THE IGNATIAN ART OF MOVING FORWARD

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IN PIER PAOLO PASOLINI'S neorealist film *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964), Jesus is portrayed moving around Galilee at a rapid pace and turning towards Jerusalem with urgency. The disciples are constantly falling behind in their efforts to keep up. In the light of this film and of the theological tradition, James Keenan comments that, in the Christian life, we are called never to stand still but always to move forward to a closer discipleship.[1]

The image of moving forward, of making progress, is one that Ignatius uses frequently in the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*. When, in 2003, Philip Endean published his important programmatic essay for the refounding of *The Way*, he noted the importance of this motif in Ignatian spirituality:

> What we do in ministry is pointing us further forward along the way of 'the divine service'—not only the service we perform for God but also God's service to us …. The process is a way of continuous growth, of God carrying forward what God has begun.[2]

Moving forward powerfully expresses the Ignatian ideal of the *magis*, of the virtue of magnanimity, by which we are called not to be slothful or pusillanimous, content merely with the minimum in the Christian life, but to seek always to move forward, to do what is for the greater glory of God. This image lies at the heart of the wisdom of Ignatian discernment of spirits, since the good spirit is the ally of progress along this Way,

My thanks to the participants in the Dynamic of Development in the Jesuit Constitutions, Campion Hall reading seminar, Michaelmas Term, 2020. The discussions and insights shared in this seminar have greatly influenced this article from beginning to end.

[1] James Keenan, D'Arcy Lectures 2022: Preparing for the Moral Life, Campion Hall, Oxford, 26 April–14 June 2022; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wz4Zd1zozaY&list=PLIJQ9ZPTJfQAdrFOTQI1B1cfMNlIb4cKd.

[2] Philip Endean, 'The Ignatian Spirituality of the Way', *The Way*, 42/1 (January 2003), 7–19, here 8–9.

the bad spirit its enemy. Discernment, in Ignatian spirituality, is just the art of moving forward along the path of the divine service.

My own enthusiasm for the Ignatian motif of progress has not always found a corresponding affirmation in my conversation partners. I recently led a seminar at Campion Hall, Oxford, with a group of mostly Jesuit academics. I focused the seminar on the idea of progress, especially as expressed in the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*. For Ignatius does not talk much of conversion, or formation, but speaks often of progress. He wants Jesuits to progress; he wants Jesuits to help others to progress; and he wants the Society of Jesus as a whole to progress in serving God. Nevertheless, I vividly remember one of our sessions when objections to this ideal of progress, one after another, were raised (objections that I shall recount below).The theme that I had proposed for the seminar fell radically into question.

We therefore find ourselves in the sphere of discernment. The spirits are moving contrarily. We find attractions but also resistances to the ideal of progress. I propose that if we are to retrieve the Ignatian image of moving forward, we need to discern bad spirit versions of this spiritual ideal from that which Ignatius proposes. The question is not, *Should we accept the ideal of progress or not?* There is no question but that progress is an indispensable concept in Ignatian spirituality. The question, rather, is, *What, in Ignatian terms, does it mean to move forward?* My proposal is that we need Ignatian progress, but that Ignatian progress may not be what we think it is.

The Idea of Progress in the Tradition

Progress is a metaphor, and a quotidian one at that. Literally, it connotes forward spatial movement towards an intended destination. We adopt this metaphor in many different spheres of life, when we celebrate someone 'taking a step forward', or bemoan a feeling of 'getting stuck' or 'going backwards'. There is nothing remarkable about this metaphor in itself. It gains valence from the context in which it finds its specific meaning: the implicit standard against which progress is measured, the end to which it is directed and the means by which it is thought to be effected.

