

SEARCHING FOR MEANING TODAY AN IGNATIAN CONTRIBUTION¹

What is "Ignatian"?

The word "Ignatian", while primarily referring to Ignatius' own experience and teaching, also carries a broader meaning. It includes the shared experience and teaching of those 'friends in the Lord' whose lives intertwined with his. But it also includes the experience and teaching of later generations of men and women who saw themselves as part of the tradition that could be traced back to Ignatius. Jesuits are the most obvious inheritors of this tradition, but few would query the right of a Maiy Ward, a Marie Madeleine d'Houet, a Mary Aikenhead, or of many contemporary women and men, lay as well as clerical or religious, to the same designation. "Ignatian" denotes the historical person, Ignatius Loyola, but it connotes all others who live out of the spirit and spirituality that he first articulated. All of these people are contributing, not just to the continuation of the Ignatian tradition, but to its enrichment and development. They are not just receiving the tradition passively, but are continually creating it anew.

The study of Ignatian spirituality cannot be a mere exercise in historical investigation, a turning to the past in order to learn more about Ignatius Loyola and the origins of the Jesuits. Anything we discover or come to understand about this spirituality must be a result of bringing the past into dialogue with the present, of asking contemporary questions of Ignatius and the texts and tradition that he left us. If these foundational texts are not speaking to our present situation, offering us practical wisdom in our daily

lives, enlightening us in our current concerns, our study remains at the level of what is sometimes referred to as "archaeologising".

Challenges to Our Certainties

In this article I wish to bring the Ignatian tradition into dialogue with one of the greatest issues of our time, the search for meaning. When the tsunami disaster struck in December 2004 our media carried a spate of articles, letters and live discussions asking the inevitable questions, "Where was God in all this? How could a good and all-powerful God allow such terrible suffering and loss of life to happen? Or does God simply not exist? Are we totally on our own in a hostile world?" Many people were going through an experience similar to that of Job in the Old Testament. They needed to question, challenge, and even rage at God. This experience has been an example of our search for meaning becoming focused, intense and soul searing because of a particularly horrifying natural calamity and its accompanying human loss and trauma.

Since the mid-twentieth century similar questioning has been taking place in the context of the Shoah, the Holocaust. This questioning has been even more harrowing and perplexing, not only because of the scale of the horror, but because its cause was not inanimate nature, but human cruelty and madness. *Homo homini lupus?* We are probably familiar with the powerful testimonies of Elie Wiesel³ and Viktor Frankl to their experiences in Nazi concentration camps. Frankl learned through his own suffering and that of others how it was possible to find meaning even in the midst of unspeakable depravity. In later years he went on to develop the science of "logotherapy", a form of psychological therapy based on what he called "a will to meaning" (logos). He had come to recognise that the loss of meaning is the greatest trauma.

Contemporary Culture

Both our spontaneous and more reflective reactions to events such as the tsunami and the Shoah highlight in particularly profound ways the need we have for meaning in our lives. They also reveal the difficulties we experience in attaining it. However, I would suggest that our greatest problems with meaning today come, not from such dramatic happenings, but from our contemporary culture. For most of us the tsunami and the Shoah did not affect us directly. Geography separated us from the former, history from the latter. But we cannot separate or distance ourselves from culture. It is omnipresent, all pervasive. Its messages bombard our senses; its ideas fill our minds. Culture is like the air we breathe. Much of the time we are not conscious of its influence on us. But it surreptitiously supplies us with our presuppositions, those beliefs and convictions that seem so innate in us that we never think to question them.

Postmodernism is the dominant cultural influence today in the western world. It can be seen both as a sophisticated philosophical system and as a climate of opinion, an unreflective world-view that affects everyone. Postmodernism is not all bad. There was a need to puncture some of the arrogance of modernity, such as the implicit belief in the inevitability of progress and the quasi-infallible status accorded to the scientific method. Deconstruction has its place. But what has mostly emerged from this "movement" is an extreme scepticism leading to a radical form of relativism. Its basic tenet is that truth is whatever is true for you. There is my truth and your truth, which are both inherently subjective. But there is no objective truth that might impose itself or make demands on either of us. As the then Cardinal Ratzinger said at the opening of the recent Conclave: "We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognise anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires."

