

MICHEL DE CERTEAU AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF ST IGNATIUS

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MICHAEL DE CERTEAU is one of the five most outstanding Jesuits of the twentieth century, after Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and along with Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan. At least he is one of those who continue to be written about worldwide. His life as a Jesuit, brief as it was (36 years), provokes exceptional interest thirty years after his death. This is true not only because of the content of his thought, which is to be found in his published writings, but because he was prepared, rather like Teilhard, to venture to the outer limits of academic reflection in relation to culture and orthodoxy. His was a mode of being, a style, that hinted at unexplored forms of freedom.¹

This why any consideration of the links that Certeau may have with the spirituality of St Ignatius invites one to recall the analyses, notably in the journal *Christus*, made by this historian of spirituality of the doctrine

¹ Born in 1925, he was already a deacon when he entered the Society of Jesus in 1950; ordained to the priesthood in 1956, he died of cancer in 1986. He was appointed in 1956 to *Christus* (writing twenty articles, numerous comments and book-reviews), and then in 1967 to *Études*. He began as a historian of spirituality, specialising in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (learned editions of Pierre Favre and Jean-Joseph Surin, *La Possession de Loudun* [1970; English, *The Possession of Loudun*, 2000]). In *Études* he published a number of key articles on the events of May 1968 ('En mai dernier, on a pris la parole comme on avait pris la Bastille en 1789'), which brought him to public notice. In the seminars he gave at the University of Paris-VIII (Vincennes) then at Paris-VII, but also at the Institut Catholique, he combined his knowledge of psychoanalysis, sociology and semiotics with professional competence as a historian, thus continually broadening the reach of his academic investigations. From 1978 he lectured in religious and cultural anthropology at the University of California in San Diego. In 1984 he was elected to a post at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris and began to teach a seminar entitled, 'The Historical Anthropology of Beliefs in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', but this was cut short by his death at the age of 63. Among his most important works are *La prise du parole* (1968; English, *The Capture of Speech*, 1997); *L'étranger ou l'union dans la différence* (1969); *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (1975; English, *The Writing of History*, 1988); *L'Invention du quotidien* (2 vols, 1980 and 1994; English, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984 and 1998); *La Fable mystique* (2 vols, 1982 and 2013; English, *The Mystic Fable*, 1992 and 2015); *La Faiblesse de croire* (posthumous, 1987; English, *The Weakness of Believing*); *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction* (posthumous, 1987); *Le Christianisme éclaté* (1974); *La Culture au pluriel* (1974; English, *Culture in the Plural*, 1997).

of the guide who taught him how to live. But such a study must also do justice to the way in which the very life of Certeau can be judged to be an ‘interpretation’ of that teaching—something like the performance of a great musical score by a virtuoso.

The Traits of a Spirituality

The fundamental characteristic, always present, is the optimism—so typically Ignatian—with which Certeau looked upon human beings and their history, upon the whole of creation and society, in spite of so many failures and horrors. In the eyes of Ignatius the human being is not corrupted by original sin, contrary to what the followers of Luther and Jansen may have thought. It is only wounded. The world is the home of God. All human beings, and Jesuits in particular, should feel themselves ‘at home’ (as Jerónimo Nadal used to say: ‘The world is our home’). Much work has to be done to make this house habitable for everyone. One must roll up one’s sleeves and not be afraid to get one’s cassock dirty. And this is how the colleges, the missions, the reductions in Paraguay, the involvement in intellectual and social questions will appear—despite all the ambiguities that historians will be all too ready to point out.

Certeau was a constant traveller in space and in time. A trait that marked him out was his *gout de l’autre*,² something he noted as true of any historian: the passion to know the other. Nothing human was foreign to him—least of all, of course, the foreigner. All those who had contact with Certeau—those who attended his innumerable seminars, both formal and informal, and who visited him



Michel de Certeau

² Perhaps ‘delight in knowing others’ captures something of this French expression. [Tr]

as research graduates in the flat where he began to live after 1974 (following the example of his first ‘boss’, Maurice Giuliani, the editor of *Christus*)—all were struck by the positive way in which he saw everyone, his benevolence, his ability to listen and respect, his willingness to help and the ease with which he would share his immense knowledge. As his *The Practice of Everyday Life* clearly shows, he could see with new eyes the ‘common people’, traditionally regarded as nothing more than sheep-like consumers by sociologists and those who formulate economic policies. Certeau, however, found in that raw material unsuspected skills in the art of clearing a path of self-determination through the dense undergrowth of social pressures.

