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SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION

FOR AUTHORS

The Way warmly invites readers to submit articles with a view to publication. They should normally be about 4,000 words long, and be in keeping with the journal's aims. The Editor is always ready to discuss possible ideas.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Autobiography	Ignatius of Loyola, 'Reminiscences (Autobiography)', in *Personal Writings*
Constitutions	in *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996)
Diary	'The Spiritual Diary', in *Personal Writings*
Dir	*On Giving the Spiritual Exercises: The Early Manuscript Directories and the Official Directory of 1599*, translated and edited by Martin E. Palmer (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996)
Exx	*The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, translated by George E. Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992)
GC	General Congregation, in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 31st–35th General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009) and *Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (Boston: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2017)
MHSJ	Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu, 157 volumes (Madrid and Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Jesu, 1898–)
Personal Writings	*Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, translated by Philip Endean and Joseph A. Munitiz (London: Penguin, 1996)

Papal documents may be found at www.vatican.va

FOREWORD

THE IMAGE FEATURED on the cover of this Special Issue of *The Way* is *And He Disappeared out of Their Sight* by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937), who was one of the first African American artists to gain international recognition. It depicts the moment in the Gospel of Luke when Christ disappears from the sight of the disciples upon their arrival at Emmaus. The continuing presence of Christ is evoked by the shadow cast on the wall behind them. As they recognise to whom they have been speaking they begin to understand why their hearts were burning within them upon the road.

All of the articles here ponder experiences that resonate with that of the disciples. The first companions of St Ignatius described such experiences as the 'turn' in conversation: that moment when wonder strikes, energy is found and new horizons are revealed. For them, moments such as this indicate rich seams of human experience where God is at work. They invite us to remain attentive, just like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, so we can discover the presence of Christ right by our side.

In the lead article, Nicholas Austin argues that spiritual conversation is a characteristically Ignatian ministry, and defines the 'turn' as 'a loving turn of attention' to the spiritual already present in experience. He explores how this practice came to influence early Jesuit ministry. Patrick Goujon considers whether the Spiritual Exercises are primarily to be understood as a conversation with the director or a conversation with God. Although there is an asymmetry between the two relationships he shows that they coexist so that the one making the exercises learns how to desire according to the will of God.

This issue includes one of the foundational texts from the Ignatian tradition about the practice of spiritual conversation, in a translation long out of print. In his Sixth Exhortation, Jerónimo Nadal (1507–1580) described how spiritual conversation infused the whole of Jesuit ministry right from the beginning. It is in this text that he describes Ignatius' famous way of finding the opportunity to make a spiritual 'turn' in conversation by 'entering by their door so as to come out by our door'. This phrase is undoubtedly a touchstone for Michael Barnes, whose lifelong dedication to interfaith dialogue leads him to reflect on how

the Spiritual Exercises can form us in virtues that lead to hospitable conversations even with those who are very different from ourselves. It is a technique evident in the gentle approach to spiritual conversation advocated by Rob Marsh in an interview recorded immediately before the recent publication of his collected essays.

Michael Holman, an experienced spiritual conversationalist, offers an updated version of Nadal's advice based on his own ministry. He draws out themes and commonalities with the experience of the first companions which can guide anyone involved in spiritual ministry. He invites us to rediscover the Jesuit art of 'going fishing' by starting evangelical conversations on the street. Thomas Enwright describes a variety of conversations and encounters as he meditates on the lifelong task of finding an authentic voice and recognising when we are speaking in the presence of Christ. In a similar vein Marion Morgan reflects upon her own experiences of spiritual conversation, noting that each one can be the occasion for a seed to be planted that will go on to flower and bear fruit.

Margaret Blackie argues that the 'turn' in conversation is signalled by a sense of wonder. As a chemist researching the causes of malaria, she finds that wonder can form a bridge between intellectual and spiritual conversations. Although exchanges in the world of academia are not spiritual as such, they are held in a framework of objectivity akin to Ignatian indifference. A similar moment of wonder can be discovered in Psalm 39. In a poetic commentary on the original Hebrew text, the editor describes the technique of *mirativity*—a moment of introspection that leads to new insight—and follows the conversational dynamics that help to illuminate this difficult psalm in the light of recent global challenges.

Ignatius wrote the General Examen as a guide to spiritual conversations with applicants to the Society of Jesus. Brian O'Leary discovers how its structure is complemented by that of the Spiritual Exercises. He notes how its ever-deepening questions challenge applicants to examine whether or not they have a true vocation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The practice of synodality has invited us all to engage with a similar process of discernment on a larger scale. A detailed account of the emergence of spiritual conversation in the life of Ignatius and its development among the first Jesuits leads Julia Violero Álvarez to reflect on the trinitarian inspiration of Jesuit ministry through which 'the trinitarian love flows and dances across human words'. She draws out

guidelines that can help to keep us faithful to the process of synodality outlined by Pope Francis.

Three of the articles in this issue were prepared by speakers at the St Beuno's Conference on Spiritual Conversation. We look forward to publishing a fourth in a future issue. We are also hoping to bring you a podcast interview with Patrick Goujon on the same topic, so watch out for news on our website soon. We would be very pleased to hear about the themes and questions that interest you; don't hesitate to get in touch to let us know. As we enter into the spiritual conversations of our life and ministry, let us be mindful of the depths that await us and be attentive so as to remain with the presence of Christ in those moments when our hearts begin to burn.

Philip Harrison SJ
Editor

THE IGNATIAN ART OF SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION

Nicholas Austin

EVEN THOSE WHO SELDOM USE the Ignatian term 'spiritual conversation' may have had many spiritual conversations, whether in the formal context of the Spiritual Exercises, or with friends, or even in chance encounters with strangers. To go away from a conversation spiritually helped, or to find, to our surprise, that something we once said has helped another on his or her spiritual journey, is to have been a participant in spiritual conversation.

The powerfully transformative art of spiritual conversation passed on by Ignatius Loyola and explained by his trusted interpreter Jerónimo Nadal is, I believe, as meaningful for our relationships with one another and with God as it was for Ignatius and the first companions.[1] I hope to show here that spiritual conversation not only is an attractive and characteristically Ignatian practice, but also touches on what is at the very core of the Ignatian way of praying and serving.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of spiritual conversation in the Ignatian charism from its very first beginnings. Ignatius was passionate about spiritual conversation from his conversion onwards. The first companions were drawn together by conversation with Ignatius that deepened into the experience of the Spiritual Exercises. Learning from his practice and teaching, the first Jesuits themselves became adept in the art of spiritual conversation. This practice was present at foundational moments in the development of the Society of Jesus. Indeed, spiritual conversation was recognised as a special mark or characteristic

[1] I take the phrase 'art of spiritual conversation' from a helpful book on the topic: Thomas H. Clancy, *The Conversational Word of God: A Commentary on the Doctrine of St. Ignatius of Loyola Concerning Spiritual Conversation, with Four Early Jesuit Texts* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978). Clancy's translation of an important text by Nadal on spiritual conversation is reprinted below, 25–29.

of the Society, both by the very first Jesuits and by those who came into contact with them.[2] Jerónimo Nadal was a second-generation Jesuit whom Ignatius trusted to explain the Jesuit way of life to others. In an important letter, Nadal passes on what Ignatius taught by word and example about the art of spiritual conversation. He encourages others to this 'excellent method of helping our neighbour': not only Jesuits, but lay women and men as well.[3]

This exploration of spiritual conversation, deepened and expanded in the articles that follow, will begin by identifying the 'turn' involved in each spiritual conversation. It then moves to Ignatius' practice and teaching of this art, as mediated through his letters, the *Autobiography*, the Jesuit *Constitutions* and, above all, Nadal's letter gathering together Ignatius' teaching. I argue that Nadal is correct that, at one level, spiritual conversation is an important ministry of the Word, alongside others such as preaching, teaching, and giving the Spiritual Exercises; at a deeper level, however, it is more fundamentally a characteristic Ignatian way of proceeding in all ministry.

Whether he or she is accompanying someone in their prayer, making decisions in an apostolic institution, building community, performing the works of mercy, teaching or preaching, the Ignatian missionary disciple is doing so in a conversational mode, with a view to what is spiritually helpful and open to the guidance of the Spirit. The Ignatian apostle will look for ways to bring this discerning, dialogical style of interacting, which flows out of the Spiritual Exercises, into more and more contexts.

The Turn

What is spiritual conversation? I begin not with a definition but an example. It comes from the late Tony Horan, a Jesuit priest who devoted most of his ministry to accompanying laypeople in Ignatian prayer, community and mission, right up to his death at the age of 92. Once he was provocatively asked: 'It must be fascinating being a priest, hearing people's confessions, learning about all their secret sins?' Tony laughed.

[2] For a historian's account of the early Jesuit practice of conversation, see John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard U, 1993), 110–113.

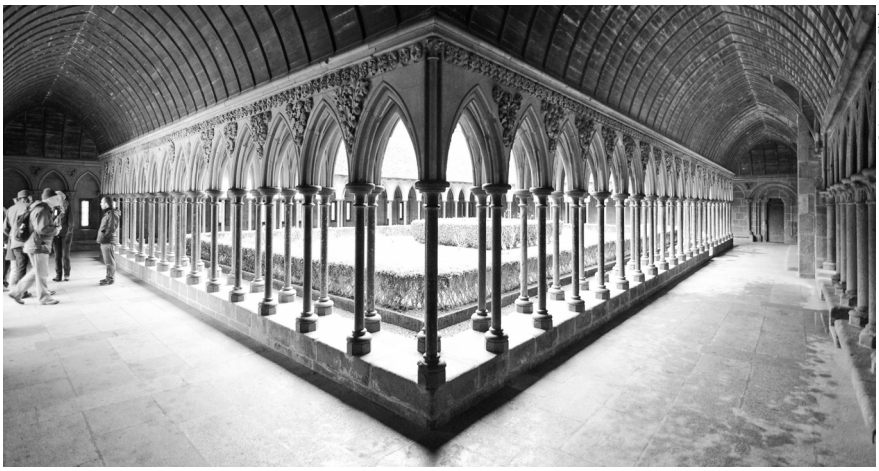
[3] The letter is entitled, 'And Any Other Ministration Wharsoever of the Word of God', MHSJ MN 5, 832–841, here 836. See below, 25–29, for Thomas Clancy's partial translation. My own translation here aims to be more literal, owing to the richness of the original text.

Then he replied, 'I find, as a priest, that in confession you see people at their best'. A good example of the art of spiritual conversation. What did Tony do? He executed a 'turn'. He went in through his interlocutor's door and came out through his own. By sharing a laugh and then disclosing a more positive aspect of his own experience, he turned the focus of the conversation from mere curiosity about other people's sins to something more spiritually helpful: the encounter with human goodness, even the encounter with grace.

Spiritual conversation often involves just such a turn from something relatively impersonal or superficial to something a little deeper, a little more personal, more spiritual. Ignatius' image for what I am calling 'the turn' may strike us today as problematic. In a letter to Paschase Broët and Alfonso Salmerón, sent on mission to Ireland, he says:

> We may lead others to good by praying or agreeing with them on a certain good point, leaving aside whatever else may be wrong. Thus after gaining his confidence, we shall meet with better success. In this sense we enter his door with him, but we come out our own.[4]

Many may worry today that Ignatius' recommended tactics in spiritual conversation have a manipulative feel about them. Are we dealing honestly and openly with others if we go in through their door and come



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[4] Ignatius to Paschase Broët and Alfonso Salmerón, early September 1541, in *Counsels for Jesuits: Selected Letters and Instructions of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, edited by Joseph N. Tylenda (Chicago: Loyola, 1985), 2.

out through our own? In a suspicious moment, we might hear in Ignatius the tone of Dale Carnegie's self-help classic, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. If so, few would want to be on the receiving end of such ministry!

Nadal's fuller explanation of the turn in spiritual conversation brings out the positive side of Ignatius' advice and may help us to receive it in a more acceptable sense today. Nadal explains that, for Ignatius, we should not launch forth from the beginning on spiritual topics. Rather, it is better to converse with people about those things that have a hold on their attention and interest:

> … with a soldier [one talks of] war; with a merchant, of business; with a nobleman, his office or the political affairs of the kingdom or republic; with a cleric, of ecclesiastical matters and of the governance of the Church.[5]

'Going in by their door' puts the accent on adapting oneself to the other person and his or her interests rather than imposing one's own agenda. Listening, one waits patiently for an occasion to turn the conversation to spiritual things in a way suited to that person's inclinations and needs:

> But in such conversations we should be on the lookout for an opportunity to alight on something in the conversation's subject matter—anything that provides an occasion to talk of the health [of the soul][6] in some apt way. Father Ignatius used to explain this method by the Spanish saying, 'Entering through their door and leaving through our own', that is, drawing closer to them by agreeing with their will, but leaving them having gained their agreement with ours. For he used to say that one should not speak immediately of vices, virtues and the mysteries of the life and death of Christ. For, before they hear us willingly, we would drive them off by our untimely zeal and make them unwilling to hear anything.[7]

This is a ministry, for Ignatius and Nadal, enlightened especially by a text from St Paul: 'I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some' (1 Corinthians 9:22b).

[5] MHSJ MN 5, 834.
[6] 'Health [of the soul]' here translates *salus*. Nadal uses *salus animae* in the same paragraph. See the reflection on this word below, 18.
[7] MHSJ MN 5, 834–835.

There are also signs that at the heart of the Ignatian art of spiritual conversation is not manipulation but a deep reverence for freedom, one that can inspire us still. We know from the Spiritual Exercises—which are a special form of spiritual conversation[8]—that Ignatius has a particular concern for the freedom of the other in relating to God. Instead of exhorting a person along this or that path, the one giving the Exercises remains 'in the centre like the pointer of a balance', leaving creature and Creator to deal with each other directly (Exx 15).

Could such a delicate balance be appropriate in spiritual conversation more generally? Ignatius seems to concede that explicit encouragement in one direction or other may be more suitable outside the sensitive context of the Exercises. Yet, even then, notice that Ignatius (as reported by Nadal) is concerned to ensure that the other person hears us 'willingly'. The principle enunciated in the Spiritual Exercises remains true: more fruit comes not when I try to get a person somewhere I want him or her to go, but rather when I accompany that person in his or her own process of freely receiving 'the enlightenment of divine grace' (Exx 2). Hence Nadal's advice is wise: be on the lookout for the opportunity in what a person is saying for a turn—a loving turn of attention, not so much to one's own agenda, but to where the Spirit may be most present, leading a person forward.

Where the Spirit may be most present, leading a person forward

This kind of spirit-attuned turn is most easily recognisable from the practice of Ignatian spiritual direction, both to those who give it and those who receive it. In 2005 I was sent by my Provincial to Boston, Massachusetts, to do my doctoral studies. In time, I arranged to see a spiritual director, Jim Sheehan, an elderly Jesuit who was living in the retirement home outside the city. I set off from my house in the car and took a wrong turn along the highway, arriving 45 minutes late. I called Jim on the intercom and said, 'Jim, I'm here, but you've probably given up hope in me by now'. He said, '*I* haven't given up hope in you. God certainly hasn't given up hope in you!' So he came to the front door and said to me, 'You must be frustrated. Let's go to lunch.'

After lunch, we went to his room and I spent half an hour explaining to Jim everything that was wrong in my life at that point. He listened

[8] Thanks to Patrick Goujon for this insight. See, for example, *Autobiography*, n. 92: 'In Venice at that time he occupied himself in giving the Exercises and in other spiritual conversations'.

silently. And then he said, 'Is there anywhere in your experience at the moment where God might be present?' To my surprise, I was able to name two places where I was experiencing real consolation and had not fully noticed. One was in my grieving for my grandmother's death and the other was in my daily experience of eucharist. Once again, this was a turn, but not a coercive or manipulative one: a simple shift of attention that allows the grace latent in experience to emerge and unfold.

What is true in spiritual direction is true in other forms of spiritual conversation, albeit with more latitude for both parties to share something from their own experience. There is a moment in such a conversation when things take a different turn, when we tune into what the good spirit is doing in someone's life. We go in through that person's door and go out by our own door—meaning by that the door, not of our own agenda, but of our alliance with the good spirit, who draws a person forward in freedom.

We recognise this turn when it happens. It is like digging for treasure in a field and hitting a chest with the shovel. Thud. We know that this is where to stay and dig; this is where the gold is.

The Early Jesuits and Spiritual Conversation

Before attempting to define spiritual conversation more fully, it will help to get a feel for its character and centrality for the early Jesuits. Ignatius himself had a lifelong love of spiritual conversation. As so often, however, what began in him as enthusiasm without discretion became more discerning and circumspect as time went on. We learn through his *Autobiography* that, from the early days of his conversion, he loved talking about spiritual things with spiritual persons, and did so with great fervour.[9] Gradually, however, he began to learn that he could help others; he could 'help souls' by spiritual conversation (n.26).[10] He began to spend significant amounts of time in this ministry, often combining it with giving the Spiritual Exercises (nn.77, 92).

[9] *Autobiography*, n. 21: 'At this time he still used to talk sometimes with spiritual people, who thought he was genuine and wanted to talk to him, because, although he had no knowledge of spiritual things, still in his speaking he showed much fervour and a great will to go forward in the service of God'. See also nn. 26, 34, 88, 92.

[10] *Autobiography*, n. 26.

Ignatius therefore became quite intentional, not just about doing spiritual conversation, but doing it in a particular way. Instead of just talking about spiritual things as one might talk about any of one's passions—as he did early on his spiritual journey—he became more of a listener. In his famous instructions to the fathers going to the Council of Trent, Ignatius says:

> Anyone of ours should be slow to speak and show consideration and sympathy, especially when dealing with doctrinal definitions that will or may be discussed in the Council. Along with his reticence, he should rely on a readiness to listen, keeping quiet so as to sense and appreciate the positions, emotions and desires of those speaking. Then he will be better able to speak or to keep silent. [11]

The principle of being slow to speak in order to listen carefully allows for a more discerning and fruitful approach to conversation.

Elaborating on this guidance, Nadal accents the general principle of Ignatian adaptation to times, places and persons.[12] Spiritual conversation is a more bespoke ministry than lecturing or preaching. One should not merely act out of love and zeal, but do so with discretion, in a way that is genuinely suited to the particularity of the persons and situations one encounters. Nadal explains that, for Ignatius,

> It is very useful indeed to apply privately to individuals what preachers and lecturers do publicly from on high for the multitude. And, indeed, there is a greater liberty and greater power in this, since the Word can be fitted [to the person] from the varying response or affect.[13]

The identification of the 'greater liberty' that characterizes spiritual conversation, when compared to lecturing or preaching, highlights the way the former has to be adjusted in 'real time', to suit the shifting reality of the other's dispositions and responses here and now. No matter how much one rehearses such a conversation, this kind of ad-libbing can only be exercised on the fly.

[11] Ignatius to members of the Society of Jesus at Trent, early 1546, in *Personal Writings*, 248.
[12] This adaptability is also emphasized in Pedro de Ribadeneira's account of Ignatius' approach to spiritual conversation: book 5, chapter 11 in Pedro de Ribadeneira, *The Life of Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by Claude Pavur (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2014), 414–419.
[13] MHSJ MN 5, 833.

A sign of the importance of spiritual conversation to the first Jesuits is the fact that it was crucially present at the inception of the Society of Jesus. Nadal observes that it was by spiritual conversation that Ignatius 'gathered to himself those first nine companions'.[14] Later, discerning spiritual conversation helped Ignatius and the first companions to elect to stay together as an apostolic body.[15] Without spiritual conversation, the Society of Jesus would not have come into being.

The first companions learn spiritual conversation from Ignatius. Pierre Favre and Francis Xavier were thought to be especially gifted by God in this art by which their own lives had been profoundly changed. Favre was convinced that Christ is pleased if we leave behind us 'a trail of good and holy conversation' wherever we happen to travel.[16] Writing from India, Xavier asked for Jesuits 'who knew how to deal with others in tender fashion' and who were not 'rigid, wanting to control others by instilling a servile fear'.[17] Thus the gentle art of Ignatian spiritual conversation became a recognised characteristic of the Society of Jesus, a contrast with some more severe pastoral approaches.

In Salamanca, when suspected by the authorities of spreading unorthodox teachings, Ignatius was asked, 'What do you preach?' '"We", said the pilgrim, "don't preach, but speak about things of God with certain people in an informal way, such as after a meal with some people who invite us."'[18]

Defining Spiritual Conversation

The practice of spiritual conversation becomes codified in the Jesuit *Constitutions*.[19] In this text, spiritual conversation is one item in a list of ministries in which Jesuits are to engage, alongside preaching, teaching, hearing confessions, giving the Spiritual Exercises and doing the works of mercy. Jesuits are encouraged to 'endeavour to benefit individual

[14] MHSJ MN 5, 833–834.
[15] Jules J. Toner, 'The Deliberation That Started the Jesuits: A Commentary on the *Deliberatio primorum patrum*, Newly Translated, with a Historical Introduction', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 6/4 (1974). For a helpful corrective the idealised account of Toner, see Philip Endean, 'The Draughthorse's Bloodlines: Discerning Together in the Ignatian Constitutions', *The Way Supplement*, 85 (1996), 73–83.
[16] Beatus Petrus Canisius, *Epistulae et acta*, edited by Otto Braunsberger (Freiburg: Herder, 1896), volume 8, 125.
[17] O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 81.
[18] *Autobiography*, nn. 64–65.
[19] *Constitutions*, Examen. 6. 4 [115], III. 1. 3 [247], VII. 4. 8 [648].

persons in spiritual conversations, giving counsel and exhorting to good works'.[20] How, though, might we define Ignatian spiritual conversation?


