

## “HERE I AM” IGNATIAN WAYS OF SERVING

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One of the key phrases capturing the charism of Ignatian spirituality is “to love and to serve in all things.” In Ignatius’s Spanish it reads “*en todo amar y servir*.” The phrase is used in describing the grace we pray for in the prayer exercise, “The Contemplation on the Love of God,” the final exercise within the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Ignatius lets us know how he is considering the verb, *to love*, by his prenote of two points in this exercise. He tells us that love is shown more in deeds than in words in the first point. Then in the second point he says that people in love share what each has with the other. The Ignatian Spanish word we translate in English as “to share” is *comunicar*. And so in a paradoxical way, though Ignatius does say deeds express true love more than words, he goes on to say what lovers do for each other *speaks* or *communicates* love.

Although Ignatius helps us in some way to appreciate his understanding of *to love*, I do not find him as helpful in letting us know what he might mean by *to serve*. It is true that we find some thirty-nine uses of the words *service* or *to serve* in the *Exercises*, but we do not find a kind of definition. If we can cite some seventy times a form of the word *service* being used in the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, we still are left to imagine what the word itself means for Ignatius.

I want to explore with you this notion of Ignatian service.

Ignatius Loyola is numbered among the great Spanish mystics of the sixteenth century. Although he did not reflect in writing on his mystical experiences in the way that Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross did, Ignatius takes his place with his own spiritual legacy alongside these two great Carmelite mystics.

A most important mystical experience for an understanding of Ignatian spirituality happens to Ignatius in 1537 as he is journeying to Rome with his companions in order that they might offer themselves to the pope for his missioning. Ignatius makes reference to this vision in his *Autobiography* [96], but he does not expand on it. He makes even a more passing reference to it in his *Spiritual Diary* when he writes “I recalled the day when the Father placed me with the Son” ([22], Feb 23, 1544). At a shrine at La Storta, Ignatius received an extraordinary response to his novena-like prayer to Mary, “Place me with your Son.” Ignatius describes his experience in these words: “he experienced such a change in his soul and saw so clearly that God the Father placed him with Christ his Son that he would not dare doubt it—that God the Father had placed him with his Son.” In the “seeing” (Ignatius’s vision), Jesus was carrying his cross. The Father addresses Ignatius and says, “I shall be favorable to you at Rome.” Then the Father turns to Jesus who is carrying his cross and makes this request: “I want you to take this man to serve us.” Jesus, with his cross in hand, looks at Ignatius and says: “We want you *to serve* us.” The vision is an obvious answer to Ignatius’s prayer to Mary. He is confirmed in his being placed with Jesus. But the placement is made with Jesus in action—Jesus carrying his cross. This vision becomes an icon of Ignatian spirituality. The vision is about Ignatian service.

Ignatian spirituality, always identified as an active spirituality, finds expression in the phrase “to serve.” Many commentators on Ignatius have noted that the *you* in Jesus’ invitation to Ignatius “We want *you* to serve us” is plural. *You* would seem to point not only to Ignatius but also to all the people who find life in Ignatian spirituality. As we try to live Ignatian spirituality, we want to be a people who serve.

We are moved, then, to ask what does *service* or *to serve* mean in Ignatian spirituality? Does Ignatius help us to understand what *service* might include? Is it confined to tasks performed or work accomplished? Is *service* always about a project or jobs? Is *service* restricted to certain kinds of actions or deeds?

I am suggesting that we might follow Ignatius in some of his experiences as recorded in his *Autobiography* to see a development in his own life about what it means to serve. Then we might return to the *Exercises* themselves to see how Ignatius incorporates an openness to God’s invitation to serve the Kingdom.

The young Ignatius was a man of great ambition. He was one who could dream of doing great deeds, being recognized for signal service in the service of a king, and perhaps by glorious accomplishments he might win the hand of a noble lady. The cannon ball in the siege of the city Pamplona by the French forces against the Spanish shattered not only Ignatius’s leg but also his dreams. During his long recovery at the family castle of Loyola he had only two books—a Life of Christ by Ludolph of Saxony and another of the legendary tales about many saints by Voragine—to fill his reading time. But by these two books, Ignatius’s dreams returned, only to be fired by the challenge to do the glorious deeds like the saints, glorious deeds in the service of Christ, his king.