‘Le monde est bon. Je bénirai la vie’ (The world is good. I shall bless life).³ Certeau may not have quoted *A Season in Hell*, but at a time when the university was dominated by existentialism, by various versions of Marxism and by multiple forms, more or less sophisticated, of a weary nihilism, he never believed that hell was others and the world. On the contrary, he believed with all his soul the exact opposite, like Master Ignatius—as had been revealed to him by Henri de Lubac, when Certeau was a student of theology in Lyon.

The Delight of Freedom: The Spiritual Exercises

At the heart of a Jesuit vocation lie the Spiritual Exercises. They are the codification by Ignatius of his personal experience while at Loyola and Manresa. His *Autobiography* describes that experience, while the book of the Exercises spells out the process and thus make it available so that others may profit from it. Like all Jesuits, Certeau had made the full thirty-day retreat on two occasions. Then, after his tertianship,⁴ he spent a year, 1960–1961, at a retreat centre, Villa Manrèse, in Clamart (on the outskirts of Paris), giving the exercises to others. Some of his articles in *Christus* are proof that, not content with making and giving the Exercises, he had also thought deeply about them. For him, as was the case for most of the Jesuits of his generation—and indeed of later generations—the way in which the Exercises were conceived had been formulated by the philosopher Gaston Fessard. His book *La Dialectique des Exercices Spirituels* (‘The Dialectic of the Spiritual Exercises’),⁵ was published in

³ Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell and Les Illuminations*, with parallel English translation by Bernard Matthieu (New York: BOA, 1991 [1873]), 14.

⁴ This is an additional year in Jesuit spiritual training inserted after the final year of studies. [Tr]

⁵ Available in a Spanish translation (Colección Manresa, 2010), but not in English. [Tr]

1956, the same year in which Certeau was ordained a priest, and two years after the foundation of *Christus* by Maurice Giuliani.

Fessard had greatly renovated the way in which the Jesuits thought of the Exercises. Since the seventeenth century most saw in them a school of prayer or of union with God. Some in the twentieth century thought they were primarily a training session for 'the service of the Church'. But Fessard suggested that they were in the first place a school for freedom (*une école de liberté*), for at the heart of the Exercises—their real *raison d'être*—is placed the 'election', which has to be understood as a free choice—as free at least as is possible given the actual circumstances in which it is made. The Exercises help a person to make a free choice of life. At the end, the retreatant can say, *It is I who have made this choice, I who have wanted it, quite freely*. And such a person can also say, *It is God who has wanted this in me*, because freedom is precisely this: to want as God wants. The French Jesuits—and also other Jesuits—took over wholeheartedly this view of the Exercises as a process, a 'way of proceeding', that enables the birth of the free act. It has become standard and a part of the common patrimony of Jesuits in France and everywhere.

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There are two articles of Certeau that bear witness to this understanding. In the March issue of *Christus* for 1957, an article appeared with the title, 'Les Lendemains de la décision. La "confirmation"' ('The aftermath of a decision: "confirmation"').⁶ Here he outlines the temptations that may threaten someone who has made an election, a person referred to by him, significantly, as 'the chosen'. Certeau applies this title both to the retreatant, and also, before him or her, to Jesus himself immediately after his baptism.

While 1957 was the year in which the first articles by Certeau appeared in *Christus*, the last one was published in 1973: 'LEspace du désir' ('The space for desire').⁷ This was a magnificent commentary on the 'Principle and Foundation' (Exx 23). Here can be found the first signs of many of the great themes which would emerge in *The Mystic Fable* ten years later. In the first place there is 'desire', which is called to escape from narrow limits and from clinging adhesion in order to take on the form of a divine 'indifference'—proper to a God who is 'always greater'. And to become 'indifferent' the human will must in the first place want

⁶ *Christus*, 14 (March 1957), 187–205.

