

WHY IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY HOOKS PROTESTANTS

By JOYCE HUGGETT

‘**W**OULD YOU TWO be willing to help me?’ The request came to my husband and me in the early 1970s from the chaplain of the local polytechnic. ‘I’m taking some students away for the weekend and wondered whether you’d like to speak to them about prayer?’ We agreed. Then we discovered that the retreat was to be held at a Roman Catholic monastery.

Coming, as we do, from an evangelical background, the thought of darkening the doors of a monastery seemed as strange as planning a visit to another planet. If anyone had warned me that stepping across the threshold of this particular place of prayer would change the direction of my spiritual pilgrimage, I would not have believed them. Yet that is what happened. That first visit to Mount St Bernard Abbey stands out in my memory, not for the talks we gave, but rather because I became intrigued by the concept of praying in silence. The silence I sipped on this and future occasions set me on a search for a deeper awareness of God; a quest which caused me to explore first contemplative prayer and then Ignatian spirituality.

Fourteen years later I published a book¹ which described how, through ‘Catholic spirituality’, my thirst for God was being quenched. I feared that one result of going public would be that my evangelical and charismatic friends would disown me. Instead, day after day, for over two years, readers wrote to tell me that this description of my personal pilgrimage was their experience too. It seemed that hundreds of us were being drawn by the Spirit of God to cherish, not only the treasures of our own background—a love of the bible and an openness to the Holy Spirit—but new-found treasures: stillness, contemplative prayer, the use of the imagination.

What was it that attracted us to methods of prayer which traditionally have been labelled ‘Catholic’? Why, when we nibbled

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the bait, did we find ourselves happy to be hooked? How did we find ourselves drawn to the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius? Do the *Spiritual Exercises* contain the potential for promoting the spiritual growth of Anglicans and Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals? Could they infiltrate the world of the evangelical and the charismatic, the radical and the contemplative Christian? These are the questions which fascinate me and which we explore in this article. We look first at some of the reasons why Ignatian spirituality is enjoying such a boom in Protestant circles.

A movement of God's Spirit

As I reflect on the letters which were written in response to my book and as I have talked to Christians in this country and in New Zealand where the retreat movement amongst Protestants is particularly strong, I have come to the conclusion that the chief reason why we Protestants found ourselves attracted first by contemplative prayer and then by Ignatian spirituality is that we were being nudged by God into these so-called 'Catholic' practices.

Several people I have interviewed while I was preparing to write this article seemed to confirm this. As one put it:

Since the Charismatic Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a deepening of people's walk with God and a hunger to pursue ways of prayer which will facilitate this. At the same time there has been a greater convergence of Protestants with Catholics and vice versa. Protestants have been finding answers to their deeper quest for God in Catholic prayer and spirituality and Catholics, particularly since they've been reading the Bible more, have a deeper understanding of the Protestant tradition. In other words, there is a deeper appreciation of one another's traditions and a willingness to learn.

In the early days of the charismatic renewal, one popular preacher painted a word-picture of the situation. Before this fresh wave of the Spirit swept over us, he claimed, we in the Churches were like ducks who were safely shut into our self-contained denominational compartments. But as the waters of the Spirit rose, these fences were submerged and we ducks suddenly discovered that we were no longer fenced in. We were free to swim above former boundaries. We did. We enjoyed and benefited from the experience.²

The barriers which were transcended in the 1960s and 1970s seem, by and large, to have been demolished as effectively as the Berlin wall. That has given Protestants easy access to Catholic spirituality. Protestants of various persuasions, evangelicals and charismatics, contemplatives and radicals are finding themselves drawn, in particular, to Ignatian spirituality. Before exploring some of the possible reasons for this phenomenon, let me explain what I mean when I use short-hand like 'evangelical' and 'charismatic', 'contemplative' and 'radical'.

By the term 'evangelical' I mean Christians who have an ingrained love of the bible, who view the scriptures as the authoritative word of God and who seek to align their life-style to its inspired teaching. By 'charismatics' I mean those who emphasize the ministry of the Holy Spirit and expect to see the Spirit operating through such spiritual gifts as tongues and prophecy, words of knowledge and healing. When I use the word 'contemplative', I am referring to those who, like Mary of Bethany, find themselves being drawn to experience God's love for themselves; those whose life so revolves around Christ that they feel his compassion for his world and find themselves compelled to take action. And by the 'radical' Christian, I mean those who insist that the way to see and touch God is to see and touch God in our neighbour.

