

CO-CREATION SPIRITUALITY

Participating in God's Ongoing Work of Creation through Spiritual Direction and the Spiritual Exercises

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I WAS STUDYING when I received a viber message from my sister-in-law in Canada: my brother (the youngest of five siblings) was confined to hospital for a series of tests, owing to a suspected heart condition that could lead to heart failure if left untreated. On receiving the news, I was filled with feelings of anxiety and the fear of losing my brother. I could not continue with what I was reading. I just dropped the book that I was holding and went to the chapel; fixing my gaze on the Blessed Sacrament, in tears I implored God to help my brother and to save him. As I was sitting there and crying, I had this thought of God, who seemed to tell me, *Do your work, so I can do mine.*

I was surprised to receive this admonition and command from God. Was I just imagining it? Was God angry with me? Why did God not come to me in the usual gentle and loving way to which I was accustomed? As I was pondering God's response to me in my prayer, I realised that it constituted perhaps the very essence of *co-creation spirituality*—the spiritual awareness that we are co-creators with God. God had entrusted me with a task that I needed to do as a student of spiritual direction, which is why I was so far from my family in the first place. This was my work; and, perhaps, God's work at this critical moment for my brother's health was to attend to him. Even if it was difficult to comprehend this at that time, I had really to entrust my brother, in prayer, to God's hands and to all the medical staff in charge of him, and do my own work, despite the turmoil within me.

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Co-Creation

It is my conviction that the human beings have a special role in God's ongoing work of creation as 'created co-creators'.¹ Through spiritual direction and the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, we can discern how God wants each one of us to take part in God's labour in the world (Exx 236), if we only remain faithful and attentive to God's ways and promptings in our lives. St Ignatius gave us tools to help us stay connected with God, open and ready to receive the grace of guidance and enlightenment in our desire and practice of knowing and doing God's will. Hence, I also believe that spiritual direction and the Spiritual Exercises, particularly the Examen and the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, may become powerful ways of changing the oppressive and unjust structures in society, the presence of which is against God's desire and design.

Furthermore, if a human person comes to understand co-creation spirituality, then this changes the mindset and world-view of that person, making him or her aware of being entrusted with power, responsibility and privilege by God. Human beings have already reached a very high degree,



God creating the stars, from a late fourteenth-century French manuscript

if not the apex, of intellectual development in the various fields of knowledge. They have, therefore, become very powerful in altering creation, bringing about, in the process, not only progress but also destruction, where there is no spiritual awareness to contain and inform this power. Hence, I believe that we need to see ourselves as co-creators with God so as to avoid becoming destroyers of the creation that God has so generously given us. Failure to do so will lead to our own destruction as a species.

¹ See Philip Hefner, 'The Evolution of the Created Co-Creator', in *Cosmos as Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance*, edited by Ted Peters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 211–234, here 211.

Creation and the Created Co-Creator

In his article 'Cosmology, Creation, and Contingency', Robert John Russell notes, 'In the early church the creation tradition was articulated in two distinct models: *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) and *creatio continua* (continuing creation)'. He further elaborates, 'the *ex nihilo* argument first of all affirms that God alone is the source of all that is, and God's creative activity is free and unconditioned'. On the other hand, 'The notion of *creatio continua* stands for God's continuing involvement with the world. Not only does God relate to creation as a whole but also to every moment, and God's fundamental relation is as creator.'² This is a significant point for me here because it ties up with St Ignatius' image of a 'labouring God' in the third point of his Contemplation to Attain Love, the last key meditation in the *Spiritual Exercises* (Exx 236). As Judith Roemer and George Schemel note, 'A favorite name and image of God for Ignatius was *Deus Operatius*, God the worker. God is at work in the world, and the point of one's offering is that one labors with Him.'³

In developing the concept of the 'created co-creator', Philip Hefner also uses the models of *creatio ex nihilo* and *creatio continua*. According to Hefner, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, 'affirms that God is the source of all that is'. However, 'The doctrine has less to do with origins than it does with dependence. Rather, as a methodological strategy, it insists that everything that is depends for its being on God the creator.' He continues, 'Creation also refers to God's ongoing sustaining of the world. Every moment of the world's existence depends on the ongoing grace of God.' And, since creation is thus dependent upon God, he argues that creation itself, including humans as created beings, is like God: 'there is a correlation between the nature of the world and the nature of the God who created the world'. Accordingly, Hefner asserts, 'God creates and so do we'. He concludes:

