

ST IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA AND SEVERE DEPRESSION

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IN RECENT YEARS THE PREVALENCE of severe depression has become an acknowledged fact of life. Personal or second-hand experience of this painful state has become commonplace. And with more reflection and analysis it has become possible to recognise its symptoms, and hence to reinterpret earlier incidences of this affliction.

A talk on 'depression in old age'¹ alerted me to the possibility that certain elements in the life of St Ignatius point to his having suffered a bout of very severe depression. In a general way, the Freudian analysis by Fr Meissner had already prepared me for this conclusion.² But on this occasion, the approach was via cognitive therapy,³ in which greater recognition is given to subject's conscious thoughts and mental schemata. Given the complexity of the human psyche, both approaches can be illuminating. The cognitive approach has the advantage that one is dealing with easily recognisable phenomena that can be expressed in straightforward terminology, as opposed to the elaborate neologisms that most Freudians seem to need in order to express themselves.⁴

¹ The British Province of the Society of Jesus organizes an annual meeting for the benefit of older members; during four days different topics—some theoretical (on subjects like spirituality for the ageing) and some very practical (for example on physical exercises or continence)—are discussed in agreeable surroundings. The talk in question was given by Roger Dawson, a Jesuit scholastic who qualified as a clinical psychologist before joining the order.

² W. W. Meissner, *The Psychology of a Saint: Ignatius of Loyola* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 74: 'From July through October of 1522, he suffered a severe depression'. Meissner illustrates his point by quoting from the description in the *Spiritual Exercises* of 'desolation' (Exx 317), though the latter phenomenon needs to be distinguished from clinical depression, as will be discussed further below.

³ Developed by Aaron T. Beck in several studies, for example *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders* (New York: International Universities Press, 1976).

⁴ See Meissner, *The Psychology of a Saint*, 74 and 366: 'In Freud's [1917] classic analysis of depression, the essential mechanism is the turning against the ego of the sadistic impulses of the superego'; 'We need to recall his [Ignatius'] largely narcissistic and phallic personality structure'.

The Problem of Scruples

In the autobiographical *Reminiscences*⁵ Ignatius gave much space to one particular trial that he underwent while living at Manresa: 'here he came to have many problems from scruples' (n. 22). At first sight one might not recognise under this term an experience that deserves to be classified as 'depression'. But the description given by Ignatius of his state of mind leaves little room for doubt. Even before his scruples, there were times when he could find 'no savour [relish] either in praying or in hearing mass or in any other prayer' (n. 21); there was 'sadness and desolation' that covered him like a cloak (n. 21). However, with the onset of scruples one recognises quite a different phenomenon: he was 'in great pain' (n. 22); he felt that the scruples 'were doing him a great deal of harm' (n. 22), they were 'tormenting him' (n. 23); he was at times in 'a state of great distress' (n. 23). All of this reveals a man under terrible mental pressure.

The immediate occasion was the fear that he had not made a full confession. Doubts continued to return, even though he had made a perfectly adequate general confession up at the monastery of Montserrat, and had done the same in the Cathedral (the Seo) of Manresa, actually writing down on his confessor's orders all that he could remember. The confessor's advice not to repeat anything 'unless it was sufficiently clear' (n. 23) was of no help, as the thoughts would recur with the startling clarity of ever-new detail. Long hours (seven each day) devoted to prayer on his knees gave no relief over several months (n. 23).

His self-contempt grew to such a pitch that he declared himself willing to crawl behind a dog if that would satisfy God (n. 23). There were even times when he seriously thought of suicide by jumping out of a window (n. 24), but the realisation that this would be sinful restrained him: 'Lord, I won't do anything that would offend you!' (n. 24). Instead he began a rigorous course of fasting, resolving neither to eat nor to drink unless he was in danger of dying. It was only later that he realised how ridiculous it was to think that by the time he was in

⁵ The *Reminiscences* were dictated to Gonçalves da Câmara, beginning in 1553 and continuing, with interruptions, until 1555, the year before Ignatius' death. All references are to *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, edited by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996).

danger of dying he would have been able to stop the process (n. 24). Fortunately the confessor stepped in at the end of the first week, and ordered him to break his fast. His prompt obedience seemed to cure him from his scruples, but in a short while, to his horror, they returned with greater force than ever (n. 25).