What makes Ignatian spirituality so attractive to Christians from such a diversity of theological persuasions? Why, for example, are some evangelicals finding themselves drawn as though by a magnet to the Spiritual Exercises?

Thirst for God

The charismatic renewal of the 1960s and 1970s made an impact on many Christians from an evangelical background and one of the results was that the Holy Spirit seemed to stir up in us an insatiable hunger for God, the divine word and the prayer which is a love affair with the Almighty. It was at this point that our own tradition, with its heavy emphasis on *understanding* the bible, seemed to let us down. It seemed incapable of pointing us to a spirituality which could satisfy this appetite. As one person I interviewed described it:

I think evangelicals are probably amongst the best at enabling people to set off on the spiritual life with their teaching about structured Quiet Times, Bible Study, prayer—but sadly there is

little help given after that. I think that is why I turned to Catholic spiritual writings for help and thus to Ignatian spirituality.

Bible-based

Why Ignatian spirituality in particular? One reason is that the *Spiritual Exercises* are so bible-based that they might accurately be re-named 'Biblical Exercises'. Because of their innate love of the bible, evangelicals find themselves on familiar, safe territory right from the beginning of their exploration into Ignatian methods of praying the scriptures. As a friend of mine put it to me:

The Bible's always been important to me but I wanted something more than the cerebral approach. I felt I'd reached a ceiling of my experience in evangelical/charismatic circles. On my Ignatian Retreat, the focus seemed to be on the Bible. I'd never experienced eight days when the focus was simply the Bible—no talks. I came away from that retreat saying, 'I have re-discovered the Bible'. I had embarked on an experiential journey into the Word. It had given me a new entree.

The biblical exercises of St Ignatius provide evangelicals with a 'new entree' because they show us how the head knowledge we have stored in the filing cabinets of our minds can make an impact on our innermost beings; what the bible calls 'the heart'. As one person put it:

So much of my learned approach to the Bible had been Bible *study*. Engaging the imagination and feelings was liberating. As I used my imagination in prayer, the Lord spoke to me powerfully. I came back from my retreat refreshed, renewed, changed.

Spreading the good news

There is another reason why Ignatian spirituality is enjoying such popularity amongst Protestants. Those of us who have been inspired and renewed by it are spreading the good news to our friends, encouraging them to explore this strange but vaguely familiar world.

I think of a Christmas newsletter I received last year. In it, the writer described how her first eight-day guided retreat had re-energized and revolutionized her life. This letter must have whetted the appetite of many of its readers. Or I think of the contemplative prayer group I formed three years ago in the Anglican church

where my husband is the priest. This group met monthly and, among other prayer disciplines, we explored Ignatian spirituality. Interest in the group grew. It has spawned two more. In addition, we have organized a Prayer School and two separate 'Weeks of Guided Prayer' when members of the church who are not yet ready for a residential retreat have explored imaginative contemplation 'in the stream of life'. The bait attracted nearly one hundred people. Now many are hooked.

I think, too, of the Prayer School I organized in our diocese two years ago. Again, when the students were introduced to imaginative contemplation, they found whole new vistas opening up for them. They wanted more. Three prayer groups emerged from that particular short school and these are still attracting new members. Many of those former students now carve out time and space for residential retreats and expect to be taken further down the Ignatian way.

Familiar territory for the evangelical

Once they are hooked, many Protestants find that they are more than content to have been landed. One reason is that much of the language St Ignatius uses and many of the principles he stresses have a familiar ring which helps Protestants to feel at home.

Take, for example, Gerard Hughes' version of the First Principle and Foundation: 'Before the world was made we were chosen to live in love in God's presence by praising, reverencing and serving him in and through his creation . . .'³ Compare this with a part of Paul's letter to the Ephesians which is well known in evangelical circles: 'Before the world was made, he chose us . . . to live through love in his presence . . . He made us . . . to praise the glory of his grace.'⁴ Many evangelicals find that, when they meditate on the First Principle and Foundation, the proverbial 'penny drops'. This happened to me when I started the 19th Annotation. As I compared Paul's language with that of St Ignatius, I wrote in my Prayer Journal: 'I've never seen these truths before. They bring deep-down joy. I sense in my spirit that this is the source of true happiness.'