Krijn Pansters notes, 'Spiritual progress is a main theme in Christian theology and spirituality'.[3] In classical Christian writings, often progress

[3] Krijn Pansters, '*Profectus virtutuum*: From Psalm 83: 8 to David of Augsburg's *Profectus religiosorum*', *Studies in Spirituality*, 18 (2008), 185–194, here 186.

is understood through the medium of an image of graduation. There is a path, a ladder or a mountain to be walked, scaled or ascended; there is also a schema that divides the progress into distinct stages. In St Benedict, the monk is to climb the twelve steps of humility. In St Gregory the Great and St Thomas Aquinas, we find the schema of beginners (*incipientes*), those who are progressing (*proficientes*) and the perfect (*perfecti*). Another tripartite movement is that of the purgative way, the illuminative way and the unitive way, as in Pseudo-Dionysius and Bonaventure. Additionally, Bonaventure, in his *Itinerarium*, reports a vision he had on the mountain of Alverna. We are to fly to God on the six wings of the seraph, which correspond to six levels of ascent. However the steps or levels are named, spiritual progress, in the tradition, is an advancement through a series of stages of turning from sin, increasing virtue and union with God.

As Pansters notes, the idea of progress in the virtues, *profectus virtutuum*, is especially significant in this tradition.[4] The idea has its roots in ancient philosophy, in thinkers such as Philo of Alexandria and Plutarch; the latter notably wrote an essay on the topic. Reacting against extreme Stoic doctrine that makes of virtue an all-or-nothing affair, Plutarch argues that ethical development is possible, and recognisable by various signs.[5] For many of the ancient philosophers, we do not become perfectly virtuous overnight, but engage in a gradual process of increasing

[4] Pansters, '*Profectus virtutuum*', 186–187.

[5] Plutarch, 'How a Man May Become Aware of His Progress in Virtue', in *Moralia,* volume 1, translated by Frank Cole Babbitt, edited by Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard U, 1922), 399–457.

in virtue through certain practices, just as athletes grow in strength and facility through diet and the exercises proper to their athletic discipline or soldiers learn their profession by military training. This philosophical tradition is assimilated by the early Christian tradition in the thought of writers such as John Cassian, Ambrose and Augustine. The themes of progress and regress become significant dimensions of Thomas Aquinas's spiritual theology.[6] The *Devotio moderna* on which Ignatius drew, even while he went beyond it, accents progress in the virtues.[7]

When an idea enters the Christian tradition from ancient philosophy, it does not stay quite the same. The idea of progress in the virtues is often legitimised by Christian authors with reference to Psalm 83:8: 'They will go from virtue to virtue; they will see the God of gods in Sion'.[8] Progress in the spiritual life, in the Christian tradition, means growing not only in the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, as with the ancient philosophers, but also in the more obviously Christian virtues of faith, hope, love, humility, mercy, patience and gratitude. Jesus is seen as the primary exemplar of the virtues. While the Christian authors recognise with the ancient philosophers that there is an *ascesis*, a set of practices necessary to grow in virtue, they also emphasize the need for grace. In the Christian tradition, progress in the virtues is ultimately gift.

Problems with Progress

Despite its respectable genealogy in the Christian tradition and the attractiveness of the ideal, today the notion of progress often meets with resistance, even from those sympathetic to the Ignatian tradition. I group the objections to progress into three main concerns: wilfulness, a disordered need to measure and lack of humble acceptance. I am indebted to the members of the seminar mentioned above for these points.

First, wilfulness: it is objected that progress is too muscular a concept for the spiritual life. The desire to progress may motivate an excessive effort to grow, a Pelagian striving, an over-trying incompatible with openness to grace.

[6] See Basil Cole, 'Thomas Aquinas on Progress and Regress in the Spiritual Life', *Nova et Vetera*, 8/1 (2010), 89–106.

[7] 'Progress in the virtues, *profectus virtutuum*, might well be labelled the "leitmotif" or "basso continuo" of the entire movement of the Modern Devotion' (Pansters, '*Profectus virtutuum*', 185).

[8] Translated from the Latin Vulgate: 'Ibunt de virtute in virtutem; videbitur Deus deorum in Sion'.

