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Ignatian Spirituality

Spirituality in a World of Action

WHEN WE LOOK AT the significant figures who have dramatically shaped contemporary spirituality, undoubtedly we must name Ignatius of Loyola as a major contributor. His vision, his flexibility, and his awareness of the needs of people in his day took him into the schools, the streets, and the spiritual life to explore radically new ways to lead people to Christ. In this chapter we look at his story.

The Milieu

The time was 1521 CE.

On the European continent, a reform was brewing. Western Christendom was in crisis. The Protestant Reformers had criticized the abuses in the papacy, challenged the spiritual laxity among many clerics and the hierarchy, and unmasked the economic rationale for many burdensome “spiritual” mandates. Rome was struggling in its response to this rebellion. The Inquisition was established but limped with its responsibilities and self-righteousness. Western Christendom was fractured, confused, and afraid. There was a need for strong leadership and a new form of

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spirituality that renewed the church and could bring individuals back into an ordered relationship with God.

The Founder

In Pamplona, Spain, a thirty-year-old Basque soldier was severely wounded in the leg while defending a fortress against French forces. He was fierce in his commitment to his home and schooled in the courtly manners of his noble family. During his convalescence, he read the only literature available that his sister-in-law could provide, the lives of the saints. While he longed for swashbuckling novels of knightly valor, he could not help but notice the courage, bravery, and radicality in the lives about those he was reading. He began to reflect on his life.

A profound spiritual transformation ignited within him. His identity as a worldly courtier and knight in pursuit of worldly ideals slowly shifted. He was moved by prayer and ascetical discipline to reform himself into a “knight” dedicated to the service of the Trinity. A religious vocation began to develop.

St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) was a mystic, an activist, a priest, and founder of the Society of Jesus, known as the Jesuits. His writings, inspired partially by his reading of the Rule of St. Benedict, are the result of Ignatius’ direct experience of the Trinity, an encounter that propelled him into a radical new approach to the spiritual life and the needs of his time.

The outpouring of his zeal was manifest in the founding of colleges, universities, charitable institutions, and pastoral activity. From his “Company” began a new ministerial approach that was active and engaged with the cultural realities of the day. It also promoted a missionary outreach that spread beyond Europe into Asia. He engaged himself with religious zeal and a spiritual grounding in the needs of the church and the sociopolitical issues of his culture. He and his confreres actively addressed the confusion of the era, informed themselves theologically, and modeled fidelity and committed relationship with God and the church in a time when many abandoned both.

Today, Ignatius of Loyola’s influence continues to renew us and challenge our complacency. Within retreat houses, renewal centers, and university classrooms, the call to spiritual authenticity and depth in relationship with God endures. As founder of the largest Catholic religious

order, the Jesuits, Ignatius' distinctive style continues to challenge us and our contemporaries. It is a tradition that has had vast influence over the course of the last six hundred years.

Spiritual Legacy: A Unique Active Apostolic Spirituality

The unique contribution of Ignatian spirituality was its embeddedness in the world of action. Prior to the emergence of Ignatius' genius, spiritual schools that dominated the religious horizon were primarily monastic and mendicant in their forms. Each of these in their own way focused on a spiritual life that was structured through prayer, work, and study. Each of them had challenged the secure religious assumptions and limits of previous eras. Now, additional forms were needed.

The legacy that Ignatius left behind reflects this new awareness that God and the religious person can be embedded in the world and active in response to that world. It is out of that engagement that institutions and individuals can be transformed spiritually, pastorally, and culturally. The spiritual life is not one of remote withdrawal but presence in the world, where God can and does communicate with God's people and lead them. Discernment on how to respond to this revelation is a major task in the spiritual life. Let us look at this legacy of Ignatius of Loyola and his Jesuit companions.

Embeddedness in the World of Action

St. Ignatius challenged the complacency of those in the era in which he lived. Rather than retreating from the world into a spirituality of the day that isolated and insulated the person, Ignatius charged into the world, embracing a reverential love of creation and seeing all of it in service of God. God could be found in all things, and all things could be found in God. It was an active spirituality that valued the world and wanted to bring about its fulfillment in Christ.