⁷ *Christus*, 77 (January 1973), 118–128.

to be so. 'To ask for what I want': the retreatant is invited to do this at the start of each period of meditation. Here one wants to want nothing or, more precisely, to *prefer* nothing. The will cannot be magnetized simply by what the person alone wants. That must come about thanks to the *affectus* (or the movements) which are the irruptions of God's will into the human will. Thanks to the discernment that takes place over several days it becomes possible to establish a new order where before there was disorder.

On the threshold of the Exercises, the 'Principle and Foundation' (Exx 23) inaugurates a break with regard to all that has gone before. This cut-off point is the frontier of a space which allows '*that* to speak' [*que ça parle*]. The condition that makes possible the new communication is not one of satisfaction or repletion; on the contrary it is a non-possession, a break, an absence. Moreover, all the zigzags that desire must negotiate in the following weeks—the preambles, compositions of place, colloquies, imaginative evocations of events, applications of the senses—all these 'operations' have no other purpose than to make it possible for the desire to be able to speak. The Exercises are not a list of truths to be considered, but a succession of steps to be taken and of discernments to be made. The organizing principle running through the Exercises is the word spoken by the other in order to enable a choice, an election. 'The text works as a waiting for the other, a space marked out by desire.'⁸ The aim is that there may be room for the other. This 'other' is, in the first place, the one who guides, and that person steps aside for the retreatant, who in turn steps aside for the desire that comes from the other.

It was necessary to emphasize the Principle and Foundation of the Exercises, as this is the foundation that makes the Exercises what they are. There can be no doubt that they were for Michel de Certeau the place where he was able to be born from on high. Like Pierre Favre (who, according to Ignatius, was the one who gave the Exercises best), he heard there the voice that was calling him to be born to freedom and to help others to tune their ears to that voice. The trait that most impressed people with Certeau, one that scandalized them at times and always intrigued them, was the sensation he gave of a calm freedom of being. Far from being a safe conformist, he could rarely be found where one expected.

⁸ Certeau, 'L'Espace du désir', 127.

'To Find God in All Things'

How is one to be always free enough 'to find God in all things'? Certeau had his own way of understanding the so-called Ignatian motto (though in fact the formula has a much older history dating back to Eckhart and Ruusbroec). God was for him, as for St Augustine, a reality that cannot be found. Given that God is not confined to heaven but present in everything, one can never end up finding God. To be more precise, to 'find', in this case, is to be seeking 'ever more', which means 'ever more universally'. There is a continual relaunching of desire, because God is a love constantly at work in the world. At least, that is how the final contemplation 'how to attain love', added to the Fourth Week, presents God.

In an outstanding article⁹ published in April 1966, Certeau pointed out that there must always be a tension in every Jesuit—a follower of Ignatius who struggles to live according to the *Constitutions* of the order founded by Ignatius, the text that is effectively the second pillar of Ignatian wisdom—between the call of the Spirit (found in one's 'intention') and the objective reality of the mission entrusted, with the particular conditions required to carry it out. The examination of conscience and the account of conscience (made by talking to one's superior) are means to harmonize the two elements. Over all, any particular apostolic enterprise is thought of primarily by Ignatius as a relationship, a constant conversation carried on with God and with others. A perfect example of the ideal Jesuit is Pierre Favre.

So far we have been pencilling in a rough sketch of how Certeau made the spirituality of St Ignatius his own. This points to the way in which such a spirituality can be brought to life by any Christian, for the Exercises are available to everyone. However, as there has been mention of the *Constitutions* of the Jesuit order, we may reasonably ask what sort of Jesuit Certeau really was.

A Jesuit Way of Being

It is something of a paradox, but it is in his writings dedicated to the Christian condition and experience in general that Certeau delineates, lightly but unmistakably, what was the 'style' of being proper to him as a Jesuit.

