

SERVANTS OF THE LORD

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The Colloquy is made speaking personally (propriamente hablando), as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant to his master (Exx 54)

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE, BOTH IN ITS PRAYER AND IN ITS ACTIVITIES, is founded on a personal relationship with the Lord. Ignatian spirituality is a once-and-for-all staking of one's whole life. It should fire a person up; it should engender commitment; it should develop to maturity through a life of mission in discipleship of Jesus. It is a matter of love put into action, of an energetic passion, of a mysticism forged in the service of others. And it all begins in something like the Ignatian colloquy, a moment of union, interaction and dialogue with God our Lord.

If this bond is absent, the result is a distorted image of God and a perverted sense of God's project. When human beings seek the ultimate, they will always be vulnerable to the projection of a sadistic, domineering figure that compensates for their moral weakness. But God isn't like that. The Son of the compassionate Father is a teacher who draws together free, responsible men and women so that they can become his disciples. He is not trying to dominate or enslave.

You can try to live your life round what Christ does—round his activity, round his service—without entering into direct personal relationship with the One who is that activity's source and origin. But it won't last. Soon you'll find yourself without motivation, hanging back. You will become like Paul's noisy gong or clanging cymbal, like Macbeth's 'sound and fury/ Signifying nothing'. Or else you will hijack Christ's enterprise for your own self-promotion. It will—as we say—all go to your head. And when your frenetic fanaticism no longer pays dividends in worldly honours, you'll give up and look for a new toy, something else to let you feel like God.

Clearly, therefore, the relationship between the Lord and his disciple is important. But it is impossible to define it, to communicate

it, to transmit it in words. It is not something you ‘know’—just as the *Spiritual Exercises* is not a text to be read. The connection between Jesus and his follower is an experience to be lived, a bond to be formed.

We have metaphors that somehow approach this mystical intimacy. We say that it is *like* the relationship between father and son, between one friend and another, between a king and his subject, between bridegroom and bride. It is *like* being a sheep to its shepherd, a student to their teacher. But none of these exhausts what is a notion quite beyond our power to imagine: familiarity with the Almighty. For God is infinite, whereas we are limited. If we could say what is at stake here, specify it, have it taped, then we would ourselves be Almighty, and ‘God’ would be just a discreet cipher that we would use to legitimate our self-satisfaction. All of which is quite wrong. We have to do things differently.

Vertical and Horizontal Images

The metaphors for our relationship with God in the tradition are there to help—to help towards seeking and finding the Lord so as to discern and do his will. They are signs that show the road, symbols and analogies that open up the heart to God’s action. If we are to have the experience behind them, if these images are to serve us as they should, if they are not to mislead us, we need to understand them in terms of what they were originally trying to do.

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius proposes that we enter into dialogue with God ‘as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant to his master’. Many retreatants think they have to choose between ‘friend’ and ‘servant’, between a ‘horizontal’ and a ‘vertical’ style of relating, because they understand the two as incompatible or contradictory. Then they come across the Call of the King (Exx 91-98), which Ignatius presents as a way of thinking about Christ. And they find themselves trapped in vertical ways of thinking, because kings are rulers. Their vision is shaped by the ways in which a temporal king is arrogant and dominating, leaving the subject shackled, subdued, enslaved. It hardly helps them get to know the divine carpenter from Nazareth and the simple Kingdom he proclaims.

The issue is deeper than just words, facts and definitions. Each human being, from wherever they come in space and time, inherits a way of seeing things. Each person’s mind is equipped with filters that



both clarify and distort reality. Any language implies certain codes of interpretation. Previous experience conditions the colour, the value, even the smell and feeling of things. No one escapes the invisible context of ideology. We drink in mythologies with our mother's milk. Kant speaks of categories that determine meaning.

Nevertheless, we can be free; we are not determined by all of this. The overall goal of the Exercises is for us to grow in freedom, to become more human. Ignatius finds his way into the gospel mystery through the mythology of medieval chivalry. For him, this is a shift, an abandonment of the Machiavellian world-view prevalent in Renaissance courtly life. Like Abraham, he leaves his own country to enter into the unknown, a land of promised blessing. For people today too, liberation is possible. But in order to know the Lord, we have to leave behind the models of humanity which shape the relationships of our time. And the way can only be found if we can manage to let go of our ideological assumptions and widen our vision.