Release came at last thanks to a curious extra ‘temptation’, but this time one that he could recognise for what it was: he was tempted to abandon his new form of life. As he says, he was filled at times with great disgust ‘for the life he was leading’—after all, he was eating badly, sleeping and dressing badly, not washing properly, and spending long, boring hours in unanswered prayer! But as he saw this ‘disgust’ for what it was, a temptation to give up, he recognised that his ‘scruples’ were in the same category: they were ‘feelings’ that could not be coming from God, but must be from the Evil One. With the decision not to accord them any more importance, and to cease from further confession of past sins, his happiness and security returned and he felt ‘liberated’ (n. 25).

The Roots of Depression

From the point of view of cognitive psychology, depression can come when a chance occurrence or experience triggers off accumulated negative thoughts. Usually these have their roots quite early in the subject’s life: as a child the person has failed to receive the love and affection which would provide a base of secure self-appreciation.

In the case of Ignatius—or Iñigo as he then was—a mother was lacking. He was the last of twelve or thirteen⁶ children born to Marina Sáenz de Licona, and it is known that shortly after his birth he was sent to be breast-fed and nurtured in a farmhouse near the family home. His mother is not subsequently mentioned, and she is likely to have died while he was very young. His wet-nurse, María de Garín, probably provided the only affection he knew as a child.⁷ Quite apart from the unconscious (which may be labelled ‘Freudian’) implications

⁶ Twelve according to Ricardo García-Villoslada, *San Ignacio de Loyola: nueva biografía* (Madrid: BAC, 1986), 61, but thirteen according to Félix Juan Cabasés, *Explicación de la Santa Casa de Loyola* (Loyola, 1997), 35.

⁷ Winston Churchill, who also suffered from chronic bouts of depression, confessed that the only person who showed him real affection as a child was his nurse.



of such maternal deprivation,⁸ there are also cognitive, or semi-conscious, consequences.

For Iñigo, further doubts about his own self-worth must have been sown when his father decided to send him away, while he was still in his early teens, to serve as a page in the courtly household of the Treasurer of Castile, Juan Velázquez de Cuéllar, in Arévalo. However well-intentioned this move was, it had the effect of uprooting a young lad from a familiar context—the hilly green Basque countryside and a homely household packed with older siblings—to a foreign, alien and formal setting—court life in the dry Castilian *meseta* with its burning heat and icy winters. It is hardly surprising that the young Iñigo sought compensation for such a wrench in superficial self-adornment (fine clothes, careful grooming, martial prowess with sword and dagger⁹), and in sexual satisfaction. He applied for permission to carry a sword

⁸ Analysed in detail by Meissner, *The Psychology of a Saint*, 362-363; he draws a parallel between Ignatius and Michelangelo, who also lost his mother very young.

⁹ James Brodrick, *Saint Ignatius Loyola: The Pilgrim Years* (London: Burns and Oates, 1956), 47, draws on the evidence that emerged when Iñigo (along with his priest brother) was brought before the judges in 1515; see n. 11.

because he had been threatened by someone furious at an affront, which was probably the result of an affair. It is notorious that what the 'Don Juan' type is seeking in pleasure is a security which is always eluding him. Iñigo was to confess to Laínez that he was very much a ladies' man.¹⁰

A turning-point in Iñigo's conversion process in Loyola came when he was granted a striking grace: 'being awake one night, he saw clearly a likeness of Our Lady with the Holy Child Jesus, at the sight of which, for an appreciable time, he received a very extraordinary consolation' (n. 10). The effect of this concerned his sexual feelings and behaviour: he was left 'sickened at his whole past life, and especially at matters of the flesh'. From then on, 'he never again had even the slightest complicity in matters of the flesh' (n. 10).

But it is probably true that Iñigo's sexual proclivities had been more of a symptom than a true cause. Cognitive therapy tries to uncover how a person thinks about their basic safety and vulnerability. For Iñigo, the strange world of Arévalo must have seemed threatening enough, but worse was to come with the disgrace of his patron, the Treasurer of Castile. The Treasurer joined protests against the curtailment of privileges that followed the accession of the foreigner Charles V to the Spanish throne. He eventually submitted on being threatened by troops, but this disgrace, along with other disasters, led to a fit of melancholy during which he died.