I recommend that we think of the human being as the *created co-creator*. This term does a number of things. Because we are *created*, we are reminded that we are dependent creatures. We depend for our very existence on our cosmic and biological prehistory; we depend on

² Robert John Russell, 'Cosmology, Creation, and Contingency', in *Cosmos as Creation*, 177–210, here 180. Russell also notes, 'an increasing number of theologians working to appropriate a scientific perspective seem to agree on the emerging vitality and importance of *creatio continua*' (181).

³ Judith Roemer and George Schemel, *Beyond Individuation to Discipleship: A Directory for Those Who Give the Spiritual Exercises* (Scranton: Institute for Contemporary Spirituality, 2000), 287.

the creative grace of God. Yet, we are also *creators*, using our cultural freedom and power to alter the course of historical events and perhaps even evolutionary events. We participate with God in the ongoing creative process. In addition, the term 'created co-creator' connotes the fact that we have a destiny. We have a future toward which we are being drawn by God's will.⁴

We can look to Jesus Christ himself who, through the incarnation, entered our human condition and became fully human like us, as our example. He fully participated in and carried out God's work in the world through his human ministry. Hefner underlines that, 'In his life, death, and teachings, Jesus offers us the possibilities for raising human living to a higher plane, one which will reveal new ways of adapting to the reality system of nature and of God'.⁵ Drawing on the insights of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, John Haught corroborates Hefner's point: 'each of us is part of an immense cosmic drama of transformation, a fact that may give new significance to our lives and works no matter how ineffectual these may sometimes seem'.⁶

Spiritual Direction as Co-Creation

Almost any kind of work or occupation is a potential expression of our call and role as created co-creators. As Hefner affirms, 'We have been created as co-creators We could not even choose to be created as non-creators. God chose. That we exist as created co-creators is God's decision, not ours.'⁷ The most natural way of living out this role is through the work in which we engage. Our work is our way of co-creating with the God who created us as co-creators. This point is also stressed by Jordan Ballor:

That human beings were created to be creators, to work, is undeniable. The anthropological concept of *homo faber*, man the tool-maker, attests to this basic aspect of what it means to be human. From a Christian perspective, we confess that human beings make things in a way that imitates their Maker. While God creates 'out of nothing' (*ex nihilo*) and then orders and arranges it, we create in a creaturely way, dependent on God's primary acts of creation. All this is true about the human person, and it is good that it is so.⁸

⁴ Hefner, 'Evolution of the Created Co-Creator', 226–228.

⁵ Hefner, 'Evolution of the Created Co-Creator', 230.

⁶ John Haught, 'Teilhard de Chardin: Theology for an Unfinished Universe', in *From Teilhard to Omega: Co-Creating an Unfinished Universe*, edited by Ilia Delio (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2014), 7–23, here 21.

⁷ Hefner, 'Evolution of Co-Created Creator', 227.

⁸ Jordan Ballor, *Get Your Hands Dirty: Essays on Christian Social Thought (and Action)* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 48.

I chose to highlight the work of spiritual direction as a way of co-creating with God here because of the unique nature of this work and ministry, which focus on our relationship with God itself.

William Barry writes, ‘Throughout the history of the church people have sought the help of other members of the church to nurture their interior life. Such help has taken many forms.’⁹ One of these is spiritual direction, which is defined by Barry, writing with William Connolly, as,

... help given by one believer to another that enables the latter to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship. The focus ... is on experience, not ideas, and specifically on the religious dimension of experience, i.e. that dimension of any experience that evokes the presence of the mysterious Other whom we call God. Moreover, this experience is viewed, not as an isolated event, but as an expression of the ongoing personal relationship God has established with each one of us.¹⁰

It follows from this definition that the person playing the role of the spiritual director journeys closely with another human being, the directee; and, through an encounter that is open and loving, a sacred space is created for the directee to be able to listen to God and explore God’s will in his or her day-to-day life experience. If the human person, then, is participating in God’s ongoing work of creation, he or she has to have a sense and knowledge—no matter how vague, since we cannot fully comprehend God, who is infinite—of how this participation will take place in the concrete, since our relationship with God covers all the dimensions of our lives. Hence, spiritual direction offers us the opportunity to explore the realm of God’s action in our lives and how God wants us to take part in the world.

St Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises

The Christian tradition is rich in various spiritualities and various traditions of spiritual direction, each with its own ways of praying and approaching God. I shall focus on St Ignatius of Loyola here because of his unique contribution to the Church with the formulation and formalisation of what he called the Spiritual Exercises. I believe that

⁹ William Barry, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God: A Theological Inquiry* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2004), 1.

¹⁰ William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 8–9.

these can be particularly effective for helping us to stay faithful to our role as God's created co-creators in our specific work and life contexts.

St Ignatius, in the words of Monty Williams, 'was a venal, ambitious member of the Spanish minor nobility in the sixteenth century, who, by reflecting on his life, discovered a path to God'. This process, Williams continues, 'transformed him, and he transformed the known world. He found the Jesuits, whose charism is to offer, to whoever desires it, a way of discerning that leads to a lived intimacy with God in the world.'¹¹ This 'way of discerning' is at the heart of St Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises.

The Spiritual Exercises are, as Lavinia Byrne writes, both a process and a text; she summarises the content of both:

The events of the life of Jesus form the backbone of the Spiritual Exercises. The person who is making the Exercises is invited to share the same process as Ignatius has undergone and be exposed to the gospel story in the way that he himself had found so beneficial. And so the Exercises follow a four-week pattern. During the First Week the one who is making them is invited to reflect upon the love and goodness of God our creator. During the Second Week the events of the incarnation, birth and public ministry of Jesus form the matter for prayer and reflection. The Third Week is spent considering the passion and death of Jesus, while the Fourth opens with the resurrection narratives and moves onwards to consideration of God the giver of all things who is constantly giving gifts from above and inviting us to seek and find the divine presence in all things.¹²

The Exercises must be taken as one integral whole. However an extended discussion of their intricacies and richness is beyond the scope of this essay. So I shall focus on just two elements: the Examen and the Rules for Discernment, which I hold to be directly related to co-creation spirituality.

The Examen

In the overall structure of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the Examen is located after the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23), which is the gateway into the Exercises, and before the meditation on sin (Exx 45 and following). David Fleming notes:

¹¹ Monty Williams, *The Gift of Spiritual Intimacy: Following the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* (Toronto: Novalis, 2009), 23.

¹² Lavinia Byrne, 'The Spiritual Exercises: A Process and a Text', in *The Way of Ignatius of Loyola*, edited by Philip Sheldrake (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991), 17–27, here 18–19.

Ignatius would have the director first prepare the retreatant to become reflective about God's presence or absence in the events of one's daily life. And so he presents first a way of making an examination of conscience, not just in terms of preparing ourselves for the sacrament of reconciliation, but a daily practice which today we have identified as a consciousness examen or an awareness examen. Since a reflective awareness is necessary for anyone making the Exercises, an understanding of this exercise has its primary importance right from the beginning of the retreat. The examen also remains the central exercise in an Ignatian spirituality of finding God in all things.¹³

The Examen occupies a prominent place in the Spiritual Exercises; Ignatius himself is known to have remained faithful to the practice and considered it indispensable.¹⁴ As Donald St Louis writes, 'Ignatius saw the Examen fundamentally as a prayer of discernment, a vitally illuminating and dynamic experience of prayerful reflection that both celebrates and enhances one's awareness and response to the Lord who is ever-present in our human experience'.¹⁵ Therefore, it is my conviction that this five-point prayer, starting with gratitude, followed by petition, review, forgiveness and culminating in renewal, is also vital to co-creation spirituality.¹⁶

Rules for the Discernment of Spirits

If we are to co-create with God, then it is imperative that we know what God wants and how God operates in our individual lives and in the world. It is in this light that the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits are another essential part of co-creation spirituality as I understand it. Michael Ivens notes, 'As well as contributing to the process of the Exercises themselves, the rules have considerable value in meeting the particular needs of today's world and Church'.¹⁷ And Donald St Louis affirms,

Ignatius's Rules for the Discernment of Spirits help to provide some specific criteria and hermeneutical principles for identifying and interpreting the action of God and the enemy ..., to detect the subtle interplay of grace and selfishness that weave into the fabric of one's response to the grace-gift of God.¹⁸

¹³ David Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 29.