Secondly, there is the unhealthy need to measure one's own progress. The desire for spiritual progress, it may seem, implies tracking how far we have advanced. This self-monitoring can be singularly unhelpful. The bad spirit can have a field day instilling the felt need to measure up to a perceived ideal of holiness, leading to a harsh self-judgment inimical to the reception of God's loving kindness. Worse, one might actually succeed in measuring up to the ideal one sets oneself, resulting in an insufferable pride in one's own achievement and disdain for those who do not, as exhibited by the Pharisee in the parable (Luke 18:9–14). Moreover, by whose standards or whose judgment can I be said to have moved forward? What God thinks of as progress may not correspond to the measures I set myself, which can be distorted by the lens of my self-centredness.

Thirdly, and finally, there is lack of humble acceptance: the spiritual life, in Christian experience, often does not resemble an orderly ascent. There are moments of rupture, interruption, even regression, that tend to characterize Christian experience. An ideal of progress may occlude the value of learning a humble acceptance of the present moment, even to the extent of accepting failure. Do we not open ourselves by God more by acknowledging our sinfulness and limitations, rather than rushing ahead to some imagined ideal future self?

Each of these objections contains a helpful insight. It would be more discerning, in my view, not to reject outright the ideal of progress on their basis, but rather to distinguish the true ideal of Christian progress from the counterfeit, bad-spirit versions we rightly resist. The objections to progress may arise from misplaced assumptions about what spiritual progress means, due to Enlightenment-influenced concepts of progress through human reason and agency. The interesting question is not *whether* to strive to progress, but *what* we mean by progress in the spiritual life, and *what does Ignatius mean by progress?*

What does Ignatius mean by progress?

Ignatius' Way of Seeing

In the historic moment when Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope, addressed the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, he began with an exhortation to walk forward together, recalling some words to the Jesuits of an earlier pope, Paul VI. Francis's choice of this image was not accidental. He claims that what is at stake here is more than a helpful metaphor: it is a characteristic way of looking at things, an Ignatian paradigm.

> I rather like Ignatius' way of seeing everything—except for what is absolutely essential—as constantly developing [*in fieri*], because it frees the Society from all kinds of paralysis and wishful thinking …. For Ignatius the journey is not an aimless wandering; rather, it translates into something qualitative: it is a 'gain' or progress, a moving forward, a doing something for others.[9]

To support this claim, Francis quotes a letter in which Ignatius responds to critics of the new Society of Jesus, who had asserted that this upstart order was insufficiently well founded.[10] Ignatius says they ignore the way of the Society of Jesus, in which all things, except an essential core of basic requirements, are always *in fieri*, in development, open to change. For Pope Francis, then, the Ignatian paradigm, Ignatius' way of seeing everything, is an attentiveness to development, movement, progress.

There is plenty of evidence that this 'way of seeing' is indeed characteristically Ignatian. Michael Buckley observes:

> What Ignatius saw, he saw as movement. The reality about him was essentially in process. His own life was understood as the history of a pilgrim, painfully learning as a child taught by God to grow into the contemplative for whom God was always present.[11]

Elsewhere, Buckley pithily remarks, 'Ignatius saw everything human in terms of developing processes'. The central Ignatian texts (the *Autobiography*, the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions*) are all 'developing movements'.[12] Commentators used to refer to the 'logic' of the Spiritual Exercises; today we prefer to refer to their 'dynamic'.[13] Throughout the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, there is language that expresses a forward dynamism.[14]

[9] Pope Francis, 'Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus', GC 36.

[10] Ignatius to Francis Borja, July 1549, MHSJ EI 12, 632–654; English in St Ignatius of Loyola, *Letters and Instructions*, edited and translated by Martin E. Palmer, John W. Padberg and John L. McCarthy (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 266–283. And see M. A. Fiorito and A. Swinnen, 'La Fórmula del Instituto de la Compañía de Jesús (introducción y versión castellana)', *Stromata*, 33/4 (July–December 1977), 249–286, at 259–260.

[11] Michael Buckley, 'The Contemplation to Attain Love', *The Way Supplement*, 45 (1975), 92–104, here 94.

