

IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AND THE LAYPERSON

The following text is the translation of a talk given by the author during the "Youth Conference on Ignatian Spirituality", which took place last September in Rome, at the church of St Ignatius. Participating in the conference were some 1500 young people from all over Italy, who had links of one kind or another with Ignatian Spirituality, amongst them many CLC members.

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It has been some time now since, at the end of my studies at the Jesuit College in Santiago, Chile, I was asked to make an end-of-course speech on behalf of my fellow students. I don't remember much now of what I said, and I don't have the text to hand. One phrase, however, has stayed with me engraved forever in my memory and in my heart. Towards the end, almost as a closing remark, I remember saying "We carry in our hearts this Ignatian fire, which we do not completely understand, but feel burning. We will know it better when, perhaps without looking for it, we have communicated it to others."

Ignatius has always been associated with the image of fire. His very name, by tradition, has the meaning of fire attached to it. In the liturgy, his feast day is linked with fire. There is really fire in the eyes of Ignatius, as one of my friends would say, and many laypeople whose hearts burn with it. It's not a question of a personal fire, feeding on himself, but the flame of Jesus Christ who, in Ignatius, has found a new way of setting the world ablaze.

I continue to feel the same fire burning in me and outside of me. Today, God wanted me to be asked to communicate something of this fire, hoping that my words would not put out the flames by trying to make them ignite to order. In fact, in its freedom the fire has been able to touch and inflame many different people. And so, I can talk to you today of the fire of Ignatius from my layperson's point of view, always bearing in mind, however, that the great fire is something nobody has on tap.

In the lives of the saints, I prefer to look at the way the person found it to sainthood, and the Spirit of God, which guides them, rather than the glorified saint. In this way, we don't just value the dazzling personality, already forged in the fullness of the fire, but concern ourselves rather with following their progression from one or two isolated sparks or a few glowing embers which are kindled by the gentle breath of the Spirit of God. That is the reason why I am not concerned here with developing the image of Ignatius as a man attached to or in love with Christ. Nor am I going to start by talking about Ignatius as it man of the Church. Rather, I shall quite simply be talking about Ignatius as a man of process, of freedom, of worldliness and sensitivity, who sought companions to give service to God. For laypeople of today, these five aspects of the Ignatian heritage are extremely precious, influencing, as they can, our family and professional life, our political choices and our day-to-day routine.

1. Ignatius is a man of process:

In Ignatius we see clearly a process of growth. And let us not think that it is a process planned with the objective of reaching certain predetermined goals. The definition of pilgrim, which he gave himself at the end of his life, included a fair bit of risk, and of unawareness of what there would be at the end. To be a pilgrim is to be free, to feel enjoyment or suffering at each of your steps and at every moment, never to be settled in a definite place, and to be ever open to new things. Right now we could say that all pilgrims are young, but not all young people are pilgrims.

In Ignatius, an internal process took place which teaches us a great deal. I like to think that Ignatius was a man not afraid of himself, who was able to see himself in all his facets, to be aware of himself and to evaluate where he stood. He was also capable of looking around him and realising what was going on. In time, he also acquired the capacity to see and recognise God's actions. He developed a

remarkable ability to recognise and accept the circumstances of the present so that he could identify what was the next stage and get to grips with the task ahead. This principle, which is based on rationality, can be very determining, and when it works alongside God's actions, gets rid, purely and simply, of all our stubborn nature, and comes to us as a precious legacy.

We who follow in the Ignatian tradition do not therefore try to impose – on ourselves or anyone else – some goal, some rigid discipline. All we do is to look for the next step to be taken in an ever-complex reality. In the course of our personal spiritual development, we will increase our capacity of self-awareness, our capacity to evaluate where we are without being afraid of coming face to face with unpleasant answers. It is only by starting, each of us, from our personal reality that we who are mortal and limited beings can grow as pilgrims, towards a point which will become clearer and clearer to us.

The legacy of Ignatius as a man of process is impressive: the discernment of spirits and the 'examen of consciousness', the progression of the Spiritual Exercises, the witness of his personal life and the freedom with which he subordinated intermediate goals to the one most important goal, the respect he had for the people he dealt with and the people he shaped – all of this encourages us today to adopt a similar attitude.

In a social and church environment in which it is ever more difficult to listen, to look at yourself without smugness, and to ready yourself humbly for the way ahead, the wisdom of Ignatius' teachings are useful for those who want to undertake a journey with self-respect and respect for others, on which they will never stop progressing and growing.