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Although *service* was still caught up in glorious deeds and accomplishments, Ignatius also found himself listening to the still, small voice of God calling within him. Little by little, he began to pay attention to the different spirits that stirred inside him, some leaving him to feel sad and desolate and others giving him joy. He began to understand a language of God through a process of discerning these spirits. He would spend long hours gazing at the stars in the sky, and felt within himself a great drawing to serve the Lord. In the midst of his dreams, he asked himself what was it that he really desired to do. As an answer, Ignatius felt that the content of his dreaming was to be a pilgrim, one going to the Holy Land where Jesus lived.

Ignatius at this time represents all those first apostles called by Jesus in the gospels. He is like the fishermen Peter and Andrew, James and John, and like the tax collector Matthew, who heard Jesus say “follow” and they did. Although Ignatius still harbored his idea of great deeds, at this moment of recovery at Loyola castle, he knew only that he wanted to follow Jesus, and somehow this following seemed to lead him to the land called “holy” because Jesus was born and died there. He wanted to be identified with Jesus. That would be service enough, and perhaps he could help souls.

“Following” is a way of serving. But it is not so much our doing some deeds as it is an active passivity on our part, just to let someone take the lead and we come behind. But for the apostles in the gospels and for Ignatius at Loyola, it is the first form of his new-found service of Jesus—just to follow, wherever he may lead.

Manresa becomes another stage in Ignatius’s growth in understanding service.

At Manresa, through a long and sometimes zigzag forming by the grace of God, Ignatius becomes available, available to however God may lead him.

At Manresa, Ignatius was initially self-determining his way of serving Christ. He set himself some seven hours of prayer each day. He fixed on his way of getting God’s grace by a total fast. A major temptation was phrased in the question: How will you be able to endure this life for the seventy years you have to live (*Aut. 20*)? When he was beset by debilitating scruples, he correctly took all the human means he could to rid himself of them. But finally he had to cry out to God that only God could help. In a dramatic image of being a child, Ignatius tells God that however God wants to work with him, he, a grown man, would chase after a puppy dog if that is how God would give him a healing remedy (*Aut. 23*). Immediately he reflects that God was at this time treating him like a schoolmaster with a pupil. Why was God teaching him this way, he asks. Because of the strong desire that God himself had given him *to serve* him (*Aut. 27*).

Manresa became the schoolhouse where Ignatius began to learn that serving is not focused on our own pre-determined efforts. To serve God means first of all to be available to God’s direction and grace. God is the master, the teacher, and we are the disciples, the learners. To bring home the fact that God is the director, Ignatius recounts five special mystical experiences - all of them pointing towards an understanding or grasp of the deepest of faith realities: God as Trinity, creation as worked by God, the Eucharistic presence of Jesus, Christ and Mary in their holy humanness, and finally insights into spiritual matters as well as matters of faith and scholarship (*Aut. 28-30*). God was making Ignatius his disciple, a person available to God. For Ignatius, to be available is to serve. He would reflect this stance particularly

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in the attitude of the third class of people in the exercise, “The Three Types of People,” in the *Exercises*.

As Ignatius moves on to next phase—the pilgrimage to Jerusalem—he opens another door which leads to a notion of serving. He discovers through many experiences of being the pilgrim that a way of serving comes from *faith*—believing and trusting. Whether it be with the use of money (prudently having some or not), or with the choice of boat (going with the bigger and better outfitted one or not), or with weather at sea (cold and stormy or beset by pirate ships), or with church authority (allowing or not allowing his stay in Jerusalem), Ignatius came to a realization that believing God and believing in God and trusting God and trusting in God was to serve God. This understanding of serving is reflected in Ignatius’s contemplative approach to the gospels.

When Ignatius determines that studies were important for carrying out his desire to serve God and others, he slowly moves to another stage of serving. Although it is at Salamanca that he evidences his desire to have companions with him in service, the realization of this desire will have its fruition during the time of his studies in Paris. There it was that Francis Xavier and Peter Faber and four others form the nucleus of the “friends in the Lord.” Whether it is the call of Christ coming to every person to be with and to work with Christ reflected in the Call of the King exercise in the *Spiritual Exercises* that inspires Ignatius to seek to serve in relationship with others, we can only infer.

But whatever the stimulus, we see another stage in Ignatius’s own growth in understanding and practicing service. To serve is to be in relationship with others. It is to accompany and to be accompanied. This is the root foundation for the Company of Jesus, the Jesuits, ones who call themselves companions of Christ and so companions with one another. The service of the Society of Jesus mirrors always men-in-companionship, not the individual apostle. Ignatian service historically is people working together because of their working with Christ.