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It is important not to restrict 'spiritual conversation' to one or other specific method or situation. Nadal offers a wide variety of contexts in which it is appropriate. He says that spiritual conversations are especially helpful after sermons, when people are more spiritually receptive: hence the early Jesuit practice of combining two apostles, one who preaches and the other who converses with individuals. It is also an important ministry for teachers in schools with their students. Even meeting people in the street or other public places can be an occasion for spiritual conversation. (Pierre Favre saw such 'chance' encounters as works of providence.)[21] Nadal gives examples of spiritual conversation in groups, for example, a gathering of students interested in the spiritual life. The ministry itself is not restricted to Jesuits. Nadal says we should urge those we minister to and our friends to learn the art of spiritual conversation, women as well as men.[22]

Whatever the context, 'spiritual conversation' in the *Constitutions* and Nadal's letter refers to conversation about spiritual things which helps our neighbour to make progress, and which is conducted in a way open to the guidance of the Spirit. Let us look at these three elements in turn.

Spiritual Things

Spiritual conversation, first, has a *subject matter*: spiritual things. Given the importance of listening and adapting to an individual, it is clear that

[20] *Constitutions*, VII. 4. 8 [648].
[21] Clancy, *Conversational Word of God*, 65.
[22] MHSJ MN 5, 836.

Ignatian spiritual conversation is not a theological discourse about spiritual things in the abstract, but a more personal conversation about those that touch on a certain individual's heart and life. Moreover, the 'spiritual' subject matter should not be read too narrowly.

Since Ignatian spirituality emphasizes the way all created things and life situations can potentially mediate God's presence, the subject matter of a spiritual conversation can include more than what *explicitly* concerns Christ as the way, the truth and the life. Nadal helpfully says that the turn in spiritual conversation is towards *salus* or things concerning *salus animae*, the health or salvation of the soul. The ambiguity of *salus* here is helpful: sometimes the subject will overtly be about the spiritual life, but at others what concerns a person's welfare, the 'health of the soul'. Today, we might say spiritual conversations are about any topic that connects, in a personal way, with someone's journey towards *true life*.[23] There can be no conflict between what brings us closer to the fullness of life and the one who is life.

Helping Souls

Spiritual conversation also has a *goal*: to help souls. Spiritual conversation, that is, edifies: it builds people up in the spiritual life—hence Nadal's continual emphasis on the charity or love of neighbour that motivates this practice.[24] For example, he praises Ignatius for exercising a 'sweet fervour of love' (*amoris fervor suavis*) towards the soul he is helping.[25] Even if someone were leading a sinful life, Ignatius would single out for praise some good work, natural gift, faith or virtue, if he or she had ever displayed any whatsoever. From this beginning in goodness, Ignatius would build the person up.

The Guidance of the Spirit

However, just as important as the subject matter and the goal of the conversation is the manner in which it is conducted: not only prudently but even discerningly—following the guidance of the Spirit. As Nadal puts it:

[23] Ignatius uses the phrase 'true life' in the meditation on the Two Standards. It refers to the genuine life Christ proposes, as contrasted with the counterfeit promise of life proposed by the enemy of human nature (Exx 139).
[24] *Constitutions*, III. 1. 3 [247].
[25] MHSJ MN 5, 834.

> The speaker should use holy and devout prudence to steer [each conversation]; but the Lord by his providence will himself navigate for us by granting us certain lines to follow, if we are open to his grace and our vocation.[26]

'Prudence', here, refers not to anxious caution but to a practical wisdom sensitive to the contingencies of human relationship. Building on this good sense in relating to others, the art of spiritual conversation, Nadal is saying, requires being alert to the leading of the Spirit.

For Nadal, then, there is no recipe for spiritual conversation; rather, we need tact and discernment to judge when and how to make the turn to spiritual things.[27] Thus, when Nadal describes how Francis Xavier was so gifted in spiritual conversation, he singles out not only his charity, his moral prudence and the sweetness (*suavitas*) of his words, but also his discernment of spirits.[28] The crucial thing in this art is not to go ahead of grace, but to follow God's lead. Nadal is convinced that the Lord will guide us if we are attentive.

The word 'spiritual' in 'spiritual conversation' therefore works overtime: it does at least three jobs. Spiritual conversation is not merely conversation about a spiritual subject matter, nor even that with a spiritual goal, but dialogue that is conducted in a spiritual manner. I therefore suggest the following definition of Ignatian spiritual conversation: *discerning conversation about spiritual things for spiritual progress*.

Spiritual conversation can be conducted by the Ignatian apostle in a wide variety of contexts, from chance encounters between two individuals to intentional groups formed for the purpose of spiritual benefit. Those who exercise this ministry are not restricted to clerics, but are recognised, at least since Nadal in the sixteenth century, to include priests and laypeople, women as well as men. It is a practice, an art, that requires something more than a mere method or a technique: it presupposes personal qualities and virtues such as prudence, discernment, attentiveness, inner freedom, reverence, gentleness and, above all, love.

[26] MHSJ MN 5, 835.
[27] A helpful point of comparison here is the 'third quality' that the *Constitutions* say the Superior General ought to have, which includes 'prudence along with experience in spiritual and interior matters, so that he may be able to discern the various spirits and give counsel' and the gift 'of conversing with such various persons' (IX.2.6[729]).
[28] MHSJ MN 5, 833.

Spiritual Conversation as the Ignatian Way

Spiritual conversation was seen by the early Jesuits as especially characteristic of the Society of Jesus and its way of doing ministry. St Peter Canisius testifies to this in a letter to the Superior General Claudio Acquaviva on the subject, at his request. Like Nadal, Canisius was a second-generation Jesuit who was deeply impressed by the accent placed on spiritual conversation by Ignatius and his first companions. He is especially keen to praise his old mentor, St Pierre Favre, as a skilled practitioner of this art. Canisius makes the extraordinary claim that, among the works of mercy and charity, spiritual conversation is the one 'with the highest praise in the Society, and the one most especially helpful to others'.[29] This is a rhetorical exaggeration, perhaps, but one that underlines the importance of this practice to the early Jesuits.

However, I do not think we do spiritual conversation justice if we restrict it to being one particular ministry of the Word of God among others, even the one with the highest praise. It has a more important place in Ignatian spirituality even than that. George E. Ganss makes the insightful point that spiritual conversation was what 'penetrated and undergirded all the other more visible activities' of the first Jesuits.[30] For the Ignatian missionary disciple, then, spiritual conversation is not just one ministry among others, no matter how important; rather, it is the Ignatian way of doing any ministry.

Spiritual conversation ... is the Ignatian way of doing any ministry

All Ignatian ministry is done in the key of spiritual conversation. Whether an Ignatian apostle is preaching, teaching, hearing confessions, giving the Spiritual Exercises, performing the works of mercy or making decisions, he or she is doing so in the mode of a conversation, leading to life, open to the Spirit.

If spiritual conversation is indeed the mode of all Ignatian ministry and practice, this is a fact calling for explanation. There must be something at the heart of Ignatian spirituality that explains why all the activities that flow from it are done in a discerning and conversational mode. Later in this issue of *The Way*, Patrick Goujon will explore the Spiritual Exercises as a form of spiritual conversation, highlighting not only the

[29] Canisius, *Epistulae et acta*, volume 8, 118. There is a translation of this letter in Clancy, *Conversational Word of God*, 57–67.
[30] George E. Ganss, foreword, in Clancy, *Conversational Word of God*, ix.

conversation between the one handing on the *Exercises* and the one receiving them, but also the 'colloquy' or conversation with God and the saints with which each conversation culminates. It is not just that the Spiritual Exercises are a basis for spiritual conversation, then, but that they *are* a spiritual conversation: a twofold one, in which a person's conversation with God is aided by conversation with a companion. The deep reason why Ignatian ministry is done in a conversational mode is because the Ignatian apostle is formed especially in the conversational encounter with the Lord, accompanied in a conversational manner.

Thomas H. Clancy ends his book on spiritual conversation by reflecting on the interplay between authentic conversations with each other, and those with God:

> We can hardly hope to learn to talk to God until we rediscover how to talk to one another. Of course, that effort itself demands prayer. We should pursue conversation on both levels. God will teach us better how to listen to and talk with our friends. And our friends will teach us better how to listen to God and to open our heart to him without self-consciousness or self-seeking.[31]

Spiritual conversation is a discerning, conversational mode of interaction that flows out of a discerning, conversational relationship with the Lord—and vice versa.

Spiritual Conversation Today

Nadal humbly concedes at the very beginning of his letter that he cannot fully explain what is involved in the art of spiritual conversation: as a ministry of the Word of God, 'it is sensed only in the Spirit, in Christ'.[32] To become adept in this art is less a matter of mastering a set of instructions than getting a 'feel' for it. While it cannot be fully explained, then, it can be experienced, it can be caught.

I mentioned to an academic recently that I had attended a conference at the Jesuit retreat centre St Beuno's on spiritual conversation.[33] He responded by explaining how the experience of receiving Ignatian spiritual direction had transformed the way he led tutorials. He was more

[31] Clancy, *Conversational Word of God*, 50.
[32] MHSJ MN 5, 832.
[33] Thanks to William Ghosh, who has given his permission for me to record my recollection.

sensitive to the interior energy behind a student's interests or insights, and more adept and helping the student to follow the 'movement'. It is not that his tutorials in literature suddenly became pious conversation about spiritual matters, but that, as someone who had received Ignatian spiritual direction, he now found a new way of accompanying students discerningly.

What started with Ignatius' simple practice of talking about spiritual things to help souls has unfolded in multiple contexts down to our own day. The Society of Jesus is today rediscovering spiritual conversation as an important aspect of its way of proceeding, bringing the practice more consciously and intentionally into community life, apostolic planning and governance. This renewal of spiritual conversation in the Jesuit way of proceeding was called for in the 36th General Congregation, where the Jesuits gathered found themselves resonating with the experience of the first companions at Venice:

> Spiritual conversation involves an exchange marked by active and receptive listening and a desire to speak of that which touches us most deeply. It tries to take account of spiritual movements, individual and communal, with the objective of choosing the path of consolation that fortifies our faith, hope and love. Spiritual conversation creates an atmosphere of trust and welcome for ourselves and others. We ought not to deprive ourselves of such conversation in the community and in all other occasions for decision-making in the Society.[34]

A sign that this recovery increasingly marks Jesuit life today is the way the 71st Congregation of Procurators, at Loyola, Spain (15–21 May 2023) was preceded by an eight-day retreat for all participants, praying and then meeting in small groups for spiritual conversation. Participants felt that the prayerful, discerning manner of conversation cultivated in the retreat flowed into the style of dialogue in the congregation proper. Interventions were marked less by opinionated argument and more by a common search for where the Spirit is leading the Society.

It is also surely no accident that, at the centre of the first Jesuit Pope's reforming agenda is synodality. For, as Pope Francis explains, synodality involves gathering to speak with freedom (with *parrhesia*), to listen humbly to each other, in order to listen to the voice of the Spirit.[35]

[34] GC 36, decree 1, 'Companions in a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice', n. 12.
[35] Nicholas Austin, 'Discernment as a Work of the Church', *The Way*, 58/4 (October 2019), 7–16.

What, then, is synodality, if not an ongoing spiritual conversation involving all members of the Church?

Ignatian apostles continually find new ways to embody the art of discerning conversation that Ignatius, Favre, Xavier and the early Jesuits exemplified in their own context. Ignatius is one of the great conversation-starters in history. It is not so much that he advocated talking about pious things but that he inspired by his example and teaching a mode of praying and serving marked by listening, discernment and dialogue. If it is true that spiritual conversation is less a specific kind of apostolic ministry than a style of interacting and relating that can infuse any activity, the invitation to us today may be to ask how we can bring this style, this manner, this art into more and more of what we do.

Nicholas Austin SJ is a theological ethicist and master of Campion Hall, Oxford. His research has focused on Thomas Aquinas and the virtues, and the connections between ethics and spirituality.

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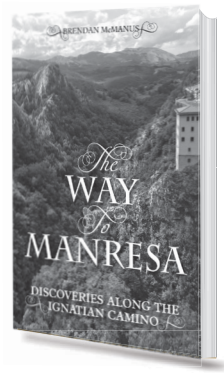

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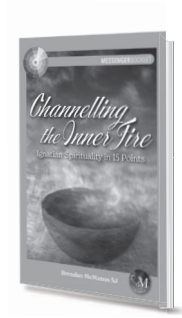

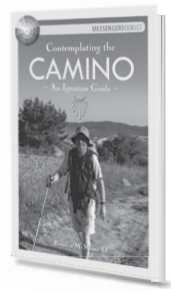

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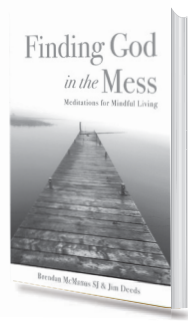

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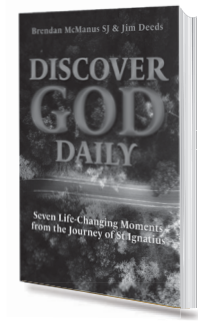

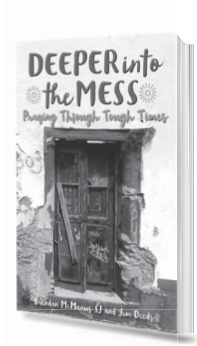

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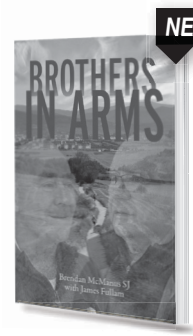

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From the SIXTH EXHORTATION

Jerónimo Nadal

Jerónimo Nadal's exhortation gives one perspective on how the early Jesuits understood the ministry of spiritual conversation. He discusses its leading proponents and proposes Ignatius as a model. Among other details he describes Ignatius' well-known strategy of the 'turn' in conversation: 'entering by their door so as to come out by our door'. These are not 'hard and fast rules' for conduct in ministry but guidance to be adapted to circumstances, time, place and person. Nadal offers a fascinating insight into the ministry of the first Jesuits that resounds today just as much as it did in the sixteenth century.

Chapter 4: On 'Any Other Ministration Whatsoever of the Word of God'

[22] It is a great grace in the Church of God, and a high office, to be a minister of God's word; and this is a thing we should try to grasp with heart and mind, brethren. Christ is the infinite Word of God and we are the ministers of this Word, for it is he who sends us, he who teaches us, he who gives our lives meaning, who gives us the grace to receive this message and know that it comes from him. He makes his word work in us and endows our work with the savour of charity and with divine enthusiasm. We cannot plumb the depths of the ministry of the word, we can only begin to grasp its inner meaning by the grace of Christ.

The chief duties of this ministry are sermons and sacred lectures or conferences as we have said above. And yet the whole sense of the ministry of God's word is summed up in our fervent spirit. We cannot grasp the totality of this ministry if we pass over its other aspects. Something similar frequently occurs in the Holy Scripture when a part

Jerónimo Nadal, *Exhortatio* 6a, MHSJ MN 5, 832–837. Translation reprinted by kind permission from Thomas H. Clancy, *The Conversational Word of God* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Souces, 1978), 52–56.

Jerónimo Nadal, artist unknown, sixteenth century

that is to come is anticipated. But what are those aspects of the ministry of the word that we have treated up to now only implicitly?

[23] The first aspect is private spiritual conversation, which is an excellent method of helping our neighbour. Ignatius used to say that this ministry teaches us important things. What preachers and lecturers proclaim from on high, we ought to try to suggest quietly to individuals. And in this latter ministry there is a greater liberty and effectiveness because one can fit the words to the disposition and reaction of the individual. And if we are men dedicated to Christ we will not fail to win souls with this method, by his grace.

[24] Pierre Favre, one of the first companions of Ignatius, was one of those apostles who had a special talent in this ministry. He had an extraordinary charm in spiritual conversation, for Pierre Favre never met a man, no matter how far gone, who was not totally changed by dealing with him. Father Ignatius used to say that Pierre could draw water from a rock.

Another Jesuit who stood out in this ministry was Father Francis Xavier, the apostle of the Indies and Japan. Ignatius himself was one of the best. His burning zeal for souls and his gift of discernment and divine tact enabled him with a few winning words to endear himself to everyone he met. He got to know men so well that he worked wonders on them. It was as if he could peer into a man's soul; and when he spoke men had to admit that he knew them better than they knew themselves. On top of all of this there was a kind of heavenly glow about him when he spoke of the things of God, which had a striking effect on those present.

[25] Ignatius was able to do great things through this ministry of God's word. First of all, it was this gift that enabled him to recruit his first nine companions. In some cases this ministry requires more skill than preaching. And yet it is the special quality of the conversational apostle quietly and slowly to win over his neighbour, to deal with him gently and light the flame of charity in his heart. Let me tell you what I know about this ministry from Father Ignatius himself.

What I will tell you he taught me not only by word, but also by example. The first thing to do is to concentrate one's heart and soul on loving the person you want to aid. Even though the person in question was a hardened sinner, he found something in him to love, his natural gifts, his belief in God and any other good things about him. He would concentrate on these things, on the good works; or—in the case of necessity—on the good works he did in the past; and he would point them out to others and discourse on them lovingly. He would test his zeal for the salvation of this soul against all the factors tending in the other direction, especially the evil spirit, who is the source and cause of all the vices. He thought that one should find out everything possible about the person, his present and past station in life, his intelligence, his physical make-up, his temperament whether it was choleric, phlegmatic, sanguine or melancholy, his past and present deeds. He inquired about all these things so that he could anticipate his needs and disposition.

He further insisted that at the beginning of the encounter there be no talk of sins to be avoided or virtues to be acquired. Rather the conversation should begin naturally. With a soldier one talks of war, with a merchants about his business, with a noble about government or political affairs of his country, with a clergyman about news of the Church and its government. So one should discuss with a man the things that hold an interest for him or that he wants to talk about, and one should follow his lead even into secular topics so long as the conversation is blameless.

[26] But in these exchanges one should watch carefully for an occasion to give the conversation a religious turn. Father Ignatius used to speak of this method as 'entering by their door so as to come out by our door'. He was not in favour of launching forth immediately on virtues and vices, the life of Christ, and the last things, because in this way our hearers never really get interested in what we are saying but are rendered inattentive by our untimely zeal. And even after we have their attention

we should not move directly to the reasons why sin should be shunned, but rather, after chatting about politics and news, we should move on to the deeds of holy men, the life of Christ, his teachings and death, and the various good habits. Only after that should we shift our attention to the detestation of bad habits in general. As for personal problems of our friend we should wait for him to bring up the subject. Only then can we broach this topic without offence. Father Favre used to say that in some cases the whole matter of a long and detailed discussion of a man's sins should be avoided.

If our friend never broaches the subject of his personal problems one can certainly find an opportunity to urge him to make a good confession, or even a general confession, to frequent the sacraments, to learn more about prayer, and to do works of charity with the motive of serving God. It sometimes happens that a man is frequently in our company and yet never gets to the point where he is willing to talk of the things of God bearing on the salvation of his soul. With such a person the best course is not to waste time on trivia even though that is what he wants to discuss, but to turn the talk to hell, the last judgment, the horrible fate of sinners and the hidden judgments of God. This will either lead him to a different field of interest or send him away annoyed so that he will not come back and waste our time.

[27] These are but a few hints. There are no hard and fast rules. Circumstances of time and place, and the character and temperament of the person involved, might indicate another approach. The resourceful apostle will be guided by a holy tact in all his conversations.

This ministry is especially helpful after sermons or religious conferences, when good aspirations have been planted in the minds of the hearers and they are ready to listen to spiritual considerations and profit from them.

Spiritual conversation is also very useful in our schools. Both priests and non-priests who have this gift of talking of godly things can lead our students not only to a more intense life with God, but even plant the seed of a Jesuit vocation in the souls of selected youths.

This ministry is also very useful when we meet men in the street or in public places. It is not difficult to get to know them and gradually bring them around to go to confession. In Rome excellent results were obtained in this fashion. A brother might meet a merchant from the country who had come to Rome on business and teach him how to

examine his conscience and confess his sins and finally persuade him to go to confession.

We should exercise this ministry not only directly, but indirectly; that is, we should urge our penitents and friends with whom we dialogue to learn the art of spiritual conversation themselves, so that they may help members of their families and household, their friends and relatives. Women can thus aid other women. But we should not urge this ministry for men and women together unless they be marriage partners so as to avoid the least hint of scandal.

