

# Ignatius of Loyola — Model for Lay Spirituality

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While Ignatius is most often thought of as the founder of the Jesuits, he spent a good part of his life as a lay person. It was as a lay person that he began developing the Spiritual Exercises and guiding others through them. During his recuperation in Loyola in 1522, the first pages of the Exercises were written and the bulk of the book was in place by 1524. He continued to refine his work until 1540, and the book was published in 1548. Ignatius was ordained in June of 1537 (although he didn't say his first Mass until Christmas of 1538) and took vows as a Jesuit along with others of the Company on April 22, 1541, the official beginning of the Jesuits.

Ignatius was a person of his time. He was born a year before Columbus arrived in the Americas in his attempt to prove that the world was round, not flat. In that same year, Muslims and Jews are expelled from Southern Spain after almost eight hundred years of Muslim rule. Spain conquered the Aztec Empire in Central America in 1521 and the Incan Empire in South America in 1533. In 1522 the first ship, the only one of Ferdinand Magellan's expedition to survive, circumnavigates the globe under the command of a Basque captain, Juan Sebastián Elcano. The Protestant Reformation is taking hold in several countries in Northern Europe. In 1543 Copernicus publishes his theory that the Earth and other planets revolve around the Sun.

The Catholic Church itself was in crises. Its priests were often ignorant of the Gospels and Sacraments and some openly disregarded their vow of celibacy. One of Ignatius' own brothers who was a priest lived with the mother of his three children. Another of his brothers who was married had a concubine who visited him regularly — another common practice of the time. The newly discovered facts that the earth was round and that it was not the center of the solar system challenged long-held theological beliefs and cosmic views. And in Spain, the Inquisition was in full swing.

Into this milieu, Ignatius was born: a Basque, a soldier, a person of a noble, but poor, family, a person of passion and loyalty, a romantic, a visionary and a mystic. He had the gift of tears, struggled with scruples and suffered from chronic illness. After his conversion, the same passion that he had for romancing and fine clothes and being a great soldier was focused on Jesus and God's Kingdom. He fell in love with God and had a special devotion to the Trinity and Eucharist. His personality was not changed, but his whole being was now focused on doing great things for God.

So what can we, as lay people, learn from Ignatius? In my own reflection on Ignatius' life, several themes seemed to appear.

## THE GREAT WORK

In 1522, Ignatius had a mystical experience along the Cardoner River outside of Manresa that was foundational to his spirituality and the development of the Exercises. He had a sense of being immersed in God. "He was given a deep sense of how all creatures emanate from God and, in Christ, return to God; how Jesus Christ completes human nature in taking our flesh; and how Christ is present in the Sacrament. He grasped that God's plan is really a project that each person on earth contributes to, and how what God hopes for us rises in our consciousness and, by God's grace, free enactment."<sup>1</sup> As he gazed at the river, Ignatius received the insight that a person can't step into the same river twice; that God's plan is continually unfolding and that all of creation, past, present, and future are one. And we are co-creators in this plan.

As other mystics before him and since his time had done, Ignatius experienced that sense of oneness, not of just the human race with each other, not even of all of creation as it now exists, but of all things from the beginning of time and into the future. In God they

are all one. He knew what today's scientists are confirming: everything is relational. God's creative activity is present in all things.

This co-creative work (I use 'work' in this context to mean any activity, not just our jobs) is sacred. If all is an expression of the divine, then there is no longer a separation of the secular and sacred. It means all of our works — raising our families, earning a living, involvement in civic activities, participating in 'church' ministries, taking vacations, attending classes — are a participation in the Great Work. We are one of the drops in the mighty river that has its own part to play in the unfolding of God's desire for the world.

This sense of being part of the Great Work is especially evident in the bookends of the Exercises, the Principal and Foundation and the Contemplatio. In the first, he introduces us to the idea of being a uniquely gifted part of creation and in the latter he leads us through an exercise in both reviewing the experience of the Exercises that is now being completed as well as helping us transition to understanding how we are called to labor as God labors, to love as God loves. In [237], Ignatius says, "Just as I see the sun in its rays and the fountain in its waters, so God pours forth a sharing in divine life in all the gifts showered upon me."<sup>2</sup>

But even in the First Week, we are called to consider how the sin of one person pollutes the world, and how even as sinful as we are creation, still sustains us. The sun still shines on us, the rain rains on us, and we are nourished by the produce of the earth as well as relationships. (Spiritual Exercises [60]). Creation is the visible sign of God's loving activity.

So each person, religious, ordained or lay, has his/her role to play in this great work, their personal vocation. And what makes an individual's vocation holy is that it is an authentic response to God's desire for him/her. A personal vocation lived within the context of the lay vocation is as holy as vocations to ordained ministry or religious life.

