



Ecology and Ignatian Spirituality

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The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change delivered the findings of their research into the impact of climate change on 31 March. The report speaks of the urgent need to tackle the causes and adapt to the effects of global warming. There is a particularly Ignatian dimension to this care for the natural world that is required of us, says José Antonio García SJ: 'God shows himself in the world and wishes to be met there'.

The project of caring for the earth is so crucial to the future of humankind that all traditions – humanistic, scientific or spiritual – ought to make a contribution. From this conviction, there arises the question of whether Ignatian spirituality has some distinctive inspiration to bring to the service of the environmental movement. I believe it has: the aim of this note is to explain this belief.

Perhaps the deepest root of this claim is found at the beginning and end of the *Spiritual Exercises*: in the Principle and Foundation, and in the Contemplation to Attain Love (*Contemplatio*). The 'things' referred to here are more than merely *things*: they are created realities, gifts of God in which God's self dwells and awaits us.

The process of the *Exercises* is marked by a double affirmation. The Principle and Foundation asserts that not only human persons but 'the other things on the face of the earth' are all created by God: that is, that they derive from God's creative love. The *Contemplatio* asserts that the whole of reality is a place of encounter with the God who is manifest there: giving things to us and giving himself in them; dwelling in these things; working in them for us; and descending from above in them.

After his spiritual experiences at Manresa, the world appeared to Ignatius as a great theophany – a revelation of the divine. God shows himself in the world



and wishes to be met there, to be adored, loved and served there. This insight constitutes Ignatius's new mysticism, which transformed Ignatius the hermit into Ignatius the Jesuit. From then on, his passionate search did not centre on fasting, penances, even on prayer as such, but on loving and serving God, and loving and serving God's world. Later, when writing the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius will ask of the Society's

members something that is valid for each one, because it defines the most essential horizon of his spirituality: 'It is precisely to seek and to find God in all things, loving him in all things and all things in him, in accordance with his most holy will'.

Is this not an inspiring principle – a triple relationship with God, with other persons, and with the earth on which humankind passes its life? Once we locate ourselves in this worldview, can we separate God from what God loves so much, the world? Can we respond to God's love without this response being expressed in the care of the habitat of all living beings? We cannot. When we interact with 'things' horizontally – as Ignatius will come to say – it is precisely to find in them their source and their giver, so to be 'horizontal mystics', contemplatives in action. When we relate with God 'vertically', it is to discover and love the world in him: to be persons active even amidst their contemplation.

Something else is to be noted in this Ignatian vision – a vision of the world as a reality imbued with God, and a vision of God as one who makes us a gift of the world and a gift of himself in the heart of the world. Men and women, the natural world, the cosmos, historical events and so on, are not for us merely an ‘occasion’ from which we detach ourselves in rising to God. We do not meet God in bypassing them but *in them*. How then, if nature is God’s gift to us, and is the place in which God gives himself to us, could we fail to interest ourselves in the world?

Many traditions, each one with its own accent, converge in the environmental movement. Our own tradition is this: ‘things’ are creatures, are God’s gift rather than simply our property. They are not merely free to be used as we wish. As we approach them, the first thing we need to do is to take a backward step, because ‘the ground on which we stand is holy ground’. Only then, when we have seen things as our created sisters, can we take a step forward. This is what Ignatius means by the phrase ‘to the extent that’ of the Principle and Foundation, and by the expression we find in the *Contemplatio*, ‘to love and serve the Divine Majesty in all things’. Haven’t we all some sense that *without* making this first step backwards, this moment of adoration and thanksgiving, our relationship with things easily becomes distorted into self-seeking?

Ignatian spirituality, at its very heart, embodies this worldview according to which God and the world are neither *identical* (according to some ancient or modern variant of pantheism), nor are realities unrelated to each other, as in a false dualism. Ignatius is far from either of these poles of thought. He appears to be close to the position of St Paul when he proclaims in the Areopagus, that everything is in God, that ‘it is he who gives everything – including life and breath – to everyone (Acts 17:22 ff). In technical terms, this Pauline vision, which is also the Ignatian vision, is usually called pantheism, which means that ‘everything exists and lives in God’.

What consequences derive from this spiritual vision for our care of the environment? There appear to be four:

1. For those who wish to live the following of Christ guided by Ignatian spirituality, concern for the care of the earth is not an optional commitment,

but it concerns us all. All of us need to consider how we can make our contribution, whether or not we campaign within some formal ecological movement.

2. Whether or not we do belong to some such movement (but especially if we do) our involvement in caring for the earth is not something *added* to our spirituality. The challenge is that this involvement be *itself* spiritual: that is, ‘ecology in the power of the Holy Spirit’, motivated by him who made his home on the earth, encouraged and inspired by him and by his project for a new heaven and a new earth. Scientific and technical analyses are indispensable, but we need this spirituality which sustains our motivation in the long term and which allows us to identify such initiatives as part of our spiritual tradition.
3. Ignatius is realistic about our possessive instinct. As an instinct it is not bad in itself: what is bad is one’s tendency to turn it into an obsession. Jesus often warned of this primordial tendency: following him, Ignatius also treated it in his ‘Meditation on the Two Standards’. Usually, he tells us, the most radical temptation of the human being is ‘to covet riches’, whether they be material or spiritual. In other words, we experience the desire to achieve our own salvation by accumulation, by the ‘disordered’ (that is, unreflective and disproportionate) use of things. But a price has to be paid for this obsession and it is invariably paid by the natural world and by our brothers and sisters, especially the poor and most defenceless.
4. There remains a theme that is very difficult to discuss, but is also unavoidable. Can concern for the environment in our Christian-Ignatian accent be an explicit dimension of the ecological debate, alongside other humanistic and scientific traditions? Ought one to *make* it explicit? I would say that it must: but the question of ‘When?’ and ‘How?’ is complex, and goes beyond the scope of this reflection. Specific methodologies would need a further consideration.

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