When beginning with the Call of the King, the sincere retreatant can become confused. It is difficult to reconcile the roles of subject, servant and friend. The problem is that the servants and masters of

contemporary imagination are, more properly, the employees and bosses of capitalism. Monarchs are either merely decorative constitutional figures of no real importance, or else tyrannical despots like the Bourbons of Versailles. But Ignatius is putting forward another model. For him, friend, servant and subject are one and the same.

The Biblical Kingdom

How can one deal with the Almighty? The paradox is already present in the biblical narratives, and is rooted in the mystery of the Incarnation, the intersection of God and humanity. There seems to be a conflict between the divinity and the humanity of Jesus, between vertical and horizontal dimensions. Perhaps, indeed, the two dimensions intersect at the cross. God did become human, a mystery that substantiates what is said about God's desire to enter into dialogue with creatures.



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The Call of the Apostles, by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)

It is the practice of discipleship that dissolves the sense of contradiction. The Lord wants to walk with human beings, share their table, and save them from pain and suffering. We can find this paradox as far back as the Old Testament. When Israel leaves Egypt, it is liberated from the Pharaohs. Even so, Moses is not proclaimed king. The Holy Nation is a people whose king is THE LORD. THE LORD's majesty is quite overwhelming—indeed so much so that no living being can contemplate His face and live. Nevertheless, this God accompanies the chosen people through the desert 'as a companion', and speaks with Moses, 'face to face, as one speaks to a friend'.¹ This friendship is not a privilege exclusive to Moses; it is extended to his heirs. Joshua, like Ignatius and everyone who makes Ignatius' Exercises, spends long hours in the tent of meeting. Centuries later, the people ask for a king, in order to be like the other nations, like the Egyptians, the Philistines and the Amorites. The idea does not go down well with Samuel; the whole point is that Israel is a holy nation, a people set apart. Israel seems to despise her status as a chosen people, THE LORD's own portion and inheritance. The prophet gives in, unwillingly. He warns that the king will take sons away for his chariots and horses and to work in his fields, while the daughters he will take to be his cooks and bakers—all as it had been back then in Egypt.² Earthly monarchy of the kind then known was incompatible with God's own sovereignty.

After a false start with Saul, the divine anointing falls on David, whom THE LORD takes, despite everything, as a son. David manages to reign gracefully as long as he puts his trust in God. His tragic fall, the Uriah affair (2 Samuel 11), happens because of his high-handedness. He usurps God's prerogative, and does what he wants with the life of another—in other words, he considers himself absolute. Some call this episode the Bathsheba affair; it is not, however, the sexual element that determines David's fate, but rather the arrogance of the murder and the cover-up. Some of his heirs ruled successfully, but generally they failed to please God—at least if the biblical historians are to be believed. Nevertheless, and because THE LORD is faithful to the

¹ Exodus 33:11; compare Exx 54.

² 1 Samuel 8:10-18; the language recalls passages from Exodus.



Christ in the House of Martha and Mary,
by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675)

covenant, the promise is kept, and a Messiah will come from the house of David (2 Samuel 7:8-16).

So it is that the one who proclaims the reign of God is a son of David. Yet in so doing, he enters into conflict with both Roman civil and Jewish local authorities. Jesus refuses to adopt the monarchical cause, and thus thwarts expectations. Though the temptation is there—‘all these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me’, says the devil (Matthew 4:9)—Jesus does not allow himself to be proclaimed temporal king. The Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus is not an empire, neither in substance nor in style. The Empire subdues rebels; Jesus calls sinners. The Empire crushes uprisings; Jesus draws people together. The Empire exacts tribute; Jesus feeds the crowds. The Empire abuses; Jesus heals. The Empire murders; Jesus raises the dead. Nor does the Kingdom fit with the Temple’s bureaucracy. The Sadducees exclude; Jesus includes. The lawyers and scribes condemn; Jesus pardons. The Pharisees may shun; Jesus shows compassion.

