

# **‘BREXIT’, IGNATIUS’ JESUS AND THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM**

*Philip Endean*

OF COURSE THE IGNATIAN EXERCISES foster independence of mind and judgment, and Jesuits in particular can be unpredictable and contrary. Nevertheless, the statistics suggest that most people interested enough in spirituality to read this journal will have fallen on the Remain side of the divides among the UK population in the referendum on EU membership. The only general feature common to Leave voters and *Way* readers seems to have been relatively advanced age. Perhaps spiritual commitment cuts us off from what made many people vote Leave. Thirteen of the eighteen Jesuit communities in Britain are located in areas which voted Remain—and I was surely far from alone on the morning of 24 June 2016 in having a Facebook page inundated with laments. The Ignatian movement, like the Remain vote, is concentrated in big cities; its members generally enjoy relatively comfortable incomes and the privileges of higher education.

But there are also deeper connections between an international instinct and Ignatian spirituality. Pedro Arrupe’s prophetic foundation of the Jesuit Refugee Service in 1980 has instilled in those who follow the way of the Ignatian Exercises a sensitivity to forced migration, rather contrasting with the anxiety about immigration that seems to have determined the referendum’s result. And central to the whole Jesuit movement is a sense of God’s work operating across national boundaries. When the first Jesuit companions asked Paul III as the one holding Christ’s place—his vicar—to send them on mission, just as Jesus had sent his apostles, they recognised that they had reached a point of crisis. Were events to be left now to run their course, the group would dissolve, and be simply dispersed by the mission. This, the companions resolved, was not to happen. It would go against the way God’s grace had moved in their lives:

... in as much as our most kind and affectionate Lord had deigned to gather us together and unite us, men so spiritually weak and from such diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, we ought not to split apart what God has gathered and united; on the contrary, we ought day by day to strengthen and stabilize our union, rendering ourselves one body with special concern for each other, in order to effect the greater spiritual good of our fellow human beings. For united spiritual strength is more robust and braver in any arduous enterprise than it would be if segmented.

Immediately, moreover, they stress that they sense this conviction as something that has come in some strong and privileged sense from God:

We want it understood that nothing at all that has been or will be spoken of originated from our own spirit or our own thought; rather, whatever it was, it was solely what our Lord inspired and the Apostolic See then confirmed and approved.<sup>1</sup>

God unites people from different backgrounds. That conviction lies at the heart of every project claiming Jesuit or Ignatian inspiration. At deep levels, then, 'Brexit' jars with Ignatian instincts.

Nevertheless, and obviously, it is simplistic to claim a direct connection between this theological conviction and support for the European Union as what it has become in the second decade of the twenty-first century. As Pope Francis put it in a press conference on his flight back from Armenia a few days after the UK referendum, 'there are decisions ... for independence, which are taken for the sake of emancipation'. Italy's youth unemployment rate of 40 per cent shows that something is not right with that 'massive union' (*unione massiccia*). Nevertheless, Christianity implies a bias towards communion, towards doing things together. 'Unity is always superior to conflict, always!' The onus of proof lies on the advocates of separateness. Given the division—Francis, speaking spontaneously, actually used the word 'war'—already present in Europe, we should be hesitant about breaking things up. 'Before taking another step towards division, we need to talk seriously to one another and to seek workable solutions.'<sup>2</sup>

The early Jesuits' internationalism was provocative at a time when the Pope could easily be in serious conflict with kings such as Philip II of Spain.

<sup>1</sup> *The Deliberation of the First Fathers*, n.3. Translation based on that of Jules J. Toner in 'The Deliberation That Started the Jesuits: A Commentary on the *Deliberatio Primorum Patrum*', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 6/4 (1974).

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, in-flight press conference, 26 June 2016, available at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160626\\_armenia-conferenza-stampa.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/june/documents/papa-francesco_20160626_armenia-conferenza-stampa.html).