[12] Michael Buckley, 'Freedom, Election, and Self-Transcendence: Some Reflections upon the Ignatian Development of a Life of Ministry', in *Ignatian Spirituality in a Secular Age*, edited by George Schner (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier U, 2006), 65–90 , here 73, 74.

[13] Joseph Veale, 'The Dynamic of the Exercises', *The Way Supplement*, 52 (1985), 3–18. For Veale, the metaphor refers to 'organic growth': 'I take it to mean the way in which the factors or parts in their relationship and interaction make for movement and growth' (3).

[14] The most important of the terms Ignatius uses is that of *aprovachiemento* and its cognates (in Latin *profectus*). In an email communication to the author, Mark Rotsaert comments, 'the verb "aprovechar,

It is surely no accident that, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, about forty of the approximately fifty contemplations in Four Weeks involve a journey.[15] Ignatius is consistently concerned with what enables exercitants to make progress, to move forward.

Discerning Progress

Ignatius begins his Rules for the Discernment of Spirits by distinguishing between those who are regressing and those progressing (Exx 314–315). The Rules, then, do not follow the older classification, which distinguishes sinners on the one hand and, on the other, beginners, those who are progressing and the perfect. There are here only two categories left: the ones making progress and the ones regressing. Simplifying the tradition by accentuating movement in the present moment, what matters now is not so much how far one has come, but only whether one is moving forwards or backwards.

Ignatius offers only one rule for the regressive: to those who go 'from one mortal sin to another' the bad spirit promises sensual satisfactions, in order to confirm their vices, whereas the good spirit brings about conscientious feelings of remorse (Exx 314). For those who are progressing, the corresponding rule turns this approach on its head:

> In the case of persons who are earnestly purging away their sins, and who are progressing from good to better in the service of God our Lord, the procedure used is the opposite of that described in the First Rule. For in this case it is characteristic of the evil spirit to cause gnawing anxiety, to sadden, and to set up obstacles. In this way he unsettles these persons by false reasons aimed at preventing their progress. But with persons of this type it is characteristic of the good spirit to stir up courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and tranquility. He makes things easier and eliminates all obstacles, so that the persons may move forward in doing good. (Exx 315)

The bad spirit, for Ignatius, is the saboteur of progress, throwing the spanners of sadness and illusion into the works; the good spirit is the ally of progress, removing obstacles and oiling the mechanism with the gifts of consolation and ease in moving forward. Discernment of spirits is the

aprovecharse" is an important verb in the *Spiritual Exercises* (35 uses, of which 9 in the Annotations) as is the noun "provecho". Aprovechar has, at least, two meanings in the Spiritual Exercises, depending on the context: 1) to make progress, improvement; 2) to be useful, profitable, advantageous'. Similarly, in the Latin versions of the *Exercises*, the verb *proficio* can mean to progress or to profit.'

[15] Tad Dunne, 'Models of Discernment', *The Way Supplement*, 23 (Autumn 1974), 18–26, here 82.

practice or art of noticing and distinguishing what aids progress and what hinders it, and integrating what helps into one's being and doing.

While the traditional language of 'progress in the virtues' is absent in the Rules, the idea may be present. In one of his descriptions of consolation, Ignatius states: 'I give the name "consolation" to every increase of hope, faith and charity' (Exx 316). By noticing, discerning and receiving the good movements that come from the good spirit, we progress in the theological virtues (and, no doubt, the other virtues also). Progress involves becoming a different kind of person: more trusting, hope-filled, loving, humble, grateful and compassionate.

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius specifies progress using other phrases, such as 'progress of the soul', 'progress in the spiritual life', 'move forward in doing good'. The most important term for Ignatius, however, is that of 'progress … in the service of God our Lord'. As we have just seen, the Rules for Discernment are primarily for those who are 'progressing from good to better in the service of God our Lord'. Ignatius, then, is putting his own spin on the tradition of spiritual progress. While growth in the virtues is important, it is not the final goal, which is to move forward in the praise, reverence and service of God.

