

## IGNATIUS CHALLENGES YOUNG PEOPLE

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A young adult has two main tasks to live through. One is the need to share one's life with others and form meaningful relationships. The second is the need to be productive in some significant way usually through work or parenthood. In the realm of faith, young adulthood is also a crucial stage. It is the stage in life when most people start to question their faith seriously, return to it, or strive to deepen and integrate it with the rest of their life. Indeed St. Ignatius' most dramatic breakthrough in his spiritual life was in his young adulthood. It was only the start of a longer journey to deepen his relationship with God but surely a critical time which laid the foundation for his later insights.

This article is a personal reflection on some elements in Ignatian Spirituality which have inspired me, as a young adult, and in my pastoral contact with other people at our University Chaplaincy and within the Christian Life Communities. It has also been inspired by the wisdom of Jesuits working at our Chaplaincy who have shared what they consider invaluable in guiding young people. The article shall first look at certain central principles in Ignatian spirituality: finding God in all things; meeting the person of Jesus Christ, discernment, and a faith that does justice. Then it shall explore certain elements in Ignatian prayer and spirituality: unique methods of prayer, silence, spiritual accompaniment and the personal-communitarian dynamic.

*Finding God in all things*

Young people in this day are growing in a culture which has faith only in that which is scientifically proven or philosophically reasoned. Such a culture often leads young people to try to live faith, and indeed their whole life, only on the rational level of questioning. They find themselves knotted up in philosophical questions about God and religion, hindering them from moving to the experiential, affective level, essential to the spiritual life. Often, this is paralleled in their life by certain scepticism about other 'spiritual' dimensions in life, such as trust and love.

Without belittling the validity of finding rational arguments for questions such as 'Does God exist?', Ignatian spirituality invites for a deeper exploration of the relationship with God and indeed with the whole of life. The emphasis of Ignatian spirituality on the awareness of God's presence in the everyday incidents -'God-incidents'- opens up a window onto how God 'intervenes' in one's life history. It also invites one to relate to the world in a different manner: not one which demands scientific proof but that certain 'knowing' which is intuitive, mystical and stems out of the spiritual reality.

*'God-incidents' opens up a window onto how God 'intervenes' in one's life history*

Writing their faith-history is one of the most enriching exercises which helps young people open their eyes to see God's handprint in their life. How surprised they are to see their life come alight with God's presence! Moreover, the examen of consciousness is also a simple but profound prayer which helps them continue to become aware of God's constant presence in their life.

*Meeting the Person of Jesus Christ*

Teens and adolescents tend to rebel against anything which authorities pass down. They rebel against the institution of the Church, constantly questioning its teaching and some practices which seem artificial or outright hypocritical. In young adulthood, this spirit of rebellion mellows down allowing for more openness and a deeper search for truth. Ignatian

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spirituality invites young people to go to the heart of Christianity. It invites them to meet the person of Jesus Christ, to find in him a dreamer, an idealist, someone who also wanted to strip everything to its essence... just like them! Above all, it is through the contemplation of the life of Christ that the knowledge of the true God is acquired.

This personal and relational dimension of religion is very important for young adults. In their lives, they seek to connect with others, to be understood, to belong. Thus, through contemplating the figure of Christ, young adults can start to relate to Christ often as they would relate to their peers. In prayer they come to share with him all that troubles them and all that enthralls them. They also come to know who he was and what qualities he brought to those around him. In contemplating passages such as the healing stories, they come in touch strongly with the saving grace of God.

Young people need to be accompanied not only to discover the true person of Jesus Christ, but to come to love him even though his ideals pose great challenges. Once they know and love him, they are then invited to follow him despite the obstacles which the world can present. Contemplating Christ at the transition stage from a student's life to life at work, as professionals, young adults can be supported in their daily challenges by finding Christ to be a reference point and a role model. Their generous spirit and lofty ideals, are sometimes at risk of being choked out by the worries of the world. They also face the constant challenge to live the Christian values clearly at the workplace and in circles where faith is not esteemed. In such situations, their ideals need to be rekindled by a constant meditation and reference to the figure of Jesus Christ. Their enthusiasm and desires now need to be channelled to come to respond to the Call of the King.

### *Discernment*

Young adulthood is a time where important decisions regarding career or state of life are made. In a world which offers so many options, this is no easy task. Some young persons tend to choose uncritically, others sit back not knowing how to choose and drift along with whatever life offers. Young adults do not only face various options but also various

opinions about the options. How easy it is for any of us to choose whatever is most consonant with what is screamed loudest by the media and other influential bodies.