There is a sense in which I *had* seen these truths before. I had grasped them with my head. I could even recite from memory that familiar verse from Ephesians. What I had failed to recognize was that St Paul's words were not only to be the guiding principle of my life, they showed me the reason why I had been created in the

first place. What I needed was not to know this in my head but to assimilate these truths with my innermost being because it is from this centre that the direction of our life is changed. As I expressed it in my colloquy: 'As I meditated on the First Principle and Foundation, I found myself tingling with excitement. Deep down, this really is what I want. You are my pearl of great price.' 'This', I noted at another stage of the Exercises 'is conversion'. 'Conversion' is a favourite word amongst evangelicals. But many of us have been beguiled into believing that when we make the initial 'U turn'—away from self and towards Christ—that is the end of the story. The Exercises explode that myth and excite us, instead, with the realization that conversion is an ongoing process. This is liberating. Realistic. It is what makes the prayer of St Ignatius, 'Direct my whole being to your praise and service', so very special; a favourite of mine and many other evangelicals.

Another thing which helps the evangelical to feel safe with St Ignatius is that the retreatant is encouraged to approach prayer with huge-hearted generosity of mind and spirit: 'As a retreatant, my one hope and desire is that I can really put myself at the disposal of God so that in all ways I seek only to respond to that love which first created me and now wraps me round with total care and concern'.⁵ This language finds an echo in the evangelical world. Take, for example, a hymn which has been popular for decades in evangelical circles:

Take my life and let it be
 Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
 Take my moments and my days,
 Let them flow in ceaseless praise.⁶

Familiar territory for the charismatic

Charismatic Christians from a Protestant background also find themselves on exhilaratingly familiar territory when they begin to explore *The Spiritual Exercises*. It has been said of the Exercises that the great emphasis of the retreat is on thirsting. The charismatic knows how it feels to be thirsting for God. Their openness to God encourages them to search for the streams of living water of the Spirit. But charismatic churches seem to talk more about thirsting than drinking and their members are begging to be shown how to feed for themselves. *The Spiritual Exercises* provide them with a welcome, proven way.

And there is another reason why charismatics find the Exercises relevant and stimulating. Charismatic Christians place a great deal of emphasis on the discernment of spirits and 'spiritual warfare'. St Ignatius' references to 'the enemy of human nature who acts like a military chief' come as no surprise. The image of an evil spirit 'who carefully maps out the tactics of attack at weak points of the defense' feels familiar. Charismatics compare such terminology with the language of St Peter: 'Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.'⁸ Or the language of St Paul: 'Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.'⁹

One of the books which is currently enjoying considerable popularity amongst charismatics is a novel which has been woven round such imagery.¹⁰ Charismatics therefore find no difficulty in identifying with the so-called 'medieval imagery' of the Two Standards exercise. They believe fervently in the alarming and devious nature of Satan or the devil. Although they would not call him 'Lucifer', they appreciate the emphasis of the Exercises and feel an affinity with a claim made by Pope Paul VI: 'Evil is not merely a lack of something, but an effective agent, a living spiritual being, perverted and perverting. A terrible reality. Mysterious and frightening . . . It is not a question of one Devil but of many . . .'¹¹

Familiar territory for the contemplative and the radical

There is another reason why evangelicals and charismatics find themselves on familiar ground when they explore the Exercises. Their deep-down heart hunger is for a personal relationship with Christ. When they realize that one of the aims of the Exercises is to enable the retreatant to encounter Christ in the innermost depths of their being, they are quite content to remain hooked, to explore the bible in the way St Ignatius recommends.

And here they are joined by the contemplative. Contemplatives, too, in the language of Julian of Norwich, desire and seek a personal relationship with God: 'I saw him and I sought him; I had him and I wanted him.' They appreciate the painstaking way in which St Ignatius encourages the retreatant to prepare their prayer. His emphasis on the Application of the Senses with its invitation to stop thinking thoughts, to sense, to gaze, to allow

Christ to enlighten them, helps them to feel that this spirituality is for them.

The radical, similarly, rejoices when he or she reads invitations like this: I 'ask our Lord that I might be able to hear his call, and that I might be ready and willing to do what he wants'.¹² They relish exercises like *The Call of the King* with its emphasis on social justice and involvement with the world and its pain. Language like this is music in the ears of the radical Christian:

I imagine a human leader, selected and raised up by God our Lord himself . . . His address to all men rings out in words like these: 'I want to overcome all diseases, all poverty, all ignorance, all oppression and slavery—in short, all the enemies of mankind. Whoever wishes to join me in this undertaking must be content with the same food, drink, clothing, and so on, as mine. So, too, he must so work with me by day, and watch with me by night, that as he has had a share in the toil with me, afterwards he may share in the victory with me.'¹³

Missing pieces of the jigsaw

But the Exercises woo Protestants of all persuasions, not only because they feel that they are on familiar, and therefore, safe ground but because St Ignatius seems to provide them with many missing pieces of the spiritual jigsaw.