Furthermore, in postmodernism there is no longer any possibility of a meta-narrative, an overarching story, myth, or belief-system that is capable of giving meaning to all our experiences and to all the dimensions of our lives. Hence Christianity is undermined because it professes to proclaim such a meta-narrative, a gospel that offers meaning, and indeed salvation, to every

person in every situation. Christians are caught in this confluence of two opposing sets of presuppositions, one emanating from their faith convictions, the other from the dominant culture. The clash of these mutually hostile systems, or at least the tension that exists between them, is experienced within us, in our minds, hearts, feelings, and imagination.

Sixteenth Century Angst

The roots of Ignatian spirituality certainly lie in a different historical context, and yet it was a like period of fluidity, transition and uncertainty. In the sixteenth century the shift was from a late-medieval worldview to the early modern, just as we have been experiencing a transition from late modernity to the postmodern. The uncertainty that was rife in the sixteenth century was due to many causes: the philosophical and religious questioning instigated by the Renaissance; political turmoil and endless wars; the discovery of non-European civilisations and their cultural values; fear of Islam in the form of Turkish expansionism; the Protestant Reformation and the consequent breakup of the western church. Old certainties were being questioned. People felt adrift in an unfamiliar world. With the collapse of the medieval consensus where was meaning to be found?

As Ignatius went through his prolonged conversion, first at Loyola and then at Manresa, he was of course focusing on his own odyssey, his own pilgrimage, and his own search for meaning and God. But it is illuminating to situate all of this personal exploration in the context, the drama, of a whole culture searching for meaning. Ignatius may not have been aware of it, but the culture's struggle was in some way working itself out within him. Just so today, our contemporary postmodern culture's struggle works itself out within each of us.

Understanding at the Cardoner

Let us now turn to that part of his Autobiography where Ignatius is describing some of his mystical experiences at Manresa. The particular experience selected here is usually referred to by the name of the river he mentions, the Cardoner.

Once he was going in his devotion to a church, which was a little more than a mile from Manresa (I think it is called Saint Paul's), and the way goes along by the river. Going along thus in his devotions, he sat down for a little with his face towards the river, which was running deep below. And as he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened: not that he saw some vision, but understanding and knowing many things, spiritual things just as much as matters of faith and learning, and this with an enlightenment so strong that all things seemed new to him [Aut. 30].

This experience was fundamental in his religious development. We notice that it was an experience of insight and understanding rather than of affectivity or union. We notice further that this understanding was of spiritual things and matters of faith, but that it also included matters of learning, i.e. secular learning, *letras*. Might we even risk translating it as "culture"? This is quite extraordinary, if not unique, in the history of Christian mysticism. When Ignatius says that "all things seemed new to him" this embraces his understanding of both spiritual and earthly realities, of religious and secular truth. Jerome Nadal similarly emphasises the centrality of such insight and understanding when he later describes the Gardener experience.

The eyes of his understanding were opened by such a fullness and wealth of interior light that in that light he understood and contemplated the mysteries of faith and spiritual things and truth pertaining to natural enquiry (*quaeque ad scientias pertinent*). The reality of all things seemed to be manifest to him and a wholly enlightened understanding...Whenever questions were put to him on matters of importance or when something was to be determined regarding the character of the Society's Institute, he would refer to that grace and light, as though he had there seen the guiding principles and causes of all things.

It is clear from both Ignatius' own account and that of Nadal that at the Cardoner Ignatius' search for meaning was rewarded in a profound way. Furthermore, a crucial aspect of the experience was a grasp of the interconnectedness of the things whose meaning he saw, bringing together matters of

the spirit, of faith, and of secular learning or culture. This interconnectedness might well be what Nadal meant by his phrase, "as though he (Ignatius) had there seen the guiding principles and causes of all things". Ignatius was given to understand how all things had their source and origin in God, in the Trinity. Their guiding principles and causes could be found in the Logos and the Sophia, the Word and Wisdom of God. From then on Ignatius never thought of the Trinity without being drawn to the world of nature and humanity, God's creation, and never thought of the natural and human world without becoming conscious of its relationship to the Trinity. There was no longer any separation of the sacred from the secular. Each was seen as compenetrating the other.

