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IN SIN WAS I CONCEIVED

Précis: The conviction that Ignatian spirituality is a perfect way carries weight but it is mistaken. For every spirituality takes shape from the gifts and graces and also the sins and limitations of its founder. We tend to reduce spirituality to axioms, images, and stories which both convey its strengths and hide its limitations. Earlier on, religious apotheosized spiritualities by triumphalistic hagiography; more recently, we have turned spiritualities into abstract theologies from which we derive unexceptionable norms. A more complete approach recognizes that every spirituality--ignatian along with the rest--is a finite instrument, and must grow and develop. Accepting this conviction frees us from excessive burdens of 'holiness' to wrestle with the real graces and sins in our selves and our life world.

Last year, I was asked to write an article for the review on the difference between Jesuit spirituality and ignatian spirituality. Many people offered illuminating comments on the article. Their comments, like those published in the review, were always courteous, rarely persuaded, but often persuasive.

I was struck, however, by a frequently shared assumption: that I could intend only to praise unreservedly whatever I identified as central to Jesuit spirituality or ignatian spirituality. It was as if the argument ran: Jesuits believe that Jesuit spirituality and ignatian spirituality are perfect. This particular feature is identified as integral to Jesuit spirituality. Therefore, a Jesuit can only praise this feature.

Now I can see good reasons why ignatian spirituality should be held to be perfect. For Ignatian spirituality, and the ways of living it in Ignatian Congregations and the Jesuits, have been approved by the Church as safe to follow. Moreover, Ignatius himself was a great saint and a mystic, and many of those who have followed his way of life have been distinguished in their holiness and generosity. Once we detect ambiguities in the Ignatian inheritance, too, we risk losing the assurance that we follow a safe path. As a result, we may well become self-conscious and half-hearted in our commitments.

While I see the force of these arguments, I am not persuaded that ignatian or Jesuit spirituality is perfect. On the contrary, all spiritualities, ignatian and Jesuit included, are marked by the effects of Original Sin, because they represent the response to God of particular, sinful human beings. They are therefore partial and, while in general terms they represent a safe path to sanctity, they all nevertheless also encourage perspectives and responses that are limited in particular, sinful ways.

My argument is not based, I should add, on an Augustinian or Reformed understanding of the Fall. In speaking of sinfulness, I mean the limitations of vision and partiality of action which are never entirely removed either in individuals or in societies. While

Christ's grace does transform us, we can never describe adequately what we do, think, and effect solely in terms of grace. We must always take account of the effects of our sinfulness and limitedness. If we do not reflect from time to time on these limitations, we are likely to mistake as virtuously ignatian what is in fact commonly sinful.

This is the more likely to happen because, in order to appropriate and to live our spirituality more easily, we usually simplify it by condensing it in a series of *axioms, images, and stories.* We Jesuits speak *axiomatically,* for example, of "thinking with the church", "following the poor Jesus", "seeking the magis", and of "seeking God in all things". We also adduce cherished images and stories which encapsulate ignatian and Jesuit life and spirituality. At a time when formation communities were stratified, scholastics used to treasure the *story* of the treatment meted out by Ignatius to a minister. On finding that the latter had dined out on lampreys at the home of a rich benefactor, Ignatius ordered him to provide lampreys for all the members of his straitened community. When at a later period the affective quality of relationships between Jesuits received greater stress, we often returned warmly to the *image* of Francis Xavier weeping on the beach when a hoped-for letter from Ignatius failed to arrive.

These axioms, images, and stories are signposts that give us directions through the complex terrain in which we live. But they inevitably simplify, incline us to particular, distorted ways of responding to God's call in Jesus Christ--and then conceal from us the distortions.

The axiom that Jesuits must be conspicuous for thinking with the church and for fidelity to the Holy Father, for example, encapsulates a central Catholic insight. But it has also encouraged a lack of reflectiveness about what was of God and what was not. To take one instance of that lack: Few would now disagree with Cardinal Frings, who criticised the unjust treatment of theologians and others by the Holy Office before the Vatican Council, saying that "its methods are out of harmony with modern times and are a cause of scandal in the world.... No one ought to be judged and condemned without having been heard, without knowing what he is accused of, and without the opportunity of correcting his views." Their ignatian commitment to the Holy Father led many Jesuits to suffer this injustice in totally admirable silence. But the Jesuits working as advisers to the Congregation, and therefore complicit in its procedures, left little evidence of having questioned--as they should have--the morality of their collaboration. Their failure would seem to be due in large part to the conviction that any service to the Holy Father was good and beyond critical reflection. This conclusion, in turn, was logically derived from the one-sidedness of Ignatius' reflections and their adoption in the Society.