This also goes for married life, where it is always so important to be aware of the process of personal development and to have a language that explains it and conveys it. Ignatius teaches us to pay attention to our interior movements, to recognise the signs of life and death in ourselves, to offer up to God the things we have already lived through and to ready ourselves to welcome with confidence what is to come. He does not see the world through rose-tinted spectacles, and is well aware that amidst the heat of the fire, some parts are cold. He knows that it is out of silence that words are given their being, that death is part of life, and that love brings both deep happiness and real sadness. Following the Ignatian path isn't going to solve all the problems of human life and love, but from it you acquire this sense of internal process and a language to express it which allows you to establish a gentler, more serene relationship with yourself, with God and with others.

2. Ignatius is a free man:

It is true that Ignatius was stubborn, but he was also free. He could pursue a goal with tenacity, but always with a higher motivation, which, in time, was to become the sole objective: "to praise, reverence and serve the Lord our God." Other things are "created for men and women in order to help them to pursue the end for which they were created." The classic principle of "in so far as" is a principle for free people, but also for impassioned people.

Ignatius constantly examines his freedom. What is my desire? What do I want? "To ask of our Lord what I want and desire" is a formula which comes up often in the Spiritual Exercises, and which speaks to us of a free person. A free person looks to the depths of their being, the place where personal desires come face to face with those of God, and where what God wants of me is not imposed on me but comes as an idea from the core of my being. Ignatius understood that God works through the medium of desires, provoking an attraction, stirring our freedom of choice. God is always present in our deepest desires, but the desires we identify and follow are not always the deepest ones. To increase our freedom is, in a sense, coming into contact with the depths of our being and recognising what we truly desire, so we can then seek it actively and ask it of God's grace.

So Ignatius was not afraid of choices or the active use of his freedom. His spiritual pedagogy always leads to choosing, be it to confirm or to change some state of affairs or your personal situation. There are no automatic decisions, since these deny freedom. "I wish and I desire, and that is my deliberate decision": Who, if not a free person could show such clarity in their writing? Today, personal freedom seems to be hidden behind a kind of social fatalism in which the different stages are fixed in advance and the ways of going about things conventional. The free person following Ignatius

never loses their capacity to ask themselves “but do I really want and desire this?” ... and this goes for the collective context too. In social, professional and political life, we can ask ourselves “Yes, it has always been like this, but do we really want and desire it?”

Ignatius’ freedom was not only a freedom of reaction, for example to reject something bad or ill advised. It is a creative freedom, capable of discernment, which also allows you (and at times requires you) to say “no” to options, which are morally acceptable and socially recommended. This last “no” will be the expression of a freedom which looks further, which is not satisfied with conventional answers, but which ventures into far-flung territory and seeks to occupy new ground or to put itself at the service of enterprises which are less individualistic and more communitarian.

Certainly, all of this could also be a simple exercise of freewill. The mature Ignatius knew this, and would always consider his liberty in the light of God, and the most freely chosen of his deeds as “offerings of greater value and of more importance.” Yes, what I want and desire ... “provided that it is for Your greater service and praise.”

3. Ignatius is worldly:

Ignatius did not distance himself from the world to find God. He wanted to stay in the world, like the apostles did – that is, serving with Jesus the Servant. For him, Jesus was not absent from the world, and he had to be seen “in all things.” How difficult it is today to recognise and accept the presence of God in the world! And yet, for us who are trying to follow the Ignatian way, the world is not only the subject or the arena of our apostolate: it is just as much one of the sources of our spirituality, that is to say, a place in which to meet God and hear God’s call.

The mystery of the incarnation has a key role in Ignatian Spirituality. God With Us, God made human, Jesus, the Son of God, born of a woman, comes into the world as one who serves. We bring about the redemption of this real world by living in it with Jesus. Such is the passion of Ignatius.