'I found it was all right to have feelings', one person told me. I understood what she meant. We in the evangelical world have been trained to trust facts and to distrust our feelings. To discover a spirituality which encourages us not only in our feelings but to listen to them and allow the Word of God to speak into them is liberating. It opens us up to God's healing touch and brings about that welcome integration of body, mind and spirit which energizes, excites and inspires.

Similarly, St Ignatius provides us with a new perspective on sin. The genius of *The Spiritual Exercises* is that they provide an overview of sin, invite us to look out before looking in and to contemplate sin only in relation to God's goodness. This enables us to see personal sin for what it is: not so much a breaking of rules and regulations as a condition about which we can do nothing. This does not absolve us from a sense of personal responsibility. On the contrary, as we sense our guilt, we feel deep sorrow for our shame—but only in the correct context of the immense and

inexhaustible mercy and grace of God. As I wrote in my journal after the meditation on hell: 'I expected to find this exercise gruesome and depressing. Instead, I find myself, at the end of it, full of joy. Indeed, I have caught a fresh glimpse of the glory of God.'

Retreat-givers

Everyone I interviewed while I was planning this article underlined the value of the retreat-giver. 'The *guided* bit of the eight-day guided retreat—having someone to accompany you on your journey—was very important', wrote one. 'My spiritual directors have played an important part . . . by listening in a non-judgemental way', wrote another. 'They have further encouraged a greater openness in my prayer. To have someone *listen to me* regularly whilst I was going through the 19th Annotation was a new and wonderful experience', said another. A third expressed her surprise that, though her retreat-giver had appeared to be very 'laid back', the kind of direction he gave was so effective. 'He stood back rather than standing forward', she reflected. 'It was so very different from counselling. It was low-key but so very apparent that God was speaking.'

I would echo those feelings. The acceptance and understanding, the non-intrusive care with which I have been 'heard' by my retreat-givers is correcting my inadequate artist's impression of God and consequently changing the course of my life. And this, I imagine, is what St Ignatius intended.

I know of no such spiritual direction in evangelical/charismatic circles. The nearest would be the 'discipling' which is on offer in certain charismatic circles. But this kind of one-to-one help differs in that it is highly directive, can be life-stifling rather than growth-inducing and can pave the way for dependency on the person giving the discipling rather than the Holy Spirit.

Choices

The third missing piece of the jigsaw comes with St Ignatius' insights on making choices. Evangelicals and charismatics, in particular, seem to tie themselves in knots when choices have to be made. One reason is that they are desperately concerned to stay 'within God's will'. Such a concern can become oppressive and there sometimes seems to be no way out of the cleft stick situations in which they find themselves.

The Three Kinds of Humility exercise, the encouragement to pray towards attaining a state of 'equilibrium', and St Ignatius' consideration of the states of consolation and desolation feel like a much-needed breath of fresh air. We Protestants welcome the balanced way the Exercises encourage us to weigh choices by listening both to subjective feelings and the objective facts which become clear when we ask ourselves that penetrating question: 'What is best for the Kingdom?'

The future of the Exercises in Protestant circles

From what I have already written it will, by now, be obvious that there is no doubt in my mind that Ignatian spirituality has an important part to play in the spiritual growth of many Protestants.

Christians of all denominations are begging to be shown ways in which they can *know* God. They are no longer content simply to know about God. Ignatian spirituality, with its heavy emphasis on finding God in all things and on imaginative contemplation, provides them with well-trying methods of encountering God in the core of their being. As one of my own retreatants put it after doing an imaginative contemplation of the Nativity: 'Christmas can never be the same after this'. While she had been contemplating the birth of Christ, Mary had placed the baby in this woman's arms.

'Here,' she said, 'caress him.' . . . I couldn't believe she'd let me hold him so soon. He was so tiny, so helpless; but so whole. I saw the small, perfectly formed fingers, warm and soft; then through my tears I saw strong, manly hands, blistered and scarred with the mark of nails. As I carefully handed him back, I said, 'What can I do for him?' 'Love him,' she said. 'He loves you.'

Protestants need to be assured of God's love. That is another reason why Ignatian spirituality, with its emphasis on love rather than duty, has much to contribute to our spiritual growth. For too long, in Protestant circles, the need for dutiful obedience has been stressed. But, as St Ignatius insisted, before we talk about service and obedience, sin and forgiveness, first we must ensure that a person knows they are uniquely loved by God. It is when this certainty has taken root in their hearts that they find springing up within themselves the desire to love and serve in response. It is then that they can pray with integrity: 'Take, Lord, and receive

all my liberty . . . and my entire will—all that I have and call my own. You have given it all to me. To you, Lord, I return it.’

