

Transitions and controls in early Ignatian retreats

The legacy of the Directories

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IN 1599, THE SOCIETY OF JESUS published a text designed to help givers of the Exercises. The project had occupied a succession of distinguished Jesuits for more than thirty years. Its title was a piece of jargon: the *Directory*, or – to distinguish it from the preliminary drafts – the *Official Directory*. To modern ears, the jargon seems mystifying, indeed forbidding, and the contemporary Ignatian renewal has largely ignored the document. The results of a recent international survey are telling:

While scholarship has taught us to use the book of *Spiritual Exercises* much better, scholarship has also taught that we cannot make much use of the *Official Directory* of 1599. Current practical experience indicated the same thing . . . [The directors and scholars consulted] . . . when they have paid any attention at all to the *Directory*, do not find it readily useful.¹

Nowadays, the *Directory* is best known for its mistakes. It is notorious for having downplayed the Application of the Senses, presenting it as either a warm-up exercise prior to the serious business of ‘meditation’, or else as light relief afterwards (Dir 43.157).² In the Third Week, Ignatius evocatively invites the retreatant to pray for ‘grief with Christ in grief, shatteredness with Christ shattered’ (Exx 203). The *Directory* seems to see such language as an embarrassing extravagance which cannot quite be written out of the text:

Although the affection of compassion is quite excellent, and should be earnestly petitioned, humbly longed for, and gratefully received, nevertheless there are other affections that should be cultivated at the same time and are of greater worth for our spiritual life.

These ‘other affections’ are rather different: ‘hatred for sin’, ‘realization of God’s goodness’, ‘strengthening of hope’, ‘love for God’,

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‘enthusiasm for imitating Christ’, and ‘zeal for souls’ (Dir 43:243–249).³ No one, obviously, would regard such fruits as undesirable. But the reality envisaged by Ignatius seems much darker, searing and subversive. It is as though his successors had become frightened of it.

If you are a second-generation member of a generative, idealistic movement, your subsequent reputation is permanently liable to attack. Subsequent innovators will always see their present situation as lamentable and the founder as beyond reproach. How can the dissonance be resolved? The only explanation available – adopted with greater or lesser attention to the facts – is that the rot set in with the founder’s decadent successors. Thus much contemporary literature on the Exercises claims to be rescuing the authentic Ignatius from a constricting tradition. Seen in terms of such a project, the second and third generations of Jesuits all too easily appear as inept authoritarians, lacking sensitivity to Ignatius’ charismatic genius. And the *Directory* simply epitomizes everything wrong with inherited conventions.

Successful, stable projections require some foundation in reality, and there are certainly some mistakes in the Directory traditions. Equally, however, there is a wisdom in these texts, particularly in the final version, that a mythology of the decadent successors can all too easily obscure. This article is a modest attempt at rehabilitation. It simply presents some of the good things to be found in the *Directories*, and makes some suggestions as to how we should now interpret their legacy.

Ambivalent purposes

‘Various directories are to be seen to by Father General.’ So decreed the first Jesuit General Congregation in 1558. The formulation presents the ministry of the Exercises as one among a number of others: ‘hearing confessions, preaching, catechizing, prayer, spiritual conversation, assistance at deathbeds’.⁴ Why this decree arose must be a matter of conjecture. Such comments as we have focus on the Exercises. An archive document speaks of the sole intention having been,

... that the Society should be given the true and genuine method and system that Fr Ignatius had in giving the Exercises, and to place on record the method which all had to follow.⁵

Polanco’s *Directory* speaks of the fruitfulness of the Exercises, and the need for Jesuits ‘to make great effort to train ourselves how to use them well and make them effective for our neighbour’s good and the glory of

God' (Dir 20:117). The 1599 text takes up this reference to training, but notes also that 'not everything could be included in the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, with the result that some points in its practical application remain obscure'. Moreover, the 1599 *Directory* presents authenticity in Ignatian ministry in terms of a uniformity: 'to be observed by all our men'. It seeks to prevent interpretations by 'each according to his own bent and preference, which would result in the progressive introduction of new and divergent methods' (Dir 43:10).