This way of doing things, the *Magna Carta* represented by the Kingdom, is to be understood in terms of the communion between the carpenter and his Abba. The bond between Jesus and his Father in heaven is close, familial. And similarly, the bond between Jesus and his disciples is one characterized by easy interchange and freighted with transcendent significance. Moreover, we can suppose that this relationship is repeated, from generation to generation. The Christian life is shaped not by law but by a style of relationship. Thus Jesus says that the love of God and neighbour is the whole of the Law. Dialogue between God and human beings—what Ignatius would call ‘colloquy’—becomes essential. The idea of Jesus as Emperor is unimaginable, as is that of Jesus as tyrant, despot or manipulator. In the Kingdom of the poor who are blessed, the end does not justify the means. Holy wars are a denial of the Kingdom proclamation. The humiliation of the little ones in the name of God contradicts the Kingdom’s very constitution.

In the Gospel of John, the crucifixion of Jesus is presented as his ceremonial enthronement. The Paschal Mystery occurs in and through the scandal of the king of kings humiliated on a cross. The Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep symbolizes the offering of self that every Christian makes, the offering expressed by Ignatius at the end of the Kingdom meditation (Exx 98). Many believe that when, before Pilate, Jesus insists his Kingdom is ‘not from this world’ (John 18:36), he is referring to a place somewhere else, far away, celestial and exclusively spiritual, to a final reward for those who toe the line under arrogant authorities, for those who withstand the unmerciful rigour and cold ascetic severity of Church rules and rulers. But if that were the whole story, Jesus’ disciples would have no reason to worry about their neighbours in this world—they could just tell them to wait for their reward. But Jesus proclaims and practices the Kingdom as a present reality. When he is placed before Pilate, he does not postpone the Kingdom in time; rather he extends the Kingdom in space. The Kingdom is not limited to the known world. God reigns wherever ‘the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed ...’ (Luke 7:22).

Jesus does not postpone the Kingdom in time—he extends it in space

Service and Employment

When his intuition puts forward the temporal king as an analogy (Exx 93-98), Ignatius is pointing to the role of the squire in chivalric romances. The relationship here is medieval; by the time of the Renaissance it was only a nostalgic memory.³ A century later, it would be called quixotic. In the courtly life familiar to Ignatius, the seeds of Machiavellian monarchy had already taken root. But in the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius is not thinking about the despotic Machiavellian prince. His concern, rather, is with kingship as it existed, even back then, only in memory—not with the calculating pride and ambition of a Henry VIII. Still less was he envisaging the absolute despotism of a Louis XIV who would say *‘l’état, c’est moi’*.

Today, the children of modern republics, who know monarchy only as a form of government long since overcome by revolutions, cannot understand Ignatius’ image. Contemporary monarchies do not help them. These maintain decorative kings and queens, who reign and are honoured, but do not govern. On the contrary, they are governed by their people. Royalty can seem to be nothing more than a topic for tabloids and paparazzi. It no longer serves as a means to help find the divine will and mission.

Sadly, the model represented by the twentieth century’s dictatorships—that of absolute obedience as means of repressing anxiety—is becoming current once again in the popular imagination in response to the spectre of terrorism. US President Bush’s newly created Department of Homeland Security is only the most publicised instance of the phenomenon. Again, this model is hardly helpful. What Jesus is about is not a crusade to overcome aliens, but a Kingdom to embrace all humanity.

Ignatius’ meditation requires us to make a break, and to look at the whole matter from another perspective. Ignatius is not writing about a decorative constitutional monarch, an enlightened despot, or a totalitarian dictator. The Kingdom of God which he came to know at Manresa and lived out in his subsequent life is a vision that is universal and transcendent, an adventure of compassionate love, a project undertaken in company, a pilgrimage without boundaries or frontiers.

³ See Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford: OUP, 1965).

The royal figure in Ignatius' imagination is feudal, and comes from the world of chivalric romance. The monarchy is a matter of divine right. Medieval kingship was not absolute; there was a higher law. The king derives his authority from God, obeys God, and is accountable to God; in all these ways he is a servant of God. And he passes on this same relational model to his subjects. Within this, obedience is not a matter merely of formal rigour and protocol; it expresses devotion, loyalty and honour. And in just the way that the king is a



servant of God, so the king's subjects are his servants. As they derive sustenance and identity from the king, so they give their lives for him, and owe him their total loyalty. In return they can count on their sovereign's unconditional support.

