

# Overwhelmed by grace: St Ignatius and Tears

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## ***The Tears of a Soldier***

Sensitive men are back in fashion. They enjoy a certain social recognition. You no longer hear people say that ‘boys don’t cry’ or that they should be brave. That was what boys used to be told when they fell over and began to sob with fear or pain at the slightest scratch. Boys who did so were taken to be weak-natured, like girls. They had to dry their tears, hold them in, and carry on as if nothing had happened. It was considered a sign of manliness.

As the wounds St Ignatius suffered at the battle of Pamplona began to heal, his behaviour seemed to fit with this stereotype.<sup>1</sup> Once he had returned to his parents’ home at Azpeitia from Pamplona, the medics had to reset the bones of his leg, because they had fused badly. In spite of what it must have felt like, ‘he never uttered a word, nor showed any sign of pain other than clenching his fists tightly’ (*Autobiography*, n.2). It did not end there. The ‘butchery’ continued during his recovery from the operation when, for purely aesthetic reasons, he decided to have his misaligned knee bone corrected: ‘His older brother was horrified, and said that he would not dare to suffer such pain; which the injured man endured with his usual patience’ (*Autobiography*, n.2). Later, when he had to answer to the Inquisition and was held prisoner in Alcalá and Salamanca: ‘it was not displeasing to Ignatius that ... he had some occasion of suffering for the honor of Christ, which he thirsted for, and for the help of souls’.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Juan Polanco, *The Life of Ignatius Loyola and the History of the Founding of the Society of Jesus*, translated by Kenneth Baker (Chesnut Hill: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2018), 10–11.

<sup>2</sup> Polanco, *Life of Ignatius Loyola*, 38.

This strong man, resilient to both physical and emotional pain, would nevertheless experience moments of his life in which tears played a significant role. His image as a tough cookie, with ‘measured speech, a desire for precision, and great practicality’, would be imbued with the gentleness and extreme sensitivity that he would later display repeatedly throughout his life.<sup>3</sup>

Ignatius demonstrates for us that tears do not have to be synonymous with weakness. He was a great strategist, with a firm and sober character, but at the same time he was intuitive, passionate, attentive and selfless. For this reason he could adapt to different situations and was adept in relationships with people of diverse social statuses and backgrounds. He had ‘the ability to move the minds of men’,<sup>4</sup> making himself everything to everyone and fulfilling what Saint Paul proposed when he said: ‘I have become all things to all people, so that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.’ (1 Corinthians 9:22–23) The Church has a long tradition of appreciating tears as a gift from God, and as an important part of the spiritual journey. But they do not always mean the same thing, nor possess the same value. In the fourteenth century, Saint Catherine of Siena wrote a ‘doctrine of tears’ in her work *The Dialogue*, where she makes an exercise of discernment over the kinds of tears and the moments in which they arise. She describes five distinct types, but they are all tears of the heart, ‘The only difference lies in whether the love is ordered well or ill, is perfect or imperfect.’<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the oral tradition of Judaism focuses on when God cries, and for whom.<sup>6</sup> The Lord cries with us, and we cry with His tears.

So it is strange that, although they are so highly valued and have such a profound meaning, there have been approaches to St Ignatius that barely take tears into account at all. It is strange

<sup>3</sup> Josep Maria Rambla, *El peregrino. Autobiografía de San Ignacio* (Bilbao and Maliaño: Mensajero and Sal Terrae, 1996), introduction, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Polanco, *Life of Ignatius Loyola*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> St Catherine of Siena, ‘Tears’, n.91, in *The Dialogue*, translated by Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> See Catherine Chalier, *Traité des larmes. Fragilité de Dieu, fragilité de l’âme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003).

because these are a marked and authentic characteristic of the author of the *Spiritual Exercises*, without which any sketch of his personality remains incomplete. Anyone who ignores them in painting the most approximate portrait of St Ignatius will be unable to capture the essence of the saint, for even physically ‘his eyelids were shrunken and wrinkled from the many tears he continually shed’.<sup>7</sup> Diego Laínez affirmed that he was, ‘so tenderly susceptible to weep about anything that recalls the eternal and the abstract that he told me he would find himself weeping tears regularly six or seven times a day’.<sup>8</sup> Such were the abundance and frequency of his tears that, on the advice of his doctor, he had to learn to hold them in, so they would not cause serious health problems. He acknowledged, ‘my eyes ached painfully’ (Diary, 12 March 1544). The first step in understanding the place of tears in Saint Ignatius’ life will be to determine what caused him to groan with sobs and copious tears, when and under what circumstances.