However, young people, who have discovered Ignatian spirituality go beyond the question 'What is the right decision?'. They instead ask 'How can I know what God wants from me in this decision?' 'Is this coming from me or is this God's will?' Ignatian spirituality does not only raise these questions, it also offers its invaluable insights on discernment thus giving concrete guidelines to young people in their process on making choices in the light of faith. There are three aspects of discernment which seem to be most appealing to young adults.

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The fact that the process of discernment is based on the Principle and Foundation helps a young person attain a clear point of reference in their life, thus aligning all important decisions in one direction. Secondly, the interesting insights about consolation and desolation help the young person grow in a deep sense of reflexivity in their lives, helping them to become discerning in all that they do. Lastly, the three moments of making an election help young persons integrate all their being: their rationality, their affectivity, their imagination and their will.

However, discernment is not an art to be learnt only for major decisions. How precious an art it is to be integrated into one's daily life: how to spend one's time, what lifestyle one leads, how one chooses to react to events. The mere exercise of being aware of one's reactions and consolations or desolations helps one grows attentive to the inner reality which can lead to finding one's true self.

### ***A Faith that does Justice***

I am always struck by the energy which young people invest into projects which reach out: to the sick, the poor, or even the environment. In our Chaplaincy, when young people go abroad on such voluntary work to Egypt, Algiers, Ethiopia, they come back transformed. They are projects

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which leave much fruit, bringing out their best elements: generosity, dedication and selflessness. Such initiatives also help young people work together, discover meaning in their life, and reflect on issues in society. Moreover, they are initiatives which are the gateway for many to discover their faith.

Thus, young people are immediately drawn to Ignatian spirituality which lays great emphasis on a love of God which is translated in deeds, on being contemplatives in action, on a faith that does justice. It is a spirituality which keeps nudging them to make the world a better place. Often, young people approach these projects with mixed and inordinate motivations, but Ignatian spirituality can help them find the true 'principle and foundation' in such activities.

At a later stage, in young adulthood, life choices may not leave much time for involvement in daring voluntary work projects, and the burdens of daily life may start eating away at the determination to fight for justice. Working for justice at this stage, does not only involve activities full of enthusiasm but involves speaking out in public about burning issues or being advocates for the weak or making radical statements through one's choice of lifestyle. If young adults are not rooted in faith, these acts of justice will peter out or result in mere activism. Discouragement, complacency or even comfort may set in when the spirit of adventure no longer grabs them.

It is here that, if the foundations have been laid properly, Ignatian spirituality comes to support the weary hearts. It challenges the young person to strive for the 'magis' and to continue to answer the question 'What am I doing for God?' within the routine of daily life.

### *Silence*

The members within the CLC community I accompany are currently going through the transition from study to work. They come back to the community meetings with stories of the new realities they face. The change in their lives is dramatic. Their identity is transformed by a different lifestyle, they are faced with very important decisions, loaded with responsibility and their life is suddenly swept up with activities which demand so much. It is in such a busy world that young adults start to appreciate the characteristic of silence in Ignatian retreats.

When offered such experiences, many young people tend to shrink back, unable to imagine how they can cope when they are used to so much noise. However, when they dare to taste the experience, they find a deep thirst for such silence and grow to seek it not only periodically but also daily in their moments of prayer. They realise its necessity in their lives, especially in our fast-moving, stressful world. It is the space for them to come in touch with their selves, their deep desires and God's voice within.

It is a characteristic which also needs to be nurtured into a personal attitude: the inner silence which runs deep below the noise at the surface of our life. It is this inner silence which is important to help young people to keep focused on their principles amidst the rush of the day, when faced with important decisions and in their day-to-day struggles.

#### *Unique Methods of Prayer*

Ignatius must have been revolutionary in the methods of prayer which he proposes. He still is. He appreciates and brings alive all forms of prayer – from the most 'devotional' to the most original of imaginative contemplation. He also has great insight and guidelines on aspects of prayer. These are highlighted in the Annotations. (*SpEx 1-20*) Two most fascinating and challenging aspects for young people are the importance of the body during prayer and the emphasis on perseverance in the prayer time, even through desolation.