[28] This ministry can also be practised communally as a kind of mixture of the sermon and spiritual conference on the one hand and of an individual spiritual dialogue on the other. For example, a group might gather to talk of godly things together with someone presiding. We started something like this at Messina in Sicily when we started the college there, but in a very rough fashion. Almost every day a few good laymen who used to frequent our confessionals and attend our spiritual conferences would meet in the church. One of them brought a spiritual book which he read while the others listened. Sometimes they would simply discuss holy topics together. I hear that this died out after a time. Later on at Rome there was a group of secular priests dedicated to St Jerome which did something similar. They would meet in a large room to listen to a short exhortation by one of their number. The speaker was designated by the priest in charge and he could either be a priest attached to the parish or one of the others. When he had finished he sometimes answered questions about the matter presented. Sometimes they prayed together, often for the intentions suggested by the times. The meeting would close with a hymn led by the singer among them.

We had a similar set-up at the college in Genoa, but I seem to remember that the general had some objection to it. Still it remains our custom in Rome, in both the Roman College and the German College, to organize sodalities among the students, where spiritual colloquies are held with a Jesuit in charge. Certainly I would think that this kind of ministry would be ideal for our houses, especially the professed houses. Naturally we should follow any policies laid down for this apostolate, but I would hope that we could reap a rich harvest for Christ in the future by this means.

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A SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION

Robert R. Marsh speaks to the editor, Philip Harrison

This interview was recorded in December 2022 in advance of the publication of Imagination, Discernment and Spiritual Direction *by Robert R. Marsh.*[1]

Phil: Rob, you are an associate fellow in Ignatian spirituality at Campion Hall in Oxford, and one of the leading lights in the Ignatian spirituality movement in Britain over the past decades. Way Books is about to publish a collection of your essays entitled *Imagination, Discernment and Spiritual Direction*. I wanted to ask you first, what do you think is the importance of imagination in the spirituality of St Ignatius?

Rob: I think for Ignatius it was key because it gave him access to God. He has a note early on in the *Spiritual Exercises* inviting the people who are praying to spend just a moment, 'the length of an Our Father' (Exx 75), considering how God is looking at you. That is an impossible question to answer. The only way you are going to know how God is looking at you is to look at God and 'see God's face', metaphorically speaking. Metaphorically speaking is the key to how Ignatius sees the encounter with God. I think a good definition of imagination is *that place where you look to see the answer to that question, 'how is God looking at me?'* A bit convoluted! Most of the definitions of what imagination is trivialise it, as though it is fantasy, or making things up, or indulging oneself, but I think for Ignatius it was contact with reality.

Phil: I was going to say that we live in a society that tells us that we cannot really believe in our imaginations because it is fantasy, it is not

[1] *Imagination, Discernment and Spiritual Direction* (Oxford: Way Books, 2023) is available from The Way Ignatian Book Service.

real. But Ignatius really draws out this reality that we can touch the experience of God through our imaginations. I was just wondering what kind of tendencies in our culture prevent us from being able to acknowledge that presence through our imaginations.

Rob: Giving retreats, which I used to do a lot of, working in a retreat house, there was an endless stream of retreatants who came along saying, *I'll just pray my own way, I don't want to get involved in praying with the imagination, because I don't have an imagination*. They kind of had an expectation that to have an imagination means to be creative or to have a visual imagination that runs in Technicolor like a film. And there is also the sense that people have that they don't trust their imaginations. They think their imagination is going to be wishful thinking or stuff they've made up. I always used to encourage them to give it a try and see. I think that is the main obstacle people have.

Phil: Along with those psychological tendencies that make us hesitate to use the imagination, do you think there are also things in the world where we live that prevent us from acknowledging the importance of the imagination?

Rob: I think there is the split between science, on the one hand, and the arts, or humanities, or imagination, on the other, as though there is a difference between them. In fact I think they overlap. But we have a bias against it.

Phil: You have also written about the role of desire in our prayer, for example in the film *American Beauty*, and how God can make use even of our worldly desires to bring us closer. A lot of people would say that our worldly desires take us away from God. It seems to be an important insight that God can use those desires to do the opposite. How do you think that works in prayer?

Rob: How do I think it works? I think, in practice, to know what we want is to know who we are. And to know what we want is the beginning of a way into knowing what God wants for us. Now it can't be just straightforward—*I want this* and that's it. There is that sense in which, as we begin to sit with our desires, and talk to God about them, that they grow or diminish. They lead us somewhere or they lead us somewhere else. Some of our desires are deeper than others, some are more long-lasting than others. The art is to find the ones that matter to us; because they matter to us, they matter to God.

Phil: And we can discover what those deeper desires are through a constant process of discernment. You have described how Ignatius regarded human experience as 'saturated with a succession of dynamic psychological events, each succeeding the other'.[2] You describe very beautifully in your book one 'microsecond' of experience and how God is present in that reality. What would you say to someone who thought that they couldn't really experience God in that way, as present in our world?

Rob: What I would say would be, *Take a risk on trying*.

Phil: As we sit here and the light is filtering through the window on this December morning, it seems as though God is really present in some way or other; it's really just about paying attention to that experience in order to be able to realise it. But one of the things that comes through very strongly in your writing is that there is a constant discernment which is involved to discover that.

Rob: Yes, I mean, I think I talk about the stories that we tell ourselves. We are alive with stories. There is always some voice in our head saying, *you are this*, *you are that*, *you are something else*. The art is to find out the stories that God tells us, and they do not have to be grand. It could be the simple story that I am enjoying the sunshine falling upon me and notice that. And, maybe, as I notice and sit with it, noticing that God

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[2] Robert R. Marsh, 'Discernment: The Good, the Bad … the Ignatian', in *Imagination, Discernment and Spiritual Direction*, 30–35, here 31.

is also here. How am I sure? Well, I am not sure! But, I am sure …. If I give it a try, try out that story that God is here enjoying the sunshine with me, what does that do to me?

In Ignatius' terms it sets up motions in my soul. Things start to move. Maybe in a simple way I like the feeling that God might be enjoying the sunshine with me. I can feel for myself what it is to enjoy the sunshine and I can feel what it must be like for God to enjoy the sunshine. That's an outrageous thing to say in some way, yet it is very simple. How can I know what it's like for God to enjoy anything? But it is a story that I can tell myself that seems to bring me peace, joy, life, light, energy … and a sense of presence. I mean, that sense that the imagination is good and that making claims to presence: *I am here*, *you're there* …. Now I only know that you are there through my imagination, but it is confirmed in all sorts of ways, and so is my imagination that tells me that God is here enjoying the sunshine.

Phil: I suppose both with the imagination and also with our experience of the world, the idea is to acknowledge that God is beyond us. By pointing ourselves in the right direction and acknowledging that God is beyond our imagination, beyond our senses, beyond our desires. That act of orientating ourselves towards God is what can bring us closer and allow us to tell a new story about ourselves in which God is involved.

Rob: Yes, but I don't think Ignatius thought that God was beyond the imagination and beyond the stories we tell about God. If anything he seems naïve on the matter. But I think it is actually quite profound. The way we live in the world depends upon how we see it, how we construct it, the way we are drawn to some things and not others. Imagination, attraction and beauty are key in Ignatius for finding the presence of God and staying with the presence of God. And, in his rather stark terms, 'doing the will of God'.

Phil: That kind of underlines the importance of treating God as real for spiritual directors—treating the experience of God of the person before you as real?

Rob: Yes, there is nothing worse than a spiritual director, and I have experienced them myself, who does not really believe what I am saying. It takes courage to be able to talk about your experience of God in your life to somebody else, because on the whole we are ready to be squashed, we are very hesitant about those experiences of God. So it takes some

believing and nurturing. And a sense of trust in the director that God is real in their lives too.

Phil: One of your maxims is to 'stay with the movement and avoid the counter-movement' as far as possible: stick with the consolation and avoid the desolation.[3] And I was wondering, was that based on your experience? How did you come to that realisation?

Rob: Well, in one sense it is obvious! When you put it that way, why shouldn't I prefer to go where God is and stay away from where God isn't? Well, why would you go anywhere else?! But Ignatius talked about his terms, 'the good spirit' and 'the bad spirit': the spirit in us and around us that draws us to God and the spirit in us and around us that wants to get in the way of that. On the whole the bad spirit, the spirit that leads away from God, is the more opinionated, the more noisy, gets more airtime. It is the voice that generally puts us down, makes things feel difficult, takes away our faith, hope and love as Ignatius says. Whereas the good spirit tends to be creative, unpredictable, and to speak with a quiet voice. It is important to listen discerningly to our experience and take it seriously, because taking the risk to believe that God is real and that those movements are real gives me a chance of going with them and deepening them—going with the experience of God and deepening it.

Phil: And the fundamental tool for doing that is the Examen? How has the Examen been important in your life as a Jesuit?

Rob: If I am honest, not very! It used to be something of a nuisance in the novitiate when the bell rang ten minutes before lunch to do give you the opportunity to do the Examen. But as something I have grown into as a way of listening to my own experience and the stories I tell myself, and the stories my experience tells me about myself, I think it's crucial. I think my job as a spiritual director in many ways is to do the Examen with people. I don't mean literally going through steps but it is to listen to what stories people are telling themselves, what experiences they are having of the good spirit and the bad spirit, and to put my weight behind the experience of the good spirit! Because by ourselves we are all going to tend to follow the bad news rather than the good. So it is

[3] Robert R. Marsh, 'Receiving and Rejecting: On Finding a Way in Spiritual Direction', in *Imagination, Discernment and Spiritual Direction*, 17–29, here 23.

fairly helpful to have a spiritual director who leans into the good spirit with you, believes wholeheartedly in the good spirit, gives you the benefit of the doubt, when your own sense of it is so tentative and partly in the way.

Phil: One of the most beautiful things you have written about is the experience of visiting a battlefield in Montana. I wonder if you could describe that experience again that helped you bring together these three themes that run through your writing: angels, ecology and virtual reality?

Rob: Yes, it was an experience when I was travelling with a friend who had just been ordained. He called it a victory tour, doing first Masses in all the places that he had lived and worked. I got to follow along. Close to where he had lived in Montana there is the little place called Chinook where you can find the Chief Joseph battleground. It was there that a great tragedy had happened. The remnants of the Nez Perce tribe were fleeing the US army and heading for the border with Canada to reach safety. They were routed fifty miles from their destination. At the time I knew nothing about the history apart from the name Bear's Paw battleground. But the experience of this place, which is a vast open plain (at the time of the year it was still green), was of this immense sadness. On that beautiful summer's day, with the sun shining and quiet all around, there was this sense of profundity, that the place was haunted. It got me to reflect upon the 'spirit of place'. How places can be sacred, how places can be horrid, and above all how places can feel significant. It was on the drive back from there I remember quite distinctly turning a corner in the road and thinking: this is all about how the world is full of spirit

Phil: The experience of the world as spirit, the experience of the spirit of place in that particular locality touches on the theme of ecology, because we live in a world that denies the relationship that we have with the natural world. I know that Pierre Favre speaks about angels as the spirits of place very powerfully. He recognises that God has a particular way of working in particular places as well as with particular people. But you also introduce the theme of virtual reality into that triptych of ecology, angels virtual reality.

Rob: Yes, and I am cheating a bit using the phrase 'virtual reality'. I am not using it in the sense of virtual reality goggles, but a sense that the

philosopher Susan Langer used it when she was talking about what makes a drawing more than a few marks on a piece of paper ….[4]

Phil: Something like the imagination or our senses, that can lead us to recognise the personhood of God in experience, if we allow it to?

Rob: The thing about the visit to the battleground was the sense that, certainly at the time, readings on ecology, theology and spirituality were stuck on the question of how you experience God in the finite: how does the world, which is very material, make room for spirit. I realised that if you thing about created spirit, the spirit of a place, angels, then you don't have to worry about how you get the infinite into the finite, you are talking about part of created reality, part of the cosmos. The cosmos itself is full of spirit—in Ignatius' terms both 'good spirit' and 'bad spirit'. There is something attractive and repulsive about the presence of spirit that we can discern. Through discernment the personhood of God is revealed.

Through discernment the personhood of God is revealed

Phil: There is an invitation to engage with the movement and counter-movement which are going on all around us if we acknowledge that they are there.

Rob: If we only took the time to stop and listen to the spirit of place, and see what its opinions are, then we might be more thoughtful about how we use the natural world.

Phil: You have spoken about discernment as our age's most pressing and urgent task. And, indeed, that there is a salvation that is available to us through our engagement with movement and counter-movement, good spirit and bad spirit. Could you say a bit more about everyday discernment as a pathway to salvation?

Rob: The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, made up several technical phrases for his poetry. One of them was 'instress', meaning the way in which a viewer, an observer, a participant, a poet, takes what they see, experience and feel, and bind it together into something that is full of life, and full of stress. I remember being on a retreat with the late great Billy Hewett SJ of this Province, who was talking about Hopkins and then sending people out into the hills around Stonyhurst College saying,

[4] See Robert R. Marsh, 'Ecology, Angels and Virtual Reality: A Triptych', in *Imagination, Discernment and Spiritual Direction*, 94–106, at 103–104.

'Go and have an instress!' That is one of the things we can do with the natural world, we can find the stress that binds it together and gives it life. The alternative to that is 'distress', or paying attention to the world in such a way that we diminish its beauty, its attractiveness, its capacity to reveal God to us. So even something as simple as listening to a poem, or looking at the sky, or sitting in the sunshine, they all give you the opportunity to find God. And to listen to what God wants, to have your own desires shaped by that.

Phil: I suppose that speaks very powerfully to the Church at this moment in history, as it enters into this process of synodality, which is about listening to each other and listening to the Holy Spirit working in the Church so that it can become something new which perhaps it wasn't in the past.

Rob: Yes!

Phil: Rob, can I ask you a bit of a personal question: who is Jesus for you?

Rob: … I am pausing, not because I don't know the answer, but because I don't know whether I want to say it out loud. He's a friend, he's somebody in my life that gives it meaning, he's somebody in my life who keeps me honest, he's somebody in my life that won't let me settle for less.

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SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION AND INTELLECTUAL CONVERSATION

Margaret Blackie

SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION has long been part of the Christian tradition. For a many years I limited my understanding of it to conversation about spiritual things. However, in the last few years I have begun to think of a particular quality of intellectual conversation as a form of spiritual conversation. God may never be named, but a sense of wonder and curiosity is both evoked and deepened in the conversation. I would like to propose a broad understanding of this kind of conversation as spiritual, which I think is congruent both with spiritual conversation within the Christian tradition and with the practice of Ignatian spiritual direction.

Before I elaborate it is probably helpful to make clear my own context. I am a cradle Catholic. In the process of doing a PhD in chemistry, I made the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola and trained as a spiritual director shortly thereafter. For the last fifteen years I have 'moonlighted' as spiritual director while holding down a series of academic jobs in universities in South Africa. These jobs have required mostly undergraduate teaching and doing research in chemistry and chemistry education.

Returning to a particular experience of intellectual conversation—this is not the conversation that usually happens between colleagues in academia. Although as I identify it as 'intellectual spiritual conversation' I begin to see its value in that space. My awareness of this quality of conversation began with Mike Lewis SJ about five years ago. We would meet and talk about ideas (and life). The conversations about intellectual ideas were not trivial or superficial or banter. For both of us, they

concerned things we were thinking about seriously. It began around particular books we were both reading and then grew to talking about ideas. My experience of saying *this is what I am thinking about* and having someone else simply say *tell me more* or *I'm not quite getting that* was tremendously affirming, and ultimately academically useful as well. Those conversations have given me the courage formally to pursue the intellectual trajectory that I think is my calling—the confluence of knowledge-building, science, personal development and philosophy. This has meant a professional shift for me from chemistry to higher education studies.

Whilst spiritual conversation can be understood in many ways, for me one aim of spiritual conversation is to be present as my authentic self. Then conversation with a person who follows the same intellectual field and can probe kindly and meaningfully is spiritual conversation. I recognise now that I have sought out this quality of conversation for my entire adult life. These kinds of conversations have helped shape who I am in the world. Particularly, my most recent job change would not have happened without the foundation of conversation after conversation after conversation.

Having recognised this quality of conversation, I began to see it when I stumbled into it with colleagues. Now, I much more deliberately induce it when a colleague or friend begins to talk about intellectual ideas. The focus is 'wonder', not 'God'. In academic circles, unless one is studying theology, explicit God-talk is usually considered at best quirky.

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More often than not, if one does introduce God-talk into intellectual conversation one will be taken less seriously as an academic. I know for a fact that including any writing on spirituality or theology in the list of publications on my academic curriculum vitae is detrimental. Those who do not know me presume I am a little flaky and take the rest of my intellectual contribution less seriously.

Accordingly, I think 'wonder' is a useful bridge between academic and spiritual pursuits. Wonder is common to both and, in my own experience, there is no real difference between academic wonder and spiritual wonder. The focus of attention may be different but the experience is the same. Wonder here is the experience of both awe and curiosity.

Common Forms of Spiritual Conversation

Spiritual conversation is commonly understood as a conversation about spiritual things, which may take two forms. First, there is a conversation between companions or peers where both are contributing and responding equally, unlike the usual scenario in spiritual direction. Secondly, there is a conversation which may be steered more by one person, in a kind of evangelism where that person is helping the other to pay attention to the more spiritual aspects of his or her own life.

I have had good experience of both of these forms. Many of my friends are spiritual directors or people who go for spiritual direction, so often a conversation will turn this way naturally. In particular, for more than a decade I used to meet my friend Nan Martin and go for a walk every six weeks or so for spiritual conversation. We would talk in turn about what was going on in our lives and where we were finding inspiration. It began in a phase where both of us were seeking spiritual directors, but the gentle companionship long outlasted the initial need. These walks were sacred spaces intentionally framed and held by both of us. Because we met alone only for this purpose it was relatively easy to keep focus. There was little temptation to steer the conversation in another direction because this was our easiest common ground. In religious life, the process of *revision de vie* can easily situate itself in this kind of spiritual conversation.

The second kind of conversation, that of a subtle evangelism, I associate most with an older person talking with a younger person—probably because that has been my own experience. When I was younger and searching for my own understanding of God, this is the kind of

conversation I remember being skilfully directed by various school and university chaplains. The exchange would begin with some problem I was dealing with, or some idea I was toying with and, sooner or later, we would find ourselves talking about God. I never felt manipulated. I was, after all, talking to a priest or religious sister. And these conversations really did help begin to crystallize for me the notion of 'finding God in all things'. Now, 25 years later, I am usually the elder. While I am not a minister of any kind, I am known both as a spiritual director and an author of spiritual books, and occasionally young people will strike up a conversation with me that smacks of a similar sense of yearning. I too find myself gently steering the conversation Godward to see where it goes.

In my experience some people do long for a space where they can talk freely about God. Being the one who is not afraid to introduce the word can be a real gift, particularly in the hyper-secularised societies of the West. In societies where believing in God is seen as intellectually weak, creating a space for such conversations is a vocation in its own right. In an academic environment in particular, God-talk is especially problematic. For many, there is a strong compartmentalisation between the things of science and the things of faith. In my academic career, my interest in spirituality is taken at best as a curiosity and at worst as an embarrassment. For young people trying to prove themselves academically, God-talk of any kind is risky in these environments. Providing safe spaces to talk about doubts, or vivid experience, or desire or whatever experience throws up is an act of generosity. My own position is not evangelical in the sense that I have no intention to 'bring the person to God'. All I desire in this second form of spiritual conversation is to provide a space where the word 'God' can be used without prevarication.

Intellectual Discourse as Spiritual Conversation

However, I would like to introduce a third kind of spiritual conversation that does not quite so obviously fall under this umbrella. It is the conversation of two people over a particular point of interest. This is the most common form of spiritual conversation that occurs in my life. God may never be mentioned; indeed the person with whom I am conversing may be agnostic or atheist. He or she may have a strong antipathy to anything spiritual. Nonetheless, in my mind it qualifies as

spiritual conversation because there is a mutual resonance with the 'hearts burning within us' quality of the conversation on the road to Emmaus from the end of Luke's Gospel. To make this argument I need to begin with spiritual direction.

As I write this, it is exactly twenty years since I was training as a spiritual director at Loyola Hall (the Jesuit spirituality centre in Merseyside, now closed). After working there for four years, I returned to academia and to the field of chemistry, but I have continued to practise as a spiritual director and to teach spiritual direction. The focus of spiritual direction, according to William Barry and William Connolly, is on 'religious experience'.[1] Such an experience can happen in any part of life, but has something of numinous quality. Rob Marsh has usefully expounded their ideas in *The Way* over the years. The essence of spiritual direction is listening for the 'movements'. In spiritual direction these are often physically embodied by a small smile, a flutter of energy, a wistful pause, which the speaker can be tempted to pass over. The skilled director will say, quite simply, *tell me more about that*. As the person dares to dwell on the brief memory it can begin to shift into live experience—something no longer glossed over but savoured. He or she begins to trust that maybe something is being communicated by God in this moment.

