



# Fighting, failing, loving: Ignatian spirituality in a nutshell

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What is Ignatian spirituality? There are, of course, as many answers to that question as there are people who have encountered it, and Hermann Kügler SJ ventures his. How does he understand the way in which Ignatius of Loyola was moved to serve Christ, and to help others do the same?

How does a life characterised by Ignatian spirituality look to the secular world? Being able to answer this question in a simple way can help us to share the riches of the Ignatian tradition with those who are outside of it. It can also provide those of us who have received the gifts of St Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises with a way to see how our lives continue to be nourished by those gifts.

I suggest that a helpful description of Ignatian spirituality is thus: 'Fight – Failure – Love'. For those whose lives are shaped by Ignatian spirituality will:

- fight for the values of the gospel;
- not seek to avoid personal failure; and
- love God, their fellow human beings, themselves and creation with all their heart.

## Fight

There is no doubt that Ignatian spirituality has a militant element,<sup>1</sup> which I mean in a positive sense as a commitment of the whole person to whatever means lead to freedom, peace, the integrity of creation, or any good and just cause. It is not enough simply to analyse challenges from a distance and then be satisfied with saying, 'it's good that we talked about it', but reflection must lead to action: 'There is a lot to do, let's do it!'

Ignatius's own life was characterised by fighting, in many different ways. He initially fought for his social position, for the affection of women and on behalf of his employers. After being wounded in Pamplona, he had to start again and then fought for his self-image,



for health, against suicidal thoughts, for the knowledge of God's will and for the service of faith. And later he fought for ecclesiastical recognition (he was accused by the Inquisition several times), to gain companions and, above all, for and on behalf of people and their salvation.

Ignatius wanted to share his own spiritual insights with others. The resulting book of Spiritual Exercises is the systematised form of a path of practice 'to conquer oneself and regulate one's life' (SpExx §21).

Vitus Seibel writes of the order Ignatius founded that Jesuits want to enter into the world's areas of tension and live with and in these tensions, instead of rashly resolving them in one way or another. Daring instead of fearfulness characterises their approach. 'Thus the constitutions tend to lead to a certain aggressiveness, a willingness to take risks, a daring to experiment'.<sup>2</sup>

To put it in starkly martial terms: Ignatius was looking for companions who wanted to fight. The prayer attributed to him reads: 'Lord, teach me to be generous, to serve you as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to look for any reward, save that of knowing that I do your holy will.'

I am convinced that this desire is characteristic not only of Jesuits, but also of all people who want to make a difference in the world in a manner informed by Ignatian spirituality. This is not an esoteric wellness programme for personal comfort. Of course,

the concrete form it takes will depend on someone's individual circumstances. But courage instead of fear, facing challenges instead of making demands, characterises the Ignatian approach. Anyone who has to wade through a swamp – metaphorically speaking – will inevitably get splashed.

## Failure

If I speak on behalf of those who have no voice, it is inevitable that I will encounter resistance from those who don't want to listen, and that I may fail personally despite my good will and commitment. I don't seek failure, but I don't avoid it either.

The tension between fighting and failure is present in Jesus's life. With earthly eyes, it is hard to see anything other than that, in the end, he failed. In the Spiritual Exercises, this is the subject matter of the third week.<sup>3</sup> Those who do the exercises of the third week enter, as it were, into a community of destiny with Christ. I share his failure in his mission, which has become his existence. He is treated unjustly and mocked, his disciples abandon him. Peter denies knowing him. He is powerless at the mercy of his enemies and a pawn of political interests with no prospect of salvation, apparently abandoned even by God.

If you search the writings of Ignatius for the word 'failure', it does not appear. Failure is obviously not something that particularly interests Ignatius. This is all the more astonishing when you consider that he himself 'failed' several times. For Ignatius, being wounded by the cannonball in Pamplona signalled the end and thus the failure of his third professional career (as a cleric, as an administrative official and here as a [soldier](#)). At the end of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he is hit by another 'cannonball': his lifelong dream of being able to stay there forever is dashed. But both events led him to a radical deepening of his relationship with Christ.<sup>4</sup>

In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius encourages us to seek and find God in all situations of life: in health and in sickness, in wealth and in poverty, in honour and in shame, in a long life and in a short one. Jesus walked this path. He did not remain on the 'sunny side' of life, but 'descended into the realm of death'.

Ignatius trusts people of faith and explicitly encourages them to 'seek and find the will of God', and thus

become co-workers of the working God. If we seek and find and do the will of God then, Ignatius would say, the question of the meaning of earthly failure shifts. It is no longer central. This does not mean that it cannot be a major concern for a person. But first and foremost, life is about doing the will of God and not about avoiding failure. Because whether life 'succeeds' or 'fails' now depends on whether someone is connected to God and does God's will. Anyone who has 'nothing' to show at the end of their life, in worldly terms, is therefore not necessarily further from God than someone else who has made an outwardly significant and important contribution to the world.