To move forward in the praise, reverence and service of God

Progress in the Constitutions

The primary text for understanding Ignatius' concept of progress is the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, written by Ignatius and Juan Alfonso de Polanco (1517–1576), his able secretary. Michael Buckley has argued that Ignatius' *Constitutions* are innovative when compared to other religious rules, since they do not focus on a daily structure for community life nor a close list of obligations. Rather, they 'chart a history, the progress through life of a Jesuit from admission to final incorporation, mission, government and the development of the entire Society'.[16] Similarly, János Lukács has shown that one central idea in the *Constitutions* is precisely the idea of progress. He says:

> The striking linguistic resemblance between the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions* lets one assume that both texts presuppose a dynamic vision of a person constantly on the move, and that a primary aim of both texts is to help foster this progress with means that are most suitable to the current position of the person …. the metaphor

[16] Buckley, 'Contemplation to Attain Love', 94.

> of progressing is just as indispensable for interpreting the *Constitutions* as it is for understanding the *Spiritual Exercises*.[17]

For Lukács, the idea of progress therefore becomes a 'hermeneutical key' for reading the *Constitutions*: 'Ignatian instructions should thus be interpreted according to the criterion of how they help us to make progress'.[18] For confirmation of this view, we need only note the preface to the *Constitutions*: 'we think it necessary that constitutions should be written to aid us to proceed better, in conformity with our Institute, along the path of divine service on which we have entered'. (Preamble 1 [134]) As Endean comments, 'the purpose of the laws is not to instil a spirit of conformity, but rather to keep people moving'.[19]

I suggest that there are three striking aspects of Ignatius' ideal of progress, as it appears in the *Constitutions*, that make it distinctive when viewed against the foil of the preceding tradition: its accent on the apostolic community, its emphasis on divine service through helping souls and its open-ended character.

First, then, while the *Constitutions* deal with the progress of individual Jesuits from candidacy through to final vows, they are not primarily focused on the individuals themselves, but on the body of the Society (X.1 [812]–X.2 [813]). The individual Jesuit will find himself and his progress in the *Constitutions* only as a member of a community, a body, that is itself progressing.[20] As the *Constitutions* themselves explain their own purpose: 'The purpose of the *Constitutions* is to aid the body of the Society as a whole and also its individual members towards their preservation and development for the divine glory and the good of the universal Church' (Preamble [136]).[21]

Secondly, for Ignatius the goal is always advancement in divine service; other kinds of progress, even spiritual growth and increase in virtue, are orientated towards this end. One textual example of this new accent comes in Ignatius' description of how to care for novices and their vocation, 'enabling them to make progress both in spirit and in virtues

[17] János Lukács, *Ignatian Formation: The Inspiration of the* Constitutions (Leominster: Gracewing, 2016), 18–19.
[18] Lukács, *Ignatian Formation*, 22.
[19] Endean, 'Ignatian Spirituality of the Way', 8.
[20] I thank Patrick Goujon for conversation on this point.
[21] See also X.1 [812]: 'The Society was not instituted by human means; and it is not through them that it can be preserved and increased, but through the grace of the omnipotent hand of Christ our God and Lord. Therefore in him alone must be placed the hope that he will preserve and carry forward what he deigned to begin for his service and praise and for the aid of souls.'

along the path of the divine service' (III. 1. 1 [243]). What we saw in the Rules for Discernment is therefore confirmed in the *Constitutions*: the kind of progress that ultimately counts for Ignatius is advancing from good to better in serving God. Spiritual progress and progress in the virtues are important because it is by them that we progress in the divine service.

Ignatius' new accent on progress in serving God makes eminent sense in terms of his apostolic spirituality, according to which the goal is always to serve God, especially by helping souls. Ignatius offers a wonderful image for this progress in divine service: that of becoming an instrument more united with God and ever better disposed to be used (X. 2 [813]).