Similarly, the Jesuit emphasis on hierarchies and the exclusion of women from the counsels of the Society, and ideally from its direct ministry, is understandable, for it is consistent with the medieval ascetic and disciplinary mould which Ignatius inherited. It also reflected the limitations of Ignatius' outlook and personality. But one of its effects in Jesuit spirituality has been to make it less easy to relate adequately to women or to recognise the primary (and not auxiliary) part they often play in imparting an

ignatian quality to our ministries. In this case, too, ignatian spirituality has been a rich, but also humanly limited, inheritance.

I have deliberately chosen relatively peripheral aspects of Ignatian and Jesuit spirituality. But the same case--that axioms, images, and stories simplify and distort our spirituality and conceal the distortions--could be made for more central themes of the *Exercises*: the Two Standards, Discernment, and the Third Degree of Humility. And indeed, the case has been made in almost every critical account of Jesuits over the last two hundred years.

Sometimes the response to such criticism is to deny it without qualification. A more modest reply is to admit the possibility that ignatian and Jesuit spirituality can be misunderstood and lived out poorly. But then the fault is ascribed, not to the spirituality, but to the human weaknesses and cultural limitations of those who live by it. The imperfection therefore lies in the followers and not in the spirituality.

While the distinction between the idea of a spirituality and its realisation is useful in some respects, it is vulnerable to an obvious objection: Spiritualities ultimately express the lives and beliefs of their founders. Therefore, as all human beings are sinful and limited, we should expect whatever they create to share in that sinfulness, limitation, partiality, and tendency to mislead. No human production can be described in an unqualified way as grace-filled.

This objection--that spiritualities share their founders' sinfulness and limitations--is usually met in one of two ways. The first is an appeal to special sanctity. An older account of spirituality implicitly distinguished authorised spiritualities from other reflections on human life by appealing to the quality of their founders' lives. Saints enjoyed a closeness to God and divine inspiration in their words and reflections that differentiated them from less privileged human beings. The unique quality of their spirituality, and perhaps even its providential quality, were vindicated authoritatively in the formal approval given to it by the hierarchical church.

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This account depended on the belief that heroic sanctity consists in unique gifts that distinguish saints from other people. An older style of hagiography which could trace God's path unerringly through the details of saints' lives, which referred to them not by name but simply as *The Saint,* and which organised their lives into chapters as illustrations of the various virtues and extraordinary spiritual gifts, made this a natural way to view saints. Because saints are so close to God, whose gift to the church they are, to criticise them or their spirituality is to criticise God and God's providence within the church.

Few would now find this portrait of sanctity plausible, both because it presents an unattractive ideal of sanctity and because it so exempts the saint from the normal processes of human development to which even a cursory reading of their biography suggests that they were liable. During their lives, for all their great gifts and generosity, they shared the same limitations, occasional cantankerousness, and partialities as the rest of us, and their field of battle and characteristic strategies can be seen to be shaped in childhood.

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In Ignatius' case, the work of William Meissner has drawn attention to the similarities between Ignatius' spiritual experience and the experience of those who had similar childhood experiences. While the precise conclusions which Meissner arrives at may be disputable, his general argument--that Ignatius' childhood shaped his later spiritual experience and outlook in ways of which he was unconscious--seems well established.

Ignatius' spirituality, then, reflected the limitations and well as the self-transcendence of his life. While the saints who originate spiritualities during their lives may be canonised as reliable to follow, they are not transfigured until after their death. Not only for good, but also for ill, spiritualities bear the mark of their founders.

When we recognise the sinfulness of our founding generations we are freed from a romantic reading of our origins and development. When Ignatius is made perfectly virtuous and provident, for example, the changes introduced into the Society shortly after him, or even during his life, become problematic. The differences between his original vision and the founding of schools or the gradual codification of prayer under Francis Borgia have to be attributed either to a coherent original design or to a bronze age following the original golden age. A more plausible account sees such changes as reflecting prudent, contingent choice made by limited human beings.