Whenever we organise Weeks of Guided Prayer for young people, most are greatly struck by the innovation of Ignatian contemplation. The imagination is one of the faculties which is developed in adolescence, and for many remains a fascinating aspect of the mind. However, few ever think that it can be used powerfully in prayer. Many are hesitant to try this out because they fear that imagination is taboo in religion. It goes beyond the absolute thinking of the childhood faith which they have grown up in. But once allowed to pray with imagination, a whole new world opens up to them and a relationship with the personal God starts to be built. Never before had the Bible spoken so directly to their lives! I have often found it an important method to use to

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help them acknowledge and unblock resistances especially with their image of God.

Two methods of prayer which young adults in our world today must find challenging but rewarding are the Ignatian Meditation and Repetition. In a world of continuously changing stimuli these two methods

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of prayer are a challenge to stop and mull over something which has struck deep until all the meaning has been savoured. In the case of repetition it is to revisit those points in prayer which were filled with consolation or desolation, to dig deeper. Besides the richness of prayer acquired, such methods instil a discipline of

'being' or 'staying with' - a quality which in young adult's lives is essential. Just emerging from exciting teenage years, young adults now need to learn how to savour moments, relationships and experiences which are meaningful to the very end before flitting on to another experience. .

#### ***A companion on the journey of faith***

We cannot ignore the importance which Ignatius always gave to the individual's journey of faith. Even his emphasis in the Spiritual Exercises on accompanying the person according to their pace, witnesses this. It reflects God's personal accompaniment with every human being. In our world where young people struggle against anonymity, spiritual direction has a valuable role in giving personal attention to a person, in being listened to as a unique being. This leads to a self-understanding thus helping them develop a clearer sense of identity. This is not merely on a human level but also on a spiritual level. In the Spiritual Exercises the person sets to find out for him/herself, what God wants. The young person is not given a pre-digested answer but finds his/her own answer.

Ignatius' universal vision and mission for spiritual direction is to help souls towards salvation for the greater glory of God. Thus a spiritual director is necessary for young adults to keep focused on the 'magis' and not get carried away living only for self-fulfilment. Spiritual direction is

necessary to help one mature from a childish faith by working on false images of God. It also provides the right space to address the profound questions and theological notions which many young adults battle with. It is the space where young adults come to discern about moral questions in life, to come to a decision which is right for them in the light of the Church's teachings. Most importantly, it is essential in finding their own personal response to Christ's call - their personal mission. In such discernment, the spiritual companion can guide the young person along the process, allaying fears and doubts and helping them interpret their interior movements.

### *Personal yet Communitarian*

Ignatian spirituality has often been misunderstood in its highly personal nature. The emphasis on the individual's relationship with God especially in the Spiritual Exercises has sometimes been wrongly interpreted as leading to a 'private' religion. But the communitarian dimension of the spirituality is also an essential element. This is seen in the various forms of community of the Ignatian family worldwide.

For young people, especially in our world today, the sense of belonging to a community is essential. The true friendships which are born from experiences such as voluntary work, retreats, live-ins are ones which continue to accompany young adults throughout their life. Such friendships are based on faith sharing and informal accompaniment of companions who are truly seeking God in their lives. An experience of a community is the major life experience which grounds young persons and helps them to flourish in all other areas in their lives. Such communities need to be discerning communities which help the individual to continue searching for God's will in their lives.

Experiences of community are also essential to give flesh to the true meaning of Church. For those young adults whose experience of a parish is anonymous, especially when they move away from their home town to work or start a family. Having a community of faith gives them a similar experience to that of the early Church. However, this experience needs to help them open up to a wider experience of the Church. This is always a challenge. In the local experience of Christian Life Communities, we face the continuous challenge of having a community not close in on



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itself but open up to the local community, then to the European and then to the world community. Perhaps, one gem which also still needs to be discovered and appreciated by most young people in Ignatian spirituality is the set of 'Rules for Thinking with the Church'. (*SpEx 352-370*) Understood in their own context, they can surely throw light on how we are to be better disciples in the Church.

### *Conclusion*

In the journey of faith, young adulthood seems to be a time of consolidation and deepening of one's personal relationship with Christ, in the light of the wider ecclesial community. This article has pointed out some elements in Ignatian spirituality which address the needs and desires of young adults mainly in their search to deepen their relationships with others and to be of service in the world. It has also pointed out elements in this spirituality which challenges young adults to be more committed disciples of Christ. It surely shows that Ignatian spirituality is indeed a treasure to be brought to more young adults, a treasure which can ignite the hearts of young people for God.