A Methodology of Discernment

A complementary way of interpreting the Cardoner experience is to see it as grounding Ignatius' understanding of, and capacity for discernment. In this way Cardoner became the touchstone or litmus test for all his later decision-making. This is what Nadal was referring to in our earlier quotation, "Whenever questions were put to him on matters of importance.. .he would refer to that grace and light", i.e. to what he understood at the Cardoner. Before that Ignatius had begun to notice and to wonder (as he had during his convalescence in the family castle at Loyola), but he did not understand. He was still, in his own word, blind [Aut. 14]. Later he will speak about his sojourn in Manresa:

At this time God was dealing with him in the same way as a school-teacher deals with a child, teaching him. Now, whether this was because of his ignorance and obtuse mind, or because he didn't have anyone to teach him, or because of the resolute will that same God had given him to serve him, it was his clear judgement then, and has always been his judgement, that God was dealing with him in this way [Aut. 27].

Ignatius was learning gradually, incrementally. He had no hesitation in admitting in the Autobiography that he was ignorant and lacked confidence in matters of the spirit, that is, in discernment. But from the Cardoner

experience onwards there grows in him an assurance that was not there before. To grasp the interconnectedness of all truth is the basis of the gift of discernment. If we reflect on our own efforts at decision-making we may well see that our difficulties often have their source in a lack of awareness of connections, correlations, implications. These connections will be partly between the human and secular realities with which the decision is dealing, but also between these realities and the divine realities that are accessible only in the light of faith. We need the gift of *ctiscretio*¹³ that grasps the interconnectedness of everything that is involved in the matter for decision, that sees the ramifications of the possibilities we are facing, and that ultimately leads us to a confirming synthesis.

The Cardoner experience did not give Ignatius a direct answer to all the questions that he was facing in his life, still less answers to the questions emanating more broadly from his cultural milieu. But it did give him a tool, a means by which he could approach all questions; it gave him a methodology. Building on his personal experience Ignatius began to fashion a pedagogy by which he could enable others to learn that methodology. He did not want or seek to answer other people's questions for them. He simply tried to enable them to search for meaning in a way that offered, not a guarantee, but a well-founded hope of success. He knew that everything lay in the hands of God who alone could gift his people with wisdom and understanding. But, having seen at the Cardoner the interconnectedness of all things, the human and the divine, he also knew that a way could be found to co-operate with God's initiative and activity.

Ignatius insisted that this had to be a contemplative way, one that opened the person to God and led them to recognise God's presence in their lives. God was interested in their questions and their searching. God was the ground of the meaning that they craved. God offered guidance in their decision-making. But how recognise and then interpret that guidance? What

are the modes of God's self-communication? Ignatius offered, not a theory, not a speculative theology, but a process into which a person was invited to enter. And since the process could be a lonely journey the person was not left alone but accompanied by an experienced guide. We are referring, of course, to the Spiritual Exercises.

The Spiritual Exercises and Meaning

But are the Spiritual Exercises always concerned with the search for meaning? Many people come to the Exercises with stated motivations that do not include the word "meaning" or its synonyms. Some say that they want to deepen their relationship with God, some that they need to renew their inner life; others seek help in facing a big decision in their lives, and there are those who are at a point when they simply desire union with God. I would suggest that all these explicit desires and motivations are linked with, or even rooted in, the search for meaning. To seek God is to seek meaning.

In the Rule of St. Benedict, after underlining the need for "a senior chosen for his skill in winning souls" to look after the novices, there comes a lapidary statement: "The concern must be whether the novice truly seeks God". The Latin phrase, *quaerere Deum*, was often seen as summing up the whole monastic life and its purpose. This concern or question, therefore, probes the novice's level of faith, his depth of desire, but also the meaning that monastic life holds for him. Will entering the monastery really give meaning to his life or simply offer him refuge, or escape, or safety, or some other lesser good? The same question, "Do you truly seek God?", can be put to anyone who asks to make the Spiritual Exercises. If the answer is affirmative, the person is ready, prepared, poised to enter the process with profit.