Iñigo had to leave the palace and seek employment with another nobleman, the Duke of Nájera and Viceroy of Navarre, Pedro Manrique de Lara, who was a professional soldier. Iñigo had seen one world dissolve around him; he now entered a new, military world, for which he was probably not prepared. In fact the Duke used his services more on diplomatic missions, which Iñigo carried out with some aplomb, than on military ones. But at the defence of Pamplona, Iñigo allowed himself to be carried away in a wild flight of chivalry, against the advice of the professional soldiers, and he was seriously wounded. As a result, he had a permanent limp.

¹⁰ MHSJ FN 1, 72, 76; see also Polanco in MHSJ FN 1, 154-156.

Depressive Crisis

The features of a ‘typical’ depressive crisis include an unrealistic appreciation of personal limits, and a conviction of special status coupled paradoxically with a sense of worthlessness. These stem from the failure to satisfy certain basic needs—for safety, for the ability to control oneself and the immediate environment, for autonomy, for self-esteem, for self-expression. We know, because his contemporaries tell us so, that Iñigo was subject to fits of anger,¹¹ in which he found self-control very difficult. It clear that respect for the lives of others did not rank highly with him: he was prepared to stab a Moor who spoke doubtfully about the perpetual virginity of Mary (n. 15), and earlier he was accused of serious offences which probably included bloodshed.¹² Further light is thrown on the type of depression that seems to have afflicted Ignatius when one examines more closely the thinking process involved in his scruples: basically he was striving to be perfect, but he thought that he could not rid himself of his former imperfections. He had projected for himself an ideal picture of what a ‘saint’ should be, and he became more and more frustrated as he saw that he did not coincide with it.

Another common feature of depression is ‘black and white thinking’: sufferers are incapable of admitting grey areas, and make ‘all



or nothing’ judgments. They are also completely focused on the self: guilt is wholly personal to themselves. They become incapable of seeing things in a wider context; the smallest fault or error justifies wild generalisations and instant conclusions. Their thoughts become negative and pessimistic: because one thing is wrong, everything is wrong. And, perhaps most distressingly, they

¹¹ MHSJ SSI 1, 566: in 1560, the Bishop of Salamanca recalled having seen Ignatius’ reaction to being jostled in a Pamplona street. He went after the men responsible with his sword; ‘if there hadn’t been anyone to hold him back, either he’d have killed one of them or they’d have killed him’.

¹² MHSJ FD, 229-246, especially 235, 237-238, 241-242.

are oppressed and crushed by 'shoulds' and 'oughts': 'I should have told the confessor such-and-such a detail', 'I ought to have mentioned that there were four and not just three offences', and so on, *ad infinitum*. They may experience a feverish loss of control over their own thought processes: again and again, the same persistent preoccupations keep recurring, driving them to the brink of madness.

For Ignatius, an additional set of half-conscious assumptions were clearly at work: the picture that he had formed of God in his earlier years was woefully defective. Authority in his home was probably represented by a remote and dominant father; Don Beltrán was the only son of Iñigo's bellicose grandfather, who was exiled to the south of Spain in punishment for his part in the clan wars of the Basque country. He had succeeded in building up the family's economic and social position, but at the cost of active service in defence of the Castilian monarchs. This had won him important iron-mining privileges. Most of his sons would scatter to military or naval careers, and many to early deaths, including his eldest, the direct heir to the Tower-Palace of Loyola. One son was given to the Church, probably to ensure that the local parish church remained under family control, and was well known for his dissolute life.

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One can form some idea of Iñigo's conception of God from the incident of the Moor mentioned above: God is a power who intervenes under duress from His saints. The saints were great because they did great penances; and it was the masochistic attraction of the really great penances that seduced Iñigo. He decided not to become a Carthusian because 'he was afraid he wouldn't be able to practise the hatred he had conceived against himself' (n. 12). At this point his ignorance was complete:

... not knowing what humility was, or charity, or patience, or discernment in regulating and balancing these virtues. Rather, his whole purpose was to do these great exterior deeds because so the saints had done them for the glory of God (n. 14)

There is an element of fear in Ignatius' scruples before a God whom he sees as one who punishes,¹³ although there are also traces of another image of God—just but loving—which is striving to break through.