The medieval courtly squire was not necessarily a man of lower social rank than his lord. He was often the son of a nearby prince who had been sent to learn noble attitudes and aristocratic manners, serving at table in a house of equal rank. When the serving was over, he sat down to eat at the same table, quite unlike nineteenth-century butlers, who may have worn fine dinner jackets but ate in the kitchen. This servant wore the livery of his lord's house, and was thus identified with him. If the lord went to hunt, the squire went with him. If he went to war or to a feast, the servant went too. Conversely, if there was work in the fields, the lord went out to cut grain and tie sheaves with his servants. Servant and master sought an intimate bond characterized by close mutual responsibility and by no formal payment.

The bond was indissoluble, one of unconditional fidelity. If the young squire later returned to his own house, the bond would be maintained as a permanent, hereditary alliance.⁴

In the Renaissance, serving relationships became commercialised, and with time they grew to be servile. Service became less of a social role, and more of a job for pay. State ministers would still be called the king's servants, and sometimes they would ceremonially pour his glass, but their real tasks were political, technical and diplomatic. Domestic affairs were by then in the hands of hired professionals. As early as 1598, a notable essay was written in English looking back to the medieval model of service with a certain nostalgia, and complaining about how the new class of servants worked for a salary.⁵ Monarchs no longer went out into their own fields to work, nor to do battle in their own wars. They paid others for those services, which by then had become commodities.

Contract labour constitutes a commercial relationship, determined by monetary remuneration, a relationship that can, given appropriate notice, be broken off. It is this model which we have inherited and which has come to shape contemporary subjectivity.

Unconditional Loyalty

Many believe that absolutism is a thing of the distant past, something which has gradually died out over the years. But that is an error. Absolutism is alive and well, and religion often provides the richest soil in which it can grow. Modern forms of Christianity often contain, more or less overtly, elements of a state religion. Faith is something established, something institutional and domesticated; it becomes just like the machinery that crucified Jesus. Even in countries which do not have a state Church, the religious attitudes which prevail are often naïve ones, forming submissive subjects who obey anyone with any semblance of authority. When the idea of divine right legitimated monarchs, it also limited their power. But that restraining influence has gone. Now authority has no generally accepted metaphysical basis, and

⁴ Robert L. Schmitt, 'The Christ-Experience and Relationship Fostered in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 6/5 (October 1974), 217-255.

⁵ 'A Health to the Gentlemanly Profession of Servingmen; or, the Servingman's Comfort', collected in *Inherited Tracts: Illustrating the Manners, Opinions, and Occupations of Englishmen during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* by W. C. Hazlitt (London: Roxburghe Library, 1868).

so civil power and international law rest on nothing more than diplomatic pragmatism, economic considerations and military might. It follows that we are vulnerable to the rise of a totalitarian state, as occurred so tragically during the twentieth century. In such a situation, the 'flock' of Christians can believe that it is following Jesus, when in fact all it is doing is kowtowing to the boss. Medieval feudalism was much freer, more balanced, more humane.

What of the relationship between Jesus and his disciples? It is well known that the early Christian community repudiated any discrimination based on social class, exploitation or competition (Galatians 3:28, Acts 10:34). And the image of Jesus which Ignatius puts before the exercitant is one of friendship, intimacy, undying loyalty, solidarity. Whosoever wants to enter into Jesus' service will be happy to live as he does, and to suffer with him. Jesus' disciples will give all that they have and are, humbly, like a friend (Exx 231). Modernity finds this type of unconditional relationship difficult—witness the fragility of marriage in our culture. The modern commercial world tends to commodify relationships.

To understand what Ignatius is doing with the image of the earthly king, one has to consider what his own intention was. If, in our practice of the Exercises, we unconsciously project models of relationship arising from modern capitalism or totalitarian despotism, we distort what Ignatius is trying to convey with the images of master and disciple, companion and friend, king and servant. If exercitants hear the rhetoric of Ignatius' meditation in terms of a servile, masochistic relationship, then their own spirituality and ministry will take an authoritarian, domineering shape. If one's image of the bond between Creator and creature is distorted, the distortion will pass over into one's human relationships. Teachers will humiliate their pupils; those in authority will abuse those under them; parents will mistreat their children; bosses will exploit their workers.

RULES OF THE HOUSE

Rule 1: The boss is always right.

Rule 2: If the boss is wrong, see Rule 1.

As a wise and holy old man once put it: if the little ones are humiliated, they learn, not to be humble, but to humiliate. When that happens, cold authoritarianism is transmitted, from generation to generation.