An important recent collection of essays shows well that the Jesuits' identification throughout Europe with the 'dominant imperialism and nationalism that arose before World War I' was an aberration. It argues that 'a gap had opened between Ignatius' original global vision and the social and political engagement of Jesuit institutions', one that is now happily closing.<sup>3</sup> The classic position as stated in the Jesuit *Constitutions* discourages 'partiality to one side or another among Christian princes or rulers', advocating 'in its stead a universal love which embraces in our Lord all parties (even though they are adversaries to one another)' (X.11 [823]).

### ***Beyond Laments and Criticism***

It is eminently possible to draw on Christian and Ignatian resources to criticize and lament the British referendum on EU membership and its outcome. Powerful voices have been raised in this regard. In *The Tablet* a week after the vote, the young British theologian Carmody Grey wrote of 'the sheer small-heartedness of the way we went about making this decision'. At no point had she heard from either side 'an acknowledgement of what John Paul II made so clear in his under-appreciated 2003 letter *Ecclesia in Europa*: that Europe is a moral and spiritual project', arising—here she cites Ireland's former president, Mary McAleese—from the fact that after World War II 'a group of men and women consciously decided to try love and not hate'. There was silence, too, about the sense in which the EU remains,

... a theological project. Not only because of its Christian roots, but because it represents a faith in the possibility of a common good that transcends the boundaries of nation, ethnicity, or economic status. As Catholic Social Teaching consistently emphasises, the common good is realised by the creation of actual political and civic institutions and associations, which manifest in their structure and function the absolute inseparability of every person's good.<sup>4</sup>

For his part, Austen Ivereigh, the distinguished biographer of Pope Francis, blogged on the very day of the vote on 'what Brexit Britain could have learned from Pope Francis's Synod'. For Ivereigh, the referendum

<sup>3</sup> Thomas F. Banchoff, 'Education and the Common Good', in *The Jesuits and Globalization: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Challenge*, edited by Thomas F. Banchoff and José Casanovas (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 2016), 256, 247.

<sup>4</sup> Carmody Grey, 'I Waited in Vain to Hear that Europe Is a Spiritual and Moral Project', *The Tablet* (2 July 2016), 8, available at <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/columnists/3/8577/i-waited-in-vain-to-hear-that-europe-is-a-spiritual-and-moral-project> (paywall).

resembled a nightmare scenario of bishops being asked to vote a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on the complex, indeed painful, business of admitting the invalidly married to the sacraments, and in particular on Cardinal Walter Kasper’s nuanced arguments for flexibility. The result in such a case would have been ‘an ugly tribal shouting-match ending in bitter division and frustration’:

Two parties would have battled it out: Team Doctrine v. Team Mercy. Faced with a zero-sum choice between changing the rules or keeping them the same, bishops seeking pastoral flexibility and merciful attention to individual cases would have voted for the Kasper solution, even though many of them feared that it would open the door to divorce. Meanwhile, those bishops who feared that it would open the door to divorce would have felt obliged to vote against, even though many wanted more pastoral flexibility and merciful attention to individual cases.<sup>5</sup>

Each side, in other words, would have been forced to vote according to their main priority, even though they agreed with the concerns of the other.

The divisions among Roman Catholics about marriage and the family remain wide, and the recent synods discussing the issues were fractious affairs. But Francis’s Ignatian vision of discernment, reflected especially in his important addresses during the 2015 Synod, has at least, for all the untidiness, kept a way open for a ‘third possibility ... a new, pastoral flexibility without eroding doctrine’. ‘Reductionist yes-no’ choices simply force people apart, when what is really needed is for them to come together, to discern the good in what all are saying, and to find pragmatic solutions to real problems.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>5</sup> Austen Ivereigh, ‘What Brexit Britain Could Have Learned from Pope Francis’s Synod’, *Cruix* (23 June 2016), available at <https://cruixnow.com/analysis/2016/06/23/brexit-britain-learned-pope-franciss-synod/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ivereigh, ‘What Brexit Britain Could Have Learned’.