¹³ In the Exercises of the First Week one is recommended to summon up feelings of fear (Exx 74).

Overcoming Depression

The effects of Ignatius' crisis were classical signs of major depression: poor concentration, indecisiveness, recurrent thoughts of death and suicide, loss of interest and pleasure in prayer or in attending liturgical functions, agitation and great distress, self-punishment (fasting) with loss of weight and probably chronic fatigue.

The cure for depression, in terms of cognitive therapy, consists in persuading the patient that their thought processes should be replaced by different ones. In the case of Ignatius, the initial step was the realisation that the thoughts troubling him belonged to the category of 'evil' thoughts, and were not the 'good' thoughts that superficially they appeared to be. This shift of perspective came about, significantly, less through his listening to what the confessors were telling him than through his attention to his own experiences. When Ignatius could see that what he was taking to be good was *really* evil, he was back in touch with *reality*. Once he had regained this objectivity, he was on the road to further development.

Fortunately for him, there were some elements in his upbringing that would now serve as the basis for a fairer appraisal of his own worth, and would open the way to an intimate knowledge of God. He had known what disinterested love could be—partly through his brother Martín and the latter's young wife, Magdalena de Araoz, and partly through María de Velasco, the widow of his first patron, who found him new employment with the Duke of Nájera. He had known a God who became a child in the arms of a mother. He was aware of the deep peace of consolation, and of compassion for himself.

Severe depression, however, usually has long-lasting effects, even if it is only experienced once. These can include an extraordinary enrichment of one's power of sympathy for others. In later years Ignatius often gave signs of this ability to penetrate into the minds and hearts of those he met, particularly in his dealing with novices in Rome. It is also remarkable that in the 'Helpful Notes' (sometimes called 'rules') for 'the perception and understanding of scruples and of the insinuations of our enemy' (Exx 346), Ignatius condemns what he calls 'erroneous' scruples (incorrect notions about what is and what is not a sin), but has sympathy for 'true' scruples (troubling doubts about sin). Such doubt can be 'of no small benefit for a time. Indeed to a great extent it cleanses and purifies' (Exx 348) But scruples are

often the sign of an excessively sensitive conscience, and the remedy may be to coarsen that conscience, or at least to 'seek to establish a position in the just mean' (Exx 350).

Was Ignatius Manic-Depressive?

In considering whether Ignatius was prone to depression, or even manic-depressive, it is important to distinguish between what is now termed 'bipolar disorder' (formerly called 'manic-depressive psychosis') and 'major depression' (also referred to as 'unipolar disorder'). A recent survey-study of psychology notes:

According to several estimates, about 10% of all men and 20% of all women in America will suffer from a major depressive episode (defined as one that lasts for at least two weeks) at some time during their lives.¹⁴

In the case of Ignatius at Manresa many of the classic symptoms of a major depressive episode were present.¹⁵ However, this episode seems to have been isolated, and later in life it was his constant serenity that mainly impressed his contemporaries: 'a tiny little Spaniard, a bit lame, with joyful eyes', as one man described him.¹⁶ Ignatius himself claimed that it would not take him more than quarter of an hour's prayer to recover even from the suppression of his beloved Society of Jesus.¹⁷

As for signs of manic exaltation—the feeling that some manic-depressives experience that 'everything is possible'—they are not evident in what we know of Ignatius' later life. He was capable of ambitious undertakings, some of which (such as the famous Irish venture entrusted to Frs Broët and Salmerón in 1541 for which Ignatius drew up very detailed advice¹⁸) were doomed to failure. And

¹⁴ Henry Gleitman, *Psychology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995 [1981]), 737.

¹⁵ The American Psychiatric Association has published a classification system (DSM-IV, that is, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition) which lists the criteria for identifying a major depressive episode: compare Gerald C. Davison and John M. Neale, *Abnormal Psychology* (New York: John Wiley, 1996 [1974]), 227.

¹⁶ Fr Láinez reported this description of Ignatius: see *Remembering Iñigo: Glimpses of the Life of Saint Ignatius Loyola: The Memoriale of Luis Gonçalves da Câmara*, translated by Alexander Eaglestone and Joseph A. Munitiz (Leominster: Gracewing, 2004), n. 180.

