

‘THE MORE UNIVERSAL ... THE MORE DIVINE’

Ruminating on an Enigmatic Dictum

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DECISION-MAKING LIES AT THE HEART of Ignatian spirituality. In making the Spiritual Exercises a person is led through a process of discernment that culminates in an election (choice, decision).¹ The *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* are built around part VII, where Ignatius offers detailed criteria for making the most fruitful decision regarding the sending (missioning) of a Jesuit into the vineyard of the Lord. Not all these criteria are of equal weight or always applicable. One on its own is never sufficient. What usually happens is that a combination of criteria has to be brought to bear on any particular sending. However, there is one over-arching criterion or norm (*regla*) that Ignatius expects the ‘one who sends’ to observe. It is non-negotiable.

To proceed more successfully in this sending of [Jesuits] to one place or another, one should keep the greater service of God and the more universal good before his eyes as the norm to hold oneself on the right course (*Constitutions*, VII.2.D[622]a).

It is worth highlighting that Ignatius refers to a norm (singular), even though there might seem to be two norms involved: the greater service of God and the more universal good. This is no grammatical error or editorial slip-up but a clear declaration that, in Ignatius’ mind, we are dealing with one reality which he expresses through the use of synonyms. The greater service of God is the more universal good; the more universal good is the greater service of God.

The weight of this assertion may not be immediately obvious unless a person is familiar with its many presuppositions. In the case of Ignatius these are based on his theocentric world-view and his conviction that

¹ See Exx 169–189 on making an election.

God is, in very essence, *Deus semper maior* (the Ever-Greater God).² This is the God who, while remaining Wholly Other, reveals Godself throughout the history of the People of Israel and, quintessentially, in the incarnation of God's Son, Jesus.³ This is the God with whom a retreatant fosters a deep relationship during the Spiritual Exercises through a prayerful immersion in the scriptures.

A little further on, introducing the fourth of the more specific criteria for choice, Ignatius makes the magisterial statement: 'The more universal the good is, the more is it divine' (*Constitutions*, VII.2.D [622]d).⁴ Is this claim a reiteration of the earlier formulation, but with a rhetorical flourish? Does 'more divine' simply mean that the more universal good leads to 'the greater service of God'? If so Ignatius, in this reworking of his earlier statement, is saying nothing new. Most commentators seem to take this for granted and offer little or no further reflection on its meaning. But it is at least worth questioning this assumption.

We might enquire, for example, whether Ignatius is adding a new dimension to the earlier formulation. Might he be conveying an insight which, while doubtless similar, is yet subtly different? And, most intriguingly of all, might he be implying something more 'mystical'? At the very least he has moved from referring to the greater service of God (a relatively comprehensible idea) to claiming that the more universal good is, in some sense, divine (which is a more baffling concept, maybe even an enigma). And why does he put forward this theological viewpoint as introduction to the fourth criterion and not before in the list of criteria as a whole? There is more than enough material on which we can ruminate!

The More Universal the Good Is ...

The conclusion that Ignatius draws from this principle that 'The more universal the good is, the more is it divine' reads:

Hence preference ought to be given to persons and places which, once benefited themselves, are a cause of extending the good to many others who are under their influence or take guidance from them.

² See Brian O'Leary, 'Foundational Values in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius', *Milltown Studies*, 33 (Spring 1994), 5–21. Especially relevant is the section entitled 'A Theocentric Worldview Open to Humanism', 9–13. Also 'Fostering a Contemplative Stance: An Ignatian Exploration', *The Way*, 55/2 (April 2016), 17–26.

³ In technical terms the God of Ignatius is simultaneously transcendent and immanent.

⁴ It is difficult not to suspect that Ignatius is quoting a well-established dictum rather than composing it himself. But, since he has made it his own, this does not affect our understanding of the text.

This is further clarified by what follows.

