

LOOKING AT GOD LOOKING AT YOU

Ignatius' Third Addition

Robert R. Marsh

A step or two in front of the place where I am to contemplate or meditate, I will stand for the length of an Our Father, raising my mind above and considering how God our Lord is looking at me, etc., and make an act of reverence or humility.¹ (Exx 75)

THIS IS ONE OF THE IGNATIAN 'ADDITIONS' or 'Additional Directions'—general guidelines 'for making the Exercises better and finding more readily what one desires' (Exx 73.1). Ignatius has just been mentioning the remote preparation for a day of prayer—what to do on falling asleep and what to do on rising. He will go on to talk about posture, about the review of prayer, and about the maintenance of a suitable mood in the retreat situation. Here, however, he is discussing what will help someone make each exercise better, what will help them find more readily what they desire. What Ignatius says here is intended for *every* prayer or spiritual exercise we make.

This may seem surprising. Especially outside retreat, relatively few of us observe this directive. I want nevertheless to argue that this third Addition not only helps us make the Exercises better, but also gives us a perspective which is absolutely vital for a correct appreciation of Ignatian spirituality. Ignatius is putting his finger here on a neuralgic issue which pains every aspect of our prayer, of our lives, and of the

¹ ... un paso o dos antes del lugar donde tengo de contemplar o meditar, me pondré en pie, por espacio de un Pater noster, alzado el entendimiento arriba, considerando cómo Dios nuestro Señor me mira, etc., y hacer una reverencia o humillación.

way we speak to one another about God. Ignatius both identifies the issue, and offers an antidote.

Mind-Blindness and Autism

As is well known, children up to the age of four cannot handle the idea that other people have other minds with independent contents. A three-year-old believes that everyone knows what they know and sees what they see. The psychologists call it mind-blindness. Somewhere between the ages of three and four, children shed their mind-blindness, and begin to work out that other people have their own sets of desires and knowledge and expectations. They develop what the literature calls a 'theory of mind'.

But some children never develop an adequate theory of mind and stay more or less mind-blind all their lives. We call this condition autism. Autistic children are able to deal with other people on one level, but they never make the leap into other people's heads to see things their way. They never understand that someone else is a person like themselves, with independent knowledge, intentions and feelings. Thus they become frustrated at the unpredictability of their environment, and seek to impose some shape by ritual and repetition. They are prone to stubbornness, and to tantrums when things are changed out of their usual pattern.

Autism is a good image for how most of us are in prayer. We tend to be mind-blind about God. We think that God knows simply what we know, sees simply what we see; and consequently we rarely stop to ask God what God *actually* sees or knows or feels. We find it hard to let God enter our prayer as a real living person; instead, we misuse the name 'God' to denote a projection of what *we* think and feel. At the very least this image sums up how I personally am in prayer. I am spiritually autistic—mind-blind about God. You might not be. You might be very different from me. But let me go on to speak of my own experience and you can judge for yourselves.

Like an autistic child, I go about my prayer in a whole set of ways that try to minimise the chaos of my inner life by finding rituals and rules to tame my inner experience. I focus on my own needs and intentions, my own desires and insights, my own consolations and desolations. Most of my prayer consists of me thinking, or me feeling, me speaking, or me being silent. Some of the time I may pay lip service



Inner Visions 9 by Alexei Jawlensky
(1864-1941)

to my *notional* commitment to the belief that God enters my prayer as a person. I certainly spend quite a lot of inner time addressing something I *call* God. But in fact, this internal rehearsal of my experience tends to swing between two modes of speech: either I talk to myself or I talk to my idea of God. Of course it is not all talking—I operate in quieter ways too, through a kind of interior looking, or just sitting. And sometimes I read or paint or write. But these activities only extend and modulate the pattern; they do not fundamentally change it. Not that this ‘prayer’ is dull; it can be lovely, or horrible, depending upon my mood or upon what is going on in the rest of my life. But what it remains, fundamentally, is *mine*—my thoughts, my feelings, my words, my silence.

Thus when my spiritual director asks me how God has *responded* to my inner talk, I tend not to know. I have not let God interrupt me. I don’t just mean that I talk and talk and never listen—‘Listen, Lord, your servant is speaking’. But even when I am *trying* to listen, even when I am sincerely asking for an answer to some deep question, I tend in fact to ask, and then go straight on to mulling over several possible

answers that God might have given already, rather than asking God and waiting for an answer.