I believe that Ignatius’s growth in understanding service came out of his experiences which we have pointed out through the citing of certain incidents recorded in his *Autobiography*. Ignatius reflected upon his experience in terms of being helpful to others, and the result was his writing of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The *Exercises*, then, I believe, become a summation of what Ignatian service is. Let us look more closely at the *Exercises*.

What Ignatius discovered and what he hands on to us is that God is the One first who serves. This is the vision that Ignatius shares with us in the “Principle and Foundation” and in the “Contemplation on the Love of God.” Ignatius begins his Principle and Foundation statement with the catechism-like answer to the unspoken question “why did God make us?” Ignatius writes: God creates human beings to praise, reverence, and serve God, and thereby save their souls. Ignatius goes on to say that God gifts human beings with all their personal talents and presents everything in creation as gifts to help them to come to know, love, and serve God. Our human response is to choose among the many gifts which ones help us in our direction towards life-with-God forever. God is the first to serve us by gifting us with an abundance of gifts so that we can make the choice among them which ones better help us seek and find God.

Ignatius makes his approach eminently clear in the final exercise, The Contemplation on the Love of God - what I call the “other bookend” of the Exercises similar to the Principle and Foundation. We are praying for the grace to be empowered to love and to serve in all the ways that God does. All four points outlined by Ignatius are pictures of God serving us. Of course, by his prenote on love, Ignatius has prepared us to see that God shows his love in deeds - in all the ways that God continues to serve us. These deeds, these giftings, speak out and communicate to us how much God loves us. In loving us, God is the first to serve.

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As directors, not as first-time retreatants, we are aware that the vision pieces that mark the beginning and end of the full Spiritual Exercises are about a God who gifts, a God who loves, and a God who serves. In every way God communicates his love for us and so serves us. If God is the first to serve, then how better can we learn what service means than by drinking in all the ways that God communicates his love for us by his deeds—all of which are meant to speak.

Just as there has been a tradition of the four points of the Contemplation on the Love of God being a resume of the Four Weeks of the Exercises, so we might review some aspects of the Four Weeks to obtain,

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perhaps, a better grasp of how God serves, with the result that we might learn to serve. I am selecting a few key images that speak of ways of serving.

In the First Week, we might turn our eyes to Jesus nailed to the cross as we are asked to image him in the colloquy in the first exercise. When we are caught in wonder that Jesus, being the Word made flesh, the Word in whom all things are created, is being crucified, we are open to hearing his response to us as a part of our prayer conversation. Jesus would tell us that his hanging on the cross is a way of his serving. Moved by love of God his Father and focused in his love for each of us, his brothers and sisters, he gives himself over to us, holding nothing back, even allowing us to put him to death. Sin in our lives is the way that we keep trying to put him to death. But Jesus waits for us, Jesus' arms are held wide to embrace us, Jesus offers us his forgiveness. How does Jesus (God) serve us? Jesus serves us by his patience, by his ever-present welcome, by his words of forgiveness. Jesus loves and so he serves.

In the Second Week, we might look at and listen to Christ issuing his call to every man, woman, and child today. The exercise is called the Call of the King. This is the risen Christ, the one who is still busy about the kingdom to come. This Jesus personally invites each one of us to be with him and to work with him. God's kingdom will come, the victory is assured in Jesus' resurrection, and life forever with God is our realizable goal. How does Jesus(God) serve us? Jesus serves us by calling us to an intimacy with him, but being with Jesus is not enough. Jesus serves us by asking us to work alongside him as together we serve the kingdom. Jesus loves us so much that he wants us to be right alongside him as we act together in our work for the kingdom. Just as Jesus' being caught up in love of God his Father has him serving just by being with him, so too our being with Jesus models this divine intimacy—essential to all other forms of serving. In our eagerness to work as our form of service, we often forget that service of God demands a loving relationship with God.

In the Third Week, we are struck by the first exercise as imaging service in a special way. In his points for the Last Supper contemplation, Ignatius highlights the paschal meal context, the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus, and the Eucharist as the greatest mark of his love. The paschal meal is a liturgical context in which Jesus, known as the Lamb of God, will bring to a fulfillment the Mosaic celebration so that it becomes a celebration of a new covenant “in my blood.” Jesus serves us by entering us into the

liturgical celebration of the covenant between God and humankind. Celebrating liturgy, then, is a way of serving.