The spiritual aid which is given to important and public persons ought to be regarded as more important, since it is a more universal good. This is true whether these persons are laymen such as princes, lords, magistrates, or administrators of justice, or whether they are clerics such as prelates. This holds true also of spiritual aid given to persons who are distinguished for learning and authority, for the same reason of the good being more universal. (*Constitutions*, VII. 2. D [622] d)

Ignatius is here invoking the criterion that, in today’s terminology, can be called the *multiplier effect*. This is both a logical and a pragmatic principle, although its espousal has often left the Jesuits open to the charge of elitism.⁵ But within Ignatius’ late medieval world-view and value system, both of which were expressed and even validated by the hierarchical structuring of society, this criterion made perfect sense.⁶ A concrete example will illustrate this.

When Diego Miró, and subsequently Luís Gonçaves da Câmara, were asked to be confessors at the court of King John III of Portugal in 1553, they declined. Their motives were partly a concern that their own spiritual well-being would be endangered by a life at court, and partly a desire to maintain the Society’s commitment to refuse all civil and ecclesiastical honours. Having been informed of these developments, Ignatius wrote to Miró saying: ‘Certainly,



John III of Portugal, by Cristóvão Lopes, c.1545

⁵ Elitism was one of the accusations levelled against the Jesuits at the time of the Suppression. It still arises in discussions about fee-paying schools, whether run by Jesuits or others.

⁶ A brief but helpful discussion of the charge of elitism is found in Barton T. Geger, ‘What Magis Really Means and Why It Matters’, *Jesuit Higher Education*, 1/2 (2012), 16–31, at 27.

I myself, when I consider your motives, grounded on humility and safety, which are better found in lowliness than in prominence, can only approve, and be edified by your intention. However ...' He then proceeded to explain why he disagreed with their decision and ordered them to accept the role they had been offered. Among the reasons supporting his standpoint he noted:

Then, if we look to the universal good and God's greater service, these will, so far as I can perceive in the Lord, ensue more strongly from this. For the good of the head is shared by all the body's members, and the good of the sovereign by all his subjects, so that spiritual benefit given to the sovereign should be rated above that which might be given to others.⁷

The core principle invoked here, that 'the good of the head is shared by all the body's members', reappears in the context of the Society itself and its Superior General. In describing the leadership qualities needed by this person Ignatius insists,

... that he should be closely united with God our Lord and have familiarity with him in prayer and in all his operations, so that from him, the fountain of all good, he may so much the better obtain for the whole body of the Society a large share of his gifts and graces, as well as great power and effectiveness for all the means to be employed for the help of souls (*Constitutions*, IX.2.1 [723]).⁸

The Ignatian Understanding of de arriba

An oft-used expression of Ignatius is *de arriba* (from above). This is a polyvalent turn of phrase, being simultaneously imaginative and theological. It is a central component in his understanding of reality and is rooted in his theocentric *Weltanschauung*. It declares that all blessings and graces descend on the created world from God. The clearest expression of this scenario is in the fourth point of the Contemplation to Attain Love: 'how all good things and gifts descend from above ... just as the rays come down from the sun, or the rains from their source' (Exx 237).

⁷ Ignatius of Loyola, *Letters and Instructions*, edited by Martin E. Palmer, John W. Padberg and John L. McCarthy (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 410.

⁸ These ideas are more fully discussed in Brian O'Leary, *Sent into the Lord's Vineyard: Exploration in the Jesuit Constitutions* (Oxford: Way Books, 2012), 136–143.

More specially, Ignatius favoured this phrase, *de arriba*, when he wanted to stress that something is *pure gift*, entirely beyond the capacity of the human person to bring about, contribute to, or in any way prepare for. Even when the phrase is not explicitly used it is possible to intuit its meaning embedded in many texts. This is prototypically true of his teaching on ‘consolation without a preceding cause’ which ‘only God our Lord can give the soul’. Although not directly relevant to the topic of this article it is worth quoting here.

For it is the prerogative of the Creator alone to enter the soul, depart from it, and cause a motion in it which draws the whole person into love of His Divine Majesty. By ‘without [a preceding] cause’ I mean without any previous perception or understanding of some object by means of which the consolation just mentioned might have been stimulated, through the intermediate activity of the person’s acts of understanding and willing. (Exx 330)

But consolation ‘with cause’ can also be considered as *de arriba* in a broader sense of the term.