¹⁷ *Memoriale*, n. 182.

¹⁸ A letter and a memorandum on this mission are available in English in *Iñigo: Letters Personal and Spiritual*, translated by Joseph A. Munitiz, selected by Michael Ivens (New Malden: Iñigo Enterprises,

at times he was considered foolhardy in the way he pressed ahead with projects, for example the founding of the Roman and German colleges when financial backing seemed non-existent.¹⁹ But even in these cases Ignatius' projects were inspired by the realism and practical good sense that led to their eventual success, rather than by a delusive optimism.

There is a passing remark in Fr Meissner's Freudian analysis which may be relevant here:

The loss of his mother would have left him with a deep-seated unconscious wish for reunion with her, specifically through death. Correlative with this wish, we could infer unconscious fantasies, formed at an infantile level in his mind, of rejoining his mother in the heavenly kingdom, where mother and son could be reunited in eternal bliss. A consequence of this dynamic would be *an essentially depressive core to his personality organisation*, rooted in his sense of abandonment, intolerable and inexpressible rage at the abandoning mother, and a devalued sense of himself as a child who was not worthy of his mother's love and fidelity.²⁰

Despite this remark, Meissner lays much more stress on the *obsessive* features of Ignatius' personality than on the depressive: 'a salient aspect of Ignatius' personality is his obsessionality'; 'as we study Ignatius' post-conversion life, we get a sense of discipline, tenacity to the point of stubbornness or obstinacy, and a pattern of behaviour impressive for its consistent degree of control—especially emotional control'.²¹

The *Memoriale* of Luis Gonçalves da Câmara reveals several examples of this. There is Ignatius' obsessive insistence on rules, all duly numbered. There is a touchiness which leads him



1995), 52-58; a translation of the letter is also included in *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by William J. Young (Chicago: Loyola UP, 1959), 51-52.

¹⁹ *Memoriale*, n. 16, n. 234.

²⁰ Meissner, *The Psychology of a Saint*, 362 (my italics).

²¹ Meissner, *The Psychology of a Saint*, 373, 374. The role of fear in the Exercises, briefly mentioned in a previous note, is one among other features that may provoke untoward reactions in retreatants inclined to depression; even a prayer such as the famous 'Take, Lord, and receive' (Exx 234) from the Contemplation to Attain Love in the Fourth Week can be excessive if presented too bluntly.

to react with what seems excessive ferocity to undue noise or to forms of pretentiousness. He can look ridiculous in his meticulous respect for titles, both those of others and his own (a trait picked out for criticism by the unsympathetic Dominican Melchor Cano²²). As a recent study has shown, one should not confuse (as Gonçalves da Câmara seems to do) extraordinary sanctity with infallibility: Ignatius' excessive compliance with aberrant medical advice nearly cost him his life, and his hyper-sensitivity in sexual matters seems to have warped his judgement.²³

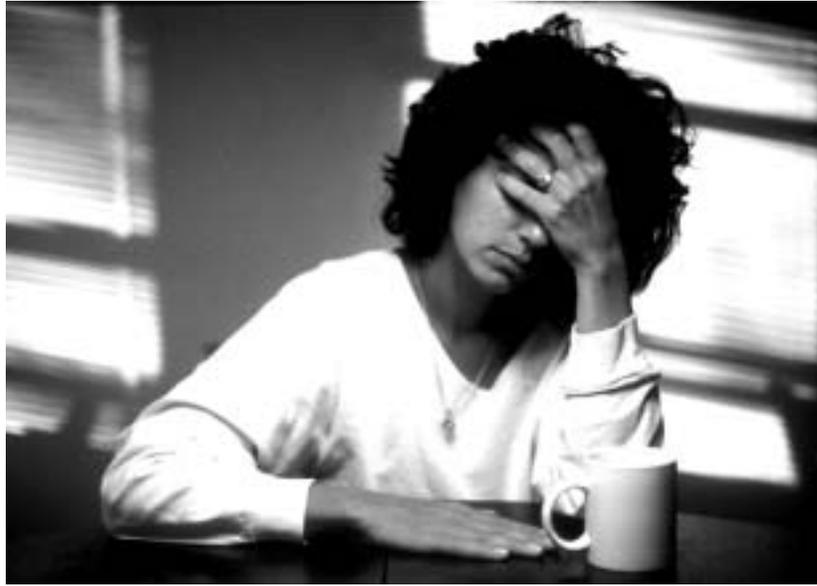
Overall it would seem unlikely that Ignatius was manic-depressive, although he experienced a major depression, from which he emerged as a living witness that one can not only survive the experience but build on it for the greater glory of God.