Polanco in 1575 presents the project as something intended by Ignatius himself (Dir 20:2), and there is a reference in a list which he made as Ignatius' secretary in 1552 to the completion 'of the Directory of the Exercises which is so necessary' as one of the tasks outstanding for Ignatius in his role as founder.⁶ In Iparraguirre's opinion, however – and Iparraguirre is no iconoclast – 'St Ignatius did not even want to put together a text of the kind which later came to be called Directories'. The texts printed as Ignatius' directories are either brief notes on isolated points, excerpts from writings of a quite other kind – or, in one case, a record of advice and supervision given by Ignatius to a less experienced retreat-giver.⁷ The 1599 *Directory* aspires to be a comprehensive manual of custom and practice, of a kind Ignatius did not envisage. It was not, says Iparraguirre, that Ignatius lacked the time or ability:

He simply preferred to follow another path, which was longer but which seemed to him more effective and adequate than that of putting together a Directory: that of transmitting his ideas, his spirit, in private, intimate conversations. Written norms, however elegant and well-judged we might imagine them to be, would always remain fossilized – rigid and dry in quality. The saint believed that handing on notes to his sons would be to hand on the method's stiff skeleton, deprived of the breath that gave it life.⁸

The fullest reflection on what the *Directories* should be trying to do comes as a preamble to specific comments by an Italian Jesuit, Fabio de Fabi, on a proposed text. Fabi is clearly dissatisfied, and suggests an alternative structure of seven chapters (Dir 24:4). The first should list references in the *Constitutions* and the *Examen* to ways of making the Exercises. The next two chapters should be devoted to what we now call the 'dynamic' of the Exercises, both in general and with reference to specific texts:

If a person does not understand the purpose of the Foundation, or the meaning of the 1st and 2nd exercises (of the first week) and the difference between them, or the point of the Examens and Additions, they will fail to focus their mind properly on getting the fruit aimed at in these exercises. Instead, they will drift confusedly among all the exercises, getting stuck on individual points. However, if they see the purpose of the individual elements, their interconnections with each other, and other reasons for them, they will be able to work more intelligently at obtaining the end proper to each exercise. (Dir 24:12)

Chapters 4 and 5 would take up textual obscurities and practical issues regarding specific points; chapter 6 would reproduce supplementary material left by Ignatius; chapter 7 would make some suggestions for the aftercare of retreatants.

As an inventory of the unfinished business left by Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, Fabi's list is helpful. What are the ground rules for Ignatian adaptation? When does a creative accommodation to people and circumstances keel over into a deformation of the method? There are a range of textual uncertainties in the text as it stands. Fabi notes that Ignatius' directives on the review of prayer (Exx 77) imply that criteria exist for judging a contemplation as successful or the opposite, but does not specify these criteria:

Some wonder if they are supposed to consider a prayer successful when they were not plagued by bothersome thoughts while praying and not assailed by evil spirits, or alternatively when they battle strenuously and courageously against such evil movements. For the latter seems to betoken greater success and progress in prayer than if they underwent no struggle or opposition. (Dir 24:18)

Our list might be different. How, for example, are we meant to timetable the different exercises in the First Week? When, in the Second Week, are we meant to timetable the process leading to the Third Time of Election, and how does it affect the structure of the day's prayer? Why does the Fourth Week present the Application of the Senses in terms that seem almost to assimilate this prayer to straightforward Ignatian repetition (Exx 227.3)?

Pastorally, Fabi notes how Ignatius' text seems addressed to people not under vows, and that it must therefore be adapted when the Exercises are given to religious:

In the treatment of indifference towards poverty or wealth (Exx 23), in the preparation for a choice of a state of life, in Annotation 14 on not making vows, it is clear that only persons in the world are envisaged. The opposite is the case in the Society's *General Examen*, where the Exercises are listed as the first of the Society's probations; and in the *Constitutions*, where this salutary ministry of the Society is frequently mentioned.

Fabi's point here touches on the issue of the relative status of the counsels and the vows, and on the tension in the tradition between an insistence simply on openness to whatever God wants and a belief that the life of the counsels is somehow higher. Our contemporary practice, however, of giving the Exercises ecumenically, of using Ignatian methods in very secular situations, and of accompanying people in daily life, raises far more radical questions of sacred and secular identity. We are well used now to the idea of false religious consciousness: pious rhetoric may be legitimating a neurosis or an acquiescence in a deeply oppressive social structure. Conversely, we have also become used to the idea that the Spirit is at work in the secular, and that what is of greatest spiritual significance in a person's life may well not be articulated in religious terms. On what basis, then, can we identify spiritual consolations and desolations in the full sense within a range of other forms of psychological high and low?