From the Personal to the Corporate

Already we will have noticed how Ignatius’ thinking on this issue (essentially one of how God relates with us) embraces communities as well as individuals. In his teaching on the maintenance of union in the Society of Jesus he expounds how God’s love ‘will descend from the Divine Goodness and spread to all other persons, and particularly to the body of the Society’ (*Constitutions*, VIII.1.8 [671]). He implies a direct gift-bearing and life-giving contact between God and the ‘body’. The principle of *de arriba* continues to operate in this corporate setting just as it had done for the individual in the *Spiritual Exercises*. But there is a significant difference, and this is where the person of the leader is crucial.

Grace, ultimately from God, is now mediated by the head to the members of the body. This can be seen to apply, not only to the Society of Jesus, but to all religious or ecclesiastical bodies, and to political bodies as well. Ignatius, in this teaching, is not denying the immediate giving of grace by God to individuals, but is indicating a further dimension to the economy of grace. God does not operate *either* immediately or mediately, but *both* immediately and mediately. This understanding of God’s working in the world allows Ignatius to hold that grace can be mediated by the monarch to his or her subjects, by the Pope to all Christians, and by the Superior General to all Jesuits.

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This, in turn, is the basis for Ignatius' teaching that the good of the monarch, or of the Superior General, or of anyone holding authority, will bring about the more universal good among God's people. Ignatius' political philosophy and his theology of Church influence each other and are in fundamental harmony. This is why the charge of elitism levelled against his insistence on the priority of ministry to those in positions of authority (which, as we will see, he extends to those wielding influence for other reasons) is anachronistic. Within his *Weltanschauung* it was no more than a reasonable and wise criterion which was meant to benefit the masses (*aiudar a las almas*). Ignatius always had the whole world in view.

It is, of course, possible to disagree with Ignatius' underlying assumptions about the nature and dynamics of society (Church or state), as many philosophers and theologians today certainly would. Indeed, few Jesuits, if any, would regard being confessor to a monarch (or even a president) as the most effective way of evangelizing in the postmodern world. And even apart from this extreme example, most recognise a need for a re-evaluation of the criterion that 'the spiritual aid which is given to important and public persons ought to be regarded as more important, since it is a more universal good'. The criterion certainly needs to be modified, but does it have to be totally abandoned? As I have written elsewhere:

[Yet] in spite of the difference between this mindset [of Ignatius] and that of a democratic and more egalitarian society, the principle of the greater multiplying effect is still valid. There are always people who, either because of their own worth, or the position and authority they hold, have a much wider influence than others do. There are those on the national or world stage whose opinions are respected, whose lifestyle is imitated, who become role models (especially for the young). If such people are evangelized and openly live by the gospel message, many others will be reached and drawn to Christ.⁹

But it is not only important and influential *persons* that Ignatius seeks to target, but important and influential *places* as well. A Jesuit presence in them can also produce a greater good.

For that same reason, too, preference ought to be shown to the aid which is given to large nations such as the Indies, or to important

⁹ O'Leary, *Sent into the Lord's Vineyard*, 101.

cities, or to universities, which are generally attended by numerous persons who, if aided themselves, can become labourers for the help of others (*Constitutions*, VII. 2. D [622] e).

The criterion of the more universal good explains why Ignatius, and Jesuits after him, have always been drawn to areas with large populations and to centres of learning. Here will be found ‘numerous persons’ (not necessarily all!) who, having themselves benefited by the ministries of the Society, will then pass on to others the fruits of their ‘being aided’. Some of these will be highly educated and hence more able to articulate their faith. ‘Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.’ (1 Peter 3: 15) The good news of Jesus Christ, the joy of the gospel, will thus be spread more and more widely. All this demonstrates how the principle of the multiplier effect applies, not only to evangelizing persons, but to evangelizing places as well.¹⁰

... the More Is It Divine

We have seen that most commentators believe this phrase means that the more universal good leads to, or is the equivalent of, ‘the greater service of God’. Parmananda Divarkar offers such an interpretation in his Indian version of the *Constitutions*.¹¹ His translation (or rather paraphrase?) reads: ‘The more widespread the good we do, the better it fits into God’s plan’. This is unimpeachable as a theological statement but does it correspond to the original? Does it not weaken what Ignatius wrote in an effort to modernise and simplify the language? Reductionist is a word that comes to mind. Ignatius is surely voicing a more comprehensive claim for what is universal than limiting it to ‘the good we do’? And is he not making a more profound statement than that the greater (or ‘more widespread’) good we do simply fits better into God’s plan?