I can honestly say that practising as a spiritual director has changed my way of being in the world—precisely because it has changed my way of attending to others in conversation. Being present to the other person allows us both to attend to Presence. This is certainly not part of every conversation I have, and I am aware when I am shifting into 'spiritual conversation' mode. My companion may be talking about an aspect of his or her job or family life, or an idea that he or she has stumbled upon, really anything, and I catch a glimpse of wistfulness, joy, a spark of some sort. It is hard to describe, but I know it when I see it. And I will say simply, *tell me more about that*, and follow up with some of those simple, open questions that I use in spiritual direction: *What's that like? What excites you about that? What stirs in you? What do you want? What's next?* (In a formal spiritual direction conversation the latter two are more likely to be asked as *What do you desire?* and *What is God's invitation?*)

A glimpse of wistfulness, joy, a spark of some sort

[1] William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Seabury, 1983), 8 and throughout.

The word 'God' may never be mentioned in this kind of conversation, and my companion may or may not be a believer. And yet I firmly hold that this too is a kind of spiritual conversation. I know that the quality of my own attention in these conversations is the same as it is when I am giving spiritual direction.

That beautiful Ignatian phrase 'finding God in all things' is sometimes presumed to mean 'making God explicit in all things', that is to say, 'naming God in all things'. This is not my position at all when considering the intellectual spiritual conversation. Rather, I am arguing that God is present in all things, whether named or not. The naming of God is not nearly so important in this instance as the experience of relational connection: the mutual resonance that occurs when you know that someone understands what you are talking about and is empathically sharing in your experience.

In asking the questions that I ask I think two things are happening. First, there is the development of some kind of empathic resonance between my companion and me. The other person gets a sense that I too am interested in what interests him or her. There is usually some kind of excitement in the person's expression that is genuinely catching. And I do know a little about a large number of academic fields so I can usually follow his or her argument. Secondly, the other person feels a greater emotional connection to his or her subject. The person is encouraged to say more, to savour, to lean into what stirs his or her passion. Where spiritual direction focuses on encounter with God, intellectual spiritual conversation focuses on the experience of wonder. The content of the conversation may appear vastly different, but the quality of attention is the same.

However, it is important to recognise that this kind of intellectual spiritual conversation is situated within a particular understanding of the development of knowledge.

Objectivity and Indifference

Particularly in academic spaces, showing one's passion can be frowned upon. This attitude derives from a mistaken understanding of objectivity: that one must be somehow emotionally detached from one's object of study. This understanding locates objectivity in the being of the scientist (*scientist* here broadly encompassing both social and natural sciences). The scientist is the passive observer of some real process. However, this is not how science actually works.

Scientists are in fact active agents in creating scientific research.[2] They carefully choose the conditions of observation, which are framed by their own training and experience. The objectivity—if such a word is useful—lies in the real mechanism that is operating in either the physical or social world. If one is interrogating the physical world, that real mechanism is likely to be relatively stable over time—hydrogen and oxygen have always reacted explosively to form water and will do so long after humans are no longer around to observe the reaction. If one is interrogating the social world, mechanisms may take different forms—human communication is influenced by technology but the tendency to communicate is persistent. Nonetheless, the manner in which one chooses to investigate changes in the physical world or in the social world is substantially shaped by the way in which one is trained and, crucially, what one finds interesting.

For example, the topic of my PhD in chemistry—making new organometallic compounds that could be tested for activity against *Plasmodium falciparum* (the parasite that causes malaria)—was shaped by several factors. First, I had done my honours project in an organometallic lab and I liked the person who had supervised me. Secondly, I had been interested in chemistry aimed at medicinal uses since I first discovered that it was a potential avenue of research in my second year of undergraduate study. Thirdly, I wanted to do an antimalarial project because my grandfather, Dr William Blackie, who had been a doctor in the country that is now Zimbabwe, had written a book on malaria.

The point is my motivation for doing that particular project was entirely personal. It may have had a real-world purpose, but I chose the project because of a confluence of experiences that were very particular to me. There was nothing objective about it. Likewise, choosing to do one chemical reaction rather than another was shaped by my prior experience in the lab. The reliability and reproducibility of the knowledge generated—how to do this particular reaction—are contingent on the reliability of my observations and my capacity to report the findings appropriately. But what I actually chose to do on any given day was inextricably rooted in my prior experience and training.

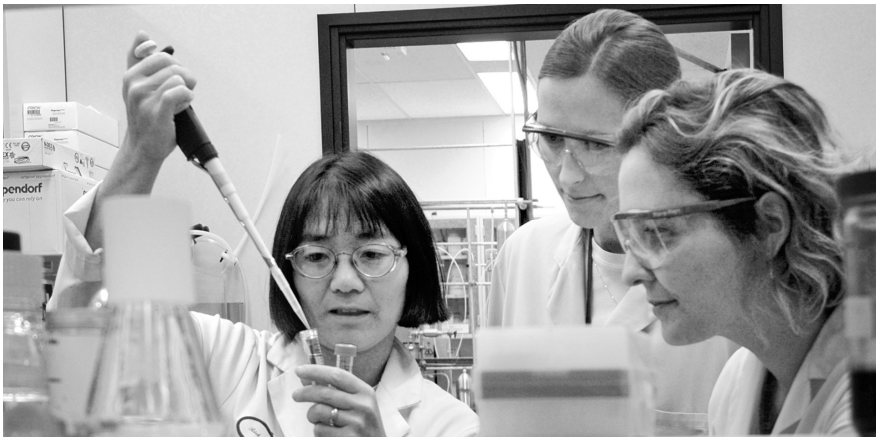
[2] Those who are interested in reading further on this can follow up with M. A. L. Blackie, 'An Examination of the Practice of Chemistry through the Lens of Critical Realism', *Journal of Critical Realism* 21/4 (2022), 401–415 or M. A. L. Blackie, 'Towards Knower Awareness in Chemistry and Chemistry Education' (PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2022).

I want to argue that there may therefore be an analogue for Ignatian indifference that is operating in the lab. Indifference for Ignatius is not the lack of emotion or the lack of desire for a particular outcome. Rather, when faced with a particular decision, indifference is the willingness to go in the direction that God leads even when that is contrary to my own desires. This indifference comes from the deeper desire to put God first. And thus all other desires are subservient to the primary desire of following God.

In an intellectual endeavour, likewise, we have emotional responses and desires. The fact of confirmation bias—that we are more likely to see and acknowledge data that correspond to our understanding of the world—is well documented. To try to evade this bias by claims of emotional detachment is simply to push it into the subconscious. We would do far better to acknowledge the desire to be proved right—and then actively to seek the data that would undermine the position we hold. This approach is far more likely to yield reliable, reproducible data. Returning to the chemical reaction—I know what outcome I desire. And I certainly made the mistake of trying to read the data a little too optimistically—to see what I wanted to see—in my first year in the lab. The result was a waste of time, energy and resources.

Intellectual Spiritual Conversation

If we take the model of Ignatian indifference into all intellectual endeavours then there is genuine merit in embracing emotion and passion. The kind of focus that one gives to moments of consolation, or 'movements', in spiritual direction has a direct equivalent in an intellectual spiritual conversation. There is no harm, indeed there is great merit, in gently focusing on the moments of inspiration or wonder in research. Too often in academia the commitment to interrogate findings rigorously shifts from a healthy hermeneutic of suspicion to a harsh and sometimes overly personal cynicism. The 'good academic' is erroneously conflated with the person who consistently puts pressure on the weakest points in an argument. The result is a rather unfortunate caricature of academia, in which the enthusiasm of the incoming graduate student, excited to begin a new project, is worn down to a mask of armoured scepticism by the end of his or her degree. And those of us involved in academic formation congratulate ourselves at having successfully done our job.



The opportunity afforded by a genuine curiosity in the passion of the intellectual is a real gift. To savour wonder gives us licence to speak of the things that we are still not quite sure about, but are exploring. The conversation helps us to make new connections. The fuel of passion exposed to the oxygen of another's interest gives us the impetus to return to the library or the laboratory to do the painstaking work of testing our ideas against the world.

All this is in the phase of exploration. The invitation of Barry and Connolly in *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* is essentially *what if I dare to take my sense of encounter with God seriously?*[3] The analogous invitation in intellectual spiritual conversation is *what if I dare to take my sense of inspiration seriously?* If I focus on that moment and allow myself to explore it in conversation with another person, what connections will get made? In my own practice of spiritual direction I feel a good sense of closure when the person I am talking to knows what to begin with in his or her next period of prayer. Likewise in this kind of conversation, if the person I am speaking with knows what to begin with when he or she next returns to the lab or library I have a deep sense of satisfaction. In both kinds of conversation there may simply be a growing sense of developing trust in one's own intuition. This trust is, of course, not the end; there must be some engagement with the real world.

In *The Matter with Things*, Iain McGilchrist argues that there are four pathways to truth: science, reason, intuition and imagination.[4] He

[3] See Barry and Connolly, *Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 19–20.

[4] See Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World* (London: Perspectiva, 2021).

argues that in the Western intellectual tradition we have strongly overemphasized science and reason and our societies are now clearly suffering the consequences. We have an over-mechanised view of society. People are cogs in the machine and efficiency the all-important value. When reason is overemphasized we are left with what we can count and a neo-liberal society might seem the only 'rational' choice. Even science itself is reduced, in some understandings, to a naïve empiricism in which there is nothing more to reality than what we can measure. The kind of intellectual spiritual conversation for which I am arguing is an important antidote to attitudes prevalent in Western academia precisely because it evokes both intuition and imagination. But as I have been careful to lay out above, this must balance the careful work of science and the development of a structured argument.

Discernment

Once intuition and imagination have been stirred, savoured and allowed to flourish through intellectual spiritual conversation, the ideas generated will need to be tested. In my own life I was given the gift of such conversation by Mike Lewis. After I had spent months talking through and refining my ideas of higher education with him, he turned to me and said 'It's all very well, but you need to prove it'.

Just as one would discern a particular decision by testing it in the world—my calling to a particular job is only affirmed once the job has been offered to me—we must test our intellectual ideas in the library or in the lab. In this phase intellectual spiritual conversation must shift to the 'pointer … in equilibrium' of Annotation 15 of the Spiritual Exercises. As companions in conversations, we become the counterweight to enthusiasm by asking the critical questions.

As scientists, once we have data in hand, what do we actually see? There must be a willingness to be proved wrong. As a companion I should begin to ask questions about other possible interpretations, but maintaining the attitude of the presupposition (Exx 22) of the Spiritual Exercises—in this case, daring to trust that people do know what they are talking about. Through careful questions we can help them refine their thinking in the course of the conversation.

Writing about intellectual spiritual conversation has been useful to me in developing and refining my own thinking. In the process I have needed to think more broadly about my practice as an academic. I

realise how thoroughly I have been shaped by Ignatian spirituality. I hold that daring to trust wonder coupled with a commitment to intellectual discernment held in the grace of Ignatian indifference is a powerful model for the pursuit of knowledge.

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RESONANCES OF THE KNOWN IN THE UNKNOWN

Multifaith Spiritual Conversation

Michael Barnes

THE FIRST BOOK I WROTE on interreligious relations bore the title *Religions in Conversation*.[1] I remember being intrigued by the fact that the Latin word *dialogus* does not occur in *Nostra aetate,* Vatican II's seminal declaration on other religions. In several documents of Vatican II, *dialogus* is used for formal engagements, usually between theological experts. But *Nostra aetate* does not use *dialogus*; it uses a different Latin word, namely *colloquia*. Christians are urged to engage with others *per colloquia et collaborationem*—'through conversations and collaboration' (n. 2). *Colloquia* has connotations of open-ended encounter or hospitality, in which people share their interests and thoughts in an atmosphere that often lacks any sort of structure. Sometimes I speak and lead; and sometimes I listen and wait. Sometimes I act like the gracious host who is 'in charge' and has the responsibility of receiving guests; sometimes I am myself the guest, the one who enters the other's space, and I find myself taken into the confidence of the host.

Now this is not to say the authors of *Nostra aetate* were thinking of interpersonal relations as a model for interreligious relations; the dominant discourse of the document is that of the history of religions, with the different religions described as sets of beliefs rather than the practices of communities of persons of faith. Nevertheless, the implication is there in the three imperatives that follow the generous acknowledgement that the Church rejects nothing that is 'true and holy' in other religions. Christians are exhorted to 'recognize, preserve and promote the good

[1] Michael Barnes, *Religions in Conversation: Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism* (London: SPCK, 1989).

things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among' their followers (n. 2).

The rest of the document includes some fairly bland words of approval of how the various religions address some fundamental human questions. Nothing is said about what these spiritual and moral good things might be; no judgment is made on any belief or practice. Whether we think in terms of formal meetings with an agenda and resolutions, or a more spiritual conversation which moves from chat about mutually engaging concerns to a disclosure of the inner person, that is the task of 'conversations and collaboration'.

The distinction is important and enlightening. To model interreligious relations in terms of interpersonal conversation is not to ignore the legacy of trauma preserved in the memories of so many religious communities. A history of conflict and violence is not overcome by well-meaning pleas for respect and understanding. Nor does calling conversation informal make it any less serious; indeed, the kindness of hospitality to strangers—the migrant or refugee—is arguably the most immediate moral claim on all communities in our crisis-ridden world. It is not, however, naïve to argue that, if religion can be a problem, it can also be the solution. Not only do religions offer rich resources for reconciliation and peace-making, they are also practised in that openness to the Divine Other which is itself the fruit of a grace-filled welcome. As all good Ignatians will know, each of Ignatius' exercises ends with a colloquy, a conversation which gathers together both the cognitive and the affective, and offers the inner movements in prayer before God.

In this sense conversation is an experience that brings out what is most human in all of us—but it is also intrinsically *theological.* In what follows, I begin with this Ignatian experience, before turning to a couple of examples of more structured conversations from the Christian tradition, and then returning to some further reflections on Ignatian practice. The principle I am arguing, that the interreligious needs to be understood through the lens of the interpersonal, may be stated roughly as follows. Whatever may be the *content* of the conversation, and however the particular responsibilities implicit in any interpersonal relationship are to be defined, both partners are responsible for maintaining the *form*, the atmosphere of respectful trust without which reconciliation, peacemaking—and most importantly *learning*—are impossible.

An experience that brings out what is most human in all of us

The Early Jesuits

This is not, perhaps, the primary principle one associates with the missionary strategy of the early Society of Jesus. The first Jesuits' practice seems, at times, more like a tactical opportunism in which willingness to learn takes second place to the conviction that gives rise to an assured teaching. In the context of a Rome rapidly being energized by the growing confidence of the counter-Reformation, that is hardly surprising. But appearances can be misleading.

In his book *The First Jesuits,* John O'Malley draws attention to the various 'ministries of the word of God' exercised by the early Society, particularly what Jerónimo Nadal refers to as 'devout conversation', a certain practical skill which Ignatius expected Jesuits to acquire—an ability to raise ordinary interpersonal encounters to an intellectually more serious and edifying level.[2] According to O'Malley, Peter Canisius eulogized Pierre Favre as a model of this practice, while Juan de Polanco recorded 'thousands of examples' of what was clearly regarded as a normal and significant aspect of Jesuit ministry. For Nadal the practice was rooted deep in the spirit which founded the Society, a spirit reflected in Ignatius' gathering of the companions in Paris and his guiding them through the Exercises in a manner sympathetic and responsive to the needs of each individual. In this regard, O'Malley tells us that Ignatius was Nadal's 'model and mentor'; Ignatius 'required that one approach individuals with love and a desire for their well-being, while carefully observing each person's temperament and character'.[3]

This type of accommodation was more pastoral tactic than the art of conversation, embodying the cardinal rule of all Jesuit ministry, that the needs of the individual are paramount. But there was another type of conversation that caught the imagination, one with a more evangelical than pastoral purpose. The evocative image was to 'go fishing'. According to O'Malley, the aim was to seek out likely individuals, engage in conversation, gradually insinuate a more serious topic, and draw them back to the church—where more demanding catechesis awaited. This, says O'Malley, was 'devout conversation, commando style'. Despite reports of great success in terms of the number of reprobates, gamblers and pimps drawn back to the confessional, others were not easily taken

[2] John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard U, 1993), chapter 3.
[3] O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 111.

in. According to some reports, says O'Malley, they 'simply fled every time they saw the scholastics heading down the street'.[4] Sheer zeal was not enough. As described by O'Malley, those early decades were not about the working out of a settled blueprint but the story of a learnt wisdom that grew from discerned experience. The practice of devout conversation made its mark on the early Jesuits themselves. The principle that underpinned it—that the virtues manifested in a well-lived Christian life are themselves the best witness to the gospel—became central to the development of what, within a very few decades, became the missionary strategy for which the Society is so well known.

Learning from the Spirit

It is, of course, important not to be anachronistic here. Today's secularised, multifaith culture cannot be characterized by some sort of latent or residual Christianity which simply has to be prompted back into life. On the other hand, the not-so-hidden assumption—that all Christian mission and ministry is based not on a few well-tried methods of persuasion but on a constant effort to discern and learn from the Holy Spirit as it moves in the hearts of other human beings—does provide an important basis on which the complex world of religious pluralism is to be understood theologically. For the first Jesuits, devout conversation was one more way of persuading their partners in conversation to see things in their way. Today's conversations are set a stage further back, as it were—rooted in an act of faith in people's God-given capacity to *persuade themselves.*

Let me continue that thought with a brief reference to two interreligious 'conversations' from the Christian tradition. The first is *The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*, written by the thirteenth-century Franciscan tertiary and Catalan mystic Ramon Llull.[5] It tells the story of a conversation between 'the Gentile', someone whom we would probably call these days a spiritual searcher, and representatives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is not apologetics—not even intra-Abrahamic apologetics. At the end the Gentile is left to go and make his own decision about which way to follow. When the three

[4] O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 113.

[5] Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*, abridged version edited and translated by Eve Bonner in *Doctor Illuminatus: A Ramon Llull Reader* (Princeton: Princeton U, 1993).

The Gentile and the three wise men, manuscript illumination, early fourteenth century

wise men eventually depart, they ask forgiveness of each other for any disrespectful word they may have uttered. After agreeing to continue their discussions later, they too go on their way, giving praise to God.

The second conversation, Nicholas of Cusa's 'On the Peace of Faith', was written in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Constantinople to Muslim invaders in 1453. Given the circumstances behind its composition, this text is remarkable for its optimistic vision of a lasting peace between warring religions. If Llull's text has about it a touch of the medieval romance, Cusa's, with its question and answer method, is more of a catechism. The author imagines a heavenly dialogue between the Logos and seventeen major regions or peoples which centres around the topic of 'religion', what people believe and practise to express that belief.

There is a nice moment towards the end when *Anglicus* raises a question about 'fastings, ecclesiastical duties, abstinences from food and drink'. Quite why the 'Englishman' should be regarded as obsessed with ascetical practices I know not. The response he gets is that different people do things differently and there is always a legitimate pluralism of religious practice which has to be respected. For Cusa, faith is not an unswerving sense of certainty, but a life of constant response to the Word of God which allows for degrees of understanding and different

forms of expression. Cusa finishes with the command of God that 'the wise men return and lead the nations to the unity of true worship … that with the full power of all they come together in Jerusalem as to a common centre and accept one faith in the name of all'.[6]

We could argue endlessly about the theology in operation here. Neither has any doubt about the superiority of Christianity. And they share another, not so hidden, philosophical assumption that, when reasonable people engage in reasoned discussion, the 'innate' truth will emerge through a process of question and answer. The conversations are very measured; there is no doubt about who is in control and where *eventually* they will lead. In so many ways they are very much artificially contrived texts which flout the usual conventions; indeed, it is something of a stretch to fit them within the category of interpersonal encounter. That, however, is to miss the point. In *colloquia* it is always the form that is of primary importance, not the content. I introduce these two texts not as forerunners of Ignatian 'devout conversation', let alone a template for all interreligious conversation, but because they remind us of a very familiar human experience.

Llull drew on the wisdom of the Andalusian world of religious learning in which Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars worked together in respectful harmony. Cusa, a notable ecumenist who strove to bring peace between Catholic and Orthodox, was addressing a dangerous political crisis which demanded intellectual and spiritual courage. They came from very different backgrounds, certainly, but their shared form of writing witnesses to a certain unspoken conviction, something held in common with our contested, pluralist, postmodern world. The respectful to and fro of different voices shifts attention from *places* or structures of power that are to be defended to the *time* it takes to establish lasting relations that are proof against violence of all kinds. In other words, at stake here is a profoundly important question about how interpersonal relations are established and maintained, or—to put it in rather more abstract terms—about the human need to bring harmony into our awareness of the abundance of things while ensuring that it does not screen us from their sheer otherness.

[6] Nicholas of Cusa, 'On the Peace of Faith', 19. 67–68, in *Nicholas of Cusa on Interreligious Harmony: Text, Concordance and Translation of 'De Pace Fidei'*, edited by James E. Biechler and H. Lawrence Bond (Edwin Mellen: Lampeter, 1990).