### ***Tears in Ignatius’ Story***

St Ignatius shed tears—a lot. There is evidence of this in many of his writings: in the *Autobiography*; in his Spiritual Diary; in a few of his letters; and in the recollections of the companions who knew him during his life. Since he was a man little given to displays of emotion and reluctant to share his interior life, the fact that he was able to dictate to Gonçalves da Câmara moments in which he could not suppress his tears, suggests not only that he was generous enough to communicate something that we have no right to hear, however much curiosity it might arouse, but also that he did so intentionally.

He shared what he did because he considered it important to reveal ‘how the Lord had guided him from the beginning of his conversion’, which is why he had agreed to tell the story of what

<sup>7</sup> Pedro de Ribadeneira, *Vida del B. P. Ignacio de Loyola, fundador de la Compañía de Jesús*, 4. 18, MHSJ FN 4, 729.

<sup>8</sup> Diego Laínez, ‘Letter to Juan Polanco Giving a Brief Biography of Ignatius of Loyola’, n. 59, in *The First Biographies of St Ignatius Loyola*, translated by Joseph A. Munitiz (Oxford: Way Books, 2019), 32.

had happened from the time of his convalescence in Azpeitia.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of seeing how the Lord led him to greater praise and service is essential, for it implies that Ignatius probably shed tears on other occasions that are not recounted since they did not arise through the action of God; and, by contrast, those he mentions are the ones that serve his purpose.

He narrates the episode that occurred after he gave his clothes to a beggar in Monserrat as though it were the first time in his life that he had shed so many tears. He told it to his confidant and the minister of the house in Rome a little over thirty years after the event had taken place. This distance favoured reflection and the internalisation of what had happened. He dictated this story in 1553 and 1555, near the end of his life; what he recounted occurred around 1522. By that time he had already become a pilgrim, deciding to 'clothe himself in the armour of Christ' (*Autobiography*, n.17). Since he didn't want anyone to recognise him, he gave his clothes to a beggar and set off for Manresa. On the way, a man asked him if he was the one who had given clothes to the beggar. The tears 'poured from his eyes, tears of compassion for the poor man to whom he had given his clothes: compassion, because he realized that they were making things difficult for him, thinking he had stolen them' (*Autobiography*, n.18). The first tears since the conversion of Ignatius, a man of strong character, bear the mark of humanity and compassion.

Settled in Manresa, he began to live an extremely austere life, until a pivotal moment arrived: the experience of profound desolation that provoked suicidal thoughts owing to an exhausting struggle against scruples he could not control. But his obedience to his confessor, his perseverance and his plea—'Help me, Lord: I can find no cure in human beings nor in any creature' (*Autobiography*, n.23)—paved the way for the action of the Spirit. 'The Lord willed that he woke up as if from sleep' and he was certain that 'Our Lord in his mercy had willed to liberate him' (*Autobiography*, n.25). The disquieting inner struggle ended. The surrender to grace was a turning point in his life. And it facilitated a further flow of tears.

<sup>9</sup> Jerónimo Nadal, 'Preface of Fr Nadal', in *A Pilgrim's Journey: The Autobiography of St Ignatius Loyola*, translated by Joseph N. Tylenda (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1985), appendix 1, 123.

From that point on, Ignatius realised that God was treating him as a child, teaching him and revealing to him the mystery of God's love through mystical graces. He then had a vision of the Trinity in the form of three keys on a keyboard, 'this with so many tears and so many sobs that he could not control himself' and 'at no point could he restrain his tears' (*Autobiography*, n.28). All of this was accompanied by great consolation. The tears flowed from a threefold experience: the gratuity of God's love, its immeasurability and the consolation that it brought.

What happened in Manresa was fundamental. It was the very reason that Ignatius composed the core of the *Spiritual Exercises* there—in which the proposed exercises included the tears he had lived for himself. We find them associated with the suffering of sin (Exx 55); the compassion for the Lord that moved him to have 'tears; and interior suffering because of the great suffering which Christ endured for me' (Exx 203); and consolation (Exx 316). He also warns retreatants about how temptation can act upon even the greatest of gifts.

Later on, he had a different experience that added another dimension to his weeping. It happened in Monte Cassino, close to Rome, where he learned of the death of Bachelor Hoces, the first Jesuit to die, to whom he himself had given the *Spiritual Exercises*. There he contemplated how Hoces entered into heaven, 'at this had great tears and great spiritual consolation' (*Autobiography*, n.98), which lasted 'not for one but for many days'.<sup>10</sup> This evidence that a companion had been received into the next life he took as confirmation of the resurrection, a consolation for the affection that he felt for his companion and a confirmation of the communion of saints—relevant for Ignatius since mediators were decisive in his spiritual journey. In this sense, Mary, Our Lady, deserves special mention for the place she occupies as intercessor in this process.