In washing his disciples' feet, Jesus clearly identifies himself as teacher and wants to expand their understanding. He wants, above all, to broaden their understanding of what it means to serve. Jesus is not asking them to fix their attention on one action of a good deed done to understand service. He has them first of all reflect on the One who serves. Created in God's image, just like the eternal Son, our very being is realized in our being people who serve. In challenging their understanding, Jesus is exploding whatever restrictions these first apostles and then all of us later ones humanly use to limit our notion of service.

When Jesus institutes the Eucharist as the greatest mark of his love, Jesus again shows his love by his deed. The Eucharist is the ever-making present the total gift of self that the risen Jesus continuously makes to his Father and to us. The actuality of the event of the Cross, limited in time and in space, receives its "now" reality and meaning in every celebration of the Eucharist—the greatest mark of Jesus' love. Jesus is forever giving over himself to us. Jesus shows us that service is embedded in surrender, a giving over of self, with nothing ever held back.

In the Fourth Week, once again it is the first exercise that is most suggestive of our drinking in ways of serving. The first exercise is the appearance of the risen Jesus to Mary, his mother. Ignatius dismisses the fact that there is no scripture passage to support this contemplation by claiming that scripture says that there are other appearances and that we have understanding. By having us contemplate the risen Jesus appearing to his mother, Ignatius brings home to us the newness of the risen life and the change in relationship that it necessarily entails. Jesus' intimacy with Mary his mother, before his resurrection at a level incomprehensible to us, is taken to another, wholly unimaginable, level at this resurrection time. This Jesus, whose risen body knows no natural, physical boundaries, meets his mother in an intimacy that can only be described with explosive joy. Jesus shares with his mother the joy of the resurrection as his way of serving. Mary, then, becomes our "key" to grasping something of the newness of our relationship with the risen Jesus. We experience Jesus' way of serving us sometimes by this gift of joy, at other

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times, by his gift of consolation. In joy and in consolation, we feel a oneness with the Lord that leaves us faltering in our language to describe our experience.

This brings us back to our two “bookends” of the Exercises, the Principle and Foundation and the Contemplation on the Love of God. We realize now more fully that the phrase “to love and to serve in all things” has a necessary proper sequence. To love comes before to serve. With Ignatian insight, loving always is the root and foundation of serving. If we love, then we will be serving people. Ignatius sees that God loves, and so God is the first to serve. As he has experienced God in his own life, he has come to a wholly new way of understanding service—a transformation of the great deeds and accomplishments that made up so much of his dreams. God has taught him, and now he knows that by drinking in God’s actions, by watching Jesus in the gospels, he has expanded his notion of service and has taken in its breadth, its length, its height, and its depth.

Ignatius writes into the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* the richness of this understanding of *service*. Some would complain that the Jesuit Order has little specification for its mission. Although the Formula of the Institute (like the basic Rule of a religious order) does describe the mission of the Jesuits, we Jesuits must confess that it does not so much restrict our activities as open up many doors to the needs of our world.

A part of Ignatius’s first insight into the service of following Christ never left him. The Spanish verb *ayudar*, meaning *to help*, is the kernel of all Ignatian service. Ignatius always wanted “to help souls.” His *Exercises* are written to be a help first for the director and then through the director for the retreatant. Consistently Ignatius urges the director of the retreat to use or not use material on the basis of whether it is “helpful” for the one making the retreat. In terms of the special vow of obedience of the professed Jesuit, the mission was to be determined by the pope who saw where the need was greatest and, as a result, the Jesuits could be of greater “help.” “To help” is hardly an exalted notion of service. It does not conjure up great deeds and accomplishments. But it is a way of serving as God serves.

What have we learned about Ignatian service? First, by looking at God who is the first to serve, we begin to learn about service. Second, from God, we learn that love is the foundation and love is the stimulus for service. Love is expressed in deeds—in acts of service—more than in words. And yet our service should speak out and communicate the love that is at its source. Third, service cannot be restricted to certain actions or deeds, to

certain results or accomplishments. From Jesus and the gospels, we learn that to follow is to serve, to be available is to serve, to believe and to trust is to serve, to accompany is to serve, to forgive and to be compassionate is to serve, and to celebrate the Eucharist is to serve. We also learn to serve is always to share what we have been given. That is why serving always follows upon loving—because lovers share their gifts.

After our explorations of this idea of service, we find that Ignatius again leads us to the grace that we prayed for in the Contemplation on the Love of God. We pray for the grace that we might be empowered “to love and to serve in everything,” “*en todo amar y servir*.” Our ways of serving will be as rich and deep as our ways of loving. We are acting with God. We are God’s servants. We stand ready and willing. We say: Here I am. I want to serve.