***I am,
by nature,
mind-blind
where God
is concerned***

I am, by nature, mind-blind where God is concerned. I do not really expect God to have a point of view about my inner experience—or about my outer experience for that matter. On the odd occasion when I get beyond this blindness, I still approach God's point of view abstractly. I wonder what kind of thing God *ought* to see or feel or believe, rather than trying to discover what God is actually seeing, feeling and believing. I am concerned with what God *would* say rather than with what God *does* say. And even when I expect more, even when my heart has been opened to the possibility that God might appear in my prayer as a real person with real feelings, desires and needs—even then, all the rituals of my inner autism are so strong that following through is a struggle.

I have not always been aware of this disability in myself. I am not reconciled to it. If you had asked me fifteen years ago whether I thought God was present and active in my prayer, I am sure that I would have given a resoundingly affirmative answer. Back then, I did not think that I was spiritually mind-blind but, looking back from where I stand now, I reckon I was.

At that time, I had had some training in spiritual direction, and I had even done some training of others. One of the standard textbooks that I read, and that I got others to read, was *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* by William Barry and William Connolly.² Now I read it, and I see that the book is occupied on every page with how to foster just the non-autistic experience of God that I am talking about. Back then, I would have told you that I believed it and practised what they were saying; but, truth to tell, if that actually was the case, it was more by accident than design. As a director I rarely asked the kinds of questions that got people in touch with the real living God of their experience; instead I was satisfied with getting them to reflect on their *own* experience. If it ever contained the real, surprising God this was a happy accident. My spiritual mind-blindness runs deep. And what is worse, I am always thinking that I have got over it.

² (New York: Seabury, 1983).

The Prison of Modernity

Why am I like this? Perhaps the answers are personal: I happen to be a sad soul who is developmentally challenged in this area. But I doubt it. Let me be bold and venture the opinion that everyone I have seen for spiritual direction or guided retreat suffers from mind-blindness to some degree. Spiritual autism is a pathology of our times. We do not allow God to be a living presence—a real subject—in our lives, because we have been trained by our culture to believe that God cannot, or at least does not, behave in that way.

A phrase such as ‘our culture’ is, of course, a little imperialistic. I mean the modern culture of the educated Western world. People who write about such things—we might call them cultural analysts—use the word modern in a very specific way. They do not mean up-to-date or recent. Rather, they are referring to a cultural trend that has been going on for centuries in the West, probably beginning around 500 years ago. According to this reckoning, Ignatius himself lived at the dawn of modernity, and he is its archetypal saint.

This version of modernity has a number of characteristic outlooks that we tend to take for granted, or at least that we find ourselves having to fight against. Let me mention four of them, four cultural attitudes which predispose us to mind-blindness about God. Two of them concern the nature of the human person; two affect our outlook on God. Together, I believe, they set us up to be spiritually mind-blind.

Individualism

First, we tend to see ourselves as individuals and to behave as individualists. When the medievals wanted to ground their knowledge they looked to other people. They looked to tradition. They looked to authorities. But subsequent philosophy has looked in a different place. It has turned to the individual, to the subject. What can *I* know? What can *I* be certain of? How can I overcome illusion? How can I be free from other people’s false ideas? These are the issues that fascinate us still. How can I be free? How can I make up my own mind? What does my own experience say about this or that? Who am I in myself?

Instead of valuing where we come from, we are concerned with who we can make ourselves into. Instead of valuing our parents’ patterns of life, we want to express our own uniqueness. Instead of valuing quiet suffering, we want to get therapy that will make us better.

On the whole, we are subjective, expressive, therapeutic individualists. No wonder my prayer is all about me, me, me.

Doubt

If I ever start to take seriously the idea that God might appear in my prayer with thoughts and feelings of God's own, a second modern outlook rushes in with objections. We have been brought up to doubt, to be sceptical. Modernity has been obsessed with the question of method. How do I become sure about what I believe? And it has tended to lean on the side of doubt. We wonder how we can be sure of anything. We do not want to be tricked by our own quirks. How do I know that this is God, and not just wishful thinking? How do I know that the words I hear are words from God, and not projections of my inner needs? After Freud and Marx, we know better than ever the many ways in which we can be mistaken, often unconsciously. So is it not better to believe as little as possible? Should I not stick with my own experience and keep God out of it? It is difficult enough to make claims about my own experience; what kind of crank starts to make claims about what God might be saying to them? No wonder I do not make great claims about my prayer; no wonder I keep it simple. I stay the level of reflection on my own experience, and avoid the risk of making a fool of myself by believing that God might speak.