#### FOCUSED PASSION — HELPING SOULS

A deep desire that arose in Ignatius from his spiritual experiences was to help souls. His primary method for doing this was spiritual conversations with individuals and small groups about the spiritual life: about virtues and vices, the Eucharist and one of his favorite topics, the Holy Trinity. The fact that Ignatius, a layman who had no theological training, dared to have these conversations and develop the Spiritual Exercises was a courageous activity during the Spanish Inquisition. He was often accused of being one of a group of heretics known as the *alumbrados* who practiced a mysticism that ignored dogmatic accuracy and theological precision. Ignatius was called before the Inquisition several times, but no errors were ever found in his teachings or the Spiritual Exercises.

Helping souls became a passionate desire in him, one that was a central point in many of his discernments.

In 1527 Ignatius and some of his companions were brought before the Inquisition and imprisoned in Salamanca and questioned about his teachings and the Spiritual Exercises. After twenty-two days of imprisonment they received the judgment that no error could be found in their life or teaching, but they were told the one thing they could not do was to define things as either venial or mortal sins until they had taken four years of further studies. Even though Ignatius knew this restriction was groundless, he agreed to refrain from teaching while in the inquisitors' jurisdiction. He took his dilemma to prayer and found that this impediment to his work of helping souls was too great. This solidified for him a direction that he had been pondering — he would go to Paris to further his studies and, more importantly, be able to also freely continue his work of helping souls.

While in Paris, Ignatius had to deal with the realities that lay people have to face: how to balance study, his work of helping souls, and finding sufficient funds to support these activities. He was often distracted from his studies by his passion to help souls. He finally discerned that in order to serve souls, he needed an education, in part to distinguish himself from the *alumbrados*.



Ite et annuntiate  
2006

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### **Questions for Discussion**

1. *Have you ever tried to explain a Cardoner experience/an immersion in God to another person?*
2. *How has the strength of the Contemplatio helped you “...to labor as God labors, to love as God loves” even under trying circumstances?*
3. *What is needed within your own CLC to help each of its members become more of a “prophetic expression of the Church”?*

It was also in Paris that Ignatius shared a room with Francis Xavier and Peter Favre, the first of the companions. Gradually others joined their company and Ignatius led them through the Exercises. As they continued to study and work together, the Spirit was leading them to a deeper commitment to each other. In 1534 they adopted a common way of life taking vows of poverty, chastity and to go to Jerusalem. But this common way of life was not an end in itself. It was a means of more effectively helping souls. When the journey to Jerusalem became impossible, they placed themselves at the disposal of the pope for mission assuming that he would have the best knowledge of where the greatest need would be. This same desire led to the ordination of those not already ordained (Ignatius being one of them) in 1537 and eventually in 1541 to commit themselves to each other within the context of a religious order, although a different type of order than those of the time. Its members would be active in the world, working with people — helping souls.

So Ignatius’ passion became focused — one might even call it a personal vocation — that of helping souls. Even though the expression of this passion took many different forms during his life, it was the touchstone of his decision-making: what would be the best way to help souls.

Each of us has a personal vocation. Herbert Alphonso, S.J., in his book, *Discovering your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning through the Spiritual Exercises*, states that the election of the Exercises is actually discovering your personal vocation and that it should then become the material for the examen. The examen then becomes, not a tool for examining our sins, but a tool of discernment. If in our examen the question becomes, “How fully have I lived out my personal vocation in this day’s events?”, then we become more attuned to how we are disposing ourselves to live out our unique spark of the divine.

### **REVERENTIAL LOVE IN COMMUNITY**

But our personal vocations are not lived out in a vacuum. We are but a drop in the river of on-going creation. The expressions of our personal vocations are shaped by the contexts of our lives: the point in history we are in, the country, religious tradition, ethnic origin, families of origin, gender, the events of our lives, food we eat, the care we take of our bodies and more. We are relational beings in relationship not only with other people, but with the universe. On an organic level our bodies are in a constant exchange with air, water, nutrients — receiving and releasing. The same is true on psychological, emotional and spiritual levels. We are constantly exchanging energy, feelings, perceptions, ideas with the universe. Since we can’t interact with all the universe at once, we are nurtured and formed in community — initially our family, but expanding in ever-widening circles. As we mature, we choose communities that resonate with us, where our personal vocations can be nurtured and expressed. We are both shaped by and shape the communities of which we are a part. Sometimes that is a joyful process, other times painful. In a healthy community there is a diversity of people and thought. And as much as we may try to reverence the expression of the divine in the others, we often fall short — both in our judgment of the other and the authentic expression of our own divine spark.