The referendum and its outcome are eminently open to criticism, and not just on Christian grounds. One hopes that we will learn from the mistakes that have been made, and that Christian thinkers will make serious contributions in that regard. But here I am attempting to do something different. The events of 2016 revealed deep problems in British political life, problems paralleled in other Western countries. Even if you think that ‘Brexit’ does not make these problems worse, but is rather an important part of their solution, the existence of these problems is indisputable. They need to be addressed, and there are resources in Ignatian spirituality that can help us do that.

Ivereigh’s blogpost ends with a broadside flourish: ‘Britain may have the mother of parliaments. But when it comes to political decision-making, it has much to learn from the world’s oldest monarchy.’ *Ben trovato*. But the elegance here rather disguises the fact that the referendum reflected what has been an increasing breakdown of confidence in representative parliamentary democracy. It is clear that something like two-thirds of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, would, if they followed their own judgment abstracting from the referendum result, vote against any move to take the UK out of the EU. Moreover, the aftermath of the referendum has further weakened the opposition to the Conservative party. The case can surely be made that Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party indicates a necessary renewal of left-wing politics—but, on that hypothesis, it is telling indeed that the renewal is occurring against the will of most Labour members elected to parliament. British political institutions have lost credibility.

Notoriously, the referendum brought into the open significant differences between the cosmopolitan big cities, thriving through globalisation, and the rest of the country. Perhaps the growth of nationalism in Scotland reflects a similar and longer-standing alienation, running deeper than its Remain vote. A report by the respected Joseph Rowntree Foundation points up strong connections between the Leave vote and inequalities within British society. In highlighting the differences in attitudes to ‘Brexit’ between the affluent and the poor, between those with significant education and those with the bare minimum, the report simply documents in more rigorous fashion what was evident as the votes were being counted. More telling is a vicious circle identified by the researchers.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Their preferred term is ‘double whammy’.



Those left behind by the globalising economy are concentrated in areas where there are few opportunities to overcome their difficulties. The alienation thus intensifies. For the researchers, the referendum,

... has thrown new light on deeper social, geographic and cultural divides that often lay hidden below the surface of our national conversation. Looking ahead, it seems likely that these stubbornly persistent and growing inequalities will strengthen.<sup>8</sup>

The way we have been doing our political business has not served large swathes of the population well. If the referendum result spurs us to take stock of this reality, and somehow initiate a change, then 'Brexit' in some form may be a price worth paying, even if it leads us where many of us would rather not go (John 21:18).

### ***The Jesus of the Ignatian Exercises***

'Brexit', therefore, despite the conflict it implies with the internationalist vision shaping Ignatian spirituality, may nevertheless, in its own way, be calling us to live that spirituality more soberly and realistically. Perhaps we are being carried away too fast and too far by the exhilaration that the

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath, 'Brexit Vote Explained: Poverty, Low Skills and Lack of Opportunities' (31 August 2016), available at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-opportunities>, accessed 2 October 2016.

new freedom of movement gives those with the skills and aptitude to take advantage of it. We may need to pause, and find the Lord’s presence in more hidden, mysterious ways, through the disadvantaged who lie at our gates. Ignatius invites us to approach the Incarnation through a consideration of,

... those on the surface of the earth, in such variety, in dress as in actions: some white and others black; some in peace and others at war; some weeping and others laughing; some well, others ill; some being born and others dying .... (Exx 106)

We may need to note, not only the cosmic breadth of this vision, but also the intractable particularities of deprivation.

Ignatius marks the transition between the First and Second Weeks through an exercise on the call of ‘a human king chosen by God our Lord, whom all Christian princes and men reverence and obey’,

... to look how this king speaks to all his people, saying: ‘It is my will to conquer all the land of unbelievers. Therefore, whoever would like to come with me is to be content to eat as I, and also to drink and dress, etc., as I: likewise he is to labour like me in the day and watch in the night, etc., that so afterwards he may have part with me in the victory, as he has had it in the labours.’