Fabi also illustrates quite vividly the ambivalence of any attempt to expand on the Exercises. He is quite clear that the text is not arbitrary, and that it should not be used capriciously: 'We must assume that Father Ignatius had a particular aim in view for each exercise, and that the order in which he presents them is neither casual nor unconsidered . . .' (Dir 24:3).

On the other hand, he also knows that the experience and needs of each exercitant must be allowed to shape the reality of the retreat, if necessary in contravention of the text. Despite what Ignatius says in Annotation 6, retreatants can experience a lack of movement between the spirits for reasons other than a failure to make the exercises at the proper time or to observe the Additional Directions. More generally, Fabi is well aware that alternatives to the methods given by Ignatius, prompted by 'freedom of spirit and the light of God's grace', can yield 'better results':

For example, each exercise ends with a colloquy and begins with a petition. It can happen, and often does, that one's spirit is moved to a

colloquy at the very beginning of a meditation; or, conversely, that something that should be done at the start of the meditation actually comes at the end. It does not seem against the intent of the Exercises, but rather in accordance with both the Exercises and good sense, that the parts of an exercise should follow the order of one's devotion and spiritual impulse, each being placed wherever there is promise of greater fruit. (Dir 24:11)

Of its nature, the resolution of this tension cannot be achieved in terms of any theory laid down in advance. The 1599 *Directory* handles the issue simply by stating two directives:

On the one hand, the director is supposed to keep exactly to the order, method, and detailed instruction found in the book, and the more strictly they do this the more God will work together with them. On the other hand, they are allowed considerable discretion, in view of the differences among persons who make the Exercises or the spirits by which they are moved, to alter the exercises or prescribe others appropriate for individual needs.

This might appear as an exasperating avoidance of the question, but in reality the only wisdom we can have on this point is an awareness that such unanswered questions are inherent to any attempt at creative Christian authenticity. New approaches to pastoral care and Christian practice, and indeed transitions in the ministry of retreats, will always – precisely because they are new – raise questions as to whether their novelty amounts to a new realization of Christian charism, or a decadence to be repudiated.

The Directories show the second generation of Jesuits struggling with questions of this kind. One school, represented chiefly by the Portuguese, Diego Mirão, and by Everard Mercurian, fourth General of the Society, is preoccupied principally with the need to preserve authenticity against possible deviations. Against them are others, such as Fabi and Polanco, who are more sensitive to the need for adaptation. A revealing moment comes when Mercurian discusses repetition, presented by Ignatius as an exploration of 'points in which I have felt greater consolation or desolation' (Exx 62.2):

The repetitions of the exercises may seem superfluous, but in fact are extremely valuable. First, they exercise one in patience and obedience. Secondly, they help reach the fruit sought in meditation. It often happens that retreatants, intrigued by the novelty of the topics, browse

aimlessly among them. The repetitions are aimed at curtailing such digressions and getting the retreatant to go back over the same materials more frequently, examine them more thoroughly, and so retain them better. (Dir 19:6)

This defensive rigorism is reflected also in Mirão's account of how to use the discernment rules:

All exercitants, but especially those making an election, should be given, prior to the preamble for making an election, the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits for the Second Week, as indicated in Annotations 8, 9 and 10; they should receive a clear explanation of these rules so as to be amply equipped in the Lord against the machinations of the enemy of human nature. (Dir 23:79)

For Polanco, by contrast, the retreat-giver takes their cue from the exercitant's experience:

When the director comes, they should ask an account of these movements. If they detect signs of the good or evil spirit, they should use the Rules for Discerning Spirits, but especially those of the Second Week. They should explain to the exercitant as much as they judge necessary for the latter's guidance or – if need be - encouragement. (Dir 20:82)

It is easy to make Mirão and Mercurian look ridiculous, and it has been fashionable to belittle their approach ever since Iparraguirre charted the history of the *Directories*. But wisdom comes from the refusal to play off against each other fidelity to the tradition and responsiveness to people's experience. These are values that must somehow be held together, in ways that are improvised rather than codified. Given the rigidities of preconiliar Ignatian practice, it is not surprising that Mirão and Mercurian have received a bad press; perhaps, however, before too long, we may also find ourselves needing to learn from them. Nevertheless, it is Polanco's magisterial account of how retreat-givers should conduct themselves which must conclude this section:

Unless they already know the exercitant, the director should try to get information about their intelligence, character, and temperament, either from others or through tactful questioning of the exercitant. In this way, they will be better able to adapt themselves to the exercitant.