Faith and Interfaith

This raises the two questions which I have long pondered. What is to be learned for faith from the experience of finding oneself 'interfaith'? How do I learn to listen attentively for resonances of the known in the unknown? The first raises the paradox of all interreligious study and conversation, that the more one learns about the religious world of the other the more one learns about the depths of one's own faith. The second is itself an act of faith—trust in the power of conversation to sound certain echoes and resonances.

We might say that what people say of themselves has a certain sacred quality—or, to put it in Christian terms, the Spirit of God works directly in the well-disposed individual. Truth is communicated *through* the interhuman relationship, in the way people speak and respond to each other. Resonances begin to make themselves felt by cultivating attention to what is seen and heard, indeed touched and tasted, as one moves—sometimes literally—into another world.

When I lived and worked in Southall in West London, right in the middle of 'little Punjab', I would take my students into places of worship and start with a rule of thumb to help them work their way through the disarming experience of crossing a threshold into another world. I would teach them to recognise three stages or levels of understanding—nothing very profound, but important in the tricky business of discerning where the Spirit may be moving. First, I would tell them, notice how you will find yourselves taken by points of familiarity and continuity. Second, once you have become a little familiar with the space and what is happening there, you will begin to notice what is different and strange. And, at some point, there follows a third stage, when echoes of the known continue to resonate in the unknown. This is the point when things become more interesting—and a little disorientating.[7]

This takes me to a wonderfully evocative image from the French Jesuit historian and cultural critic Michel de Certeau. The 'other' is never repressed but always continues in some way to 'haunt' the space which we seek to fill with our theoretical constructs.[8] However imaginative

[7] I have written of this practice in a study-report of an interreligious learning experience in 'The Work of Discovery: Interreligious Dialogue as Life-Long Learning', *Spiritus*, 11/2 (Fall 2011), 224–246).

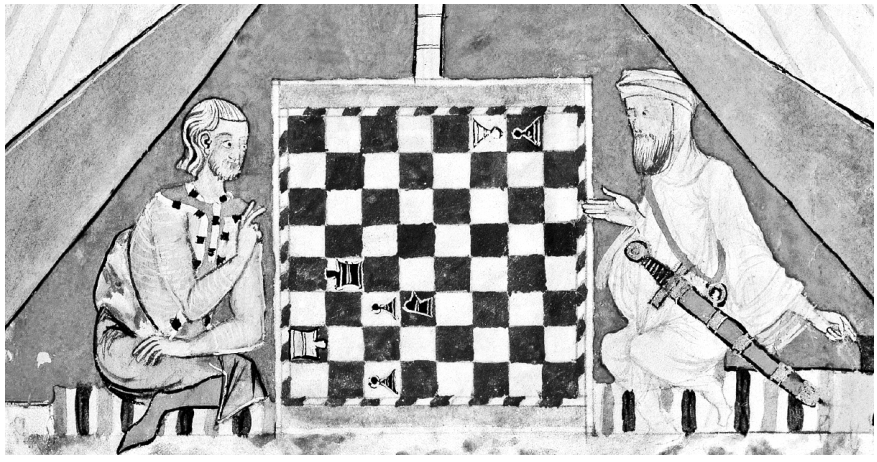
[8] This 'heterological law', as it is sometimes called, underpins much of de Certeau's work in historiography and cultural studies. Perhaps the best illustration is the series of essays published as *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

and generous my account of the person whom I encounter, there is always something elusive or indefinable which resists comprehension. Just when I think I have understood the account that the other gives, something else, something more, emerges—a further interpretation, perhaps, or an unexpected objection—which simply does not fit. And I have to start again.

The other is *always* there, revealed in traces which we seek to comprehend, but equally the other is *never* there—and lies always beyond our imaginative grasp. That fairly common experience brings us up against something that we can all recognise. Conversation grows from encounter, a chance meeting or something more formally conceived, and opens up a while web of possible connections both within and beyond our 'familiar world'. My conversation partner is another person like me—but not just this individual who demands a response. Rather the other, like me, points to a whole history of interaction which is, in a very real sense, still part of the present reality.

Exterior Encounter and the Challenge of the Other

Let me turn now to the inner conversation that follows from the exterior encounter. To say that the other always returns, 'haunting' the present and expecting further engagement, means that the Christian host needs to foster a basic attitude of receptivity and willingness to learn. This attitude is ethical—demanded by the relationship with other human beings—but it is also theological, because it forces us to shift our own



A Christian and a Muslim playing chess, manuscript illumination, mid-thirteenth century

boundaries, to discomfort ourselves. And to trust the other, to act hospitably towards him or her, is to enter into the realms of a holy mystery which speaks of God.

At first that sounds counter-intuitive, even doubtfully orthodox. Christian witness to the God of Jesus Christ is rooted in the events which have formed the community—ultimately the Christian story that is celebrated in the paschal mystery. But this is not the story of the replacement of one community by another, Jews by Christians. It begins with a much more profound encounter and conversation, the 'metastory' of the Triune God: the Father's sending of Word and Spirit for the creation and redemption of the world, in which, through the power of the Spirit of Christ, the whole of humankind participates.

This Word that God speaks, and the response uttered in the death and resurrection of Christ, can only be accounted thoroughly paradoxical. And that is the point: God questions the very tendency to seek comprehensive answers and resolutions. The paschal mystery reminds us that the only true self is the one that has been dragged painfully through the otherness of incomprehension and near despair. For a Christian, therefore, 'action' is inseparable from a certain 'passion'; our witness to what we know goes hand in hand with a disarming wonder at what we do not—and perhaps cannot—know. To gain a proper sense of Christian faith and practice in a pluralist world demands a theology which allows for a certain *passivity*, the experience of limitation imposed by otherness of all kinds, to speak of *the Other*—of God.

There can be no doubt that to practise such a hospitable conversation with the other is immensely challenging, both practically and theologically. How benign the other was for the early Jesuit missionaries it is difficult to say. No doubt their confidence in the superiority of the Christian creed provided a welcome security against all questions. But it did not need a September 11 to remind their twenty-first-century successors that there is more to conversation with the other than gentle exchanges about spiritual verities. Even before those terrible events it had become clear that we were entering a new phase.

The early enthusiasm to engage with other religious worlds had long since given way to a more sober appreciation of the dark side of human religiosity, which at times demands a robust response. We live now in a more frightening world, where the power of unfettered religious rhetoric to inspire horrific acts of terrorism has become a part of everyone's daily reality. In such circumstances, how are we to make

sure that passivity does not descend into paralysis nor, in compensating for the missiology of conquest, vulnerability become a mere glorying in victimhood?

Prophetic Resistance and Waiting on God

If there is to be an answer to that question it is to be found in a spirituality which seeks to be as faithful to the Christian vocation of prophetic resistance as it is sensitive to the traces of a divine otherness which continue to touch us in all our human relationships. Only in a practised attention to the Word of God, as it is spoken in the disarming interface between same and other, between what is known and what remains always strangely beyond our comprehension, do we learn to imitate the 'active passivity' of the self-emptying Christ.

This spirituality of 'active waiting' returns us to the generous response to God's loving self-revelation which is at the heart of the Spiritual Exercises. What the Exercises formed in men as diverse in culture and temperament as Matteo Ricci, Thomas Stephens, Roberto de Nobili and Ippolito Desideri (the great early eighteenth-century apostle of Tibet) was a generous openness to the signs of God's reconciling love, from which grew a *discerned and decisive* attitude of waiting upon God's creative Word. The question—not one which can be addressed adequately here—is what brings those two key elements together into a single spirituality. But as a shorthand, I commend that paradox of 'active passivity': after the manner of Christ a putting off or relinquishment of self which opens a path to fullness. The more one allows oneself to be 'taken' by God, the more the living and loving grace of God becomes incarnate in our midst.

It is, of course, arguable whether those early Jesuit missionaries had a more difficult task than their successors in today's postmodern world. But what gave them all the patience and the energy to persevere in seeking to understand lies not so much in existing strategies of persuasion as in the spirit of wonder developed by the Spiritual Exercises—a vision of the Spirit of God permeating the whole of reality. Catholic Christianity—and Ignatian spirituality is nothing more than a method for developing the best of that Catholic instinct—holds not just that every aspect of human life can be reached by the grace of God but that, properly understood, all human experience can witness to that grace, can become sources of a transformation which God is *already* accomplishing.

Today we live with the peculiar ambiguities of a globalised yet increasingly fragmented world. I am not arguing that cross-cultural communication is impossible; on the contrary, my point is that it is laborious and time-consuming. But it needs to be accompanied by the work of discerning the multiple ways in which what is strange and other pervades our world, and indeed our innermost selves—in both benign *and* dark forms. The more we learn about those extraordinary Jesuit stories which go on 'haunting' our age with memories of men surprised and challenged by the other, the more we become sensitised to the richness and diversity of God's guiding Spirit. The Exercises commend not just a method for the discernment of spirits but a mysticism of love which desires only to respond generously to God's will. Their spirit, so to speak, lies not with the maintenance of certain convictions in the face of hostility but in a generous openness to the other which is born of the experience of the freedom of God's grace made alive in suffering human beings.

In summary, what I am arguing is that the Exercises form particular virtues and skills which have a rich potential for engaging with persons of good will. How are they to be appropriated in a way which addresses a society in which 'faith' and 'culture' seem at times to exist in very different compartments?

The Power of Conversation Itself

Maybe 'spiritual conversation' needs to be seen less as a tactical adjustment of the more explicit forms of proclamation and more as a value *in its own right*. To know how to get a conversation going, and to leave the resolution with God, rather than demand a particular outcome, is not just an appropriate way of understanding the very human experience of conversation, it also represents an authentic development of the properly Ignatian spirit. Where, in O'Malley's account, the first Jesuits were quite prepared to 'shake the dust off their feet' when they encountered opposition, contemporary Ignatians are called to exercise a greater patience—with ourselves as much as with the other—if only because the mending of the various fractures of our postmodern world is an infinitely more complex business than Ignatius could ever have imagined.

Nevertheless, what we do share is a skill in *initiating* conversation, if not in bringing it to a completely satisfactory conclusion. The famous 'presupposition'—'that every good Christian ought to be more eager to

put a good interpretation on a neighbor's statement than to condemn it' (Exx 22)—is itself based on an implicit 'theology of conversation': that God works directly in the well-disposed individual, and that therefore truth is communicated through what is *actually articulated* in the relationship established between director and exercitant. Somehow that implicit theology has to be converted into everyday conversations. Certainly, it needs to be made more explicit—a more conscious recognition, perhaps, that the Spirit of Christ is at work in *all* interpersonal relations where serious discernment takes place.

What is most necessary is an act of faith in the *power of conversation* itself. Is that not another 'presupposition'—a variant, perhaps, on Ignatius' great principle—what stands behind Llull's story of the right-thinking Gentile—and even Cusa's theatrical array of religious types and cultures? Hospitality and trust in the other are virtues that can be learnt with experience and practice. That does not absolve Christians from the need to be clear about who we are and what we stand for, but it does mean learning how to be more relaxed with, and hospitable to, those familiar yet awkwardly intractable resonances which are often confronted when conversation touches on more serious issues of the practice of faith. De Certeau's point is that the other cannot be repressed but only returns in *an-other* form. If that is correct, then persons of faith become 'persons of interfaith' not when they seek to retreat to a safe place where the other has been domesticated to an empty (and dangerous) shadow, but when that risky mingling with others in the everyday is grasped with courage and generosity. Faithfulness and openness exist always in tension—as do the fundamental practices of all good conversation, speaking well *and* listening well.

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THE CONVERSATIONAL WORD OF GOD

Michael Holman

AS IS THE CASE WITH MANY, if not most, people engaged in one form or another of pastoral ministry, I find myself having many spiritual conversations with a variety of women and men of different ages, backgrounds and walks of life. Some of these are one-off, but more often they are regular, typically taking place every four to six weeks.

What makes these conversations spiritual is a certain desire my conversation partners have, which gets expressed in a variety of ways. Some want to grow in their relationship with Jesus, which often means they desire a more personal relationship with him. They may be seeking advice on how to pray or how to fit prayer into a busy day. They may have a decision to make and are keen to follow the leading of the Lord in making that decision. They may have difficulty in living the gospel with integrity in a business or university world which is far from supportive. One of the challenges, I find, is to listen out for the desire which often lies underneath the one they actually express and to help them articulate that desire for themselves.

I sometimes reflect on the variety of ways in which people first make contact. Sometimes they have heard me give a homily, met me at the back of the church after Mass or even in confession. Sometimes it's more anonymous: they phone up the parish reception and ask if there is anyone available to talk about prayer. However they come, I try to be welcoming and approachable, and to give them time to talk, always allowing them to set the agenda.

I do find that young people. especially. value these kinds of conversations. The age difference doesn't appear to be an obstacle, in fact I think it's more often positively attractive. It's not so much that they want to be led, to be given answers. True, they see in Jesuits people who have a range of experiences from which they can benefit, but it's more that they see us as people who have persevered, have remained

faithful, which is something they admire as they often have a sharper sense than I have of the difficulties of living a life of faith today. I find this very humbling, but challenging too. While it's important for them to realise over time that we all have our limitations, it's as important not to disappoint them.

Typically, spiritual conversations—with whatever age group—have three elements: the ups and downs of life over the past so many weeks; the challenges as well as the opportunities of living the gospel in whatever context someone is in, be it family or work or university or wherever; and how the person has prayed and the fruits of his or her prayer. Often the first element leads to the second and then the third. Sometimes, though, the focus is on one or the other of these elements alone. It may be, for example, that a person wants to share something difficult that has happened in the family. If so, I will generally ask, even with only a few minutes to spare, *where has the Lord been with you in this?*, since the greatest service we can offer is to help people identify the presence of the Lord for themselves, often in unlikely places.

Another important service we can render is to encourage our conversation partners. One way I find I do this is by helping them accept that they should indeed, as the saying goes, pray as they can and not as they think they ought. This is important as it's often the case that people regard one form of prayer as somehow better than another. They try to hang on to this or that way of praying, when in fact the

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Lord is inviting them to pray in another way. I trained in spiritual direction many years ago during two (very hot and humid) summers at the Jesuit spirituality centre in Wernersville, Pennsylvania. I remember a presentation in which one of our guides spoke about 'seasons of prayer'. I find myself referring to this again and again. Sometimes God meets us in *lectio divina*, sometimes in meditation, sometimes imaginative contemplation, and so on. What matters is less the form of prayer, more to go and stay where God meets us.

There are many challenges, I find, in this ministry of spiritual conversation and most have to do with listening. Ignatius thought a good conversationalist was less a good talker, more a good listener. This requires abnegation, patience and self-control. 'Be slow to speak', he wrote, 'and only after having listened quietly, so that you may understand the meanings and leanings and desires of those who speak. You will thus know better when to speak and when to be silent.'[1]

It strikes me that the Jesuit was to be a listener of a particular kind: someone who was able to recognise how the Lord was working in a person's life so that something might be said to help that person progress, to move to where the Lord is inviting him or her to go: to abandon unhelpful and even sinful habits, for example, or to give more time to prayer, or to embrace a more generous, less self-regarding way of life. Knowing when and how to suggest such a move is a precious skill, one to pray for.

Another help to careful listening can be trying to identify where in the four weeks of the Spiritual Exercises this person is living and praying at any time. What might be the grace this person is being offered, the grace for which he or she might pray? The journey of a lifetime through the seven mansions which Teresa of Ávila maps out, each with its characteristics, temptations and challenges, can, in the hands of the expert, similarly be a great help to careful listening.

How can I be sure to listen carefully in the course of a day which may be packed with commitments of many other kinds? I find remembering what was spoken about in a conversation many weeks before difficult, but curiously helpful, as I find myself that much more attentive as I try to pick up the threads from last time. I'm also that much more open to hear something new. If you like, I'm freer of preconceived ideas. I also

[1] Ignatius to members of the Society of Jesus in Portugal, MHSJ EI 12, 678.

find it important to reflect on the conversations I have in order to become the better conversationalist, the better listener, I need to be. This reflection takes three forms.

I have long found supervision of great assistance in ministry in general and in this ministry of conversation in particular. I meet with my supervisor, who has a psychotherapeutic background, about once a month. I hope our sessions help me arrive at a more honest estimation of myself, such that my own issues are less likely to get in the way of my listening, of my attentiveness to the other. This is decidedly a work in progress.

The conversations I have feature as well in my daily Examen. I often find myself saying that in what strikes us in the course of this prayer, the Lord may be tapping us on the shoulder saying, 'Take careful note of this!'. Reflecting in this way on what people have said in spiritual conversation and how I responded helps me, I find, become more attuned to how the Lord speaks in someone's life: to the vocabulary he uses and the tone of voice he adopts.

Another way in which I reflect on my conversations is by reading. I find most helpful those books which lift the lid, so to speak, on the early Society of Jesus. The result of painstaking research into contemporary sources, they nurture and challenge our living of the Ignatian way today and keep us true to our roots. One classic of this type is well known: *The First Jesuits* by John O'Malley. A book I find especially helpful is less known and long out of print: *The Conversational Word of God* by Thomas Clancy. It is, to my mind, a classic and should be on the reading list of all engaged in the ministry of conversation.

There is a form of conversation about which both O'Malley and Clancy write, and which I'd like to adopt and see our Society returning to. It was described by Juan de Polanco, Ignatius' secretary, and Jerónimo Nadal, his close collaborator, as 'going fishing'. Ignatius wanted his Jesuits, young and not so young, to go into the streets and piazzas, especially on a Sunday afternoon when there would be more people about and when they would have more time, and engage with unsuspecting passers-by, as Ignatius apparently said, 'going in their door and leading them out your own'.[2] The capacity to engage others in these missionary conversations was of such importance for Ignatius that superiors were

[2] Jerónimo Nadal, *Exhortatio* 6a, in MHSJ MN 5, 834 (see above, 25–29).


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to act as mentors to young Jesuits in this ministry. Should a man not be gifted in the art of this kind of spiritual conversation, he was to be paired with a man who was. So, while one gave a lecture, the other would stand by the door ready to talk with members of the audience as they left.

What animated these missionary conversations should animate all our conversations, namely, 'zeal', a word often used by Ignatius but rarely used today, which I understand as a conviction that what matters most in the midst of the complexities of life is someone's relationship with Jesus. How do we keep this zeal alive?

One of Ignatius' first companions, Pierre Favre, was regarded as a fine conversationalist. He emphasized the importance of loving your conversation partner, however contrary his or her views might be to your own. Those amongst whom he worked in Germany, who had theological views contrary to his own, were to be held in 'great affection and love'.[3] How can we express this affection and love appropriately? By praying for them, in a particular way.

Many decades ago, I was working in a Jesuit school, both as a teacher and as an assistant chaplain. There was much to do, and I enjoyed doing it. My superior sat me down one day. He knew me all too well: he had been my novice master. He wanted to know all about my work,

[3] Pierre Favre to Diego Laínez, 15 Match 1546, MHSJ MF, 400.

so I rattled off one activity after another. Then he looked at me and asked, 'Michael, do you every pray that you might see those children and their families as the Lord sees them and respond accordingly?' Embarrassed, I had to confess I didn't, but the question has remained with me and reminds me that the help we can give our conversation partners is incomplete unless we pray for them and increasingly come to see them in this discerning way, with the eyes of the Lord, while feeling something of his longing for them and for us all.

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STILL, SMALL VOICE OF CALM

Thomas Enwright

THE LAST TWO LINES of a nineteenth-century Quaker hymn address the Lord as *voice*: 'speak through the earthquake, wind and fire; O still. small voice of calm'.[1] It recuperates the elemental experience of Elijah, in which the voice of the Lord resounded in a gossamer of silence with the question: 'What are you doing here?' (1 Kings 19:11–13). As the Lord became present to Elijah he began to find his own voice. It was not just a matter of searching for words within himself but of allowing the presence of the Lord to evoke the truth within him.

We live in a world where competing voices drown out the faltering ones of those who strive to respond to the truth as Elijah did. It is hard for a single voice to be raised to speak out against the clamour. The yearning for an experience such as Elijah's, in which our voices are roused by the presence of the Lord, has never diminished. Just as force can bind our voices so that they are scarcely heard, love can unbind them so that they may express truth in authenticity. We need a certain poise to free our voices so that, when we come into the presence of the truth like Elijah, they too will be awoken.

At the Threshold

The voice lies at the threshold between humankind and the world. It comes into being where experience, memory and consciousness meet in the body to create gestures that shape human life. The effort required to raise it from this place and out of the silence is what gives the voice its capacity to move the hearts of others. From this point of equilibrium it receives the tone, colour and rhythm, deepened by images, that give it musicality. But as the ancients already knew it is not eloquence that gives a voice its force but its capacity to communicate the truth.[2]

[1] 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind', adapted by Garrett Horder from a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier and published in *Congregational Hymns* (London: Elliott Stock, 1884).
[2] See, for example, Plato, *Apology*, 17a–c; Cicero, *De inventione*, 1:1.

