

THE TWO STANDARDS AND IGNATIAN LEADERSHIP

Nikolaas Sintobin

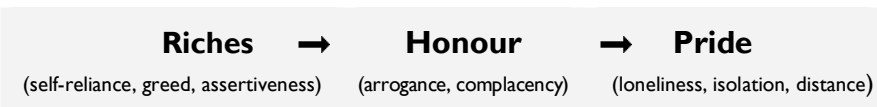
IN HIS MEDITATION on the Two Standards, Ignatius offers us a way of reading two very different experiences. The meditation testifies to a refined understanding both of human psychology and of Christian spiritual experience. It is about two scales of values that we all recognise. The first one is very attractive, even though it represents the dynamics of evil. The second is not attractive at all at first glance. However, this is the one that leads us to Jesus.

The Dynamics of Evil

Evil is the power that wants to destroy human beings. The ‘enemy’ tries to isolate us from other people, to lock us up in ourselves and thus to draw us away from real life. Ignatius teaches us that the evil one likes to take the form of the angel of light (Exx 332). Under the disguise of the good, starting from something that is at first only good and therefore seems attractive, he eventually destroys us as human beings by destroying our relationships. This applies both to individuals and to communities. He does this in two ways.

The Path of Systematic Self-Overestimation

This first path seems attractive, at least at the beginning. We are spontaneously drawn to it. Ignatius distinguishes three steps here, each following from the last.



and it is the right answer. My students are really fortunate to have such a teacher. What a good thing for my colleagues that they are allowed to work with someone like me.

I am also a real gift for the diocese. I just hope they realise how lucky they are.

Fortunately for the whole organization, there is at least one person of my level and competence. How on earth would our community be able to function if I were not here ...? It is so good for our network that there is at least one work where everything is really in order: our planning, our personnel policy, the development of our vision They can at least take an example from us.

Actually I am more or less irreplaceable. And, in all modesty I just have to say that I owe it all in the first place to my own strength, talents, competence, creativity and work. Thank you very much, my God, that you have made me so good.

Thus we end up at the second stage, that of *honour*: everything derives from my own merit.

I owe everything to myself. It is because of my hard work and because of all the human and technical know-how I have developed. Meanwhile, the level of my colleagues, the other schools, the other retreat houses ... my goodness. They are friendly people. At least, most of them. They only do what they can. They do their best. You can't blame them for that. But, as I say, the level on which they operate leaves a lot to be desired. At the very least, I am a professional. The conclusion is simply evident: since I have, I know and I am more than the others, I am also better than the others.

This brings us to the third stage, that of *pride*. At my own level, in my role and in my sector, I start to regard myself as the centre of the world: the smartest, the best, the most interesting, the most efficient

To some extent, I'm a bit the one who keeps the school going. What would happen if I were ever to leave this place?!

What would happen to the community and to the province if they couldn't count on me? Luckily I can give some advice to our provincial from time to time. That way, he gets to hear something sensible now and then.

I am simply at the top of the pyramid and, in fact, even if I do not really want to admit it, I am looking down on the others. They have the right to exist. But I can't really work with them, let alone need them.

There is only one problem. At the top I am all alone. There is only room for one. That's me.

I don't need the opinion of my colleagues. My presentations are simply better than theirs. There is no need for me to listen to my students or my colleagues. They should listen to me as much as possible. The provincial has nothing to teach me. He just doesn't know what it's all about.

I am simply better; I know better. What could I learn from others? What could cooperation on an equal footing bring me? By the way, I have also noticed that they have now, in fact, become a bit frightened of me. People admire me, admittedly. But when I'm very honest, I find that they don't love me. They start to keep their distance.

I am well aware that there are still weaknesses in my way of working and in our organization. But I'd rather not talk about that; they don't matter much. I do realise that I don't always have the answer either. Some people refer to this as vulnerability. But it would be quite ludicrous if I showed that to my subordinates or colleagues. Besides, the attraction and persuasiveness of what I can and do know is so great that these imperfections no longer have any importance. Anyway, where could I go to for advice or help? I would embarrass my partners with difficult questions to which they do not know the answers.

A subtle form of this dynamic may mean that you can see it in sharp focus and clearly at work among others—colleagues, brothers—but, at the same time, you are firmly convinced that things are really different for you.

Ignatius likes to call the devil 'the enemy of human nature'. What is specific to human nature—as God wants it to be—is to be in relation, a relation of mutual respect and appreciation, living and working with others. This is exactly what the enemy, starting from the attractiveness of riches, has successfully destroyed.

The logic of wealth and pride has cut me off from others and destroyed my relationships. I am efficient and productive, very definitely. But on the inside I have become a hard, lonely and complacent being. As successful as I may seem to the outside world, at the bottom I am actually an unhappy person. I am the prisoner of my 'riches', which are so attractive; my 'treasures' have become my golden cage. I do feel somewhere that something is wrong. But I will not give up this deep secret for any money in the

world. My 'riches' have led me to hell in a sly way. All my good qualities have, in a sense, been perverted. Instead of opportunities they have become obstacles.