⁹ 'L'Universalisme ignatien: mystique et mission', *Christus*, 50 (April 1966), 173–183.

Going Out and Moving Around

At the heart of the Exercises, just when the election is taking place, the retreatant is exhorted to bear in mind 'that a person will make progress in things of the spirit to the degree to which they *go out* of self-love, self-will, and self-interest' (Exx 189).¹⁰ The expression 'go out of self-love' is unusual. And yet, there is no spiritual adventure that does not begin by an exodus, starting with that of Abraham. Certeau makes frequent mention in his writings of the father of all believers. Everything begins with a going-out from oneself, which is never definitive but has to be constantly renewed. Each has to go out from self, from the childhood home and from familiar ways, in order to come face to face with the 'other', the stranger, the one who upsets, troubles and, at times, intimidates. That is the price one has to pay if one's existence is to be fruitful.¹¹



However, it is not enough to go out and meet people, to enter into conversation and *conversar*. One also has to move around, travel, survey, never be at rest.¹² For Certeau, the other guardian figure along with Abraham is the 'Pilgrim', found in the Ignatian autobiography. Once Ignatius had recovered from his wound and could walk again, he set off. His wanderings were to last twenty years. Only at the end of the route did he find his goal, the place where God wanted him to be: Rome. But even then, the journey had not ended: during the sixteen years left to him of life, Ignatius did not cease to travel in spirit along with his sons, whom he would send to the four quarters of the world while keeping up with them an epistolary *conversar* as closely as possible. As he writes in the *Constitutions*, 'our vocation is to travel through the world and to live in any part of it whatsoever where there is hope of greater service to God and of help of souls' (III.2.G [304]). It is not necessary to spend one's life in aeroplanes in order to fulfil this vocation. Certeau limited

¹⁰ My translation. In place of 'go out' (a literal rendering of the Spanish original, *salíere*), many translations paraphrase: 'divest themselves' (English of Ivens), 'sera depouillé' (French of Jean-Claude Guy), 'hij zich losmaakt' (Dutch of Mark Rotsaert). [Tr]

¹¹ Joseph Moingt, 'Une théologie de l'exil', in *Michel de Certeau ou la différence chrétienne*, edited by Claude Geffré (Paris: Cerf, 1991).

¹² Stanislas Breton, 'Le Pèlerin, voyageur et marcheur', in *Le Voyage mystique. Michel de Certeau*, edited by Luce Giard (Paris: Cerf, 1988).

his own travels basically to North and South America. The travelling that Ignatius had in mind was mainly cultural and spiritual. Here also, Certeau was a Jesuit after Ignatius' own heart. He was anything but a stick-in-the-mud. His published works are proof that he was a great hiker, ready to explore new paths of knowledge, stretching into different epochs, cultures and societies. So much so, that others had difficulty in keeping up with him: where is he? Who is he? What is he really thinking?¹³

The subtitle given by François Dosse to his biography of Certeau is *Le Marcheur blessé* ('The Wounded Walker').¹⁴ Just as much as the limping Ignatius, Certeau was also *Der cherubinischer Wandersmann* ('The Cherubic Pilgrim') imagined by the seventeenth-century mystic poet Angelus Silesius. It is with an evocation of him that Certeau finishes *La Fable mystique*. The often quoted comment by Certeau is:

The mystic is someone who cannot stop walking and who, quite certain of what is lacking, knows that whatever may be found in a place, it is not *that* for which one searches, so that one cannot settle down and be happy with *that*. The desire creates an excess. One has to go further, to some other place.¹⁵

Some have thought they could see here a self-portrait of the author as mystic. And that is true enough! The key element here is desire. It is the character of desire to be mystical. Certeau had the grace—thanks, no doubt, to St Augustine, Ignatius, Freud and Lacan—to recognise this fact. The truth is that, however little one may be aware of it, the world is full of mysticism and of mystics. And Certeau himself, as one has to admit, was one of them, but that is not the point.