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While speech does not belong to everyone—some are born without it and others lose it through injury or illness—every human being has a voice that deserves to be heard. Its unique character is formed through its privileged acquaintance with the world. The patterns that underlie it are woven in childhood, when the bustle of the playground combines with the intimacy of hearthside. It is not quite right to say that the voice is trapped within us waiting to get out. The door at the threshold swings freely and the voice stands confidently waiting to welcome our interiority into the world. It is the owner of the house and not the guest.

A philosopher once said to me that words are like animals. Just as an otter lives in a river not a tree, so each word has its proper home. Using one's voice is not a matter of simply imitating the words of another, for words are not merely symbols to be copied. They are particular tools that each have a task to fulfil in the place they belong. It is when we see what words can do that we desire to become skilful at using them. We notice quickly how the use of some words enables us to grow in status, knowledge and friendship, while the use of others leads to a diminishment of these things. When we acquire a language we acquire with it a world.

When we realise that we can turn words against others for our own ends we learn to create falsehood. The capacity of human beings to lie fascinated the ancients so much that they developed the metaphor of the word spoken from the heart as a seal of honesty to apply to legal contracts.[3] The idiom still exists in our repertoire today. The voice can

[3] The history of this practice goes back at least to the Assyrian empire—see *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria* (680–669 BC), edited by Erle Leichty (Philadelphia: University Park,

reveal when a word is not spoken from the heart because our tongues feel awkward in our mouths as we speak. The key that unlocks the truth of the voice is authenticity, but authenticity does not come before truth. What it means for the voice to express both truth and authenticity has a deeper significance than merely saying the right thing.

Though fear and hesitancy might interrupt a growing voice, these are the same challenges that lend it character. A friend advised me before leaving home not to lose my regional dialect because otherwise when I returned no one would understand me. He knew of the risk of losing touch with the place where experience, memory and consciousness first began to coincide. The unique patterns that are set up within us prevent us from becoming dry imitators of what we or others have already said.

If experience generates the patterns that underlie the voice, then memory is the reserve where such patterns are held. Just as manuscripts are hoarded in the recesses of archaic libraries, so the memory retains the patterns of voice that have been brought to light through experience. They connect us with a great effort that has run like a fine red thread through the history of humanity. Sometimes unknowingly, our voices echo those of the people who came before us. A wise teacher once told me that it takes more than good parents to bring up a son or daughter. It takes seventy generations of good parents. If language achieves anything at all, it is only because it is a tried and tested way of welcoming us into the world.

At the threshold the voice turns outwards while still aware of our interiority. If its articulation were no more than knowing what words or gestures to use in a particular situation then it would be a simpler affair. Instead it involves understanding the interplay between the unique matrices in which other voices have been created. They might resonate deeply with our own to create a reassuring common ground, or dissonate to fracture the path that leads to communion. What is most important in conversation often falls into the gaps created by misunderstanding. The uniqueness of the effort to discover how these matrices enter into play with each other is the voice's excitement.

Moreover, a voice that has been found can sit too majestically within us, as a source of pride. No longer at the threshold, it sits on the

2011), 107. In the scriptures it is used as a warning against falsity: Deuteronomy 30: 14; Job 33: 3; Psalm 12: 2; Psalm 19: 14; Ezekiel 33: 31; Luke 6: 45; Romans 10: 9.

veranda or takes its place by the window with a view of the world. Its eloquence outshines the poise that once lent it authenticity and truth. This voice has denied the continual human effort that has been passed down from generation to generation. It no longer wants to meet the world as it is. In this way the voice loses its capacity to hold the attention of others. The freshness that marks a voice of authenticity and truth requires constant attention to those who are listening. It takes a long time to discover the standpoint that enables the voice to sit lightly on the threshold.

A Veneer of Anonymity

There is a veneer of anonymity that exists between us as we pass one another on the streets. A walk through a city gives rise to the opportunity for us to imagine other lives, but few of us transform our images into relationships. At one time in my life I would regularly go out on the streets of the city to start conversations with strangers. I braced myself for failure, unsure of what to say on the steps of the town hall or in the middle of an art gallery. Yet the conversations started easily enough and quickly became the opportunity to talk about deeper matters. From there they would often develop into conversations about faith in its varied forms.

The veneer of anonymity between us is only gossamer thin. It is waiting to be broken so that our need for communion can be fulfilled by the meeting of voices. If we break it, then new horizons of communion open up within us. Reading helps us overcome anonymity, too. In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, Atticus Finch explains, 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view … until you climb in his skin and walk around in it'.[4] When we read about others their voices are woven into the matrix of our own. We become capable of empathizing with them as if their experiences were ours.

Languages and Landscapes

The voice expresses itself equally in writing, speech, gesture and any other medium it chooses. It is possible for the voice to value one medium

[4] Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960), 36.

at the expense of all others. Some cultures value writing so much that it tightens the spoken voice until it can hardly breathe a word. At that point gestures begin to overflow into writing like a flood that cannot be contained.

The emotional and spiritual content of a language is no greater or lesser in one culture than another. The voice finds a way to express interiority any way possible, like water seeping though the ground. What is communicated through a gesture in one language is communicated through intimate spoken words in another. Some languages have elaborate pragmatics for entering into conversation, while others just talk about the weather. Each culture has its own landscape that maps this emotional and spiritual content. It is covered with hills and valleys like geographical contours. When the content appears in different places on the map for different cultures, then misunderstandings can occur. These differences do not mean the landscape is any more or less beautiful in one culture or another.

Bound in Silence

The same openness that allows voices to enter into communion with others leaves them vulnerable to force. The teacher who yelled at us at school, the relative who coerced us with violence or the manager who shamed us before our colleagues could all have left our voices bound. A society in which our identity is constantly jostled by questions can leave us hesitant to reveal who we are. Not everything that is within us is designed to be expressed in the light of day; some things shine brighter in the twilight of intimacy. It is in situations such as these that the veneer of anonymity begins to form. The voice must be able to stand lightly at the threshold of our interiority so that we can still look into the deepest dimensions of our being. If it has to become the protector of interiority, then it runs the risk of being driven into silence. Perhaps the appearance of that thin veneer of anonymity protects us, but it also deepens our hesitation.

The silencing of the human voice by force closes the door to authenticity and truth. Throughout human history people have been silenced by different forms of oppression. Even unknowingly, a dominant voice can constrain the voices of others. When the door is closed, from outside or within, the voice is locked outside on its own doorstep. Language has the power both to give esteem and to take it away. While

the voice can only be completely silenced by force, it can also be drowned out by other more demanding voices. In such moments gentle persistence is required to keep being heard. Once when I was learning a foreign language, I kept a journal in which I wrote poetry each day. Amid the confusion of everyday misunderstandings it was a still point where my voice could continue to flow unimpeded. For those whose voices are drowned out or distorted by force, creativity can also bring relief. Even when it is kept secret, creative expression can become an underground stream that keeps flowing when everything else is silencing them.

A Love That Enfolds

If the voice is to be unbound then it must be enfolded in love. Once I was praying with a group of women from a slum in Latin America. Their lives were choked by daily violence born in poverty. As we prayed, one of the women spoke up and said that her daughter had been abducted on the way to school and that nothing had been heard of her since. Those gathered were stunned into silence not just by the dreadful news, but by the gentleness with which she spoke. When the voice is surrounded by loving ears it sounds familiar to the speaker even if it surprises or distresses the listener. When the voice is surrounded by ears that are closed it can sound awkward or even embarrassing. A voice that is enfolded in love is unbound to speak the truth even if the truth is difficult. Her daughter was never found, but we were able to surround her with love in the moment when she spoke the truth.

The hidden correspondence between speaking and listening, or teaching and learning, is articulated by the prophet Isaiah, who wrote, 'The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.' (Isaiah 50:4) The human voice is irreducibly connected with our capacity to listen. You could say that the distinction between the two is an artificial one, based on the assumption that those with power are the ones who speak while those without are the ones who listen. Actually listening can exhibit all the qualities of authority and power normally attributed to speech. Attention to another person is the form of consciousness that brings experience and memory into alignment. It is not enough for a faltering voice to be heard; care must be taken that it feels heard.

The same outwardly focused attention strives to place the other at the centre of the conversation. When we find ourselves held in mutual attention, communion can begin to emerge. A spiritual director once taught me that to help someone with a moral problem it was enough to ask for his or her five most important values. When we draw attention to what is important to someone, that person is placed at the centre of the decision being made. He or she is able to harness the ethical impulse of conscience in a way that would not be possible while bound to the values of another person or institution. Being bound to another's values, no matter how laudable, can break someone's back. It creates a costly split between our interiority and the world. Placing someone at the centre of the discernment might be said to be the technique of Jesus, to whom the paralytic was lowered through a hole in the roof right into the middle of a conversation with the Pharisees (Luke 5:17–39).

A Moment's Pause

Some silences are not the result of force, but moments when the voice gathers pace. Such moments precede the alignment of memory, experience and consciousness so that they can express something fresh. A Canaanite woman came to Jesus to ask for Jesus' mercy on behalf of her daughter (Matthew 15:21–28). Although she recognised who he was, he gave her not one word of reply. His pause is a sign that even Jesus learned something new from conversation. When he came into contact with her he discovered that his mission was not just for his own people but for all nations (Matthew 28:16–20). Something new and somewhat

embarrassing emerged in the conversation, marked by her awkward joke. Here a silent pause opens up new vistas and the horizon stretches out before us.

The tradition of the Desert Fathers is contained in snippets of conversation, usually between a spiritual father and a younger monk. In one of them three friends become monks, the first chose to become a peacemaker, the second chose to visit the sick and the third chose to live in solitude away from the distractions of the world. The first two were unable to fulfil their chosen way of life because there were overwhelmed by so many people, so they went to visit the third.

> And he was silent for awhile, and then poured water into a vessel and said, 'Look upon the water'. And it was murky. And after a little while he said again, 'Look now, how clear the water has become'. And as they looked into the water they saw their own faces, as in a mirror. And then he said to them, 'So is he who abides in the midst of men: because of the turbulence, he sees not his sins: but when he hath been quiet, above all in solitude, then does he recognise his own default'.[5]

It is in solitude that murky waters become clear, but spiritual conversation with one who has experienced silence can help us understand why they were cloudy in the first place.

A Presence That Evokes

When two or more people are intertwined in conversation we sometimes detect the hint of a presence. It is as though someone whom we do not recognise is standing at our side. The disciples on the road to Emmaus had this experience when their gloomy conversation was enlivened by the presence of Jesus. It was only later that they recognised who had been walking with them. Luke describes this experience as a flame burning in their hearts during their conversation (Luke 24:13–35). The jostling emotions of inauthenticity and falsehood were banished in the presence of authenticity and truth. What does it take for us to recognise that same flame burning our hearts as we stand in the presence of Christ? If we could understand that the presence of Christ evokes a fresh voice within us, then our spiritual conversations would be transformed.

[5] Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan, 1994 [1936]), 66–67.

In some circles authenticity is contrasted with truth as though experience could separate one from the other. If authenticity comes before truth might this lead to falsehood? If truth comes before authenticity might this lead to disingenuousness? Perhaps a distrust of our experience lies behind these questions. No matter how poorly understood, each of our experiences is real. It is the experience of others that raise the question of what is true. When we start to acknowledge this experience we allow our authenticity to coincide with the truth. The presence of another can evoke truth within us.

Just as the presence of a lover evokes the voice of the beloved, the presence of a mother evokes the voice of her child, or the presence of a friend evokes the voice of his or her soulmate, so the presence of Christ evokes the truth within us. The image once came to me in prayer of my father soothing my grazed knee with his moistened handkerchief. The tender love of a human father was evoked by the presence of the tender loving mercy of God the Father. It was a moment of great truth when I suddenly understood. It is not as though we need to drive a wedge between authenticity and truth. They come naturally when we allow our voices to be evoked by the presence of Christ.

The presence of Christ evokes the truth within us

I remember sitting in a shack with a corrugated iron roof in a poor area of a Latin American city. I listened as an elderly man, whose face shone in the darkened room, spoke to me about the birth of his daughter. He told me that the child had arrived unexpectedly in the middle of the night. Without even clean towels or water he had gone around the neighbourhood asking for help while a relative tended to the mother. Finally he came back in time for the birth. He went on to tell me that he imagined the birth of Jesus happening in a similar way. His memory coincided precisely with the Gospel in which Mary and Joseph were also caught unexpectedly without the help that they needed to give birth to a son. What greater authenticity and truth can there be than to recall an experience, no matter how briefly, that coincided with the life of Christ?

When we give voice to our experiences of Christ's presence in our lives, that presence reawakens within us. We feel his presence once again evoking something in our voice. From far away in the in the muffled archive of our memory something asks to be read once more. A skilled spiritual guide can detect the patterns underlying the voice that come

into contact with Christ. The words that are spoken acquire a poise and an intensity because they are spoken in the presence of truth itself. Sometimes the voice is tinged by surprise or embarrassment because the presence that evokes our voice is not our own. If we were to understand those patterns more deeply, our spiritual conversations would be transformed. Along with its characteristic surprise a voice that has spoken with Christ is marked by tenderness, freedom and self-control. It is never coercive but poised lightly at the threshold. It is unlike anything we have ever heard before because it is born in the uniqueness of God.

Once I was speaking to a young father from an indigenous tribe in the Amazon. He and his family had moved away from their traditional lifestyle in the rainforest to settle on the edge of a town. He explained that when they had lived in the forest they used to navigate by the scent of the trees. Though it was easier to find his way around the town he was lost about how to bring up his children. I asked him what he did when he spent time with them. He told me that when he came home at night after a long day's work he sat with his children in the dark and pointed up to the sky to teach them the names of the stars. Through the circumstances of time and place change, the voice continues to stand confidently at the threshold, in the presence of Christ, to welcome interiority into the world.

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THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AS CONVERSATION

Patrick Goujon

IGNATIUS INCLUDED the Spiritual Exercises among the ministries of spiritual conversation: 'They will likewise endeavour to benefit individuals in spiritual conversations, both by advising and exhorting to good works, and by giving the Spiritual Exercises' (*Constitutions*, VII. 4. 8 [648]). However to think of the Spiritual Exercises as conversations seems paradoxical. On the one hand, they are commonly understood as a conversation between the one giving and the one receiving the Exercises. On the other hand, they are understood as a conversation with God. So in which of these senses did Ignatius consider them a ministry of conversation?

Surely what is most important is what happens between God and the retreatant. This is exemplified in the moment of decision when the director is to, 'leave the Creator to work directly with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord' (Exx 15).[1] Nevertheless, the conversation between director and retreatant seems to be fundamental to the realisation of this moment. In order better to understand the conversational dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises, we will look first at the role of conversation in Ignatius' *Autobiography* and how it corresponds with the discovery of his personal experience of God. We will then consider how the Spiritual Exercises are designed to open the retreatant to this same experience, and the role of the director in the light of this process of acquiring openness.

Spiritual Conversation in Ignatius' Autobiography

Ignatius' *Autobiography* helps us to understand how it is that God communicates Godself to Ignatius, but Ignatius still seeks out spiritual

[1] This article uses the translation of the *Spiritual Exercises* by Philip Endean, Joseph A. Munitiz and others found in *Personal Writings*.

people for advice. In Manresa he met regularly with a woman who was famous at that time for her spiritual wisdom (n. 21). He went to confession, repeatedly, even after his general confession at Montserrat. In the midst of a great crisis he added conversations to confessions without avail (nn. 21–22). As he felt more and more anxious he was even tempted to commit suicide, so he increased his asceticism and prayed for longer (n. 24). Although he had already received insight about his spiritual life at Loyola, Montserrat and Cardoner before embarking on his adventure in the service of God (n. 14), he still felt lost.

All of a sudden, his turmoil ceased. What happened to him? Despite all the confessions and his confessor's advice to stop, he was still mulling over his sins. Just about to go to confession again, he noted:

> But at the end of these thoughts there came to him some feelings of disgust for the life he was leading, and some impulses to cease from it; and with this the Lord willed that he woke up as if from sleep. And since he now had some experience of the difference in kind of spirits through the lessons God had given him, he began to mull over the means through which that spirit had come. As a result he decided, with great clarity, not to confess anything from the past any more. Thus from that day onward he remained free of those scruples, holding it for certain that Our Lord in his mercy had willed to liberate him. (n. 25)

A period of reflection followed this moment of 'awakening'. It was through the discernment of spirits that Ignatius confirmed his decision not to confess past sins. Yet he did not abandon confession or spiritual direction. Once he had understood that he was able to examine his own will he was able to free himself from the asceticism to which he had previously been bound. He allowed his body to regain its rightful place in his spiritual life, bringing peace and a kind of certainty. He makes it clear that this was a gift from God received through his discovery of 'some experience of the different in kind of spirits' (n. 25)

What does this have to do with spiritual conversation? Through an act of self-communication, God became the foundation of the help Ignatius received from and later learned to give. Spiritual movements that meet with the consent of the will bring about a clarity that dispels all doubt. It was God who was shaping this capacity for discernment in Ignatius: 'At this time God was dealing with him in the same way as a

schoolteacher deals with a child, teaching him' (n. 27). Later he would design the Spiritual Exercises to help others learn from God in the same manner. He continues to go to confession, meet spiritual people and ask for advice, but it is here that his own desire 'to help souls' first appears in the *Autobiography* (n. 26). We see the core of Ignatius' spiritual pedagogy: a person gains spiritual consistency with God first through assent to the spiritual movements within—not from God alone, but from God first.

The Spiritual Exercises as Conversation?

Approaching God in Solitude

The Twentieth Annotation explains that a retreat requires disengagement, separation, a preference for seclusion and isolation. This runs counter to the notion of the Exercises as spiritual conversation. Such an ascetic, even antisocial, effort brings concentration and an undivided mind. It shapes the retreatant's capacity to 'approach and reach' God and to 'receive grace':

> This isolation will have three principal advantages, among many others .... The second is that in this state of isolation, with one's mind not divided among many things but entirely taken up with one thing alone, namely, serving one's Creator and doing good to one's soul, one is able to use one's natural powers all the more freely in the diligent search for what one's heart desires. The third, the more we are alone and by ourselves, the more capable we become of approaching and reaching our Creator and Lord, and the more we reach Him, the more we make ourselves ready to receive graces and gifts from His divine and supreme Goodness. (Exx 20)

Those last lines are in tune with the invitation to enter into the Exercises with generosity and courage (Exx 1) in order to encounter a self-communicating God (Exx 15). If we read these two annotations together, it is clear that the Spiritual Exercises are a combination of active commitment and receptivity. The First Annotation compares spiritual exercises to physical activity, albeit taking place in an environment of isolation. Meanwhile in the Twentieth Annotation the same exercises are described as leading to an awareness of and an ability to receive God's grace, God's self-communication.

Our contemporary perspective places great weight on the importance of conversation and sharing. However the purpose of the Spiritual Exercises is the formation of the self so that it may approach and receive

God. This entails not becoming trapped in the ego, but rather being transformed through an encounter with the one who sets us free:

> During these Spiritual Exercises it is more opportune and much better that the Creator and Lord communicate Himself to the faithful soul in search for the will of God, as He inflames her in His love and praise, disposing her towards the way in which she will be better able to serve Him in the future (Exx 15).

God's grace consists in the gift of our freedom. Through it we become aware of what affects us and, after discerning and recognising what comes from God, we act accordingly. This is encapsulated in the title: 'Spiritual Exercises having as their purpose the overcoming of self and the ordering of one's life on the basis of a decision made in freedom from any ill-ordered attachment' (Exx 21).

Receiving Exercises

We can define exercises as 'a series of activities to develop a skill'. If the skill to be learned is the ability to receive God's grace, how does Ignatius develop it? First, through the cultivation of receptivity. The person *making* the Exercises is *receiving* the Exercises. The retreatant does not choose what he or she does but rather receives it 'from the one who gives the exercises'.[2] Someone else intervenes in the formation of selfhood. It is an asymmetrical conversation, in contrast to the individualistic approach of much contemporary spirituality.

Second, the ability to receive grace is developed through the form of each exercise. Even though the retreatant asks for grace in the Second Preamble (Exx 48), he or she is told what to ask for:

> The request must be adapted to the matter under consideration, so e.g. in contemplating the Resurrection one asks for joy with Christ joyful, but in contemplating the Passion one asks for grief, tears and suffering with the suffering Christ (Exx 48).

The request is given by the book of the Exercises and told to the retreatant. Hence it is expressed even before the retreatant has made it. It takes the place of what the retreatant would otherwise ask for him- or herself.

[2] In the Spanish and Latin versions, there is no mention of a director, a name later coined by the Jesuits.

Here we enter into the heart of Ignatius' pedagogy. Although in the beginning the retreatant is invited to express what he or she wants and desires (Exx 48), this is immediately intercepted by the matter for contemplation. For the most part that desire will come into contact with the life of Christ in the retreatant's imagination. He or she will listen to whatever of Christ resonates from the contemplation within, receiving comfort, challenge, peace, unity of desire—finding a way to live harmoniously with Christ. This is the first pole of a tension which is resolved at the end of each exercise.