Divine Action

If philosophy has spent 500 years struggling with the problem of knowledge, theology has spent that time worrying about divine action. What place does God have in the world? What can God, in concrete physical terms, actually do? Do we believe in miracles? Is the world not, rather, a disenchanting mechanism?

The caricature of the medieval world portrays it as rife with superstition, with angels and demons around every corner. The coming of modernity has banished angels and demons to chocolate boxes and television screens. Perhaps this is a relief. But what has been lost is a sense that God can be a part of everyday human experience. Science has pushed God to the edges of our culture. Newton thought that his clockwork solar system ran pretty smoothly on its own, with God providing the occasional necessary top-up. Then Laplace did the maths, and found that the planets got on very well all alone, thank you. When asked about God, his reaction was politely dismissive: 'Sir, I

have no need of that hypothesis'. Over the past 500 years we have tended to find, over and over again, that we have no need of God. God has been pushed into the distance. And the idea of God has been watered down, tamed. The interfering tyrant with a finger in every pie has become a remote and impersonal first cause. Not the kind of God whom I expect to express opinions in my prayer.

God as Person

Which brings us to the question of whether God is a person. This is not really a modern problem: it is much older. On retreat people often ask, 'why do I need to tell God that—God knows everything already?' If God is unchanging, all-knowing, and uniformly benevolent, how can I expect God to have moods, feelings, desires, needs even, which God expresses in my prayer? Why communicate with such a God? What effect could I possibly expect to have upon this God? God might be watching me, but what sense does it make to consider *how* God is looking at me?

Ignatius and Modernity's Pitfalls

Ignatius and his *Spiritual Exercises* date from the beginning of the cultural trend that we call modernity. Ignatius has one foot firmly planted in the medieval world, with the other standing in the modern era. Ignatius' genius, I believe, is to offer an outlook, a spirituality, which is at home in modernity and yet avoids its pitfalls. The third Addition sums up his outlook. Here Ignatius is giving not only an orientation for any kind of prayer or spiritual exercise, but also a pointer to how we should shape our whole way of life. We are to begin by spending a moment considering how God is looking at us, and we are to respond with an act of reverence. Very simply, Ignatius is inviting us constantly to include *God* in our theory of mind, constantly to let God be really real.

Ignatius is at home in modernity, and yet avoids its pitfalls

We do not begin our prayer alone as individuals; we begin with *someone else* looking at us. We will rapidly move on to the '*id quod volo*', the grace that I desire. But first we experience, for a moment, that *we are desired*, that we begin outside ourselves, that who we are is not self-generated. We are not self-made men and women. We *receive*

ourselves, in the eyes of another. In this way, Ignatius defuses our individualism.

He subverts our doubt, too. We start our epistemology with doubt; Ignatius begins his with trust—not trust as the opposite of doubt, but trust that subverts doubt. We doubt our senses. We doubt the facts. We doubt ourselves. But Ignatius does not want us to start our prayer in the realm of facts and data and things; he points us towards the realm of relationship. Relationship, to be real, always begins in trust, and breathes trust as its atmosphere. We are right to doubt *things*, but right to trust *persons*.

All relationships demand a basic trust. Trust can be tempered by experience; in some cases it must be toned down, or even withdrawn. But unless we can trust at least some of the time, we remain alone and isolated. As is well known, Ignatius is no advocate of credulity. Not all our experience is experience of God. We are moved by many spirits, good and bad, and Ignatius provides the guidelines for telling them apart in his methods of discernment. But discernment only operates in an atmosphere of prior trust—only when we admit an experience and let it develop do we have the grounds for discernment. You cannot discern from a distance. You have to get involved, to take the risk; only on that basis can you assess the feedback and make the adjustment. Discernment implies relationship.

In the third Addition, Ignatius invites us into a complex, relational reality. If God is looking at us, God is in relationship with us. As we try to understand this relationship, we can focus either on God or on ourselves. We can consider what it is like to be looked at. How am I feeling? We can also consider the God who is looking, and what that God is like. How is God feeling? As we move between these two ways of responding to Ignatius' invitation, they begin to fuse, to enrich each other, to be woven into something intricate and beautiful. I am looking at God looking at me looking at God. When I look at the God who looks at me, it is not a matter simply of seeing the other as one object among many, but of looking, gazing, contemplating. We *see* each other. The look transforms—it is *encounter*.