Anyone failing to ‘accept the appeal of such a king, how deserving he would be of being censured by all the world, and held for a mean-spirited knight!’ (Exx 92–94)

At this point in the exercise, Ignatius introduces Christ explicitly. Initially, he draws simple parallels between the gospel message and the romantic imagery he has deployed:

... if we consider such a call of the temporal King to his subjects, how much more worthy of consideration is it to see Christ our Lord, King eternal, and before him all the entire world, which, and each person in particular, he calls and says: ‘It is my will to conquer all the world ... whoever would like to come with me is to labour with me, that following me in the pain, he may also follow me in the glory’.

Anyone ‘with judgment and reason’ would offer themselves for this call (Exx 95–96). But then Ignatius moves beyond the chivalric metaphor. He considers those who might want to go further, to make greater offerings. The petition is a solemn one—‘I want and desire, and it is my deliberate determination’, made in the presence of the Lord’s Mother, and all the

saints of the heavenly court. But its content—admittedly with a proviso, ‘if only it be your greater service and praise’<sup>9</sup>—is darker: ‘to imitate you in bearing all injuries and all abuse and all poverty of spirit, and actual poverty, too’ (Exx 97–98).

Against the memory of the twentieth century’s world wars and the threat of nuclear destruction, Ignatius’ feudal, martial imagery easily seems anachronistic, indeed morally problematic. Retreat-givers are familiar with the problem, and have their strategies for addressing it. But one reason why these strategies work is that Ignatius’ central message itself goes beyond the martial idiom in which it is couched. In the Spanish text, where we would expect a title, we are simply given a sentence: ‘THE CALL OF THE KING HELPS WITH CONTEMPLATING THE LIFE OF THE ETERNAL KING’. The process involves not only resemblance but also contrast. The *call* of the King in this world is temporal, and imagined though the conventions of a particular culture. It opens us out on to something more mysterious: the transcendent *life* of the *eternal* King. Ignatius’ chivalric imagery is not his whole story, but only its beginning. Following Christ leads us to a challenging shock. Companionship with him is not straightforward. The pattern here can be traced right back to the synoptic Gospels, notably that of Mark. In Mark, the true identity of Christ is a secret. We begin with heroic exploits as signs of the inbreaking Kingdom, but gradually the reader is confronted with a darker, more paradoxical reality, one that is far harder to accept, of salvation coming through opposition and suffering.

There are perhaps here some spiritual resources for living, not only or primarily with ‘Brexit’ in itself, but also, and more importantly, with the problematic political realities that the referendum has brought to the surface. Ignatius’ exercise is more than an encouragement naively to follow an ideal, whether chivalric or pan-European. It is preparing us for the whole Second Week in which we deepen our ‘knowledge of the true life which the supreme and true Captain shows’ (Exx 139). This knowledge requires us to engage with the models of humanity and authority shaping our cultures and histories, and to learn to perceive and discern conflictual psychic and social forces of which we might not hitherto have been aware. It is of a piece with Ignatius’ exercise on the Call of the King that cosmopolitan Remainers were brought up sharply against the reality of the slight majority who experience the world very differently.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this, see my ‘On Poverty with Christ Poor’, *The Way*, 47/1–2 (January/April 2008), 47–66.



It is only by working through the ambiguities of our social identity, and the models of a good life conveyed to us by our families, our national and tribal histories, even our Churches, that we can gradually learn to appreciate 'the life of the eternal King', who is quite other.

### ***The Road to Jerusalem***

By chance, the Sunday liturgy following the referendum presented us with Luke's Jesus making a decisive transition.<sup>10</sup> The time has come for Jesus 'to be taken up', and he sets his face resolutely for Jerusalem—Jerusalem, where he will die and rise again, accomplishing our salvation, and whence his disciples will proclaim in his name the forgiveness of sins for all nations (Luke 24:47).