The Spiritual Exercises, when made as Ignatius intended, enable a person to discover meaning precisely because they enable a person to have a profound experience of God. Ignatius uses very striking language when referring to this experience, even anticipating that God will deal directly with the person.

During these Spiritual Exercises it is more opportune and much better that the Creator and Lord communicate Himself to the faithful soul in search for the will of God, as He inflames her in his love and praise,

disposing her towards the way in which she will be better able to serve Him in the future. Hence the giver of the Exercises should not be swayed or show a preference for one side rather than the other, but remaining in the middle like the pointer of a balance, should leave the Creator to work directly with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord. [*Sp. Ex.15*].

The scenario painted here is revealing. The active party is God who communicates Himself, inflames the soul, and disposes her. The human person is mostly passive, receiving the communication of God, being inflamed and disposed by Him. The third party, the one who gives the Exercises, remains in the background, a benign and wise presence, but one who does not interfere or come between God and God's creature. It is true that this text refers most explicitly to the time of election, that part of the Exercises when the retreatant is trying to come to a decision about some important matter. The one who gives the Exercises may have their own views on the issue, may even think they know what would be best for the retreatant, or what option would most effectively serve the Church and the world, but they are called to silence! They must allow the dialogue between God and the person to take place without interruption, without any attempt to influence the outcome.

At other times during the Exercises, it is true, the one who gives them has a somewhat more active role. They present the different exercises, explain them briefly, offer feedback to the person's account of what is happening in prayer, occasionally answer queries, but in doing all this they still have to avoid coming between the retreatant and God. The dynamic is adapted, but not changed, compared to the time of election.

Ignatius and the Alumbrados

Ignatius' approach here got him into serious trouble on a number of occasions. He even had to defend himself before the Inquisition. His critics perceived that he was encouraging people to trust their inner experience. In the Spain of his time this seemed to show that he was one of the *Alumbrados*, the Enlightened Ones, who were said to claim a direct illumination of the Holy Spirit.¹ As a result they ignored, or even held in contempt, all ecclesias-

deal authority and all external ritual in worship. They also, or so it was said, considered themselves above all norms of morality. It did not help that Ignatius, in his post-conversion years, moved in circles that included some *Alumbrados*, and so he could readily be associated with their practices and teaching. He was also suspected of being a Lutheran. The basis of this suspicion was similar. To trust one's inner experience seemed very close to Luther's teaching on the private interpretation of Scripture. So he was spreading heresy and had to be stopped! But whenever the issue came to trial Ignatius was always exonerated.

The best-known account of a brush with church authority while Ignatius was still a layman comes from the Autobiography. What was being questioned was the source of his right to teach. This was not an investigation by the Inquisition as such, but an examination of Ignatius and some of his followers by the Dominican friars at the convent of San Esteban in Salamanca. Nevertheless, it gives a good picture of the suspicions he aroused at that time. We take up the story after Ignatius has acknowledged the rather limited amount of study that he had done. The subprior continues his questioning:

"So then, what do you preach?" "We", said the pilgrim, "don't preach, but speak about things of God with certain people in an informal way, such as after a meal with some people who invite us". "But", said the friar, "what things of God do you talk about? That's what we want to know." "We speak", replied the pilgrim, "now of one virtue, now of another, in praise of it; now of this vice, now of that, and in criticism." "You aren't learned", said the friar, "and you're speaking of virtues and vices. About this no one can speak except in one of two ways: either through learning or through the Holy Spirit. If it's not learning, then it's the Holy Spirit. *And this point: that it is of the Holy Spirit, is what we would like to know about!*" Here the pilgrim was a little wary, as this way of arguing did not seem good to him. And after having been silent a while, he said that there was no need to speak more about these matters. As the friar insisted, "Well, now that there are so many errors from Erasmus and so many others who have deceived the world, aren't you willing to explain what you're saying?", the pilgrim said, "Father, I won't say any more than what I've already said, unless it be in front of my superiors who can require it of me" [Aut. 65-66],