Obedience to the Divine Will

Religion often attracts conformists, people prone to neurotic submissiveness. There is a legitimate place for talk of absolute obedience to God; but this particular wheat of the Kingdom has been sown alongside a darnel of subservience to a loveless God, a caricature whose authority is passed on to equally loveless religious authorities.

The first point to be remembered is that we can never appeal to religious authority as an excuse for sin. God always comes first, before any human authority. And if there is only one God, God's demands must be consistent. It is therefore impossible that God could ask an individual through some human mediation to behave in a way that goes against the divine law. We can legitimately talk about asceticism overcoming worldly desires to give priority to God's will, but it is never right to mortify conscience. Vatican II's document *Gaudium et spes* speaks powerfully of the dignity of conscience:

Deep within their conscience, individuals discover a law which they do not make for themselves For inscribed in their hearts by God, human beings have a law whose observance is their dignity and in accordance with which they are to be judged. Conscience is the most intimate centre and sanctuary of a person, in which he or she is alone with God, whose voice resounds in their depths. (n. 16)

Perhaps we are tempted to be edified by the figure of the simple believer fulfilling religious duties quite unquestioningly, like an obedient child. But such behaviour is as likely as not to be immature, obsessive and unhealthy. God wants us to be thinking adults. Simple conformism is irresponsible; we are obliged to be aware of the consequences of what we do.

We call Islamic fundamentalists engaged in suicide missions religious fanatics. But what of our own attitudes of irresponsible submissiveness? Because the temptation to power is so seductive, it can be the most difficult task of all to exercise religious authority with genuine humility—by divine right in the good sense, as it were, and

with a clear conscience. In many cathedrals, confessionals and religious houses, a sort of sadistic despotism can be practised masquerading as the imposition of God's will. The cause of Christ can be transformed into a holy war led by whoever happens to be the boss.

The kind of unconditional loyalty that should grow out of the Spiritual Exercises is a bond of total identification with Jesus, the Lord. When the first Jesuits wanted to express that identification through a vow of obedience, they did so in a specific way and for definite reasons. During their deliberations, they entertained the argument that obedience could lead to personal sanctification simply because it involved the denial of one's own desires. But in the end that argument was discounted; their reasons for opting for their version of obedience were that it would help them better fulfil God's will, preserve unity, and attend to the spiritual and temporal necessities of others. Their concern was with a genuine practical service, with love put into action; this prevailed over individual, perhaps narcissistic, self-abnegation. They decided against a docile, dehumanising submissiveness. Their desire was to become companions, collaborators and friends of the Lord. They were looking beyond themselves.⁶ The example shows that what is at stake is an option of faith that is radical, and, at the same time, responsible and profoundly human. If communities of Christian faith truly reflect the Kingdom of God, they are round tables, not pyramidal bureaucracies.

We live in an era that encourages individualism in every sphere of life, especially in matters of faith. Moreover, the thought-patterns prevailing in our time do not favour unconditional bonding. The most they allow is an individual bond with Jesus at the expense of any Church element. Partly this is due to modern culture; partly, it emerges from a style of catechesis which seems to be on the rise—perhaps as a backlash following the reforms of Vatican II. This new style of faith-formation emphasizes self-denial, individual so-called sanctification, and submissive conformism rather than being sent by Jesus to serve others. The result is that the community of faith becomes fragmented, and service of others comes to appear secondary or irrelevant.

***To be the
Lord's
companion
is more
than docile
submissiveness***

⁶ For these observations, I am grateful to Damian Howard SJ. For the document recording the early Jesuits' discernment process, see Jules J. Toner, 'The Deliberation that Started the Jesuits: A Commentary on the *Deliberatio primorum patrum*', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 6/4 (June 1974).

If, however, I am a friend, servant and subject of Christ our Lord, if I am that companion who eats with him and dresses like him, if I enter into familiar dialogue with him, and cultivate in myself the dispositions which were his, then I see what I do with and for others as important. What I do, what I bring about, will be motivated by a Christian love and passion, and by a mystical union with the King who gave his life for his own. It will be an advancement of the Kingdom of God in the world of today. It will manifest, in Johannine language, the glory shared by the Son and the Father; it will radiate the compassion of the Friend for his own who are living here and now. We come to be contemplatives in action as we learn that the offering to the Eternal King just is to be Jesus' companion, friend and servant.

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