Building on his own aptitude toward action, Ignatius reflected on how his natural propensity could be placed at the service of God. He began to see how God was revealing God's Self within the realities of an active life, that prayer itself could be melded into a life that took one beyond the confines of a chapel and made it manifest itself within the everyday

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rhythms of a life of work, study, play, and relationship. God was not restricted to set periods of time and specific practices and prayers, but was continually revealing God's Self in all forms of life. Ignatius himself modeled how to take notice of God infused in all aspects of life.

Transformation of Individuals and Institutions

Out of his radical service to the world emerged a dedication to the transformation of institutions and individuals. An active apostolic approach to ministry brought the Jesuits out into the streets to work as missionary evangelists, worker priests, academics, pastoral agents, and retreat directors. The Gospel of Jesus Christ became a motivating energy for changing social structures and bringing people into responsible empowerment. Ignatian spirituality was a call to action and acknowledgement that the Gospel was a countercultural and nonviolent revolution.

In tandem with this call to action was a call to justice. Transformation required an evaluation of injustice within the systems of society. Such a focus demanded that changes be made when such assessments revealed unjust situations and attitudes. This element of Ignatian spirituality would find new expression with the support of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, when an emphasis would be placed on the conversion of the larger world by a church that was firmly planted within the culture and called to evangelize it.

A Spiritual Life of Direct Communication with God

Prayer served the development of this revolutionary attitude, ordering and shaping it by fostering an intimate relationship with and commitment to God. It required a constant reformation from within, in dialogue, evaluation, and honesty with one's self and God.

Ignatius had the audacity to claim in the exercises, which emerged from his own spiritual journey, that a person could actually seek and find the will of God that was specific to that person, and that God directly wanted to communicate with the soul. All religious experience and prayer were a means of ascertaining the will of God for them and reforming one's life accordingly. All spiritual endeavors were valued according to how

they assisted the seeker in tempering the inordinate desires that blocked fulfillment in God.

This access to the will of God was not a hidden wisdom, exclusive to religious professionals either. It was available to all people of faith. God was communicating constantly with all people of good will. The key to discerning this will was to notice the movements and invitations of God and respond whole-heartedly to God's call.

The Use of Imagination and Reflection in Prayer

Ignatian spirituality promoted the use of imagination, reflection, emotions, and desire to reach and touch God. Unlike many schools of spirituality before, which discounted and even discouraged the imaginative capacities of the human person, Ignatius affirmed that God could be actively perceived within the movements, sentiments, and orientations of the human heart. All faculties of the mind, the heart, and the will, including one's memory, were to be put in service of God's plan.

Within the life of prayer, greater depth and insight could occur through systematic reflection on the experience of prayer. Ignatius encouraged extensive reflection and attentiveness to prayer as a means of clarifying the motivations beneath them. In this way the tendency towards self-deception and superficiality could be acknowledged and consciously addressed.

Discernment in the Spiritual Life

However, one had to hone one's awareness of what was being revealed within these movements and craft one's response according to the will of God. This involved discernment. Ignatius was a master of human psychology even before the advent of the scientific study of the psychological. He used his own life as a laboratory of experimentation to see what dynamics had contributed to his spiritual advancement or regression.

Ignatius spent years examining his own spiritual yearnings, inclinations, impulses, and desires. He reflected on his own trials and errors in moving into mystical experience. His intense reflection produced phenomenal insight that advanced knowledge of the interior struggles of the human person. These guidelines opened up new vistas for integration of

all aspects of the human person into the spiritual life. This systematic and thorough process became the basis for a new methodology for discerning the roots and origins of movements within a person's inner life. It became a form of discernment for major life choices and decision-making in daily challenges.

Contemporary Spiritual and Pastoral Contributions

Of the many historical schools of spirituality that have survived to the present day, few have had as far-reaching an impact as that of Ignatian spirituality. Conceived and born in an era resembling our own, with schismatic movements, hierarchical criticism, institutional decline, and spiritual resurgence, Ignatian spirituality has survived the test of time and has flourished in its many forms and ministerial adaptations. An active spirituality that refuses to retreat from the world that calls to us for help, the Ignatian tradition continues to challenge us to remember that God is everywhere, and our response to God is our collaboration in personal and societal reform.

Most notable of the contributions that the Ignatian school of spirituality has given to modern Christians are structured methods for self-examination, spiritual discernment, and reform. St. Ignatius' legacy is a detailed series of exercises through which individual and communal conversion can occur.