¹⁴ See Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 33.

¹⁵ Donald St Louis, 'The Ignatian Examen', in *Way of Ignatius Loyola*, 155.

¹⁶ I find Timothy Gallagher's book, *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), very helpful and accessible in its pastoral approach in teaching this prayer.

¹⁷ Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 205.

¹⁸ St Louis, 'Ignatian Examen', 158.

In this way, through the grace of God and with the guidance of a spiritual director, we are able to identify how we are moving towards or away from God, cooperating with or resisting God's actions in our lives.

St Ignatius divided the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits into two sets: the first fourteen rules (Exx 313–327) are meant for those who are in the First Week of the Exercises, while the second set of eight (Exx 328–336) are for those in the Second Week. As Roemer and Schemel explain, 'The First Week is concerned with the basics of spirituality', while 'the Second Week person is much more concerned about the quality of decisions he or she will make for the Kingdom'¹⁹ Through spiritual direction, the person making the Exercises will be helped to determine which set of rules is applicable to him or her.

It is important to bear in mind that this process of discernment remains full of nuances and subtleties, and has its own particular complexities. However, David Fleming is right to assert, 'One of Ignatius's greatest gifts is his Rules for Discernment He showed how God speaks a language to us through our feelings.' Feelings are very real to us; thus, God becomes very real and close to us as well. It follows then that, 'Prayer, and growing familiarity with God, and an intimate knowledge of Jesus and his actions are all elements of a discerning heart'.²⁰

Elizabeth Liebert and the Social Discernment Cycle

At the Center for Spirituality and Justice in the Bronx in the 1980s Elinor Shea and others pioneered an approach to the interconnectedness of spirituality and justice, and the role of spiritual direction in bringing them together, based on the 'pastoral circle' of Joe Holland and Peter Henriot.²¹ The pastoral circle has four 'moments': *insertion*, that is, 'inserting our approach close to the experiences of ordinary people'; *social analysis* of these experiences; *theological reflection* 'in the light of living faith, scripture, church social teaching, and the resources of tradition'; and *pastoral planning*, deciding how to respond to the results of the analysis and reflection.²²

Elizabeth Liebert added features to this model, adapting it to create what is now known as the Social Discernment Cycle, and has made it

¹⁹ Roemer and Schemel, *Beyond Individuation*, 181, 227.

²⁰ David Fleming, 'What Is Ignatian Spirituality?' (Chicago: Loyola, 2008), 89.

²¹ See Elinor Shea, 'Spiritual Direction and Social Consciousness', in *Way of Ignatius Loyola*, 203–215, here 203.

²² Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), 8–9.



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central in her own work in group discernment. Citing the significant contributions of the theologians Walter Wink and Eleazar Fernandez in the analysis of the systemic evil that is present in the world, Liebert asserts that, ‘it is systems that preserve both justice and injustice’.²³

The Social Discernment Cycle is designed to address large and small systems, to help us take concrete steps in the face of systemic complexity, be it in one’s family, workplace, neighborhood, school, or church, in local or national politics, or in response to the global ecological crisis. The only way we can affect the future is to do the right thing in the present. Social Discernment helps us discern what the ‘right thing’ might be, and, together, take the first step. It helps us make ‘little moves against destructiveness’ as well as ‘little moves for constructiveness’.²⁴

She further elaborates:

Oppression is maintained not simply by a series of individual unjust actions. Indeed, the insidiousness of oppression of all kinds is that it transcends individual actors. Personal actions to repair damaged relationship, while laudatory, do not get at the root of systemic oppression. Rooting out systemic oppression, as well as making lasting system change that enhances positive elements, requires action upon

²³ Liebert, *Soul of Discernment*, 30; see also 36–40. And see Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) on the ‘Domination System’ present in the world, (37–62). Eleazar Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil* (St Louis: Chalice, 2004) draws on Fernandez’s own context as a Filipino theologian based in the United States, and identifies classism, sexism, racism and ‘naturism’ (environmental destruction) as among the major forms of systemic evil that pervade our reality (34–35).