Those of us in CLC have felt called to express our personal vocation within this community. Many of us are also members of the Roman Catholic Community.

Ignatius’ own experience within this community was a complex one. His spiritual conversations, public catechizing, and frequent reception of the Eucharist resulted in no fewer than eight legal processes being directed at him by church authorities between 1526 and 1538. In his role as General of the Society, Ignatius worked directly with various popes over issues related to the Jesuits both profitable and conflictual. “He did not hesitate to pray ceaselessly, convince politically powerful friends to intervene on his behalf, create a paper trail or visit the pope personally — Ignatius did whatever it took to hold off or reverse a papal decision he felt was wrong.”<sup>3</sup>

In the Spiritual Exercises [352-370], Ignatius gives us what is commonly referred to as “Rules for Thinking with the Church.” While there is some discussion about whether

this section was really considered a part of the Exercises by Ignatius since it was added much later, or that perhaps it was meant primarily for those involved in the public ministry of the Church, there are points that can be useful in a lay person's approach to the Church. (Both Fleming and Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert give contemporary interpretations of these points that reflect four hundred fifty years of experience in the church (you can't step into the same river twice), and the ecclesiology of Vatican II.)

The title, "Rules for Thinking with the Church," is a mistranslation of Ignatius' title for this section of the Exercises. The word that has been translated as Rules is better translated as Guidelines. This is consistent with the other uses of the same word in the Exercises. Also the word "Sentido" which has been translated as "Thinking" is a form of the verb *sentir* which Ignatius uses consistently throughout the Exercises to communicate not an intellectual activity but a felt-knowledge, a knowing with the heart, an affective activity. Within this context, these Guidelines then, become more of a way of living in a Church that is both divine and human with both affection and critical loyalty. "In the midst of the confusion and turmoil of the sixteenth-century church of his day, he knew the difficulty of maintaining a mature balance, a clear-headed judgment, and a loving reverence for both tradition and change. The guidelines which he proposed were meant to be internalized by the retreatant, just as the guidelines with regard to eating or the guidelines for the discernment of spirits."<sup>4</sup>

Ignatius' experience with the hierarchical Church led him to a deep appreciation for the fact that it is an incarnated authority structure, and that we need to deal with the reality of this concrete manifestation of power and authority. "Ignatius's Church is always relational, and the relationships are human as well as divine."<sup>5</sup>

Ignatius felt that the ironic and satirical writings of people such as Erasmus undermined the morale of the Church, the Community. So his Tenth Guideline [362] echoes [22] by advising the retreatant to be more inclined to praise than to blame and to deal privately with those able to address the problem in the Community. In today's world, this inclination to praise rather than blame and always assume the person is operating out of sincere motives, is sorely needed. It seems that not only in the Church, but in all of society, we are quick to find fault and blame. We hardly take the time to really listen to what a person is saying before we are already preparing rebuttals. We seem to have forgotten that we are all part of the Great Work, that all persons are an expression of God's loving presence — even those whose opinions are totally different than ours. They are still expressing some truth. And we need to look for the truth and build together on that foundation rather than focus on differences and tear each other apart.

With this understanding of the Guidelines, the often quoted "black appearing white" statement in the Thirteenth Guideline [365] takes on a different interpretation. As would

have been understood in his time, Ignatius was simply reiterating the fact that there are some mysteries of the Church that go beyond human understanding, such as the presence of Christ's Body and Blood in the Eucharist. It is not a call for blind obedience.

Within the Church Community there are also different functions. The function of the institutional aspect of the Church is to carry the tradition and provide a structure, like a skeleton, that supports the rest of the body. It is more rooted in the past. There is another aspect of the Church Community which is also very necessary, the prophetic. This aspect is visionary. It reads the signs of the times and adapts the expression of the values and traditions to the contemporary life. It moves the Church forward into the future. Ideally there is a healthy balance and respect between these two aspects, a creative tension. When either one dominates or disregards the contribution of the other, the community suffers.

The laity, and CLC in particular, I believe, belong more to the prophetic expression of the Church. We are the ones who are more in touch with the signs of the times. We are more aware of the paradigm shifts that take place. We can adapt more quickly to changes. But this also necessitates for us an on-going discernment in our communities within the context of the Church how the Spirit is calling us to an authentic, but new expression of our faith. CLC's praxis of discern — send — support — evaluate is our way of doing this. We are the ones called to create the new wineskins to hold the new wine.

This is what Ignatius did. And Jesus before him. ☩

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  3. Dyckman, Katherine, S.N.J.M.; Garvin, Mary, S.N.J.M.; Liebert, Elizabeth, S.N.J.M.; *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women*, Paulist Press, 2001, p. 315.
  4. Fleming, p. 281.
  5. Dyckman, et al; p. 315.

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