In referring to Erasmus, the leading Christian humanist of his day, the subprior was on weak theological grounds. Spanish fears of the teaching of Erasmus were greatly exaggerated. However, Ignatius probably did not realise this. The whole line of questioning was more obviously geared to trapping Ignatius into admitting that he was an *Alumbrado*, that he had received illumination from the Holy Spirit. Ignatius saw the trap. He had already admitted that he had little learning, hence learning could not justify his speaking about God, or about virtues and vices. To accept the alternative suggested by the subprior would have condemned him. So he refused to answer the question. But what if Ignatius had chosen to answer? The subprior's question was not only clever but, whatever its motivation, a fair one. Did Ignatius believe that the knowledge he conveyed in those informal conversations about God had come to him from the Spirit? The answer would have to be affirmative. Ignatius trusted his inner religious experience, especially that at Manresa and by the Cardoner, and he drew on that as an authentic source of whatever he later shared or taught about God.

Sources of Authority

What preserved Ignatius from heresy was that his trust in his inner experience did not lead him to reject church authority and tradition. Unlike the *Alumbrados* he recognised that these were two sources of authority. They both needed to be respected, and when necessary, held in tension. It was the same Holy Spirit who dwelt within the individual soul and who animated the Church. There is a similarity of thought, even if not an exact parallel, in Rule 13 of his Rules for Thinking with the Church:

We believe that between Christ Our Lord, the bridegroom, and the Church, His bride, there is the same Spirit who governs and directs us

for the good of our souls because it is by that same Spirit and Lord of us all who gave the Ten Commandments that our holy mother Church is directed and governed [*Sp. Ex.* 3651].

There could hardly be a stronger and more succinct endorsement of the authority of the Church, built on a theology of the Holy Spirit. Ignatius was always dealing with polarities: the divine and the human, the individual person and the corporate body, mission and community, spirit and law, charism and institution, the universal and the local, and so forth. The temptation or easy option, when faced with such polarities, is to choose one over the other. Such an either-or approach simplifies life, avoids uncertainty, and lessens stress. But it is flawed. It ignores the complexity of life even on a purely human level, and still more, the profound mystery of God's plan for his creation.

Ignatius, by contrast, embraced a both-and approach. He acknowledged that he had to take with equal seriousness the divine and the human dimensions; the rights of the individual person and of the corporate body; the imperative of outgoing mission and the necessity of a nurturing community; the priority of spirit and the need of law to enshrine it; the spontaneity of charism and the continuity achieved through institution; the soaring universal vision and concrete local commitment; God speaking within each human heart and God speaking through the Church. If all this brought tension, then so be it!

Living with Tension

Some years ago I was asked to write an article entitled "Living with Tension" as part of a collection on the Jesuit Constitutions. My first reaction was of great reluctance because I foresaw this as being a difficult assignment. Yet as

I began to look at the Constitutions, and at Ignatian spirituality as a whole, through the lens of this title, examples of tension surfaced everywhere. I opened the article by suggesting that tension is already implicit in the Ignatian *magis*, the constant search for the greater service and the greater glory of God. Most people are introduced to the *magis* towards the end of the Principle and Foundation in the words, "we should desire and choose only what helps us more towards the end for which we are created" [*Sp.Ex.* 231].

Then I argued that tension is also inherent in Ignatius' way of working with our desires, the raw material of the Spiritual Exercises. Desires emerge from dissatisfaction with the way things now are, whether in ourselves or in our world. Desires have us straining forward, away from the "what is" towards the "what could be", away from the "already" towards the "not yet." The dynamic of desire is closely connected with our search for meaning.

Finally, I took some of the polarities in Ignatius' thought mentioned above, and showed the inevitability of experiencing the tension between each pair if one were living a Jesuit life of mission. However, this is not exclusively a Jesuit experience. It is also the experience of anybody who embraces Ignatian spirituality.

But let us return to the polarity between the authority of inner experience and the authority that exists in the Church. One reason for underlining this is to avoid the impression that, by trusting his inner experience, Ignatius was a total subjectivist. Far from it! He was neither a sixteenth century *Alumbrado* nor a twenty-first century post-modern. Nevertheless, he did trust his inner experience. He believed that God spoke directly to his soul, and this led to the teaching he handed on through the Spiritual Exercises. It is also the teaching that points the way for contemporary men and women as they search for meaning today.