Many of the characteristics of the Ignatian style, including a sense of the Church, perhaps have their origin in Ignatius’ “mundaneness” or realism. He was neither an idealist nor a spiritualist. Not for him, an unreal church. He did not lose himself in dreams about ideal people and ideal situations. His constant concern was to recognise God’s concrete action in each person and in each situation, and to work alongside them. This does not mean at all that he ignored or was blind to the problems and the faults of the hierarchical Church, or those of any person or in any situation, but rather than allow these things to stand in his way, he never lost sight of God who continued in the midst of these failings to build the Church and to save all humanity. The respect which he showed to everyone, to which I have already referred, can also be seen to result from his realism: God is at work in every person, not in some ideal image they might have of themselves, or in expectations imposed on them by others. Accepting this leads a person along a joyful path, that of following Christ. There we find a great richness, which is available to all, and particularly the young. This is one of the most unmistakable graces that you get from an experience of the Spiritual Exercises.

In this area of the “mundaneness” and realism of Ignatius, there is another aspect, which I would like to touch on. At this moment, we are in a world, which offers, according to Einstein’s words, “a great profusion of means and a great confusion of ends.” According to the Ignatian school, it is here that we are called to spread God’s Kingdom, working every day like companions passing by, seeing, speaking out, looking after, helping, transforming, multiplying human efforts. The end is clear: “God’s kingdom and God’s justice” (Mat 6:33). The way is plainly marked out: to make Jesus and his Gospel present in our lives. In this way, we can and we must employ all of the many legitimate means, which are available to us today.

We should never reject the means of this world as if they were essentially sinful or led to sin, since going down this road, we could end up “withdrawing from the world”, or even condemning the world as evil, and we know that Ignatius didn’t fall into this trap. He was a man of his time, convinced that God acted in the world through us and through the means we had at our disposal. We, his disciples in the world of today, mustn’t be afraid of some of the impressive means which science and technology put at our disposal. Rather we should prepare ourselves to use all legitimate means available, attaching a great value to perseverance and to excellence in the use we make of them.

Study and programmes of formation are of vital importance in this – never neglected or underestimated by Ignatius, who was capable of undertaking a programme of studies at the age of thirty-four in order “better to help souls.”

But, following in the footsteps of Ignatius, we will avoid attaching ourselves to the means to the extent of making them into ends in themselves, and so bringing to a premature end the pilgrimage of the free person who knows that there is still a long way to go. Ignatius was capable of abandoning ventures which were not leading to their objective, and knew how to persevere with those which it seemed to him *were* getting there. He saw his plans on the rocks, but he always knew how to overcome the disappointment, change his ideas and hatch new plans using other means to get the same result. He maintained a complete freedom, knowing how to use means “to the extent that” they helped him to reach his objective – and his freedom was made up of tenacity and of a good dose of healthy passion. More than this, what mattered to Ignatius was to follow Christ poor and humble, and not to have the kind of power associated with human means. Ignatius had a *sense* of power and knowledge, but he was not a *man of power*, nor indeed did his life revolve around knowledge. Rather, for the sake of the resplendence of God’s power, he was capable of asking for the grace of being chosen for the Third Kind of Humility: poverty with Christ poor, rather than riches; humiliation with Christ humiliated, rather than honour; to be regarded as foolish or mad for the sake of Christ, rather than wise and prudent in this world. All this, as ever, “provided that it be for the greater praise and service of the Divine Majesty.” (cf SpEx 167,168)

It is this tenacity and this healthy passion, this excellence – not interested in, but capable of, great success and power – this sense of Christ, poor and humble, which we, his disciples, must strive to bring to this age, where there is such a great confusion of means and ends, in the world ... and in the Church.

4. Ignatius is a man of sensitivity:

Sensitivity, now, is an absolute necessity. When effects, which are obvious, and immediate, only sensitive men do not follow causes and women can keep a certain sense of purpose in their lives.

Ignatius suffered and shed tears of compassion when he realised the unintentional effects of his innocent, even generous gesture of giving his fine clothes to a beggar. It wasn’t until afterwards, when something made him imagine the consequences of it, that he could see his action from the point of view of the poor man, and not in the light of his own young fervour; and the change of perspective made him cry. That is one of the aspects of his sensitivity: the capacity to become aware, and to be moved, to change perspective and to see things from a point of view other than one, such as that of fervour, which is conventional or traditionally accepted.