Two years later, the confirmation of the Society of Jesus by Pope Paul III gave Ignatius great joy. As superior general he left, as was his custom, some notes in his *Spiritual Diary* (1544–1545) that correspond chronologically to the deliberation on poverty and part of the composition of the *Constitutions*. These circumstances made him intensify his prayer, through which he experienced an

<sup>10</sup> Polanco, *Life of Ignatius Loyola*, 59.

increase in devotion and tears: 'This often used to happen as he was going along talking about important things, and that would make him arrive at assurance' (*Autobiography*, n.99). 'He told me', said Gonçalves de Câmara, about 'decisions over which he had been forty days saying mass every day, and every day with many tears' (*Autobiography*, n.100).

There are few occasions about which we know when St Ignatius cried out of sadness. But Ribadeneira recollected in his biography of the saint two episodes in which the founder of the Society shed many tears over the unedifying situations of his companions: in one case, over someone who was on the point of being lost to a serious temptation; in the other over persistent disobedience.<sup>11</sup>

In the last few years of his life, however, he received a lot of joy and spiritual consolation from thinking on death, which turned everything into tears. It occurred with such frequency that, on many occasions, he stopped thinking about it so as not to receive so much consolation. He had not always lived with the prospect of death like this. When he was sick in Manresa, what he wished was that the offences he had committed against God would not be forgotten. On another occasion, when he was travelling by ship from Valencia to Italy, he thought he was going to die in a great storm; he was not afraid of condemnation for his sins, but of not having done enough with the gifts and graces that God had bestowed upon him.

Aside from specific occasions, Ignatius had a custom that Ribadeneira noted, starting from his first vision of the virgin and child, just before walking to Azpeitia. He enjoyed 'looking attentively at the beauty of the heavens and the stars, which he did often and slowly.' He remained so 'enraptured and in suspense' with 'tears pouring from his eyes for the great delight that he felt'. 'He made habit of this that lasted for the rest of his life.'<sup>12</sup> For this reason, Diego Laínez recalled how, already in Rome, he went up on to the roof to look at the heavens: 'There he was, with head uncovered, shedding tears that streamed down his face, with such

<sup>11</sup> Ribadeneira, *Vida del B. P. Ignacio de Loyola*, 5.2, MHSJ FN 4, 769.

<sup>12</sup> Ribadeneira, *Vida del B. P. Ignacio de Loyola*, 1.2, MHSJ FN 4, 95.

smoothness and silence that he did not feel either sobbing or moaning, or noise nor any movement of the body'.<sup>13</sup> At the end of his life, he was thrilled at the prospect of meeting the Father: 'It was time', wrote Polanco, 'that his constant work should arrive at true rest, his infirmities at true health, his tears and continuous suffering at bliss and perpetual happiness'. And so, 'he gave his soul to his creator and Lord without any difficulty'.<sup>14</sup>

### ***The Memory of Tears***

The moments when Ignatius shed abundant tears and sobbed—and noted it—could be categorised as 'experiences of transcendence'.<sup>15</sup> The 'most intense tears', together with 'greatly increased devotion' and multiple instances of the same, were effectively experiences in which the presence of the Lord became overwhelming and clear, for the most part linked with consolation and in conjunction with a God who, always greater, was gradually being revealing to him.<sup>16</sup> Recalling his 'excess of tears' (Diary, 16 February 1544), among other gifts ('a deepening of faith, of hope, of charity; spiritual joy and repose, tears, intense consolation, elevation of mind, divine impressions and illuminations'), was for Ignatius the making of a memory of gifts received, one that was closely linked to remembering his poverty, his stubbornness and blindness.<sup>17</sup>

The brief overview of a few moments in the life of St Ignatius presented in the previous section, in which tears had a unique role, allows us to summarise in a few points the most noteworthy aspects of what Ignatius himself saw in them.

### ***The Passage of God***

The tears that Ignatius remembered and that held interest for him are those that give testimony to the passage of God through his life

<sup>13</sup> Ribadeneira, *Vida del B. P. Ignacio de Loyola*, 5.1, MHSJ FN 4, 748–749.

<sup>14</sup> Juan Polanco to Pedro de Ribadeneira, 6 August 1556, MHSJ FN 1, 764, 767.

<sup>15</sup> José A. García and Felix Revilla, *El relato del peregrino. Lectura espiritual y pastoral de la Autobiografía de san Ignacio* (Bilbao: Mensajero, 2025), 56–57.