To grave and learned persons they should speak succinctly and learnedly; to persons of little spiritual experience, with greater fullness. To both kinds, they should set forth the Exercises in a clear and orderly fashion. It is important, however, that while allowing for differences in the intelligence, learning or experience of their exercitants, the director should, on the one hand, avoid explaining the points too fully – both so that the exercitant may have greater relish in what they themselves discover (Exx 2) and so that more room may be left for lights and movements from above; on the other hand, they should avoid being overly brief and schematic, but should give enough to ensure that the exercitant understands the points correctly and is able to see their way into the meditation. (Dir 20:31)

Texts from a different world

So far this article has considered the *Directories* in terms of a perennial Christian problem: that of determining what counts as authenticity. However, we can read them not just for what they tell us about our issues in the ministry of the Exercises, but also for what their differences from us might evoke. Some details in the collection of Directories are simply quirky. A whole document – according to Iparraguirre written by either Polanco or Laínez – sets out a comprehensive list of material for an eight-day adaptation of the Exercises, which yet, despite some verbal similarities with the text, hardly touches into the deeper dynamics of the process (Dir 9). Lawrence Nicolai, a Norwegian convert from Lutheranism, tells us of his custom to visit each exercitant four times daily (Dir 21:35). Nicolai shares with other early Jesuits a preoccupation with whether retreatants write down the points given them, and he is of the school which prefers to avoid this practice. But his procedures are distinctive and, surely, eccentric:

I tell them at the beginning they may not copy things out. I also check at the beginning how much paper they have and how much they have used up. If I suspected anyone of making copies, I would tell them jokingly about my system for catching people who secretly made copies; I would say that in their confession at the end before Communion, I asked people whether they had copied anything, and in this way catch them out, since no one was so hardened as to dare receive the Sacrament with a deliberate lie. Other times I searched their rooms while they were at Mass. Sometimes I found copies under their mattress. (Dir 21:38)

At other times, the differences reflect a difference in culture. Duarte Pereira, a Spanish novice director, seems to have conflated the infancy contemplations of the Second Week with the Kingdom and the Two Standards. He seems to have used the adoration of the Magi as an entrance to both the Kingdom and the Two Standards: ‘. . . this child, a king from the crib, is beginning to wage war upon the world, the devil, and the flesh; he is already summoning people, shepherds, kings’ (Dir 10:84). Similarly, the response of the poor shepherds to the angels’ call becomes emblematic of the Ignatian desire to follow the poor Christ (Dir 10:86-92). Perhaps the text evinces a lamentable confusion, the confusion that convinced more authoritative figures of the need for centralized instruction. Equally, however, these texts antedate the discovery by nineteenth-century scholarship of how the Kingdom was the central theme in Jesus’ preaching. Ignatius in this respect was an innovator, in ways that might have been bewildering to exercitants whose religious sensibility was nourished above all through pictures, notably of the events surrounding Christ’s birth and of his passion and resurrection. It could be that Pereira was attempting, rather impressively, to make accessible Ignatius’ prime concern to exercitants unused to written texts.

At times, too, the *Directories* give glimpses of a spiritual sensitivity which is simply the fruit of holiness and experience. One anonymous commentator writes as follows:

. . . a spiritually advanced person with much experience in prayer has no difficulty in eliciting great joy, love, and trust from meditation on judgment and hell – as also fear and confusion from paradise. For example, they can reflect that they actually deserved the pains of hell: the very person whom Judas betrayed as a mortal and sold a single time for thirty coins, they themselves have over and over again despised and sold, immortal, for some insignificant trifle or pleasure; yet despite their ingratitude God has not only not sentenced them to the same sufferings, but has heaped them with graces and walled them about with divine protection. Recognition of God’s mercy towards them fills them with joy, engendering deep hope and love of God. (Dir 26:18)

Issues of control

Polanco, drawing on the Vulgate, wrote of how someone making an election according to the second mode of the third time should have a thorough awareness (*persentiscere*) in themselves that the inclinations they feel come from God alone (Dir 20:91). Gil González Dávila, at a

later stage in the process, objected to this terminology. The word *persentiscere*,

. . . has been much criticized. Explained according to sound doctrine, it is not dangerous, but since such expressions are abused in Spain by the *alumbrados* and *dejados*, I would prefer to make clear the mind of our Father Ignatius, rather than use this word without distinction. (Dir 31:19)

González's comment evinces a nervousness about illuminism and about developing a concept of spiritual experience which might challenge legitimate authority. He assumes that the mind of Ignatius is clearly distinguishable from that of groups that had fallen under suspicion in Spain, despite Ignatius' own conflictive relationships with the Inquisition. The bad reputation of the *Directories* among contemporary retreat-givers is surely linked to the defensive authoritarianism that was, without doubt, a major influence on their composition.