But more than this, convinced of the here-and-now relevance and nature of the Gospel, he often suggests to us the technique of “Application of the Senses”. Tasting, touching, smelling, seeing, hearing, since “it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth.” (SpEx 2) Recently, in an Ignatian formation course with participants from fifteen European countries, I suggested using this technique, with the conviction that Jesus is present in Europe today. I suggested they look at Europe and do a “representation of the place” by means of an “Application of the Senses.” They should “see the different persons.” (106,114); “listen to what they say...” (107,115); “consider what they do...” (108,116) and “see in their imagination” (65). They should see sin and grace, recognise Jesus suffering and Jesus who cares for and transforms. They should be able to see the Child who grows and who passes through, and all this in the same Europe that is their home. We know that in Europe, and in the whole world, we can “hear the wailing, the howling, cries and blasphemies against Christ our Lord...” (67); “smell the smoke, the sulphur, the filth and corruption” (68); and “taste the bitterness of tears, sadness and remorse of conscience” (69). But we can also “smell the infinite fragrance and taste the infinite sweetness of the divinity, and likewise apply these senses to the soul and its virtues and to all...” (124); or yet “apply the sense of touch, for example, by embracing and kissing the place where the persons stand.” (i.e. the Holy Family). (125)

The language of the senses is the first concrete step we take, from the example of Ignatius, to make an apostolic response to the needs we perceive around us. But it is essential that we can “see them, smell them, and hear them.” Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty or cold, naked or in prison...?

The apostolic application of the senses has already been suggested to us in the Gospel, and the life of Ignatius, at different moments, including his time as Superior General in Rome, is full of examples which show how he perceived needs and responded to them in one way or another.

5. Ignatius seeks companions to give service:

Jesus calling the apostles, and sending them on mission are two Gospel scenes which left a strong impression on Ignatius, and which one finds in the most typically Ignatian meditations: The Call of the King, the Two Standards, the Three Classes of Person... I have always had the feeling that Ignatius was called amongst others. It is not him, Ignatius, who calls others to join him in his enterprise. It is the Eternal Sovereign who calls each one, personally and, indeed, as working companions to labour for the coming of the Kingdom. (cf SpEx 95) It is the Lord of the whole Universe who chooses so many people as apostles and sends them throughout the whole world. (SpEx 145) It is the Lord who speaks to these co-workers and friends and sends them on their mission. (SpEx 146)

Thus, Ignatius always sought companions and put himself to work alongside them. In order that they would really be companions of Jesus in his mission, "friends in the Lord" and not disciples of Ignatius himself, all the companions would seek to have a personal experience of God and to grow in intimacy with Jesus.

Personally, I have lived this experience in the Christian Life Community. It is an Association of the Faithful, the vast majority of them laypeople, who define themselves as a world community inspired by Ignatius. Their origins go right back to the time of Ignatius, and to the first groups of laypeople or "companies" which grew up around the apostolic spirituality of the Spiritual Exercises. The apostolic character, the tone of universality and the sense of church – so characteristic of the Ignatian tradition – require an expression in communitarian terms which, bearing in mind the principle of the incarnation in real and diverse situations, opens us to the complexity of the world's – and the Church's – problems, drives us to serve and makes us transcend geographical, sentimental, social and age-related constraints, and does not tie us to the charisma of a particular leader.

An Ignatian community is not in end in itself. Ignatius understood this and maintained a healthy attitude of detachment towards the Society of Jesus, which he himself had founded. The Christian Life Community also wants to serve, and never to be an end in itself. It wants to be an apostolic community, to invite into service all those who, in the footsteps of Ignatius, want to join together to work with Jesus, following him closely as laypeople. There are also religious communities; equally rooted in the Ignatian tradition, and together we are developing the capacity to establish joint ventures and to co-operate to bring to the Church the grace, which God gave Ignatius to work for the Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

There is a great deal more that could be said about Ignatian Spirituality from the layperson's point of view, but rather than bring in other points, I would like to piece together what I have said.

Ignatius's sensitivity is capable of recognising God's actions and our own, of seeing, tasting and sensing how these two lines cross, separate, and seek each other before coming together to intermingle in a heart which no longer makes any distinction between spiritual life and life in the world, so that the whole of life is a life in the Spirit.

Life in the Spirit is *the whole of life* drawn towards, and transformed by God. The whole of life: action and prayer, formation and service, joy and pain, success and defeat, the wilderness and the promised land. This is what Ignatius lived, with great intensity: "to seek and find God in all things" he would say. This is the fire that we want to see burning in our lives and right across the world. For this, we the disciples of Ignatius seek today to experience God, to train our hearts with exercises, to find companions in our mission, following Christ poor and humble, so that the sensitivity of spirit we are able to develop is converted into apostolic action.

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