In the colloquy the retreatant is invited freely to 'talk over whatever comes to mind' (Exx 52–54). The retreatant is invited to speak to Christ or God, expressing what has been suggested by the meditation or contemplation: *I have a great desire to follow you*, *I do not want to lose my life*, *I cannot live without giving myself in solidarity*, *I am afraid of losing everything*. The key here is to express the desire as closely as possible to what has been understood, felt or experienced during the exercise. The coherence and direction of that desire emerge gradually until the fruit, desirable and now possible, can be picked.

The conversational mode of the colloquy helps the retreatant to find his or her freedom. He or she considers God as a friend or a master:

> A colloquy, properly so-called, means speaking as one friend speaks with another, or a servant with a master, at times asking for some favour, at other times accusing oneself of something badly done, or telling the other about one's concerns and asking for advice about them (Exx 54).

This does not mean that the retreatant speaks without regard for the one to whom he or she is speaking, after all God is to be praised, reverenced and served (Exx 23). The colloquy is an invitation to use one's freedom of speech in personal prayer by focusing on God as a friend. At other points an explicitly feudal tone is implied (Exx 74, 98) while the retreatant is subsequently invited to stand before 'God and all the saints' as in a heavenly court (Exx 95–98, 151, 232). Nevertheless the colloquy is one of the key places in which to experience freedom before God; an invitation to go beyond the images of God that might censor our speech. It is here that conversation takes in its fullest sense: the free expression of a desire now liberated.

The free expression of a desire now liberated

Indifference

The Spiritual Exercises could easily become a monologue produced in a closed circuit. The isolation, the concentration of mind, the use of imagination and the intensity of inner movements could all contribute to an inescapable inward focus. The concentration and solitude can delude the retreatant into following his or her own plans rather than searching for God. That is why the Spiritual Exercises insist on indifference.

This is first articulated in the Principle and Foundation, but it is also reflected in the movement from petition to colloquy in the structure of each exercise. It works hand in hand with the 'purity of intention' expressed by the preparatory prayer: 'to ask God for grace that all my intentions, actions and operations may be directed purely to the service and praise of His Divine Majesty' (Exx 46).[3] Before dialogue with God, prayer is an opening of the self, an exposure in vulnerability: we ask of God what we cannot offer ourselves. Prayer is born out of the recognition of my lack, of the desire that I cannot myself satisfy.[4]

From an Ignatian perspective, every prayer is rooted in the indifference of the Principle and Foundation. Right at the centre of the *Spiritual Exercises* are the criteria for making a good and holy decision (Exx 169). They are preceded by the exercises on the Three Classes of Persons (Exx 149–157), and the Three Kinds of Humility, (Exx 165–168). In relation to conversation, indifference is the attitude whereby I give God a real place in our conversation. It is easy enough to talk to God about my own plans, but much more difficult to entertain God as a real conversation partner who has something different in mind. When Ignatius speaks of the openness to the possibilities that God might present, he does so in the language of ends, means and disordered attachments:

> But what happens in fact is that many first of all choose marriage, which is a means, and secondly the service of God in married life, although this service of God is the end; and similarly there are others who, first of all, want church benefices, and afterwards to serve God in them. The result is that such people do not go straight to God, but they want God to come straight to their disordered attachments. (Exx 169)

[3] Often reduced to Addition 3, Exx 75, suggesting coming into the presence of God.

[4] See Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech,* translated by Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2004), 19.

This explanation can be understood in terms of a relationship. Indifference entails that God is no more present in one situation than another, whether in sickness or health, poverty or wealth, expected or unexpected situations. This realisation frees us to receive an image of God that runs against our preferences; an image of a God who surprises us and may even thwart our plans. Indifference is the precondition for true conversation with God. Ignatius expresses it in this way: 'Everyone must bear in mind that one will make progress in spiritual things in the measure in which one shall have put off self-love, self-will and self-interest' (Exx 189).

The Role of the Director

Having understood the conversational form of the Spiritual Exercises, it is now time now to turn to the role and attitude of 'the one who gives the Exercises'. First, the conversation between 'the one who gives the Exercises' and 'the one who makes the Exercises' is not a conversation between two people but between three. God is part of a conversation that is grounded in communion. God is the one to whom the retreatant speaks and from whom signs are deciphered through the inner movements that emerge in the contemplation of the life of Jesus Christ. The one who gives the Exercises organizes their rhythm (Exx 4), adapts and administers the matter for meditation or contemplation (Exx 4, 18) and teaches the retreatant how to interpret inner movements and their traps: 'the one who gives the Exercises lets lay open before that person the cunning tricks of the enemy of human nature' (Exx 7). The one who makes Exercises is thus able to recognise the movements of spirit according to the set of rules that have been explained to him or her. In the Fifth Addition the person is also invited to reflect on what has happened during the exercises: 'At the end of the exercise I shall either sit down or walk around for a quarter of an hour while I consider how the contemplation or meditation has gone' (Exx 77).

In short, the role of the one who gives the Exercises is to organize and explain them so that the retreatant may live his or her life. Moreover the giver possesses a certain attitude of care for the receiver. The giver encourages and strengthens the retreatant (Exx 7, 22) preventing him or her from over-enthusiasm that might lead to a 'precipitate promise or unthinking vow' (Exx 14). The giver ensures that the retreatant makes the Exercises with regularity and fidelity (Exx 6). It is a role characterized by attentiveness to his or her unique characteristics: 'Careful consideration

must be given to the individual temperament and capabilities of the exercitant' (Exx 18).

Despite this care for the one receiving the Exercises, the ensuing conversation is not simply one between friends. As has already been noted, it is an asymmetrical relationship. A movement animates the dialogue that allows the giver to organize the journey while simultaneously stepping aside. A focus on the exercitant's experience of God allows free exchange between the two of them:

> There is much to be gained if the giver of the Exercises, while not wanting to ask about or know the exercitant's personal thoughts or sins, is given a faithful account of the different agitations and thoughts brought by the different spirit (Exx 17).

Finesse and tact are required to undertake this role, as well as great attention to body language. It is defined and limited through the famous image of the pointer of a balance:

> Hence the giver of the Exercises should not be swayed or show a preference for one side rather than the other, but remaining in the middle like the pointer of a balance, should leave the Creator to work directly with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord (Exx 15).

The role of the director is far from the freedom of spontaneous conversation. Perhaps a comparison with the free musical improvisation

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of a jazz band might help. The melody is usually well known by the musicians. Although none of them know where the music is going, the players join in because they know the rules of harmony and how to connect the chords. Nothing is written in advance, but the musicians are able to interact because they understand the rules that underlie the music they are playing. By listening to each other they discover a complementarity that moves the improvisation forward.

In the Spiritual Exercises God communicates Godself, so the standard melody is already given! It suffices to repeat the Fifteenth Annotation:

> The one giving the Exercises ought not to influence the one receiving them more to poverty or to any particular promise than to their contraries … it is more opportune and much better that the Creator and Lord communicate Himself to the faithful soul in search for the will of God, as He inflames her in His love and praise.

It is not for the giver to influence the receiver, but neither does God, who can only give in an act of self-communication. The conversation between the giver and the receiver of the Exercises depends on the ability to be aware of this communication. As they listen to the underlying melody, they begin to improvise their own spontaneous composition. The ongoing conversation can only form part of the act of mutual communication which exemplifies the true nature of love (see Exx 231). The one receiving the Exercises responds to this love first in the colloquy and then definitively in the decision made during the retreat.

Solitude and Openness

Ignatius saw the Spiritual Exercises as conversations. His autobiography demonstrates how he gained spiritual consistency with God through a personal discernment which never precluded the guidance of others. The Spiritual Exercises are organized around two poles in tension: solitude and openness; the solitude of the retreat, in silence, and openness through meditation and contemplation on the life of Jesus Christ. This tension is maintained by a living dynamic: retreatants move from the request for grace that they receive in the Exercises to the dialogue in which they express what they want on the basis of what has happened in their prayers. They combine receptivity with freedom. Solitude helps to open their eyes to life, to notice what moves them deeply. In this way, in contemplating the life of Christ, they learn to ask for what is sought and desired.

Through care, attentiveness and indifference, the director enters into an asymmetrical conversation in communion with God and the retreatant. The ministry of spiritual conversation is grounded in a communion with the underlying melody of God's love; it is a spontaneous composition that shows us how to receive that love so that we can help others.

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DISCERNING A VOCATION

The General Examen of St Ignatius

Brian O'Leary

THE YEAR 1944 SAW THE PUBLICATION of a best-selling novel by the US writer Margaret Langdon. Its title was *Anna and the King of Siam*, a fictionalised version of the memoirs of Anna Leonowens (1831–1915). Anna had been born in India and had married a Welshman there (Thomas Leon Owens) who died prematurely at the age of 33. This tragedy had left Anna on her own with a son and daughter. She travelled around South Asia, taking up work wherever she could. This eventually led to her spending five years as tutor to King Mongkut of Siam's many wives and children. Langdon's book soon spawned a film of the same name. Then, in 1951, Rogers and Hammerstein brought a musical version of the story to Broadway. This we know and love as *The King and I*. The production contains many memorable songs, among the most popular being the one with the lines:

> Getting to know you,
> Getting to know all about you
> Getting to like you,
> Getting to hope you like me.[1]

At this point the reader may well be wondering what *The King and I* has to do with the General Examen. I seem more interested in Anna Leonowens than in Ignatius of Loyola! So I need to ask for a little patience until the reason for my digression becomes clearer.[2]

[1] Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *The King and I*, vocal score (New York: Williamson Music, 1955), 61.

[2] In all that follows I am drawing on my earlier work, *Sent into the Lord's Vineyard: Explorations in the Jesuit Constitutions* (Oxford: Way Books, 2012), chapter 2.

The Originality of the Society of Jesus

It is difficult for us today to realise how radical the Society of Jesus appeared in the mid-sixteenth century. Jesuits claimed to be religious, yet they did not have chapter, nor celebrate the divine office in common, nor have a regime of penances obligatory on all, nor wear a distinctive religious habit. Not only were these innovations seen as being in discontinuity with the revered tradition of religious life reaching back to the Fathers of the Desert, but they could be interpreted as a partial surrender to certain criticisms of the Protestant Reformers (and those of Christian humanists such as Erasmus). Then there was the fourth vow of special obedience to the Pope concerning missions. This appeared superfluous in the eyes of some (since the vow of obedience taken by all religious includes obedience to the Pope), and arrogant in the eyes of others (as asserting a special relationship with the Vicar of Christ).

Underlying all these new features was Ignatius' vision of a religious life that was radically decloistered, not only in comparison with monasticism but also with the life of the mendicant friars. There even seemed to be a secular quality about this new order that was a scandal to many traditionalists. Ignatius' vision of religious life may have been attractive and exciting to a growing number of people—but was it orthodox? Some influential people judged that it was not, among them Tomás de Pedroche (*c.* 1490–1569) and Melchor Cano (1509–1560), two influential Dominican theologians and members of the Inquisition. Consequently, it is not surprising that the early Jesuits had to spend a lot of time and energy in offering an ongoing *apologia*—explaining who they were, the nature of their charism, and why their way of life was fully orthodox.

The need to present the Society candidly and accurately arose first in relation to church authorities. Without their understanding and support there would have been no papal approbation of the order. There was also a need to explain the Society to the faithful, those people to whom the Society wished to minister. The Society required credibility in order to be apostolically effective. But a third category also existed—those who showed an interest in joining the Society. Ignatius paid great attention to this last group, realising that it was from among these (mostly) young men that the Society had to choose its new members. This imperative provides the rationale for what we know as the General Examen.[3]

[3] The General Examen must not be confused with the daily examen prayer, familiar to most readers.

> *The end of this Society is to devote itself with God's grace not only to the salvation and perfection of the members' own souls, but also with that same grace to labour strenuously in giving aid toward the salvation and perfection of the souls of their neighbours. (Examen. 1. 2 [3])*

Mutual Comprehension and Appreciation

The document introduces a series of structured conversations between a representative (or representatives) of the Society and the applicant who wishes to join. Permeating this whole process are two primary concerns. The first is that the applicant should be fully aware of the nature of this new order, and of what a commitment to join it would involve. The second is a corollary to this, namely, that no one will be admitted to the Society whose life (behaviour) and doctrine (beliefs and values) have not been thoroughly examined. In other words, the General Examen sets up a dynamic whereby the Society's representative instructs the one who wants to enter, *so that he may come to know the Society*; and investigates the one who wants to enter, *so that the Society may come to know him*. We might say that—both on the side of the Society and on that of the applicant—it is all about 'getting to know you, getting to know all about you, getting to like you, getting to hope you like me'. Or, in more sober terms, the goal is mutual comprehension and appreciation.

In *The King and I* a long and often difficult exchange of ideas becomes necessary because Anna, on the one side, and the king, his wives and children, on the other, come from dramatically different cultures. It is not so much a clash of personalities (though that too exists) as a clash of philosophies, world-views, values—and inherited sensibilities. The Siamese court represents a culture that incorporates patriarchy, authoritarian government, polygamy, slavery—traditions going back thousands of years. Anna represents the modern Western values of equality and freedom that emerged from the Enlightenment (although having Christian roots). The road to mutual understanding is sure to be rocky.

The issues at stake in the General Examen may not be as dramatic or intractable as those between Anna and the king—but they are

nonetheless complex. They too can only be resolved through dialogue, or, as we may prefer to say today, through spiritual conversation. Ignatius feared, with good reason as it turned out, that applicants to the Society might have a distorted understanding of its nature and charism. As noted earlier, these men's knowledge and experience of religious life in the mid-sixteenth century would have been limited to monastic orders such as the Benedictines, or mendicant orders such as the Franciscans. They would have had no familiarity with an order as wholly devoted to mission as the Society of Jesus set out to be—simply because none such had ever existed before.

Absence of Precedent

Not only was the Society of Jesus itself a novelty, so too was the General Examen. It still remains a unique document in the history of religious life. Of course, it is true that the early monks did not easily admit new members to their monasteries. Pachomius used to make an aspirant wait for a number of days at the monastery gate before allowing him to enter. According to Cassian, a candidate was not to be accepted until he had spent ten days making his request—prostrated on the ground and in tears. Benedict also counsels that no one wishing to embrace the monastic life should be admitted until after four or five days, during which the candidate is to persevere in asking to enter and in enduring this delay and other difficulties with patience. In medieval times, the *Constitutions* of the Dominicans prescribed that three competent friars be appointed in each convent to examine candidates and to report later to the prior and the chapter. But none of these orders produced as wide-ranging and sophisticated a document for use in the examination of an aspirant as the General Examen.[4] In practice, therefore, we have nothing with which to compare this Ignatian text. So, how are we to address it? Where might we find a key capable of unlocking it?

The eminent American Jesuit philosopher and theologian Michael J. Buckley (1931–2019) suggests that the most useful key lies in the mind of Ignatius himself—in his characteristic way of thinking. He argues that this mindset of Ignatius does not change, irrespective of the genre

[4] The only possible precedent is a text by Humbert of Romans OP (*c.* 1194–1277) entitled 'Function of the Examiner'. However, this is considerably narrower in scope than the Ignatian text. In any case, Ignatius was unaware of its existence.

in which he is working. Learn how his mind functions and we will better understand *any* writing that arises from it. More specifically, Buckley argues that, in interpreting the General Examen, most help will be acquired from our knowledge of the *Spiritual Exercises*—and the thinking of Ignatius that lies behind that document. The latter may not offer us a strict parallel to the General Examen, but the similarities and resonances between the two texts—even their overall dynamic—are both surprising and instructive.[5]

Location and Environment

We note first that the conversations outlined in the General Examen are to take place not in the novitiate, but somewhere separate—a quiet location where the dialogue participants will be undisturbed.

> We are convinced in our Lord that what follows is of great importance in order that his Divine and Supreme Majesty may make use of this least Society. The persons who are accepted into it should be not only long tested before incorporation into it but also well-known before they are admitted to the probation which is made by living in common with those in the house (i.e. the novitiate). Therefore, it is expedient that near our common abode there should be a lodging where those who are admitted may live as guests, for twelve to twenty days … that during this time they may inform themselves better about the concerns of the Society and the Society may come to know them better in our Lord. (*Constitutions*, I.4.1 [190])

This setting is remarkably similar to that described in Annotation 20 of the *Spiritual Exercises*. We recognise the same stress on withdrawal, on separation, on not socialising—in a word, on solitude.

> Ordinarily, in making the Exercises, an exercitant will achieve more progress the more he or she withdraws from all friends and acquaintances, and from all earthly concerns; for example, by moving out of one's place of residence and taking a different house or room where one can live in the greatest possible solitude (Exx 20).

[5] See Michael J. 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 P. Schner (Waterloo, On: Wilfrid Laurier U, 1984), 65–90. Particularly relevant is part 2, 74–80.

In both cases the intention of Ignatius could hardly be clearer. He wants the exercitant—and the applicant seeking to join the Society—to enter into a similar kind of physical environment. This in turn will create an atmosphere that is conducive to spiritual conversation between the one who is giving and the one who is making the Exercises—and between the one who is conducting and the one who is undergoing the General Examen. It will also foster a listening attitude and an increasing sensitivity in all involved to the presence and the movements of the Holy Spirit. After all, if God through the Spirit is not an active participant, no conversation can ever be spiritual. Consequently, there will be no discernment, and no good and sound election.

Four-Part Structure

Besides its insistence on an appropriate location, the General Examen also resembles the Exercises in having a four-part structure.[6] Within this, as within the Exercises, the development envisaged leads to a gradual deepening of interiority and a sharpening of challenge.

The first chapter in the General Examen provides a description of the Society of Jesus itself. It places particular emphasis on the ways in which it differs from the older orders. This highlighting of difference serves to disabuse the applicant of any expectations he may have from his earlier acquaintance with monastic or mendicant forms of religious life. More positively, it clarifies the purpose of the Society as an apostolic body. The fourth vow of obedience to the Pope in the matter of missions is explained, as well as its consequences for anyone who makes this vow.

The second chapter explores whether there exist in the applicant's life or background any impediments to entry into the Society. Such

> *In addition to the three vows mentioned, the professed Society also makes an explicit vow to the present or future sovereign pontiff as the vicar of Christ our Lord. This is a vow to go anywhere His Holiness will order, whether among the faithful or the infidels ... for the sake of matters pertaining to the worship of God and the good of the Christian religion. (Examen. 1. 5 [7])*

impediments may arise either from the universal requirements of canon law in relation to religious life, or from the particular law of the Society. If any major impediment exists, the General Examen immediately comes to an end and the applicant departs. Otherwise the process continues.

So far the information provided by the Society's representative (chapter 1) and by the applicant (chapter 2) has been mostly factual, one might say objective. In chapter 3 the questioning broadens in its scope and becomes distinctly more personal, more autobiographical. It requires of the applicant a willingness and an ability to articulate his religious experience. He is asked about the pattern of prayer in his life, and encouraged to describe those spiritual experiences that have cultivated in him an affective relationship with God. This deep sharing by the applicant makes him better known to the Society as a person of faith, but it also reveals the applicant to himself in a way, and at a depth, that he may not have fathomed heretofore. Without such self-knowledge the applicant would be less capable of discerning whether he is being called to the Society of Jesus or to some other way of Christian living.

At one point in the questioning, its directness and force become quite startling. Consider the following:

- Is he determined to abandon the world and to follow the counsels of Christ our Lord?
- How much time has elapsed since he made this general decision to abandon the world?
- After making this decision, has he wavered in it, and to what extent?
- About how much time has elapsed since his desires to leave the world and follow the counsels of Christ our Lord began to come?
- What were the signs or motives through which they came? (Examen, 3.13 [50])

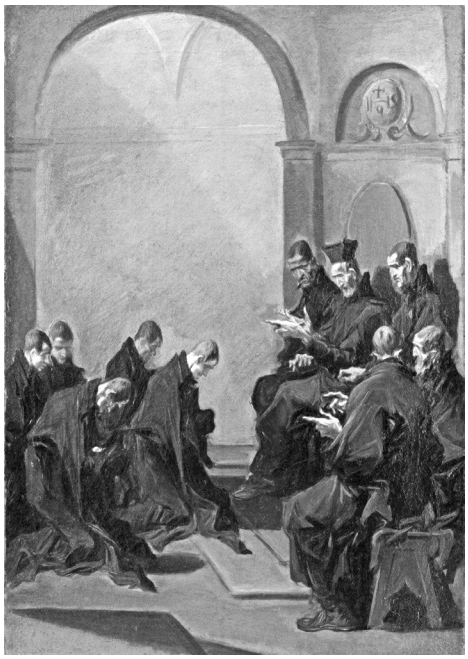
This is no offhand, casual conversation but one which is intentional and purposeful. Observe the strength of that word 'determined', and the starkness of the phrases 'to abandon the world and follow the counsels of Christ our Lord'. These are phrases which traditionally evoke religious life. Here they are repeated so as to underline their seriousness. Throughout these questions there remains a presupposition that the applicant's original attraction was to the religious life as such. Then the history of

his desires is thoroughly investigated. How much time has elapsed; has he wavered; what were the motives and signs that mediated these desires? The whole development of his previous discernment is explored, so as to be better understood and more personally appropriated.