Depression or Desolation?

The relationship between depression and the Ignatian concept of 'desolation' is also important here. Someone unfamiliar with the specific characteristics of spiritual desolation might easily confuse it with depression, but in fact they operate on different wavelengths, even when they coincide. 'Desolation', for the mature Ignatius, is the work of the devil, and is independent of feelings of satisfaction or distress: a married man happily going to see his mistress can be in a state of 'desolation' for Ignatius; an unhappy student who has failed an examination, but continues to trust in God's love for him, may not be. Usually, of course, sadness and distress are typical of desolation, as are many of the features that characterize depression; but in this case they come because of *spiritual* causes—one is being tried, and tempted, and troubled by 'the enemy of human nature' (Exx 7, Exx 317). Ignatius describes the symptoms mainly in relation to prayer-life; we need 'a

²² Terence O'Reilly, 'Melchor Cano and the Spirituality of St Ignatius Loyola', in *Ignacio de Loyola y su tiempo*, edited by Juan Plazaola (Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto, 1992), 369-379 (especially 371-373): the full text of Cano's critical report on Ignatius (whom he had known in Rome) was published by Professor O'Reilly in his *Variorum* volume (1995), *From Ignatius Loyola to John of the Cross: Spirituality and Literature in Sixteenth-century Spain*, chapter 5.

²³ Ignacio Cacho, *Ignacio de Loyola: ese enigma* (Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto and Mensajero, 2003), 381-393; he is discussing the *Memoriale*, n. 35 and n. 56.



wider account ... in order to sketch out the typical expressions of desolation in relationships and in various circumstances'.²⁴

Sometimes a spiritual director will be able to recognise quite quickly that a person asking for advice is under psychological pressure, which may be revealed in insomnia, in loss of self-esteem, or in a painful lack of interest and energy. But the director may also gradually realise that although a person has suffered, and may still be suffering, from psychological depression, this accompanies a genuine state of spiritual desolation, in which the person faithfully strives to pray despite temptations to doubt and even to despair.²⁵ In the first case, the best policy is to direct the sufferer to a competent psychotherapist; in the second, both psychological and spiritual help may be needed.

Ignatius' spiritual director at Manresa, although clearly following the rules for dealing with scruples, could do nothing to help him, and in fact just made matters worse (n. 23). Ignatius was able to break out of the vicious circle of depression only when he regained contact with

²⁴ Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises: Text and Commentary—A Handbook for Retreat Directors* (Gracewing: Leominster, 1998), 217.

²⁵ Examples of the different cases that may arise are outlined briefly by Brigitte-Violaine Aufauvre, 'Désolation spirituelle et/ou dépression', first published in *Christus*, 197 (January 2003), 27-35, then translated into English, 'Depression and Spiritual Desolation', *The Way*, 42/3 (July 2003), 47-56.

reality. Should one conclude that he was not undergoing at the same time the experience of spiritual desolation? My own opinion is that one should accept this conclusion. However spiritually profitable the experience of depression may have been for Ignatius, it belongs to a different category, and I think it would only be confusing to identify it with 'desolation' as intended in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Nobody in a state of depression should be encouraged, or even allowed, to undergo the Exercises. They are certainly not a cure for psychological depression, and they are more likely to aggravate the condition than to help. This is not to deny that perseverance in prayer when a person is in depression can be helpful and very profitable. If nothing else, the example of Ignatius' severe attack of depression can be an encouragement to others to believe that a cure for depression is both possible and full of promise for the future.²⁶

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²⁶ Some very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article reached me from a number of Jesuit friends: Thomas E. Clarke, Robert Costello, the late Jock Earle, Philip Endean and Russell Pollitt. My thanks to them all.