## Love

How does a Christian live love of self, love of neighbour, love of God and love of creation?<sup>5</sup> And how does he or she organise these four fundamental relationships that constitute us humans? He or she will orientate themselves around the person of Jesus, who knew no fear of intimacy; he was capable of deep feelings. For Jesus, there was no contradiction between love for people and love for God. In our human view, we might assume that the more we love God, the less room there would be in our hearts for love for people – or vice versa: if we loved a person with all our heart, there would be less and less room for God.

In Jesus's view, the exact opposite is true. 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind ... you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Mt 22:37, 39), he tells his disciples: love of God and love of neighbour interpenetrate and interpret each other without falling into one. They are 'unmixed and undivided'. Jesus lived like this on many occasions. When he allowed himself to be touched and moved, he felt that 'power had gone forth from him' (Mark 5:30). He welcomes the faith of little children (Mk 10:13-16) and takes them by the hand (Mk 5:41). He heals a blind man with a paste made of saliva (Jn 9:6). He allows himself to be anointed (Jn 12:1-11). He washes feet (Jn 13:1-20). He seeks the companionship of his disciples on the Mount of Olives (Mk 14:32-42). He allows his wounds to be touched (Jn 20:27). [He breathes on the disciples](#) (Jn 20:22). He embraced his friends in the greeting of peace (Lk 24:36). His love releases and leads to freedom: 'Do you also want to go?' (Jn 6:67), he asks his disciples.

A touching and impactful biblical story is the encounter of the risen Christ with [Mary Magdalene](#) (John 20:11-18). Mary obviously wants to keep the risen Christ for herself alone. ‘Do not hold me’, Jesus says to her – not, as some old translations say, ‘do not touch me’. The point is not that she should not *touch* him. What she has to learn is that love sets you free. The moment she is tempted to cling, she has to learn that freedom is a child of real love. Then she goes to the other disciples and proclaims: ‘I have seen the Lord’. Love is fruitful, here in such a way that it has comforting, healing and hope-giving effects on other people.

Jesus is a compassionate man who has a heart for his fellow human beings. His behaviour shows that God is tenderly and lovingly devoted to people. This is the basic idea behind the devotion to the [Sacred Heart](#) cultivated in the Catholic tradition and especially by the Jesuits. Certainly, in professional life, it is common practice to judge people on performance and also on utility. But in genuine human encounters, these are not categories.

### *Three clues from the Spiritual Exercises and from the life of Ignatius*

*Firstly*, ‘Fight - Failure - Love’ could be seen to correlate with the second, third and fourth weeks of the Spiritual Exercises. Ideally: after I have organised my life in the first week, I discover my vocation in following Jesus in the exercises of the second week. When it becomes concrete, it has a militant element. I am very consciously seeking and deepening my vocation as a person and as a Christian. I want to follow Jesus, not only for the ‘feel-good factor’ it might give me, but also to enter into a community of destiny with him – even where it gets difficult and is not ‘fun’.

In the imagery of the second week of the retreat, a ‘fighting spirituality’ can be seen in important places: in the exercise of the Call of the King, I imagine both that the king wants to conquer (*conquistar*) the ‘land of the unbelievers’, and that I want to come with him and fight for him (SpExx §§93, 95). The reflection on the [Two Standards](#) (SpExx §§136-148), is about visualising two different ‘army camps’ (SpExx §§138, 140). Before the planned campaign, one commander addresses a speech to his ‘demons’, motivating them for the forthcoming battle, the other to his ‘servants and friends’ (SpExx §146). The images used are

certainly rooted in the context in which they were written, but the questions they raise remain topical.

In the exercises of the third week, I am ready to share in the suffering of Christ as my friend. I can seek and find God even in personal failure, because I also share in Jesus’s relationship with God. I do not avoid personal failure.

The events of the third week are not isolated in the framework of the Spiritual Exercises, but they have a place at the centre of life. Discipleship of the crucified one not only applies to a certain period of practice, but should also characterise a life ever more deeply and intensively. ‘The aim of this week is to become awake to the possibility that God wants to involve me in co-suffering with Christ in a way that corresponds to my life and my mission.’<sup>6</sup>

In the third week, the meaning of my own existence can be lost: everything has become meaningless, nothing that once sustained me is still alive. This can go so far that I perceive in myself reproachful attitudes, paralysis, despair, stubbornness, rebelliousness and flight into distractions. I want to avoid the ‘power of darkness’ and avoid failure. The feeling creeps over me that I have made a mistake. Instead of turning to Christ, I turn to my own self.