The second way of meeting this objection--that spiritualities are marked with their founders' sinfulness and limitations--is currently more fashionable. It is to absolve spiritualities from sinfulness and limitation by describing them in abstract theological terms. Correct spiritual attitudes and conduct are then derived from this complete theological vision. They are derived safely, because the spiritual vision is not restricted or biased by individual human partiality and sinfulness. Where the spirituality is lived out in limited or sinful ways, these defects are not blamed on the spirituality but on its faulty appropriation. Ignatius' spirituality, for example, might be described as the invitation to enter into the life of the Trinity through communion in the one, apostolic church. From this theology, the

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ecclesial character of the vows and discernment can be derived, as can detailed guiding principles for genuine ignatian living.

When abstraction is conducted at a sufficiently high level, a spirituality can certainly be represented as flawless. If we summarise ignatian spirituality, for example, in Jesus' command to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves, it is unassailable. Such broad description, however, fails to describe what is distinctively ignatian or Jesuit. On the other hand, when we spell out in some detail the attitudes, insights and responses involved in a distinctively ignatian spirituality, limitation and partiality inevitably emerge.

Indeed, even in the translation from a living spirituality to an abstract theology, partiality and limitation are not removed but only concealed. When we draw practical spiritual consequences from such a theology, the human limitations hidden in the abstractions become evident. An excellent, if non-ignatian, example of this point can be found in Hans Urs Von Balthasar's illuminating discussion of the male and female principle in Christianity. His account persuasively commends the place of receptivity in Christian life. But his definition of the relation between male and female, even though supported by a wide range of European cultural reference, is tightly bound to his cultural and personal background, and perhaps particularly to his relationship with Adrienne Von Speyer. Hence, when he moves from this abstract theology of difference to name the proper ordering of gender roles within the church, he does no more than lend a specious universality to a partial and idiosyncratic outlook. In his act of abstracting, he leaves behind the limitations neither of his culture nor of his autobiography.

My assertion that ignatian and Jesuit spirituality are both rich and limited or sinful may seem merely iconoclastic, so that, even if they happened to be true, they would be quite unhelpful. It will be said that they owe more to post-modernism than to Christianity, and are deeply corrosive of commitment. For to the extent that we allowed them to influence to us, we would become hesitant and suspicious about the foundations of our living. To live effectively, we need an unconditional trust in the roots of our spirituality, and in the Society which has nourished us. The critic might conclude that to find faults in one's mother is unnatural, adolescent, and churlish.

I recognise the power of this objection. Nevertheless, the reasons for admitting that our spirituality is partial and limited have a cogency beyond mere acceptance of post-modern necessity. To recognise the partiality as well as the riches of our own spirituality increases our capacity for self-knowledge, and makes us attentive to the ways in which the devil can disguise himself as an angel of light. In particular, the insight draws attention to the ways in which we can allow our proper pride in and love of our Jesuit

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brothers to metastasise into an amoral and pragmatic commitment to the presumed interests of the Society.

To acknowledge the frailty of a spirituality also makes it clear that the following of Jesus Christ, particularly in hospitality in concrete and political ways to the poor and the stranger, are the criteria to measure all Christian spiritualities. While a spirituality gives flesh, structure, and endurance to the following of Jesus Christ, they are not to be identified. When we recognise the sinful character of any spirituality and of its appropriation, we remain properly restless, unarmoured against the claims of a radical life.

Finally, I would argue that far from dampening enthusiasm in the living out of a spirituality, an acknowledgment of its limitations frees it. A perfect spirituality derived from a perfect founder lays upon us heavy burdens to live up to it. The burdens imposed by a heroic past are all too evident in the history of the Society as they are in more than one other ignatian congregation. But when we realise that the spirituality which we inherit is both precious gift entrusted to us and limited, both providential and vulnerable to change and decay in its institutional forms, a testament both of sanctity and of sin, we are freed to live freely within our spirituality without being enslaved by it.

To demand a spotless spirituality is like demanding a faultless mother. Mary excepted, such are not given. It is, moreover, the mark of an adult to recognise limitations in teachers, parents, and world, and to find in those limitations even deeper inspiration for gratitude for the real gifts of their lives and for what we have inherited from them.