The Downward Spiral

The dynamics of evil can just as easily lead us into a downward spiral, of systematic self-underestimation and feelings of inferiority. This is the mirror image of the upward spiral. Ignatius does not speak explicitly about this. But, fundamentally, it is about the same thing: insisting too much on all kinds of richness, this time the *absence* of richness.

Denial of Self-Worth → Inferiority → Self-Destruction

Instead of considering yourself to be great, you believe yourself to be nothing. In your heart there is a voice that says:

I have nothing to offer, no special talents, I am not liked by my collaborators; I am simply too stupid, pedagogically a disaster, I stumble more than I speak, I have nothing to offer my pupils, let alone my colleagues. The mission I received from the provincial, that is just to keep me busy. They don't really know what to do with me, nor do I know myself. In community sharing or staff meetings I prefer to keep quiet rather than to speak nonsense. If it wasn't that I had a permanent contract, I would be sacked tomorrow. If the superiors had known what I really am, they would never have allowed me to start as a novice. I'm just not worth anything. When I compare my organization with the sister organizations of the other provinces, I feel like a small mosquito in front of an elephant.

Everything is stuck and every step is one too many. If, once in a while, things go well, then you can't really accept it any more. It must be an accident. A friendly comment from a colleague must be flattery. An encouraging word from the director cannot be sincere.

He simply understands what the problem is with me and so, at best, he felt sorry for me. It is simply the objective truth that I am an inferior being.

You are your own prisoner, locked up in your own dungeon, this time not made up of all your fantastic talents but of your limitations. You are the only one who has the key to unlock the prison cell, but the last thing you will do is use that key. Your feelings of inferiority have become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's just a small step from 'I can't do anything' to

'I'm nothing'. You consider yourself to be a superfluous, awkward, deadweight, isolated from others, without value or dignity.

This attitude is particularly prevalent among younger people. But adults, too, can get stuck in this logic. Thoughts of running away or quitting or even suicide—'I'm done with it'—are not far away any more. Here, too, evil conceals itself in the form of good. Your own disappearance or elimination from human society will give you and others peace and quiet. Here, too, relationship—that which defines us as human—is seriously disturbed, because of a distorted attitude towards 'riches', or rather their pretended absence. The enemy takes advantage of your vulnerability to destroy relationships here as well. You don't dare or can't ask for help. You sincerely believe that if you start to show your vulnerability to another person, all is lost. Now you are hiding behind a front The fear, the shame, the inferiority mean that you hardly dare enter into an open relationship with other people, let alone with God. Here too, as a human being, you are in danger of complete loss through an overvaluation of riches, this time in the variant of not having certain forms of riches.

The Dynamics of Good: The Dynamics of Jesus

The dynamics of evil tries to destroy our relationship with others and to make life impossible. The dynamics of good—the dynamics of the life Jesus teaches us to live—does exactly the opposite. Here, too, three stages can be distinguished. At first sight, they do not seem so attractive. But this is the golden path of evangelical life as way to God.

Poverty → Humiliation → Humility
(limitation, powerlessness)

The dynamics of Jesus starts from the experience that human beings are small and unfinished and not self-sufficient. We need each other. If I dare to look honestly at my reality, then I am constantly confronted with my poverty. We do not live in a perfect world and always encounter the limitations, the smallness, the confines of knowledge and ability that characterize our human reality. This is true for my own personal imperfection as well as those of other people and of the organizations and structures in which we work. Whether we like it or not we have too little time, we lack all kinds of know-how to be able to cope all on our own. We are making mistakes. We are poor and limited people and we

need help. If we are honest, we can only conclude that we cannot live and work without others.

I may have prepared the dossier so well; I may have done everything I could; and I may have done it well; but the outcome is often different from what I had foreseen.

Our spirituality may be so rich, but for some people it just doesn't take hold, and for some problems it doesn't offer an answer.

My personal experience of vows or marriage, community life, the concrete organization of our retreat centre or our social centre, of our province ... if you look at it a little more closely, there are problems everywhere. In theory, it's all very nice. Practice is different.

We had worked out a fantastic project with our province, the financing was complete, the necessary people were found, there was a good communication and, nevertheless, it has become a big fiasco—a nightmare.

Like every human being, I have talents. I also have limitations. Sometimes I have particular characteristics that mortify me. Sometimes I am confronted with this in a very unpleasant way.

Spontaneously, a person prefers to avoid the experience of this poverty. It takes courage to look it straight in the eye. The awareness of such poverty simply hurts. After all, we want to be strong and independent. We want to be able to handle everything, and everyone, on our own. Experiencing our own powerlessness, limitation, injury and brokenness is a little humiliating. No healthy person longs for humiliation as such. No healthy person likes to be confronted with poverty. You do not desire it in your organization, in your specific mission, nor with regard to yourself, in your family or in your community.