In the exercises of the fourth week, though, I realise: my life succeeds because I live it in the light of the resurrection, of the risen one, turned towards Christ, even if he ‘is not here’ and I cannot ‘hold on to him’. I walk my path through life in the power of the Holy Spirit, who works in me. I love my fellow human beings in a liberating way.

In the great final meditation of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius presents one of the greatest and most central of his texts: the Contemplation to Attain Love (SpExx §§230-237). You will probably only understand this text if you not only read it, which you can do [here](#), but meditate on it.

This spiritual exercise comes at the end – not the beginning – of a four-week training programme in which you have meditated and prayed about how to live a life of faith. You have experienced for yourself the meaning of living more and more in union with God, following Jesus Christ and practising active love

for your neighbour, both in an individual environment and by influencing this often problematic world.

Secondly, Ignatius's image of Christ, which is the foundation of Ignatian spirituality, is a Jesus who carries his cross and works hard to redeem the world, suffering as he does so, and who does not shy away from his own failure. 'Fight – Failure – Love' can be seen in the vision of [St Ignatius at La Storta](#). In his autobiography, Ignatius himself talks about an experience in the church of La Storta on the Via Cassia, about 14 kilometres from the gates of Rome: 'Then he felt such a transformation in his soul and saw so clearly that God the Father had joined him to Christ, his Son, that he no longer dared to doubt that God the Father had joined his Son to him' (*Autobiography*, 96). Diego Lainez, who was travelling with Ignatius and Peter Favre at the time, mentions an important detail about this event in a lecture he gave to the Roman Jesuits in 1559: 'it seemed to [Ignatius] as if he saw Christ with the cross on his shoulders and next to him the eternal Father, who said to him: "I want you to accept this one as your servant", and so Jesus accepted him and said: "I want you to serve us"'.<sup>7</sup>

Hugo Rahner has comprehensively and convincingly explained that for Ignatius the vision of La Storta was one of the most important mystical experiences of his life. 'The actual effect of the vision is the henceforth unshakeable awareness of having entered into an indissoluble communion of life with the poor Jesus, who is the head of the small community whose name they want to bear'.<sup>8</sup> From the outset, the newly founded order was convinced that this view applied not only to Ignatius, but to all those who wanted to follow this way of life.

Ignatius saw himself called to go to Rome out of love for God and people, to 'fight' for the good causes there – and that he might fail in the process did not seem out of the question to him. The tension between fighting and failing, between being committed and being able to let go, becomes visible. He is able to live it in actions borne by love.

Thirdly, the image that Ignatius most frequently uses for a life of following Jesus is that of the labourer in the vineyard of the Lord.<sup>9</sup> This image does not appear in the *Spiritual Exercises*, but more than a dozen times in the *Constitutions*. This is how Ignatius sees himself in Rome: no longer as a pilgrim or soldier, but as a labourer. He had arrived there through the school of *Spiritual Exercises*, and he was looking for collaborators for the work in the vineyard of the Lord. Shaped by the experience of the *Spiritual Exercises*, these collaborators too should participate in this work in action borne by love, militantly, and while not seeking failure, also not avoiding it if it has to be: *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*.

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Kügler and Jörg Nies, 'Spiritualität des Kämpfens - Potential und Grenzen', *Geist und Leben* 96, no.2 (2023), pp. 125-133.

<sup>2</sup> Vitus Seibel, *Architektur einer Gemeinschaft: Impulse aus den Satzungen der Jesuiten*, Ignatianischer Impuls 59 (Würzburg, 2013), p. 62 (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> See: Hermann Kügler, 'Die dritte Woche der Ignatianischen Exerzitien: 10 Thesen', *Geist und Leben* 92, no/ 4 (2019), pp. 345-355.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Franz Meures SJ for this comment.

<sup>5</sup> Fabian Moos, Paris, draws my attention to this fourth 'love relationship' with reference to Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato si'*. 'Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered.' Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* (2015), §70.

<sup>6</sup> Karin Johnne, *Geistlicher Übungsweg für den Alltag* (1989), p. 244 (my translation).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in J. Stierli, *Ignatius of Loyola, Gott suchen in allen Dingen* (Olten, 1981), p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> Hugo Rahner, 'Die Vision des heiligen Ignatius in der Kapelle von La Storta', in *Ignatius von Loyola als Mensch und Theologe* (Freiburg, 1964), pp. 53-108, p.73 (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> See: J. Peter Schineller SJ, *The Pilgrim journey of Ignatius. From Soldier to Laborer in the Lord's Vineyard and Its Implications for Apostolic Lay Spirituality*, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 31 (1999).