Today we might apply a little creative licence to interpret the 'instrument' through a musical metaphor. To move forward in serving God, it is necessary, one might say, to 'tune up' the human instrument, so that it may be ever more dextrously wielded by the divine hand. The human instrument is attuned to God's artistry by goodness and virtue, familiarity with God in prayer and action, zeal for souls and singleness of intention to place all at the service of God. Also important are learning, the ability to preach and teach, and 'the art of dealing and conversing with others' (X. 3 [814]). This process of tuning happens by both supernatural and natural means, both grace and discipline.

Progress for Ignatius is therefore always apostolic: it is about becoming the kind of instrument that is apt to be used by God's hand in helping souls. In the *Formula of the Institute* (the foundational document of the Society of Jesus, preceding and presupposed by the *Constitutions*), the very aim of the Society of Jesus is expressed as: 'to strive especially for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine' (n. 1). There is a wonderful consonance between means and end here: Ignatius sees Jesuits as individuals striving to progress together in Christian life, with the purpose of helping others do so also.

Thirdly, Ignatius defines the specificity of what the progress of a Jesuit is about, without succumbing to the temptation to force Jesuits into a particular mould. It is a delicate balance, a held tension. As we have seen, it is hoped that the formed Jesuit exemplifies the contemplation in action, as well as the apostolic virtues, learning and the art of conversation (X. 2 [813] – X. 3 [814]). Yet Ignatius is not overly prescriptive about how these qualities are manifested. We see this in his instructions on Jesuit prayer. Early on in the *Constitutions*, Ignatius lays down generic guidance for the prayer, confessions and other devotional practices of scholastics, but insists that they follow the judgment of their superiors

(IV.4.2[340]–IV.4.C[345]). Later on, when he describes the prayer of a fully professed Jesuit, he disappoints us if we are expecting a clear set of guidelines.

Endean comments, 'Ignatius' attitude to the question of how Jesuits should pray was relaxed'.[22] I quibble with the word 'relaxed'. Ignatius says that prayer and penances are to be pursued according to no other 'rule' than 'what discreet charity dictates to them' (VI.3.1[582]). Discreet charity implies discerning charity. Here, the professed Jesuit, assumed to be a discerning man, follows his own prayerful judgment, although not without accountability to and support from his confessor or superior. As a help to his discernment, he is reminded not to go over the top with his prayerful and penitential practices, nor to become too lax: discretion finds the mean. It is not, then, a question of being 'relaxed' about how a formed Jesuit prays. Rather, Ignatius trusts the Jesuit's discreet charity as the best guide. Discretion is not relaxed, but well poised: it will find the appropriate balance, the right tension.

Endean is right to note that Ignatius does not give specific guidelines about how much, or in what way, the Jesuit should be praying. This atmosphere of freedom and discretion was arguably quickly forgotten in the Society in the generations after him, who were much more confident in ruling what was, and what was not, Jesuit prayer.[23] For Ignatius, what is most fitting almost always has to be discerned on a case-by-case basis.

The Paradox of Progress

Given the Ignatian concept of progress that emerges from the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions*, how is it best to deal with the objections raised earlier? In my view, they are not devastating to the ideal of Ignatian progress, but purifying. The objections are ways to refine our image of what it means to move forward.

Firstly, the desire to progress can indeed lead to an excess of will, as in Ignatius shortly after his initial conversion experience. But there is nothing within the idea of progress that implies it happens by our effort

[22] Philip Endean, 'To Reflect and Draw Profit', *The Way Supplement*, 82 (1995), 84–95, here 85.

[23] See Endean, 'To Reflect and Draw Profit', 85–85. An apposite example lies in an unfortunate episode concerning Baltasar Álvarez, a spiritual director of Teresa of Ávila, who had begun to teach a kind of 'quiet prayer', or contemplative prayer. His superiors judged that this was not according to the Jesuit institute—it was not the Jesuit way of praying—and so told him, not only not to teach this prayer, but even not to practise it himself! The ideal of discreet charity seems absent here. See Baltasar Álvarez, 'Beyond the Train of Ideas', translated by Philip Endean, *The Way Supplement*, 103 (2002), 43–54.