Nevertheless, Ignatius mentions this second step of humiliation as an important one in the imitation of Christ. And in his *Autobiography* we see time and again how Ignatius does not shy away from humiliation. Sometimes, in his desire to identify himself more intensively with Jesus, he himself consciously searches for it. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius regularly invites us to imitate the poor and humiliated Christ.

Let us not forget that it is the ultimate humiliation of the cross that will allow Jesus to experience and thus reveal to us the fullness of God's love. Perhaps, therefore, we too do not need to fear the experience of humiliation so much—humiliation in the footsteps of Jesus—which always comes at the wrong time and which always hits us just where we do not

want it to hit us. Perhaps we, too, can make sense of this humbling but fundamentally unavoidable confrontation with our poverty in such a way that it can enable us to become more connected with the Lord and with God, and thus to grow in authentic humility and real humanity.

You have the choice. You can always refuse the confrontation with poverty and the humiliation that goes with it. But then the risk is real that you will end up in self-deception, running away from your reality. You can also face poverty and humiliation, and try to find a place for them out of a desire to identify more with Jesus. Then they become a springboard to grow in truth and humility.

Being humble means accepting that you cannot do everything, that you are limited as a human being, as a group, as an organization; that you do not control everything; that you dare, or desire, to open up to the help and assistance of others; that you can receive, rather than just give yourself. Working together, making compromises, experiencing your limitations and dependence, is no longer a failure. The other, whether a colleague, younger person or sister organization, is no longer a rival to whom you have to prove yourself but a partner from whom and with whom you can receive more life, in mutual trust, learning, working things out and enriching your experience.

Humility makes you discover that all the beauty in life is ultimately a gift. You can only really give if you have learned to receive first. To need to receive, to know yourself dependent and vulnerable, is no longer an experience of failure but a privileged way to live more to the full. Consider the conversion of Thérèse of Lisieux. At first she thinks she will set a good example on her own and do everything herself, far better than everybody else. This will be a total failure. In the end she will say that she can only hold out empty hands—and with gratitude. For in her empty hands she can receive much more grace.¹

Humility makes gratitude possible. Humility is the experience that it is the other who makes you great. Ultimately, for the believer, that other is God. Humility is the source and condition of joy par excellence. Humility makes a person gentle and shows the way to humour and healthy self-mockery. Humility means that imperfection is no longer seen as an obstacle, but as an invitation to enter into a real relationship with the other and to receive and learn from each other.

¹ See *The Prayers of St Thérèse of Lisieux: The Act of Oblation*, translated by Aletheia Kane (Washington, DC: ICS, 1997), 54.

The dynamic that Ignatius extracts from the example of Jesus can serve as a spiritual pedagogy. It allows us not to have to endure human limitations as a tragic destiny. It teaches us that we should no longer be frightened or feel ashamed of being confronted with our smallness, vulnerability and even, sometimes, stupidity through the experience of humiliation because of our failures. It is not necessary to repress these experiences or rationalise them to make them harmless. We may, on the contrary, admit to them, trusting that something good will result. In this way our poverty can become a pathway to more human richness and, for the believer, a springboard to greater intimacy with the Lord. Poverty can indeed become, paradoxically, a source of consolation.

When I reflect on my regency—I was in charge of the social outreach programme for 175 pupils of our high school in Paris—I especially remember a number of gaffes I made there in dealing with pupils and parents. Several times they confronted me with these errors, in a friendly way, or not so friendly. Even some of the pupils challenged me directly. I am still taking advantage of the lessons I learned at that time. This did not happen automatically. It required quite some reflection and prayer. I note that I am still grateful for what they taught me, even if, at the time, it was sometimes very confrontational. Some of these people have become close friends.

A friend of mine became the director of a small conference centre. In the first weeks she took ample time to get to know her staff. Every day she invited someone to come and drink a cup of coffee at her desk,

including the gardener, who has been working there for fifteen years. The man was moved and it took a while before he could indicate why. In the all those years, he had never been invited to sit down when talking to the previous director. My friend said how touched she had been by this and how much she had learnt from it. Indeed, not only can you learn from your own poverty, but also from that of others. Just as pride destroys our relationships and our humanity, humility is an invitation to strengthen relationship, with others and with God, and to make us grow towards greater humanity.

Both dynamics are present in our lives: in our attitude towards ourselves, towards others and towards God. I have presented them in black and white, emphatically so as to make things clear. Often they do not happen in such an obvious way. In particular, the dynamics of evil can be very subtle. It can be disconcerting to discover how much it can sometimes manipulate you; how, behind noble motives, something sly can hide. It is only if you learn to recognise it that you can also learn to deal with it. And then you can really choose for the good in your life.

Nikolaas Sintobin SJ is a Jesuit and an internet chaplain. He has worked as a lawyer, a teacher and a spiritual director and has an especial interest in the spirituality and pedagogy of the Jesuits. In 2016 he published *Jesuits Telling Jokes: A—Serious—Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality*.