<sup>16</sup> Diary, 13 February 1544 and elsewhere.

<sup>17</sup> Ignatius to Francisco de Borja, 20 September 1548, in St Ignatius of Loyola, *Letters and Instructions*, edited by Martin E. Palmer, John W. Padberg and John L. McCarthy (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 255.

by means of an experience of consolation. Crying stirs up the emotions, reduces tension, expresses something uncontainable and opens the floodgates of the overflowing heart. The uncountable graces that Ignatius received produced a profound impression on him, and he never grew accustomed to them, for they only served to reinforce the boundless and undeserved love he received. The Lord constantly demonstrated to him how much He loved and needed him. In fact, the more Ignatius asked to be punished for the many sins he saw he had committed, and for which he shed so many tears, the more merciful the Lord was to him. God was captivated by his sincere repentance, and Ignatius by God's prodigious magnanimity.

Ignatius' interest was never in speaking of himself (in fact he abhorred it) but rather in telling others the story of consolation (of which tears were a part). This is why the guiding thread of his autobiography is the Spirit's way of proceeding from his conversion onward. Looking back, he became conscious that this loving companionship brought forth intense tears that he found satisfying because they gave free rein to the life surging within him. They were a gift through which his body expressed the impression made upon it by the love of God.

The 'great flood of tears' (Diary, 18 February 1544) that became greater over the years was not the result of the increasing weakness Ignatius might have experienced in old age, a time when emotions tend to run close to the surface owing to frailty and loss, but was brought about in him by the forcefulness with which infinite, gratuitous and undeniable Love was revealed to him: always greater. What followed in the wake of that love was gratitude. Ribadeneira affirmed: 'among all the virtues our Father possessed, the one that especially stood out was that of gratitude, in which he was, it seemed to me, exceptional and admirable'.<sup>18</sup> This, along with praise and reverence, forms an unbeatable combination to confront reality, and tears are pregnant with all three. Ignatius was grateful for them, too; in them God gave him a channel of communication. But at times he did not receive them as he should have done.

<sup>18</sup> Ribadeneira, *Vida del B. P. Ignacio de Loyola*, 5.2, MHSJ FN 4, 771.

*Discernment*

Letting himself be led by the Spirit helped Ignatius to detect temptations. He recognised that sometimes he had wanted, on the one hand, to hold on to his gifts and, on the other, to identify them solely with the Spirit. He struggled to accept that he was not supposed to absolutise the countless graces he received. He gradually learnt to receive them and to place them at God's service through discernment. He recognised, with disarming humility, his disordered affections in this area, as they appeared in the deliberations on poverty and in the drafting of the *Constitutions*. In both cases, he became obsessed with the search for confirmation for some decision he was making, and prayed constantly, taking note of his tears with this aim in mind—until he realised the trap. Under the appearance of the good (wanting to confirm and purify the election) he put what was more important on the back burner: the will of God, and above all, God's love, which goes above and beyond our compliance. From then on, consolation was no longer contingent on the intensity of tears. This is why he warned his companions against seeking tears indiscriminately, because everything should be subordinated to the greater praise, reverence and service of God.

Gonçalves da Câmara recalled that when the doctor ordered Ignatius not to cry because it would compromise his health, 'having accepted it through obedience, he finds, as often occurs in these matters, that now he receives much more consolation without weeping than he had previously'.<sup>19</sup> He thereby found that the Spirit would continue leading him without tears.

All human reality, tears and sobs included, has to be discerned, because it is subject to ambiguity, temptation and our own desires and interests. All that Ignatius learnt was reflected in the ninth rule of discernment for the First Week (Exx 322), in which the saint signalled three causes behind desolation: being lukewarm, lazy or negligent; making our greatest service dependent on consolations and 'increased graces'; and attributing devotion,

<sup>19</sup> *Remembering Iñigo: Glimpses of the Life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The Memoriale of Luís Gonçalves da Câmara*, translated by Alexander Eaglestone and Joseph A. Munitiz (Leominster: Gracewing, 2005), n. 183.

intense love or tears to ourselves. It is hard to accept that ‘all these are a gift and grace from God our Lord’.

### *Compassion*

‘The first tears that he shed after leaving his own country’ were tears of compassion.<sup>20</sup> Some might have thought that the poor man to whom Ignatius had given his clothes had stolen them, and this deeply affected him. Ribadeneira adds to this episode an interesting reflection which he attributes to Ignatius: ‘Woe to you sinner, who neither knows nor can do good to your neighbour without causing him harm and affront.’<sup>21</sup> Ignatius failed to grasp the consequences of his selfless act. He was unaware that charity, too, must be discerned. Yet those tears, regardless of his spiritual immaturity, pointed to a naturally generous heart: sensitive and predisposed to the good, with ‘great spirit and generosity’ (Exx 5).