Ignatian spirituality offers other insights which come to the Protestant with such a startling freshness that spiritual growth is accelerated. I think, for example, of the daily Examen. This simple but powerful method of sensing the activity of God’s Spirit in the nitty-gritty of everyday life so cuts through the sham and pretence in which much of our so-called spirituality is wrapped that it becomes life-changing. Or I think of the *id quod volo*, ‘what do you want?’ That question, posed by Christ as we encounter him in our imagination, nails us, brings us up with a jolt, takes us to the heart of the matter, strips us of our projections and forces us to face ourselves as we really are. This, too, challenges us to change. Or I think of that invaluable asset to spiritual growth: the review of our prayer time. Again, this simple but profound method of tracing what has been going on in our encounter with Christ: where we have felt in desolation and why; where we have felt in consolation and why, confronts us with the reality of the situation: that our life, so often, still revolves, not around Christ, but around self. We Protestants desperately need a spirituality which catapults us from our narcissism into a Christ-centredness which involves an engagement with his world and its poor.

I know of no such objective means of assessing the authenticity of prayer stemming from Protestant teaching on spirituality. For this reason I recently published a Prayer Journal to encourage Christians to discover for themselves the dynamic of the Examen. I have also produced one book of Ignatian-style meditations and another is to be published in the autumn. These publications have already produced an enthusiastic response from many non-Catholics who are panting for prayer guides which spur them on to be active in their contemplation and contemplative in their many activities.

Whatever helps

At first, I feared that such projects might seem presumptuous coming, as they do, from the pen of a mere Protestant. Two words from St Ignatius prompted me to press on with these publications: ‘Whatever helps’.

Ignatian spirituality, as I have tried to show throughout this article, is already enriching the lives of countless Christians from a whole variety of backgrounds. Because it provides a well-proven,

biblical structure which takes individuals just as they are and shows them how to encounter the Christ of the gospels, it works. Even so, some Protestants, while valuing highly the nub of Ignatian spirituality, have qualms about responding to some of the suggestions made in the Exercises. Many evangelicals and charismatics, for example, prefer, when they write the colloquy, to pray to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit rather than write to the Father, the Son and Mary. If we are to take seriously St Ignatius' guidance, 'Whatever helps', we need to be sensitive to such qualms.

For the same reason, careful thought needs to be given to the training of spiritual directors who understand the peculiar sensitivities of the Protestant embarking on the Spiritual Exercises. The need to train the kind of spiritual director who is a facilitator, who acknowledges that the real director is the Holy Spirit, who respects the directee and is content to journey alongside those he directs, patiently accepting them as they are and allowing the Holy Spirit to change them in God's own way and at God's own pace is urgent. We Protestants have trained caring people in the art of listening and provided skilled counsellors to cope with crisis counselling, but we are only just beginning to glimpse the potential for the Kingdom of equipping soul-friends who, under God, journey alongside others down the pathway of prayer. Non-Catholics in New Zealand are showing a great deal of creativity in meeting this challenge. For several years now, they have provided the necessary training and are establishing an impressive national network of trained, experienced spiritual directors who can come alongside Christians from a whole variety of traditions. It is my hope that the courses in this country currently being promoted by Gerard Hughes and Anglicans like Graham Chadwick and Gordon Jeff will become more widely available so that the treasures of Ignatian spirituality will be enjoyed and appreciated over the years by an ever-increasing number of Christians—Catholic and non-Catholic—and that one spin-off will be an ever-increasing understanding of one another which, in itself, would be a living testimony to that generosity of heart which was so dear to the heart of St Ignatius himself.

NOTES

¹ Joyce Huggett: *Listening to God* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1986).

² David du Plessis's image.

³ Gerard Hughes: *God of surprises* (DLT, 1986), p 63.

⁴ Ephesians 1,3.

⁵ David L. Fleming: *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, p 7.

⁶ Frances Ridley Havergal (1837-1879).

⁷ David L. Fleming: *The Spiritual Exercises*, # 327.

⁸ 1 Peter 5,8.

⁹ Ephesians 6,12.

¹⁰ Frank E. Perette: *This present darkness*.

¹¹ Quoted in Robert Faricy: *Seeking Jesus in contemplation and discernment* (Collins, 1983), p 88.

¹² *Spiritual Exercises*, #91.

¹³ David L. Fleming: *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, p 65. *Spiritual Exercises*, #93,94.