St. Ignatius used the term "Spiritual Exercises" to encompass every method of examination of consciousness, meditation and contemplation, including verbal and mental prayer, which might lead the practitioner into greater awareness of God and compliance with God's will. The flexibility that Ignatius espoused in his teaching about the different exercises is pertinent for today, for all forms were meant to be adaptable to the specific person, intent on removing any disordered attachments from his or her life that distracted him or her from following God completely. In Ignatius' style of spirituality, all exercises should dispose us to freedom.

We will highlight three "exercises" that originate in the Ignatian tradition: Examen of Consciousness, a daily spiritual review; the directed eight day retreats, a weeklong spiritual encounter; and a thirty day spiritual retreat, a month of spiritual exercises.

Examen of Consciousness

Originally called “the Examination of Conscience,” this practice is an exercise done twice daily. It is meant to increase the practitioner’s awareness of how God is moving in them, and how they are responding in the concrete events of everyday life. Each examen requires fifteen to twenty minutes to turn the practitioner’s mind to God, to acknowledge that presence, to invite God to review together half of the day and to reveal moments of collaboration with the Holy Spirit and moments of dissonance.

After revisiting the day’s actions, an intentional decision to reform consciously those behaviors and attitudes that blocked the flow of the Spirit is made. Organically, a greater sensitivity to a Christlike mind is groomed in this daily reflection, and a gradual interior transformation can be seen in the person’s choices in the practical aspects of life. Ignatius recommends this exercise be done at noon and at the end of the day for greatest effectiveness.

Directed Eight-Day Retreats

Each Jesuit is asked to make an eight-day silent, directed retreat annually to attend to any disordered or distracted aspects of his life and reorient himself towards Christ. For all of us, the active life can take its toll and, even with the best of intentions, dull our attentiveness to God. Ignatius knew the necessity of regular, systematic reflective time done in dialogue with Scripture and a skilled director.

The yearly retreat, which he advocates for lay and religious alike, allows for a deliberate time of dwelling with Scripture texts selected by a trained retreat director and checking in with Christ in a deeper way than a busy life might afford. On an eight-day directed retreat, at least three separate hours of silent, Scripture-based prayer leads the retreatant into a deeper contemplative grounding in relationship with Christ. It is from this that a renewed dedication and discernment in daily life can occur.

Thirty Days of Spiritual Exercises

At least twice in a Jesuit’s formation, both initially as a novice and later during a “second novitiate” or tertianship, Ignatius recommends the Thirty-day Scriptural Retreat. Four “weeks” of spiritual exercises in a

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carefully crafted progression, the exercitant (the one doing the “exercises”) prays through meditations on God’s gift in creation, our disordered response and sin towards that gift, and contrition with the examination of conscience. Incorporated is a decision-making for or against Christ and his way, and a systematic dwelling with his life, suffering, death, and resurrection. All of this is meant to serve the purpose of “discernment” of a life’s direction. Scriptural passages are provided in an ordered way to maximize the experience of parallel movements that Ignatius himself had experienced in his own process of in-depth conversion.

This process involves the careful accompaniment of a skilled spiritual director, who knows the exercises and can guide the exercitant. Within this deep and intense process, contemplation and intimacy with Christ is experienced. This intimate encounter with Christ assists and clarifies for the exercitant which life direction is most congenial and collaborative with the will of the Holy Spirit.

An alternative form of the thirty-day format of this retreat is the nineteenth-annotation version of the Spiritual Exercises during which the thirty days of meditation are stretched out for several months under the tutelage and guide of a skilled director. For those whose commitments prohibit them from stepping away, this form is becoming increasingly appealing and formative.

In Summary

Ignatian spirituality provides us with guidelines for discernment on life directions, advocates spiritual direction for all people who are serious about their spiritual formation, and provides structures for these to happen. Throughout the world Jesuit Retreat Houses offer skilled directors and environments of silence conducive for those who can extract themselves from their active lives and step apart for deliberate reflection and prayer. In addition, the ongoing practices of spiritual direction and the examen of consciousness reinforce the graces received in life and in retreats.

Questions for Reflection:

- Do you have a way of reviewing and evaluating the way you lived your life each day?
- How is your spirituality one that is both active and contemplative?

Resources for Ongoing Study:

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Ignatius of Loyola. *A Pilgrim's Journey: The Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola*. Translated by J. Tylenda. Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1985.

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Meissner, W. W. *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992.

O'Malley, John. *The First Jesuits*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.