The occasion was opportune because, on his way to Manresa, a substantial change began to transpire in Ignatius, from being preoccupied with his own sins and perfection, to desiring to please God with greater earnestness. This shift allowed him to bring order to his being ‘destined for great things’ and his eagerness to help others.<sup>22</sup> It stayed with him, which is why he remembered it. Perhaps that is why compassion, understood as identification with those who suffer, appears at important moments: in the *Spiritual Exercises* in the desire to be together with the crucified one, and ‘ask for pain, tears, and suffering with Christ suffering’, that is to say, to have having the same feelings as the Lord Jesus (Exx 48); and in the fact of putting at the centre of his vocation ‘helping souls’ (*Autobiography*, n.45). He put so much value on compassion that Polanco, in his name, wrote to a companion to communicate to him:

When someone feels compassion for the miseries of the neighbor in the will and the higher part of his soul [and] desires to do what he can to relieve them ... he needs no further tears or sensible feelings in the heart.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Laínez, ‘Letter to Juan Polanco’, n. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ribadeneira, *Vida del B. P. Ignacio de Loyola*, 1.4, MHSJ FN 4, 107.

<sup>22</sup> Ribadeneira, *Vida del B. P. Ignacio de Loyola*, 1.3, MHSJ FN 4, 99; Polanco, *Life of Ignatius Loyola*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ignatius to Nicholas Floris, 22 November 1553, in *Letters and Instructions*, 449.

He understood that tears of compassion were a gift from God that made him sensitive to the suffering of others, including the Lord.

#### *Devotion and acatamiento*

In St Ignatius' writings on interior movements, 'devotion' appears frequently alongside tears. Of the 139 times the term is used in the Spiritual Diary, 82 are linked to tears. This is significant considering that it is placed first among the qualities of the superior general of the Society (*Constitutions*, IX.2.1 [723]). It is a multifaceted virtue that signifies familiarity and union with God, readiness to serve and ease in finding God: 'every time and hour he wanted to find God, he found him' (*Autobiography*, n.99). The tears and devotion became especially abundant and continuous for St Ignatius in the celebration of Mass; the eucharist was an authentic source of consolation. This makes for a parallelism between the two realities, tears and devotion, in terms of their magnitude and power. Adjectives such as 'most intense', 'enormous', 'abundant', 'very intense', 'much' and so on complete the picture of the force of the experience in both cases. There was no doubt that what Ignatius experienced affected him profoundly in body, soul, action and relationship.

At the same time, between numbers 156 and 188 of the Spiritual Diary, Ignatius introduces a word, *acatamiento*, which he discusses in a brief but significant way. The concept means admiration, contemplation or paying homage. He uses it habitually with two adjectives: 'reverential', referring to his own act of adoration; or 'loving', as a counterpoint to fearful awe. He speaks of the two as the principal criteria that must be meditated in his relation with the Lord: that is to say, in placing himself at the feet of the Lord, to do what the Lord wants, whether or not that be tears and devotion. Doing so, the same loving awe 'always increased my devotion and tears' (Diary, 14 March 1544).

#### *Superabundance*

Following the thread of tears leads us to the conclusion that what prevailed within St Ignatius was the experience of being overwhelmed by the disproportion and greatness of what God made possible. Responding, somehow, was the least that he could do. Nothing could compare with what he had received. All the works

of the Society of Jesus combined throughout the centuries will never compare what the Spirit wrought in St Ignatius and continues to work through him.

Tears, in his case, are not merely a matter of emotions, nor are they simply one gift among others, for he would not have granted them such a preeminent place otherwise. In his Spiritual Diary, of which some 25 folios remain, one can find nearly 450 references to tears. This document is a faithful record, in which the tears he shed practically every day are noted, most linked with the eucharist—the place of honour where the ever-greater God made Godself especially visible to him. He contemplated the breadth, length and depth of that love, and was left in amazement (compare Ephesians 3:18–19).

Overwhelmed by grace, the founder of the Society of Jesus wanted to leave a record of what he had experienced, which, in his case, manifested itself, among other gifts, through ‘many and continuous’ tears and ‘great sobs’.<sup>24</sup> These became a conspicuous witness to the superabundance of God’s love in him and, through him, in us. The apostolic fruitfulness of St Ignatius’ work takes root here. He received everything and gave everything. It was not his own possession; it was God’s.

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<sup>24</sup> Diary, 11 May 1544 and other entries; 14 February 1544.