This encounter is a touchstone. Modernity doubts that God can act, and doubts that God is a person. Ignatius is asking whether we can move beyond our doubt. Can we *discover* a God who *can* act and who is a person? When I pause and consider and look at God looking at me,

**Ignatius
invites us
into a
complex,
relational
reality**

who do I find looking back? That is a question for experience, not for theory.

Some translations of the third Addition read ‘consider *that* God is looking at me ...’. This reading is linguistically possible, but it misses the real point. The brute fact in itself might be enough to dispel the problem of individualism and the problem of doubt, but we need something more. We need to see *how* God is looking at us. Not in general, not in principle, not in the abstract—but here and now and specifically. Is our God is a living person with thoughts and feelings of God’s own, and not just an extension of our own thinking and feeling?

Once people have discovered the living God, they often discover too that their experience in prayer is not totally malleable. It has a stubborn shape. The God of their prayer is not totally projected. Prayer starts to get surprising. The bush burns, but it is not consumed. You ask a question, and get an answer that shocks you. You search in one place, but God is in another. You are feeling one thing, but God feels another.

When prayer becomes an encounter with the living God, it becomes unpredictable. You thought you were doing something relatively safe—praying—and instead you find yourself face to face with someone real. Fierce or fond, bright or dark (who knows?), but it is someone other and someone real—not yourself. Ignatius wants every spiritual exercise to be an encounter with the living God, another knot in the web of relationship woven in the gaze that passes between you and God.

Today God is smiling. Tomorrow God is sad. The day after God might be sleeping, or dancing, or weeping, or angry. I cannot know how God is looking at me without looking at God. I cannot make up the answer, or guess it, or remember how it was. The only way to do what Ignatius asks is to turn the inner gaze on God and see, here and now, how God is actually looking back ... at me.

It is in this way that Ignatius wants each one of us to step into prayer every time. All Ignatian prayer begins with the encounter with the living God. Only thus can the identification of personal desires be more than selfishness or individualistic therapy. Thus it is that Ignatian colloquy can become real conversation, ‘friend to friend’, rather than a hesitant monologue. Only through this encounter do all the annotations, procedures and processes make sense. This central conviction also governs Ignatius’ laconic dictum: ‘acts of the will

require more reverence than acts of the intellect' (Exx 3.3). Because of this encounter, Ignatius can expect the Spiritual Exercises to be a rollercoaster ride of alternating spiritual motions. This encounter also tells us why generosity is the prime prerequisite for making the Exercises well.

The whole First Week can be seen as a simple development of this attitude to prayer. Can I discover myself in the eyes of God? Can I come to see myself the way God sees me—honestly and benevolently? Me, with all the fragments, all the shame and all the glory, caught in a gaze of love, and invited into companionship with Jesus?

This article has been couched in the language of vision throughout—looking, gazing, seeing, contemplating. But you could substitute any of the other senses. Many of us know God imaginatively through sound: we hear God speak. Others sense God by touch; they could not tell you how God looks at them for all the tea in China, but they know the weight of God's hand on their shoulder. It is the communication that matters—how it happens is secondary. Ignatius does not simply say, 'considering how God our Lord is looking at me'; he adds what is a favourite word of his, 'etc.' Some translations take the 'et cetera' to refer to further thoughts we might have. But a richer interpretation sees it as referring to further activities in which *God* may be engaging. God is not only looking at us but interacting with us in a wide range of ways: enlightening us, communicating Godself to us, embracing us.³

Thus the third Addition offers more than an introductory gambit in the game of prayer. Ignatius' God is an active God, a God not content to be a distant observer, a God intimately engaged with every person who prays. This God is miles away from the cultural caricature I presented earlier. This God can be encountered, known. This God feels, acts, interacts. This God has personality.

Robert R. Marsh SJ studied chemistry in Oxford for several years before entering the Society of Jesus in 1986. After studies in London and Berkeley, he is now on the staff of Loyola Hall Jesuit Spirituality Centre, near Liverpool, UK.

³ Willem A. M. Peters, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: Exposition and Interpretation* (Jersey City: Program to Adapt the Spiritual Exercises, 1968), 22-24.