

## ON THE OTHER HAND

*On the one hand, thoughtful readers have found good in the pages of this review, from the first things on. On the other hand, they have not found here the last word on a given topic. As a consequence, one suggests these further considerations about the article "Perfection in Whatsoever State of Life."*

### Lay Perfection and Living the Evangelical Counsels in Everyday Life

**I**n her beautiful article [Review #86], Maria Clara Bingemer maintains that the *Exercises* of Saint Ignatius "can and should be offered to laymen and women in their entirety, and in all their radicality." The very fact that she finds it necessary to demonstrate this presupposes the existence of a contrary opinion, that is, the position of those who claim that the *Spiritual Exercises* cannot and should not be given to laypeople in their original form. Maria Clara defends her hypothesis by analysing paragraph [135]. She is against limiting the use of *Exercises* to religious, and argues against the theories which aim at justifying this view, and which use *Exercises* themselves to back up their position. She maintains that they were written by a layman and that they should be offered once again to laypeople since it was for them that they were destined in the beginning.

In my opinion, Maria Clara's arguments are convincing. However, I think that her position would be strengthened by an investigation of the term *evangelical perfection*, and more specifically, an investigation of firstly, *to whom*, and secondly, *to what*, Ignatius is referring when he uses this expression in *Spiritual Exercises*.

I. It seems to me that Maria Clara does not give herself scope to analyse in depth the meaning of the expression *evangelical perfection*, which appears at the end of [135], because she is more interested in demonstrating that Christian perfection can be attained in any state of life, as Ignatius affirms at the end of that paragraph. This could almost give the impression that because this expression seems a challenge to her position, she is putting it aside. But there is no way of escaping the fact that Ignatius uses this expression three times in his *Exercises* [15, 135, 357]. To whom is he referring when he uses the phrase "evangelical perfection"? That is the question.

If, as is commonly supposed, evangelical perfection is inextricably linked to religious life, ("religion" is the word Ignatius uses), the theory that Maria Clara is trying to prove would always be threatened by the idea that for Ignatius the perfection that deserves the adjective *evangelical* is incompatible with the lay state. Therefore the *Exercises* should only be given in their entire and undiluted form to those laypeople who are able to embrace evangelical perfection by becoming religious!

It is not necessary to repeat that this idea is at the root of many interpretations of the *Spiritual Exercises*, nor that it is favoured by some Directories. But did Ignatius really think like this?

I believe that the originality of Ignatius does not consist merely in affirming that perfection is possible, "in whatever state or way of life that God allows us to choose," but goes even further. On the one hand, there is no doubt that he links evangelical perfection to the practice of the evangelical counsels. On the other hand, it seems to me that there is no doubt at all in his mind: the practice of the evangelical counsels is not necessarily linked to the religious state.

The idea that evangelical perfection is possible only in religious life might seem self-evident, because of the historical prejudice attached to the lay state and, in the case of *Spiritual Exercises*, because of the Latin Vulgate translation. This translation in fact makes it seem that Ignatius is talking in [135] about two determined and established states of life: the secular and the religious. However, in the [Spanish] Autograph Directory, Ignatius does not say this. Referring to different states or ways of life he simply writes "first" and "second". He does not say (as the Latin Vulgate would have it), that the first state is "common"; nor does he say that the second state, which he calls "of evangelical perfection," supposes obedience and religious life (as the Vulgate makes him say). Ignatius is not speaking here of secular life and religious life. As he wrote in [177], the issue here is only some "state or way of life within the limits of the Church." A way of life or a state which is not necessarily "established"--a term the Latin Vulgate adds in its translation.

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I believe that this apparent canonical indetermination, which might seem to be imprecision or ambiguity--and which the Latin Vulgate hastens to correct--is typical of Ignatius' spiritual attitude, of his respect for the liberty of God and of the human person, and of his openness to the future. Practically speaking, this indetermination or ambiguity means that for Ignatius it is not only *common* perfection, but also *evangelical perfection*, which can be lived by a layman or woman.

The Autograph Directory (no.22; *Review* #87, p. 34) upholds this interpretation when, in speaking of what should be reflected upon before making an election, it says: "What he proposes for deliberation is this: first, whether a life of the counsels or one following the commandments; second, *if a life of the counsels, then whether in a religious institute or in every day life*; third, if in a religious institute, then which one...." (see *SpEx* 15 and 2).

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These considerations, I believe, are not merely exegetical subtleties which have no importance. On the contrary, they help to reinforce Maria Clara's thesis, because they examine the words of Ignatius

himself. They show that evangelical perfection is not confined to religious life, but that it has something to say to the lay state too, insofar as it is possible in some way to practice the evangelical counsels in this state. The considerations justify the offering of *Spiritual Exercises* in their entirety--with all that they demand--to those laypeople who feel called to this perfection.

2. I confess that I would like to have found in Maria Clara's text a more positive and concrete explanation of what Ignatius means by *perfection*. It seems to me that there are three aspects of this which are fundamental.

Firstly, I believe that for Ignatius the meaning of the word *perfection* is almost instinctively closer to the term used in the Greek New Testament than to the Latin term whose meaning Maria Clara investigates at the beginning of her article. As in the Gospel texts which underlie Ignatius' words, perfection (*teleiosis*), has to do with the end (*telos*), or with moving towards the end, or with going out of oneself, and so on. *Perfection* is an earnest desire to "wish for and choose only those things which lead to the end for which we were created" [*SpEx* 23,7].

Secondly, in both the lay and the religious state, perfection is indissolubly bound up with poverty, as the Exercise on the Two Standards demonstrates without a shadow of a doubt.

Finally, as is obvious in the same Exercise, the desire to practice the selflessness of poverty as radically as possible, with the total stripping of oneself which it demands, is linked with the explicit desire to "help all" [*SpEx* 146, 2].

Perfection is apostolic!

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