Life Common to All

There are some pages by Certeau, among the clearest that he ever wrote, that give a clue to what was the mystery at the heart of his life and of his enterprises. In the first place, there is the short text entitled 'L'Étranger' ('The Stranger') which opens his work, *L'Étranger ou l'union dans la différence*.¹⁶ The experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus triggers

¹³ For a brief and suggestive evocation of his spiritual journey, see Luce Giard, 'Searching for God', introduction to the new edition of *La Faiblesse de croire* (Paris: Seuil, 2003 [1987]).

¹⁴ François Dosse, *Michel de Certeau. Le Marcheur blessé* (Paris: La Découverte, 2000).

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau, *La Fable mystique*, volume 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 411.

¹⁶ An English title might be 'The Stranger, or the Union in the Difference', but this work has not been translated into English so far. [Tr] Along with Certeau's edition of the *Mémorial* of St Pierre Favre, it is a work familiar to Pope Francis.

a meditation on the other; the desire for the other; and the Christian adventure in so far as it revolves around a God who is always other, taking place in a community of brothers and sisters which is called to go out of itself in order really to be itself. A Christian can only be a Christian in relation to someone. He or she has constantly to link up with, and repair ties with, other human beings, especially with those who do not recognise themselves as Christians.

Another text, much longer, has the title 'L'Expérience spirituelle' ('The Spiritual Experience').¹⁷ It develops the theme of relationship-with-the-other that is central to the overall vision of Certeau. It is possible to summarise it (though too briefly and in far too abstract a way) by saying that each individual, each group, and each community in history,

... finds its *meaning* only in relation to that which it is *not*, and basically in relation with God. This 'nothing without' is presented already in a certain sense by Jesus when he says: I am *nothing without* my Father and I am nothing without you, my brethren, or without a future that is unknown to me. Each of us is capable, to some extent, and in however modest a way, of being open to the infinite, by this conjunction with others (something indefinite) and with God (the infinite). Constantly, the infinite is that which we both receive and lack, that about which we cannot *not* speak, but which also condemns us.¹⁸

The infinite, the absolute, the unconditional is not to be sought in some inaccessible empyrean nor in some exceptional experience. It is present around us in all that is commonplace, it permeates in mysterious fashion all our relations, our space, the very differences that divide us and hold us fast without our really knowing where all that is leading us. The umbrella term or subtitle that Certeau uses for this situation is '*la vie commune*' ('life common to all'). He took this phrase from the fourteenth-century Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec, and it refers not to life in community, but to 'ordinary' existence in so far as it knows itself to be permeated by 'that Other ... which is ever missing', quite beyond and quite distinct from any sensation or particular feeling,¹⁹ and also in so far as that 'life common to all' is the very opposite of a solitary life. That is how Certeau understood mystic existence, the mystic dimension of existence, for himself and for others.

¹⁷ *Christus*, 68 (October 1970), 488–498; Luce Giard reprints it as an introduction to her new edition of *L'Étranger* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991).

¹⁸ *L'Étranger*, 10.

¹⁹ *L'Étranger*, 11.

It is quite obvious that this is not the terminology of Ignatius of Loyola. Nevertheless, it points to the sort of experience that is evident in the apostolic pragmatism which characterizes Ignatius' letters and the *Constitutions* of the Jesuit Order, and which is also present in the pages that remain of his *Spiritual Diary*.

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These few thoughts are far from delineating all the inspiration that Ignatian spirituality and Ignatian tradition gave to Certeau. More needs to be said about the reflections he published on the relationship that exists between an individual or an institution and a particular tradition. The ideas outlined by him in an article for *Christus* in 1966, 'L'Épreuve du temps' ('The Test of Time'), allow one to understand the often disconcerting way in which Certeau claimed fidelity with the Church of Rome and the Society of Jesus. They also help to dissipate erroneous views about his notion of a '*rupture instauratrice*' ('creative break') and of the coolness shown towards him by Henri de Lubac. Certeau always wanted himself to be recognised as a grateful disciple of de Lubac, but one wishing in turn to follow him in his creativity.²⁰

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²⁰ Help for the terminology in this translation came from *The Certeau Reader*, edited by Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). [Tr]