exx. §237.

⁶ Cf. The Parable of the Three Classes of Men, Sp. Exx. 149 ff.

⁷ Sp. Exx. §136-148; 165-168.

⁸ Cf. Sp. Exx. 237 which is a description of the activity of the salvific Economy by which God's providence is understood as the outpouring of his Love – a Love which is now seen to have the form of Christ. The attributes of God, justice, goodness, mercy are understood as real acts in creation, and therefore manifestations of the Kingdom. Through the grace of the union of service/companionship we are also enabled to participate in these attributes and make them our actions. It is part of the 'realised eschatology' that belongs to the Exx. and allows us to see that

Nadal's gloss on Jesuits as 'contemplatives in action' might be better understood within this scriptural category rather than an attempt to reconcile the active and contemplative forms of religious life.

⁹ Sp. Exx. §15

¹⁰ Sp. Exx. §50; § 141.

¹¹ Sp. Exx. §60.

¹² Added to the Exercises are The Rules for Thinking with the Church, and their controversial test § 365, 'What seems to me white, I will believe black if the hierarchical Church so defines....' Clearly these 'rules' arise out of the controversies of the time, especially Protestantism. In emphasising the Hierarchical Church as the ultimate arbiter of truth the Exx. intend us to understand our relational indebtedness within the economy of grace. It is important see that these rules are about maintaining an undivided Kingdom and an undivided Church. The obedience is not just to a hierarchy but to 'Christ our Lord' and 'the one Spirit' who hold sway 'for the salvation of souls.' But one should not simply read the Exx. within this historical context alone. Within the text, there is clearly an integrated sense of the 'communio' of being – part of the restoration which Christ brings about as Head of Creation. An Ignatian understanding of the Church has also to see it with the *communio* of being, integral to the mediation of the redeemed and sanctified life. In this sense, Christ as head of his Church and of Creation is also the active Truth which informs the whole economy. Christ has epistemeological importance and our companionship with Him has epistemeological significance for us which is worked out not only in terms of the created world and ecclesiology.

¹³ Sp. Exx. §234.

¹⁴ Sp. Exx. § 230. ff.

¹⁵ Ignatius's sense of this finds more formal theological expression in St Thomas, who says from the habit of charity the spiritual man will have a sense of what is a right judgement, what is in accordance with God's salvific purpose. Cf. *Summa Theologiae* II-II 60.1. ad 2. Also, II-II, q 45, a.2c.