The end of an article such as this is no place to explore the complex questions of the relationships between the early Jesuits and the religious conflicts in sixteenth-century Spain. Writers on Teresa of Avila have, in the last ten years or so, begun to situate her in her historical context, and made clear that the historical Teresa de Jesús differs in some important respects from the hagiographical image of Saint Teresa of Avila; the development of her cult serviced and legitimated important shifts in the nature of religious authority in Spain in the early years of the seventeenth century.⁹ Analysis of this kind might help us interpret more creatively developments in Ignatian spirituality among the second and third generations of the Society of Jesus.

Moreover, whatever the fruits of future historical research, we need also to approach texts such as the *Directories* out of a vision of spiritual mutuality much richer than was common even a generation ago. For all that Ignatius might speak of the immediate dealings between creator and creature (Exx 15.6), this immediacy was granted to one schooled in a community of faith, and indeed was enabled by the socialization he had undergone. This kind of rudimentary 'postmodern' interpretation of spiritual experience surely enables us to think in new ways about the relationship between charism and authority in the Church.¹⁰ The spiritual prophet is not a lonely individual, in more or less latent Promethean conflict with authority, but rather a member of the Church with a special sensitivity to new possibilities for discipleship, and for

realities which prevailing religious constructions ignore. In such a light, it might be possible to interpret more eirenicly the transitions in retreat giving, and their associated conflicts, reflected in the *Directories*. To follow one's own convictions under God may lead a person to behave in ways that authority may not sanction – but such acts, rightly undertaken, strengthen rather than weaken a person's solidarity with the Church, at least in the full theological sense.

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NOTES

1 *Review of Ignatian spirituality*, 90 (Spring 1999), p 8.

2 References of this form are to document and paragraph numbers in *On giving the Spiritual Exercises: The early Jesuit manuscript Directories and the Official Directory of 1599*, translated and edited by Martin E. Palmer (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996). Palmer's numbering follows that of Ignacio Iparraguirre in the MHSJ edition of 1955. On the general issues here see my 'To reflect and draw profit', *The Way Supplement* 82 (Spring, 1995), pp 84–95, or, more fully, 'The Ignatian prayer of the senses', *Heythrop Journal* 31 (1990), pp 391–418.

3 For further discussion, see Brian O'Leary, 'Third and Fourth Weeks: what the Directories say', *The Way Supplement* 58 (Spring 1987), pp 3–20 – probably the most extensive and valuable discussion of the Directories in English.

4 GC 1, d. 107, in *For matters of greater moment: the first thirty Jesuit General Congregations – a brief history and a translation of the decrees*, edited by John W. Padberg, Martin D. O'Keefe and John L. McCarthy (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1994), p 97.

5 Quoted – but without indication of date or level of authenticity – in Ignacio Iparraguirre, *Historia de los Ejercicios de San Ignacio vol 2: Desde la muerte de San Ignacio hasta la promulgación del Directorio oficial (1556–1599)* (Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1955), p 419. Iparraguirre's scholarship in this volume and in the preparation of the MHSJ edition remains foundational, even though there may be good grounds for questioning his hermeneutics.

6 Iparraguirre, *Historia* 2, p 415.

7 For these texts, see Palmer, *On giving the Spiritual Exercises*, pp 7–31. Gonçalves da Câmara speaks of Ignatius having finished the *Directory* he intended to write, and implies that the task was small: Polanco was to ask Ignatius questions whenever he thought of them, for 'in matters concerning the Exercises he would not need to think a lot before answering them; (Dir 6:12 [Notebook, n 313]).

8 Iparraguirre, *Historia* 2, p 416.

9 Two distinguished examples among several: Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa: religious reform in a sixteenth-century city* (London: Cornell University Press, 1989); Gillian T.W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the politics of sanctity* (London: Cornell University Press, 1996).

10 I have tried to develop this further with reference to Ignatius in 'Ignatius and Church authority', *The Way Supplement* 70 (Spring 1990), pp 76–90.