alone. For the mature Ignatius, God is the primary agent, with whom we cooperate. 'Therefore in him alone must be placed the hope that he will preserve and carry forward what he deigned to begin for his service and praise and for the aid of souls.' (X.1[812]) Moreover, there is no hint of spiritual narcissism in Ignatius' image of progress. For the mature Ignatius, progress is growth in charity, zeal for souls and a pure intention to do God's will. The desire to grow in virtue, in this picture, must be a good but somewhat back-seat desire: as we progress, our driving-seat desire increasingly becomes other-centred, as we act on a charitable desire to 'help souls'.[24]

Secondly, it was suggested that this concept could lead to an unhealthy focus on measuring one's own progress. As I noted earlier, in much of the Christian tradition that precedes (and indeed follows) Ignatius, progress is understood against the interpretative background of a schema of steps: beginner, progressing, perfect; purgative, illuminative, unitive; the twelve steps of humility; the six wings of the seraph; the mansions of the interior castle; and so on. Occasionally, authors attempt to find some correlation in Ignatius, as when someone claims, for example, that the First Week of the Exercises is purgative, the Second Week illuminative, and the Third and Fourth Weeks unitive.

But on my reading there is no indication that Ignatius wanted to get drawn into talk of these kind of stages. As we saw, in the *Constitutions* he casts a veil over the prayer of a professed Jesuit, only asking that he continue to move forward with discreet charity. This lack of a schematic

[24] Rob Marsh has raised a concern about 'misplaced attention'. In the Exercises and spiritual direction, 'progress happens as a consequence or by-product of engaging with God and God's action in the exercitant. That seems to me where the dynamism comes from and change occurs, progress happens. It seems to me that paying (too much?) attention to the progress is a distraction from the God who is taking the initiative to engage the retreatant in many and creative ways (and unpredictable ways too).' (Email communication.) I thank Rob for this point and agree with it. Progress does not come primarily by focusing on progress, but happens more obliquely than that, by loving attention to God and others.

developmental theory of the spiritual life is frustrating for those who wish to measure progress, but it gives Ignatian progress a liberating quality, a reverence for the surprising and unique ways the Spirit brings different people to grow differently. Endean observes that Ignatian spirituality, consequently, is especially suitable for those whose Christian vocations lead them 'beyond the normal': 'The discernment learnt in the school of the Exercises enables us to act with integrity in worlds for which rule books have not been written, or where those that are available are inadequate'.[25]

The image of the end point at which Ignatius progress aims is substantive but open-ended, as it lies in the apostolic virtues and the life of loving service. Since the life of service may look different in different people in diverse circumstances, the primary guide moving forward is not, for Ignatius, a schema of predictable stages, the same for all, but the practice of discernment or discretion.

Spiritual progress is, in fact, a mystery. It is a mystery because it is a Christomorphic process, a way of become conformed to Christ.[26] It is progress in discipleship, in knowing the Lord 'that I may love him more intensely and follow him more closely' (Exx 104). Being a mystery, this growing participation in Christ's life is rich and multifaceted. However, while it is not exhausted by any formula or description, it is not hopelessly vague or undefined. It is to be expected that one's understanding of progress itself progresses as one moves forward along the way of the Lord. To the question, *What is spiritual progress?* the mature Ignatius would have given a very different answer to that of Iñigo shortly after his initial conversion in Loyola.

The third and final objection is, in my view, the most serious. Is it not better to accept the reality of the present moment, where God is truly to be found, then to be seeking to move on towards what one imagines one ought to be? Should we not be practising acceptance, even in apparent failure and regression, rather than striving for progress? But this question contains false assumption: *either* acceptance *or* progress. Progress is practised best *through* humble acceptance, since it is through the latter that we become open to graced change.