Interiority not Subjectivism

We have inherited from at least as far back as the Renaissance a valid conviction of the need for interiority, for awareness of our own subjectivity (which is not the same as subjectivism). Meaning is to be sought and found within ourselves. Since Freud this conviction has been strengthened by the insights of psychoanalysis and the other psychologies that have followed in its wake. In our highly psychologised culture such a conviction is almost

cultural datum. But it is not reduced to it. For Ignatius there is a complementary source of meaning, namely the Church. Note the adjective "complementary". These are not alternative sources of meaning, independent of each other. That would be the either-or approach. But complementary sources need each other and must be in constant dialogue. It is the same Holy Spirit who is dwelling and operative in both.

This need of an individual for the Church is well expressed in a semi-autobiographical article by Karl Rahner entitled "Courage for an Ecclesial Christianity". He writes:

"Since I am a human being and a Christian, in the last resort it is obvious to me that I am a Christian in the Church, an ecclesial Christian... [Moreover] Christianity is a historical religion bound up with the one Jesus Christ. I heard of him only through the Church and not otherwise. Hence I cannot be content with a purely private Christianity which would repudiate its origins."¹

But Rahner also held that we meet God in our subjectivity, our interiority. As Augustine said, God is *intimior intimo meo*^ deeper within me than my own inner self. In that inner meeting of Creator and creature, Divine Spirit and human spirit, meaning reveals itself and makes our life worthwhile.

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NOTES

1. This article is an abridged version of a lecture sponsored by the Brentwood Religious Education Service, and delivered in Brentwood, England on 28th April 2005.
2. Aphorism from Plautus (d. 184 BC) in his *Asinaria*. Paraphrase: "Humans act like wolves towards their fellow-humans."
3. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, translated from the French by Stella Rodway. Penguin Books, 1981.

Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, translated from the German by Use Lasch. Hodder and Stoughton, 1964.

5. It is this climate of opinion that I am mostly concerned with in this article.
6. Deconstructionist theories bring a hermeneutic of suspicion even to our most cherished certainties, but can, perhaps paradoxically, have a purifying effect on religious faith.
7. Cited in *The Irish Times*, 19 April 2005, p. 8.
8. As far back as 1975 Paul VI had written, "The split between the Gospel and the culture is without a doubt the tragedy of our time". More recently, with Jesuits specifically in mind, the 24th General Congregation in its Decree 4, "Our Mission and Culture" (1995) commented, "The boundary line between the Gospel and the modern and postmodern culture passes through the heart of each of us. Each Jesuit encounters the impulse to unbelief first of all in himself," n. 104.
9. Quotations from the Autobiography and the Spiritual Exercises will be from *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, translated with introductions and notes by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean. London: Penguin Classics, 1996.
10. See Leonardo R. Silos, "Cardoner in the Life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola", *AHSI*, vol. 33 (1964), p. 3-43.
11. *MHSI, Fontes Narrativi*, II, p. 239-240.
12. He describes the signs of this blindness: "He never considered anything about the interior life, nor did he know what humility was or charity, or patience, or that discretion was the rule and measure of these virtues" [Aut. 14].
- 13- Discerning wisdom that is linked with experience but is ultimately *de arriba*, a pure gift from God.
14. *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict*, edited by Timothy Fry. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981, chapter 58, 6-7, p. 267.
15. See Alistair Hamilton, *Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth-Century Spain-. The Alumbrados*. London: James Clarke, 1993. Also Luis Fernandez, "Inigo de Loyola y los Alumbrados", *Hispania Sacra* 35, 1983, p. 585-680.
16. See M. Bataillon, *Erasmus et l'Espagne*, 2^m edition, 3 volumes, Geneva: Droz, 1991.
17. Brian O'Leary, "Living with Tension", *The Way Supplement*, 61 (Spring 1988), p. 35-47.
18. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 20, translated by Edward Quinn. Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981, p. 9.
19. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 3, 6, 11.