Ignatius is not limiting, or indeed personalising, ‘the good’ in this way. He is enunciating a general, even a metaphysical, truth. His application of

¹⁰ The oft-quoted anonymous Latin couplet admirably catches the spirit of this criterion as well as identifying the distinctive spiritualities to be found in religious life:

*Bernardus colles, valles Benedictus amabat,
oppida Franciscus, magnas Ignatius urbes.*

Bernard loved the hills, Benedict the valleys.
Francis the towns, Ignatius great cities.

¹¹ *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, Annotated and Complemented by General Congregation 34* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1996), 160.

that truth to the Society's choice of ministries becomes the criterion of the multiplier effect. But this remains a practical, partial, even though fully justifiable, application. The original, deeper meaning of *quanto universalius ... tanto divinius* remains unexplained.

The God of Ignatius

It may help if we broaden our approach and examine, however briefly, Ignatius' idea of God and of the good. The Gospels, with which he was so familiar, provide an obvious starting point. What was Ignatius especially drawn to in their pages? In the Second Week of the Exercises he suggests that the retreatant take for prayer the text of the Sermon on the Mount (Exx 278). The Third Point he offers as an aid in this exercise makes reference to the following gospel passage:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:43–45)

We learn who God is from how God acts. If God is not discriminatory in bestowing the gift of rain, neither is God discriminatory in any other exercise of love. On the contrary, God's love is all-inclusive, universal in its outreach and unconditional. This love exemplifies the truth expressed



The Sermon on the Mount, by Cosimo Roselli, c.1500, Sistine Chapel

in the well-known axiom of scholastic philosophy: *bonum est diffusivum sui*. Goodness (or 'the good'), of its very nature, spreads itself out, shares what it is. It cannot do otherwise. If goodness were to hoard its own treasure, or wrap itself up in a narcissistic pose, it would not be goodness. It would be self-contradictory, counterfeit, a satanic deception. It would be displaying what is 'characteristic of the evil angel, who takes on the appearance of an angel of light' (Exx 332).

God, according to Christian theology, is the Supreme Good. So God always acts as goodness must (*diffusivum sui*). Ignatius understood this, not only from his reading of the Gospel, but from his mystical experiences. He conveyed his conviction explicitly in the Contemplation to Attain Love:

I will ponder with deep affection how much God our Lord has done for me, and how much he has given me of what he possesses, and consequently how he, the same Lord, desires to give me even his very self, in accordance with his divine design (Exx 234).

There is a totality of giving on God's side which invites a reciprocal totality of giving on the side of the retreatant ('Take, Lord, and receive ...'). This giving of oneself is intentionally and ultimately to God, but it will be mediated through the giving of oneself in love and service to other persons. We are called to honour the incarnational principle. Such is, in summary, the central point of Jesus' teaching on the Final Judgment in Matthew 25:21–46.

Returning to the Sermon on the Mount, a few verses after the quotation drawn on above, Jesus says, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48). How is our heavenly Father perfect? In the universalism of His goodness and love! We then are to be like our Father in the universalism of *our* love for all people and for the whole of creation. There is to be nothing constricting in our vision or discriminatory in our choices. On the contrary, we are called to expand constantly the scope of our love and the 'diffusion' of our goodness. In this way we will become more like our Heavenly Father in *His* perfection.