Within the Gestalt school of psychology and therapy, Arnold Beisser stands out, not only for his description of what he calls 'the

[25] Endean, 'To Reflect and Draw Profit', 9.
[26] Thanks to Graham Ward for this way of putting things.

paradoxical theory of change', but also for being a living example of the paradox he describes. The paradox, on his view, is that one changes, not so much by trying to be what one is not, but by accepting what one is. In a well-known essay on the topic, he explains:

> The Gestalt therapist rejects the role of 'changer', for his strategy is to encourage, even insist, that the patient be where and what he is. He believes change does not take place by 'trying', coercion, or persuasion, or by insight, interpretation, or any other such means. Rather, change can occur when the patient abandons, at least for the moment, what he would like to become and attempts to be what he is. The premise is that one must stand in one place in order to have firm footing to move and that it is difficult or impossible to move without that footing.[27]

Beisser's life was a living parable demonstrating this insight. While a successful young man—a national tennis champion and a qualified medic—Beisser caught polio and became paralyzed, unable to move not only his hands and legs, but even his head—unable to live outside an iron lung. Beisser recounts, in his short autobiographical book *Flying without Wings*, how he came, after such a dramatic interruption in life, nevertheless to flourish. Lying incapacitated on his bed, he began to set goals for his recovery: relationships, gaining a profession, becoming a writer. 'I thought achievements could make me feel worthwhile again and give me self-respect.' In retrospect, he acknowledges this search was based on a 'misunderstanding'. 'The major transition needed was from seeing life as a competition to experiencing it much more simply and directly for what it was.'[28] While in time the things he desired were indeed given, the change occurred only by the embrace of his current reality, with its own surprising possibilities and gifts.

An Ignatian spiritual director would resonate with many aspects of this philosophy. When directees come for spiritual direction, the Ignatian director sets aside his or her own agenda and expectations, attempting to meet them where they are. The director may encourage directees to let go, for a moment, of strong ideals of where they should be, with their attendant guilt or self-satisfaction or over-trying, and to dwell

[27] Arnold Beisser, 'The Paradoxical Theory of Change', in *Gestalt Therapy Now: Theory, Techniques, Applications*, edited by Joen Fagan and Irma Lee Shepherd (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 77–80, here 77.

[28] Arnold Beisser, *Flying without Wings: Personal Reflections on Loss, Disability, and Healing* (New York: Bantam, 1990), 11.

simply with the God who is actually present to a person as he or she is. It is paradoxically in the letting go, in being with what is real, that forward movement takes place.

In the Spiritual Exercises, the correlate of Beisser's acceptance is, I suggest, found in the Two Standards exercise (Exx 138–148). Here Ignatius adapts the traditional identification of humility as the necessary condition for progress in the spiritual life.[29] Ignatius portrays a humble Christ, located in a place that is 'lowly, beautiful, and attractive' (Exx 144). The Lord disseminates his sacred teaching by the non-coercive force of attraction, drawing all to spiritual poverty and humility, qualities he exemplifies himself. From these gracious qualities, Christ's friends and servants 'should induce people to all the other virtues' (Exx 146). For Ignatius, poverty and humility are the gateway to progress in the virtues and the following of Christ's way.

The paradox of progress, of moving forward through humble acceptance, may be especially tangible in moments of interruption, rupture, even failure.[30] These are not reasons to abandon the ideal of moving forward, but occasions for reassessing what it involves. The shape of Ignatian progress often follows the pattern of suffering, death and resurrection. What is experienced as failure can involve a stripping away of illusory ideals, a clearer perspective on what really matters, and growth rooted in humble acceptance rather than driven aspiration.

Beisser talks about change through acceptance; Ignatius portrays the grace of progress that comes through poverty and humility. The paradox of progress, then, is this: one makes progress in the spiritual life, not so much by striving to be what one is not, but by being oneself, as one is, before the gracious God. Grounded in this lowly place, we find a foothold from which to practise discernment, the Ignatian art of moving forward along the path of the divine service.

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[29] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.2, q.161, a.5, ad.2, where humility is described as the 'foundation of the spiritual edifice' because it makes a person open to the influx of grace. For narrative display of this insight, Aquinas would have pointed to Augustine's *Confessions*.

[30] Thanks to Eddie Howells and Graham Ward for discussion on this point.