²⁴ Liebert, *Soul of Discernment*, 3.

the whole system. Once we move from personal to systemic analysis, we realize why so many of our well-intentioned actions either make no difference in the system or invite perverse reactions from the system, making a bad situation worse.²⁵

Hence, it is imperative that we broaden our process of discernment beyond the personal level and include the unjust and oppressive structures and systems that continue to exist in our own societies and homelands, and in the world at large. As created co-creators, we deal and live with these systems: systems that are composed of human beings, but have acquired both power and personality of their own.

Co-Creation and Change

While I was writing this, I was also doing my Examen twice daily, asking God if my inspiration was coming from God, if I was on the right track. With all sincerity, I did not write and study simply in order to gain my qualification; I wanted to bring something back to my country to help my people. I have an ardent desire for change. I cannot be deaf and blind any more to the suffering of the poor because of the unjust social, economic and political structures that continue to exist in the Philippines, my home, and in the world beyond. The only tools I have at my disposal are spiritual direction and the Spiritual Exercises. I want to find a way to use them as well as I can. This is why I want to articulate the meaning of co-creation spirituality. I find Liebert's words encouraging when she says:

If an action is well timed and placed at a leverage point in the interlocking forces that compose the system, sometimes a single actor or a single decision can move an entire system. One person can change the direction of a work situation. One person can propose a new ministry that catches a congregation's imagination. One person has sometimes headed off a war. One person can change a system, which in turn changes other systems, forming a network of cascading changes unimaginable from the point of the first contemplative action.²⁶

I propose to define co-creation spirituality as a way of being and proceeding in the world, individually and collectively, highlighting the role and the call of the human person as a created co-creator with God. Underlying this is the privilege and responsibility of active participation in God's ongoing work of creation in every dimension of our life and existence.

²⁵ Liebert, *Soul of Discernment*, 9.

²⁶ Liebert, *Soul of Discernment*, 123.

I believe that the knowledge of co-creation spirituality brings into the human consciousness an awareness of our true nature as God's created co-creators. As such, it gives human beings a sense of dignity and honour that what they are doing in their profession, work or ministry is not merely a mundane task but actually a meaningful participation in God's creation. I hold that it is important to have this awareness lest we get caught up in the daily routine and grind of doing something over and over again without having a sense of where it is leading.

Since spiritual direction and the Spiritual Exercises tap into the innermost dynamics of the human person involved in them with the desire to know God's will and follow it in freedom, these practices become concrete ways of participating in God's ongoing work of creation. However, every job, profession or useful activity has the potential to participate in the good that God is doing in the world if we are attuned to God and desire to align our thoughts, intentions and actions with God. As William Yeomans aptly states, 'Wholeheartedness in the service of God demands a constant effort of discernment, a growing sensitivity to the will of God. Without this, generosity can lead only to "the expense of spirit in a waste of shame".'²⁷

But spiritual direction and the Spiritual Exercises, in particular the Examen and the Rules for Discernment of Spirits, have especial promise as effective methods for transforming the oppressive and unjust structures in the world. These processes enable the person to see him- or herself in graced openness and honesty, and inform that person if he or she is digressing from the path that leads to God. Walter Wink states: 'God at one and the same time *upholds* a given political or economic system, since some such system is required to support human life; *condemns* that system insofar as it is destructive of fully human life; and *presses for its transformation* into a more humane order'.²⁸ Since all systems and structures are made up of human beings who are endowed with the promise and possibility of being transformed, therefore, oppressive and unjust systems and structures can be transformed as well.

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²⁷ William Yeomans, 'Two Standards', *The Way Supplement*, 1 (1965), 20.

²⁸ Wink, *Powers That Be*, 32.