The Contemplation on the Incarnation (Exx 101–109) is a further example of how Ignatius appropriated this teaching of Jesus and showed us his image of God. The scriptural teaching is now expressed in a vivid, imaginative manner that yet conveys deep theological insights. Ignatius proposes to the retreatant:

I will see and consider the three Divine Persons, seated, so to speak, on the royal canopied throne of Their Divine Majesty. They are gazing on the whole face and circuit of the earth; and they see all the peoples in such great blindness, and how they are dying and going down to hell Likewise I will hear what the Divine Persons are saying, that is, 'Let us work the redemption of the human race'. (Exx 106–107)

We note especially phrases such as 'the *whole* face and circuit of the earth', and '*all* the peoples', as well as 'the redemption of *the human race*' (not certain individuals or even some chosen groups). The stress is on the universality of the divine project which is itself a revelation of who God (the Divine Persons) is in Godself.

The fourth point in the Contemplation to Attain Love was already mentioned when examining the Ignatian term *de arriba*. The first three points portray God as the Giver of gifts (Exx 234), as dwelling in me and in all creatures (Exx 235), and as active and labouring in me and in all creatures (Exx 236). The fourth point introduces something quite new and even mystical.

I will consider how all good things and gifts descend from above; for example, my limited power from the Supreme and Infinite Power above; and so of justice, goodness, piety, mercy, and so forth—just as the rays come down from the sun, or the rains from their source (Exx 237).

This affirms that our limited goodness is flowing into us from God (*de arriba*). But it is affirming much more. In this perspective our limited goodness participates in the infinite goodness of God. We are good through our participation in God.¹² Hence our goodness can, at least analogously, be called divine. And since God's goodness is universalist of its essence, our human goodness is divine through its participation in the universalist goodness of God. Hence, to choose always the greater good is to deepen this participation or, in other words, to grow more and more into the image and likeness of our Creator God (see Genesis 1:26).¹³

¹² 'Thus he has given us ... his precious and very great promises so that ... (you) may become participants of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4). See too the words spoken by the priest at every celebration of the Eucharist: 'By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity'.

¹³ Further exploration might link these reflections with the eastern doctrine of divinisation.

The US Jesuit theologian Michael J. Buckley addressed these themes in an article, often considered a classic, on the Contemplation to Attain Love. In this extract he focuses on the transition between the first three Points of this exercise and the fourth.

Everything speaks of God as it resembles him, and calls back to God as the image calls back to its reality. This is to catch some glimpse of Who is giving, Who is present, Who is working and labouring for men. The transition of this point is from the acts of God to the reality of God in himself, a shift made possible because things are not only gifts and holy and sacred history—they are participations in his nature. It reveals how interior God is, and how everything exterior flows from within him. All that is done, everything that is made, is not called from the outside by some sort of pressure; it is the spontaneous result of his own inner richness and goodness. His doing is of his being.¹⁴

Coda

‘The more universal the good is, the more is it divine.’ The ruminations in these pages may not have provided a definitive explanation of this enigmatic dictum, but they have highlighted some issues that it raises and offered suggestions for a way forward. I have presumed that the dictum was most likely quoted rather than composed by Ignatius. But quoted from what source? Where did Ignatius find it (or where did Polanco find it)? Scholars have failed to identify any writing from the Christian tradition in which it appears.

The nearest they have come is a passage in a lesser-known work of Thomas Aquinas. This, at least, expressed views similar to those we find in the Ignatian text. Aquinas stated: ‘Furthermore, the human mind knows universal good through understanding, and desires it through will: but *universal good is not found except in God*’.¹⁵ Ignatius may well have read this work of Aquinas (it was better known in his day) while a student at the University of Paris. The passage quoted would have brought him to a clearer understanding, or affirmed his own intuition, of the relationship

¹⁴ Michael J. Buckley, ‘The Contemplation to Attain Love’, *The Way Supplement*, 24 (Spring 1975), 92–104, here 103.

¹⁵ St Thomas Aquinas, *De regimine principum*, translated by Gerald B. Phelan (Toronto: Institute of Mediaeval Studies, and London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1938), 71 (my emphasis). This text deals with the education of a prince destined to rule.

between the universal good and the 'divine'. It was only a small step further to realising how this relationship could convert into a criterion for the choice of ministries or, in today's language, into apostolic discernment.

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