At this decisive moment, his followers are present too. Jesus sends some messengers ahead of him, who encounter resistance from Samaritans unhappy that the party is moving towards Jerusalem. There are also some people seeking to join Jesus' company. Jesus is stark with them. Like the Son of Man, they will have nowhere to lay their head. One has a father to bury, and is told, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God' (Luke 9:60). Once the hand is laid on the plough, there is no looking back.

Jesus takes a decisive step, involving a rupture with the past, the breaking of family ties, and xenophobic conflicts with a neighbouring tribe. He uses forms of language that seem absurd and outrageous. The overlap with 'Brexit' is striking.

It is no simple matter to see how God may be at work in the referendum's results, and in our politics more generally. It may indeed be that there are important lessons to be learned about the excesses of the European project in its present form. It is tempting to draw a simple contrast between an electorate subject to manipulative propaganda from all sides, and Luke's Jesus following the Holy Spirit. But it would be bad theology and bad politics to rest content with such binary thinking. God's providence embraces our history; God's very self has now been invested in the human project.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 9:51–62. To confirm suspicions: what follows is based on a homily I gave in Paris on the Sunday in question. By odd coincidence—the date was fixed long before that of the referendum was announced—it was probably the first occasion on which a British priest had had the honour of preaching at the main Sunday liturgies in the church of Saint Ignace, noted internationally for its contributions to liturgical music through Joseph Gelineau and Jacques Berthier. For the original version, see <http://www.stignace.net/images/PDF-telechargement/homelies/2015-2016/Luc9-51-62-st-ignace-26-06-2016.pdf>, accessed 2 October 2016.

No, even if the result of the referendum sickens us, it may be opening us up to an important element in the gospel message. Shocks and jolts mark not only human politics, but also the following of Christ. Christ's resolute movement to Jerusalem, his call to us to take up our cross each day and follow his path—all this requires us to be open for moments when our ideas are called profoundly into question, for dark, difficult and searing experiences. Though the point should not be perverted, there is nothing in the gospel guaranteeing that our path to God's Kingdom will make sense to those dear to us. It may well go against the run of conventional public opinion. Indeed we ourselves may not be clear about what is happening, or sure that we are in the right. But, for most of us, at one point or another in our lives, the call of God will involve such moments. So it is that the Lord calls us to pursue the path to our Jerusalem.

That same Sunday liturgy following the referendum presented us with Paul's teaching about freedom in the letter to the Galatians (5: 1, 13–18). This freedom is a gift received from Christ, a gift to be protected from self-indulgence. Paul also speaks of the need for discernment between the true liberty of Christ, and the travesty that is nothing but a pretext for the desires of the flesh. It is only gradually, as we follow Christ on his way to Jerusalem, that we learn what is at stake in this distinction. The journey will confront us with our selfishness, both personal and collective. The conflicts will involve dark forces within ourselves; they will also play themselves out in our family relationships, in our life in society, in our politics. Sometimes we will have to abandon things that have become dear to us.

The referendum was surely marked by what Paul calls the desires of the flesh—desires always prone to corrupt our quest for the good. But we can nevertheless, even now, move forward in confidence. For we have the promise of the leading of God's Spirit, and we can thus, even now, move forward in confidence. Those led by the Spirit may well have to struggle with the flesh, but they have been promised freedom from its control. Grace is with us, even if only dimly perceived. Our political structures may well be in disarray—but we can still be moving forward with Jesus, with our faces too turned towards Jerusalem—resolutely.

*Philip Endean SJ* has been associated with *The Way* in various capacities since 1987, and is now working at the Centre Sèvres, the home of the Jesuit faculties in Paris. He has written widely on Ignatian and other theological topics, and is regularly involved in teaching and lecturing throughout Europe. He maintains a personal website at [www.philipendean.com](http://www.philipendean.com).