Then the examination continues:

- Does he have a deliberate determination to live and die in the Lord with and in this Society of Jesus our Creator and Lord?
- And since when?
- Where and through whom was he first moved to this? (Examen 3.14[51]).

The questions are similar, but now they focus specifically on the applicant's desires in relation to the Society of Jesus. Is this the religious order to which he is being called? Once again, the issue of determination is raised—not a determination to enter the novitiate, but 'to live and die in the Lord with and in this Society of Jesus'. Then the General Examen seeks to explore the history of such a desire and resolve. The applicant is being asked to recall and revisit a crucial dimension of his autobiography—how God led him from the time when he first noticed an attraction to the Society.[7]



Sermon to Jesuit Novices, *by Alessandro Magnasco, after 1711*

We might notice also that Ignatius does not ask about living and dying in the Society, but living and dying 'with and in this Society of Jesus our Creator

[7] As in Examen 3.13 [50] above, the similarity with a request that Jerónimo Nadal made to Ignatius is striking: 'I begged the Father to be kind enough to tell us how the Lord had guided him from the beginning of his conversion' (preface of Nadal to the *Autobiography*, MSHJ FN 1, 358, quoted in *Personal Writings*, 3).

and Lord. This phrase, 'with and in' personalises the question, as it were, by bringing in the dimension of relationships. The Society is not simply an organization within whose structures a Jesuit lives, but a companionship, a network of 'friends in the Lord', with whom he lives and follows Christ in love until death. The relationship with God in Christ is intimately connected with the relationship that the applicant seeks with other Jesuits.

Cost and Glory

By the end of the questioning contained in chapter 3, the Society's representative(s) may already be clear that the applicant's determination is real and has been the result of a free and well-informed choice. We might well ask, 'What more needs to be said'? Yet we find that the conversation continues—and at great length. What is going on in the mind of Ignatius? Let us turn once more to Michael Buckley.

> In the Exercises, the election is followed by the Third and Fourth Week, the cost and glory of discipleship; in the General Examen, this confirmation that an election has been made is followed by one of the most profound descriptions of this cost ever written by Ignatius, the great fourth chapter of the General Examen. In both the Exercises and the Examen, this is the moment in which the disciple hears and lives with the words, 'If anyone will come after me ….'[8]

Much of the teaching in this chapter can be placed under the heading of 'renunciation'—from the renunciation of temporal goods (Examen 4.1[53]–4.5[59]), through the renunciation of family ties (4.6[60]–4.C[62]), to the renunciation of the self (4.8[63]–4.33[90]). This rubric of renunciation places Ignatius in continuity with the oldest expression of religious life—that of the Desert Fathers. In that ancient tradition, 'renunciation' was so essential to an understanding of monastic life that someone entering a monastery was said to be 'making his renunciation'. Indeed, monks were frequently known as 'those who renounce'.

Ignatius had learnt much about renunciation—or what we may also call asceticism—in the years following his conversion. We know that he came to abandon his early excesses when he realised that they were

[8] Buckley, 'Freedom, Election, and Self-Transcendence', 77–78.

damaging his health and impeding his ministry to others. He discovered that asceticism was a means, not an end. But Ignatius never abandoned his conviction that asceticism was a necessary component of the spiritual life, and in the General Examen he encourages the aspirant 'to seek in our Lord his greater abnegation and continual mortification in all things possible' (4.46[103]). In the context of Jesuit life, however, the main stress will be on interior renunciation, and its aim will be the inner freedom of the apostle to give himself totally to mission. Availability and mobility—characteristics of the new Society—are not cheaply won but require an appropriate, even demanding, asceticism.

However, this nuanced understanding and practice of renunciation must itself be embedded in an even deeper reality—a Jesuit's desire for union with the poor and suffering Christ. Accordingly, after he has outlined the means for reaching inner freedom, Ignatius ends his ascetical exposition with a passage of deep affectivity—one that borders on the mystical.

> They desire to clothe themselves with the same clothing and uniform of their Lord because of the love and reverence which he deserves, to such an extent that where there would be no offence to his Divine Majesty and no imputation of sin to the neighbour, they would wish to suffer injuries, false accusations, and affronts, and to be held and esteemed as fools … because of their desire to resemble and imitate in some manner our Creator and Lord Jesus Christ, by putting on his clothing and uniform …. Therefore, the candidate should be asked whether he finds himself in a state of desires like these that are so salutary and fruitful for the perfection of his soul (4.44[101]–4.46[103]).

The question now put to the applicant is no longer about determination but exclusively about desires. Ignatius knows that what he is describing can only come from above, *de arriba*, which means that it is pure gift. One suspects that in this passage Ignatius is opening up the depths of his own soul. In addition, there is a remarkable similarity between what he writes at this point of the General Examen and his description of the Third Kind of Humility in the *Spiritual Exercises*:

> The Third Way of Being Humble is the most perfect, and consists in this. When I possess the first and second ways, and when the options equally further the praise and glory of God, in order to imitate Christ our Lord better and to be more like him here and now,

> I desire and choose poverty with Christ poor rather than wealth; contempt with Christ laden with it rather than honors. Even further, I desire to be regarded as a useless fool for Christ, who before me was regarded as such, rather than as a wise or prudent person in this world. (Exx 167)

Ignatius wants the applicant to consider whether he is experiencing the grace of the Third Kind of Humility—or at least has the desire to receive it. A positive reply will confirm the young man's suitability for the Society.

Recapitulation

It may be helpful to recapitulate briefly. We have followed the unfolding of an examination (Examen), carried out in an atmosphere of solitude, in which the Society reveals itself to the applicant and the applicant reveals himself to the Society. This process includes a consideration of the spiritual autobiography of the applicant, facilitated by the questioning and listening of the examiner. The gradual articulation of the applicant's religious experience enables him to own it as uniquely his own.

At this point the applicant is asked to focus especially on the time since he first experienced desires to enter religious life and determined to do so—and then on the time since these desires and determination were first recognised as pointing to the Society of Jesus. He is next challenged by the traditional renunciations associated with religious life—only now re-interpreted in the light of the Jesuit charism. Finally, he is asked if he wants to follow the poor and suffering Christ, even to be identified with Him. If he answers in the affirmative, and if the

> *It is likewise very important to bring to the attention of those who are being examined, emphasizing it and giving it great weight in the sight of our Creator and Lord, to how great a degree it helps and profits in the spiritual life to abhor in its totality and not in part whatever the world loves and embraces, and to accept and desire with all possible energy whatever Christ our Lord has loved and embraced.*
> *(Examen. 4. 44 [101])*

examiner is satisfied, the applicant will be admitted into the corporate setting of the novitiate to begin his training.

Ignatius is never satisfied with small desires and limited generosity—whether it be in one about to enter the Spiritual Exercises (Exx 15) or in an applicant to the Society being led through the General Examen. On the contrary, he looks for great desires, magnanimity, resolve, determination, enthusiasm, zeal—qualities that might be summed up in the word *passion*. If these are a person's initial dispositions, Ignatius is confident that the person can only grow in spiritual maturity, and will be most effective in helping others (*aiudar a las almas*).

The General Examen is built around conversation—or a series of conversations. These are intentional and structured. From the start they are also spiritual, since the participants are engaging in discernment—seeking to discover the presence or absence of a vocation to the Society under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This spiritual character of the conversations becomes more explicit as the examination proceeds. Simultaneously, they are revealing ever-deeper levels of the applicant's soul until they reach the depths revealed by the crowning Fourth Chapter.

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ALL HUMANITY IS MERE BREATH

Philip Harrison

WHEN WE READ THE PSALMS we overhear the spiritual conversation between the people of Israel and God. In most cases we hear only one side of the dialogue, because God's voice is rarely made explicit. However, close reading can reveal how the writers are responding to the presence of God. This occurs especially at moments when a psalm subtly changes direction in some way. Psalm 39 serves as a good example here, and while translations can give us some idea of its movements, they are far more evident in the original language.[1] One particular technique used in this psalm is *mirativity*, which is a moment of introspection that occasions a turn in the poetic line of thought.[2]

The psalm presents a series of questions which are answered through such mirative turns. It opens in a suffocating atmosphere of self-imposed silence, develops the extended metaphor of flame for the spread of distress and uses an unusual simile comparing God's rebuke to a moth's consumption of cloth. The theme of liminality evokes fragility at the limits of human experience. Despite the darkness of its subject, the psalm's poetic turns reveal how the writer responds gently to the presence of God.

Structure and Dynamic

The psalm may be divided into three stanzas: the first (vv.2–5) ending with the half-line, 'let me know how ephemeral I am'; the second (vv.6–12) ending with, 'surely all humanity is mere breath'; and the third (vv.13–14) with a long line ending '… and am no more'.[3] Other

[1] All translations here are the author's own.

[2] This grammatical category was proposed by Scott DeLancey; see 'Mirativity: The Grammatical Marking of Unexpected Information', *Linguistic Typology*, 1 (1997), 33–52.

[3] I am using the verse numbering for the Hebrew Bible.

Psalm 39

2. *I said, 'I will guard my behaviour / from the sin of my tongue,*
I will guard my mouth with a muzzle / while the wicked are before me.'
3. *I was dumbed by silence / I was muted from good*
So my distress stirred / my heart warmed within me.
4. *Fire kindled in my sigh, / I spoke with my tongue*
5. *'Make known to me Lord my end, / and what is the measure of my days,*
Let me know how ephemeral I am.'

6. *Behold! By handspans you give my days, / so my life is mere breath before you,*
7. *Surely all humanity stands as all breath, / surely each walks in shadow*
Surely they make noise by mere breath, / each makes heaps but knows not who gathers them.
8. *'Now, for what do I wait Lord? / My hope it is in you.*
9. *From all transgression deliver me / do not set me as the fool's scorn.*
10. *I am silent, do not open my mouth, / for it is you who have acted.*
11. *'Withhold your blows from me, / from the beating of your hand I am worn down*
12. *By rebuke for sin you chastise each one / and like a moth dissolve his delight*
Surely all humanity is mere breath.'

13. *'Hear my prayer Lord / and my cry for help!*
Give ear to my tears, / do not be deaf!
For I am a stranger to you, / a sojourner like all my ancestors.'
14. *'Look away from me, so that I brighten / before I go and am no more.'*

arrangements of the lines are possible, but this one captures the dynamic of the psalm, moving from an individual search for significance to a universal proposition about humankind, before arriving at the conclusion that human beings are nothing without God. It has the advantage of preserving the structure of question and answer, and respects the effect of the final foreshortened lines of the first two stanzas.

Self-Imposed Silence (vv. 2–5)

In Hebrew each line of this stanza ends on a rhyming stressed syllable, with one break in the rhyme on the word for 'muzzle', to indicate a change of sentiment. Although the English translation sounds different, you can still perceive where the semantic emphasis breaks down:

> I said, 'I will guard my behaviour / from the sin of my tongue,
> I will guard my mouth with a muzzle / while the wicked are before me.'

The wording of the first line indicates that an assertion is being made about a past occurrence. The repetition of the word אֶשְׁמְרָה (*esh'm'rah:* 'I will guard'), which is followed in each case by a rhyme, lends the line a sibilant and labial quality that evokes murmuring. The two lines form a parallelism between the initial idea of guarding my own behaviour from sin and its development into that of guarding my mouth before the wicked. The repetition of the first-person pronoun suggests a self-entered interiority that also characterizes the shadowy world of v.6 and the lonely nocturnal one of the moth in v.11.

The imagery of the mouth and tongue, however, alludes to the liminality of this experience on the edge of interiority. The effect is intensified in the second line by the inclusion of that word for 'muzzle'—a highly unusual one which refers in a Phoenician tomb inscription to a gold artefact to seal the lips of the dead.[4] This image contributes to an atmosphere recalling the suffocating silence of the tomb and anticipates the final line of the poem in which the writer speaks of the threshold between life and death.

Continuing to refer to the past, the writer describes how he had tried to remain silent in vain:

> I was dumbed by silence / I was muted from good
> So my distress stirred / my heart warmed within me.
> Fire kindled in my sigh, / I spoke with my tongue (vv. 3–4)

The reason for this is explained later (vv.8–12) when the writer speaks of the unrelenting rebuke of God. Here a parallelism develops the half line 'I was dumbed into silence' into 'I was muted from good', showing how the writer's resolution had kept him 'from good' instead of simply guarding his lips 'from their sin'. A break in rhyme at the word for 'good' marks the beginning of another parallelism, between distress and warmth, that forms the basis for an extended metaphor.

Even before the phrase 'fire kindled' explicitly introduces the metaphor, the movement of flames is suggested 'stirred', its warmth by 'warmed', and its sound by 'sigh'. The writer uses flame as a metaphor for the spread of the feeling of 'distress'. Both the source and target of the metaphor share aspects of movement, warmth and arousal, associating

[4] See Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002) volume 1, n.11.

the feeling of distress with the physical sensations caused by fire and the spread of fire with the bodily effects of emotion.

Self-imposed silence inhibits doing good as well as evil, a tension which ignites the spiritual distress that burns within the writer's heart. As a result, his resolution is broken and he begins to speak, at the same moment that the metaphor of fire is made explicit. At the end of this line, the word for 'tongue', repeated from v. 1, marks a transition from the simple verb 'to speak' to another with the connotation 'to speak meaningfully'. This suggests a deepening of the words which now emerge from the depths of the writer's silence.

The beginning of the following line marks the opening of a conversation with God. The repetition of the verb 'to know' at the start of the next two lines echoes the repetition of 'guard' in the opening one, indicating a transition from guarding life to seeking knowledge from God:

> 'Make known to me Lord my end, / and what is the measure of my days,
> Let me know how ephemeral I am.' (v. 5)

The parallel between the 'end' and 'measure' of life in these lines creates a contrast in perspective between the totality of life and the experience of living. This difference of perspective informs the revelation in v. 6 that for God the writer's life is almost nothing—'mere breath'. By focusing on the end of life rather than life as it passes, the writer has failed to appreciate its transience from day to day. The theme of liminality is developed and extended through the words for 'end', 'measure' and 'ephemeral', and continued with the word 'before' in the next lines.

The totality of life and the experience of living

Whereas this theme first appears in the boundaries of the human body and the social world, now it is used to refer to the boundaries of human life, over which the writer has no control. As a verb, the word for 'ephemeral' also connotes 'to belittle oneself in conversation', describing exactly the self-imposed silence of the writer in vv. 1–2.[5] The writer realises that his own self-effacement in human interaction is also his

[5] This word is translated as 'refuse' in most English versions, but in its discursive context means to withdraw from responding to someone who speaks or to belittle oneself. See Ezekiel 3: 27: 'But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God"; let those who will hear, hear; and let those who refuse to hear, refuse; for they are a rebellious house.'

condition before the limits of human life. The foreshortening of the next line provides a clear conclusion to this first stanza: a question directed at God to which the following stanza gives answer: *How ephemeral am I?*

The Ephemerality of Humankind (vv. 6–12)

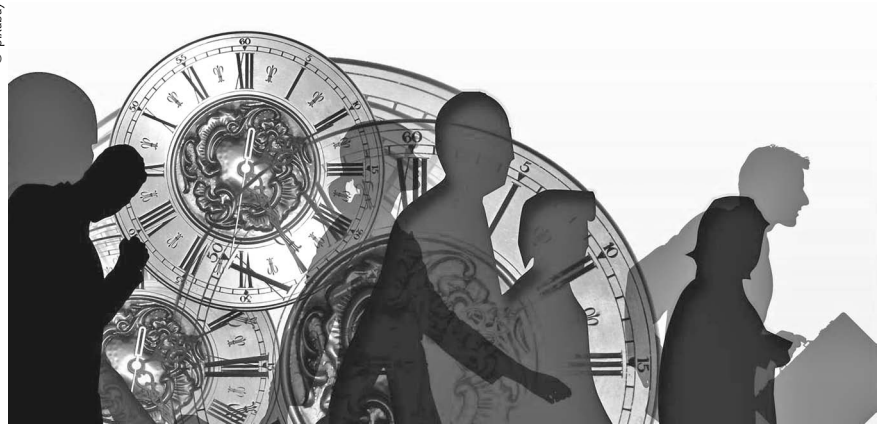
The second stanza of the psalm forms a reply to the first by exploring the universal dimension of the writer's individual search for significance. An increase in the number of stresses in the first line breaks with the tight rhythm of the first stanza, and the lines begin to lengthen:

> Behold! By handspans you give my days, / so my life is mere breath
> before you,
> Surely all humanity stands as all breath, / surely each walks in shadow
> Surely they make noise by mere breath, / each makes heaps but
> knows not who gathers them. (vv. 6–7)

The stanza opens with the word הִנֵּה, *hinneh*, which I have translated as 'Behold!' It can be understood as mirative: a shift in the poetic line of thought brought about by becoming aware of God as a conversation partner. The writer exclaims in wonder as God reveals to him an alternative perspective on human life.

The parallelism in the first line creates a contrast between how humans perceive each day by human measures ('handspans'), and how God perceives it, 'as nothing'. This new perspective reflects the relationship between 'my end' and 'the measure of my days' in v. 5, and leads the writer to make a series of propositions introduced by the adverb אַךְ (*akh*: 'surely'). Its repetition sustains the exclamation of wonder to form a clear chain of thought which emerges as a result of God's response. The word's palatal and dental alliteration produces an effect of crisp speech in contrast to the murmuring of the opening section; the writer has now come to a deeper clarity about his situation.

Of the next four lines the first three are introduced by 'surely', and the fourth offers a concluding gloss. The half-line 'all humanity stands as all breath' paradoxically fixes the totality of human ephemerality as a permanent, enduring condition. This total ephemerality is placed in contrast with the affirmation that, as an individual, each person walks around in shadow. The universal ephemerality of humankind is thus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set against their individual ignorance of their own condition—including the writer's own. A second, conceptually and morphologically related, parallelism moves from plural universality of 'they make noise' to the singular individuality of 'he makes heaps'.

All human beings go around diminished by self-absorption, like the writer, making no more noise than breath. As a result, each one heaps up goods only for him- or herself without being appreciated by or appreciating the efforts of others. The futility of their lonely nocturnal existence anticipates the simile between God's rebuke and a moth eating cloth in v. 12. There, the moth is described as consuming humanity's 'delight'. Both images allude to the prideful gains of human beings, gathered in shadow and ignorance.

The word I have translated as 'now' moves the text into a different time-frame, in which responsibility for the writer's predicament is placed upon God. He arrives at a new question as a result of his realisation that he is not alone in his distress, but shares the same experience with the rest of humanity:

> 'Now, for what do I wait Lord? / My hope it is in you.
> From all transgression deliver me / do not set me as the fool's scorn.
> I am silent, do not open my mouth, / for it is you who have acted.'
> (vv. 8–10)

Perceiving a way out of distress, the writer beseeches God to end the constant rebuke which is the cause of his self-imposed silence. A parallelism contrasts deliverance from transgression with avoiding the 'fool's scorn'. He asks for God not to open his mouth, justifying his

request by claiming that his silence is not self-imposed but imposed by God: 'it is you who have acted'.

The rhyme is broken at this line and the stress is foreshortened, letting the final clause beginning 'it is you' hang like an accusation against God. Moreover, the near juxtaposition of the similar sounding פִּי (*pî*: 'mouth') and כִּי (*kî:* 'for') reinforces the abruptness of these words. There is something disquieting here that suggests the writer is actually motivated more by avoiding scorn than being delivered from transgression. This is further emphasized by the play throughout the psalm on several Hebrew words that sound similar: meaning 'life-span', 'ephemeral', the implied cognate 'to belittle oneself', 'scorn' and 'mere breath'. This assonance brings a lightness and disorientation to the psalm's treatment of ephemerality. The listener is left to wonder if the writer's silence really is divinely required or merely self-imposed foolishness.

The rebuke of God is described as an intolerable punishment rather than itself offering deliverance from transgression.[6]

> 'Withhold your blows from me, / from the beating of your hand I am worn down
> By rebuke for sin you chastise each one / and like a moth dissolve his delight
> Surely all humanity is mere breath.' (vv. 11–12)

These lines introduce the simile of the moth to describe the persistence of God. This insect slowly and inexorably consumes those precious textiles of which a householder is so proud. In the same way, the sternness of God rebukes the prideful human being, slowly but unrelentingly consuming 'his delight'. This echoes the description of human beings heaping up without knowing who will gather in v. 6.

The simile is troubling because it compares God's persistent rebuke to an insignificant insect which is little more than an irritation. Conversely, the humble moth is raised to the surprising status of an analogue for the rebuke of God. Unexpectedly this offers a glimmer of hope that humanity which, like the nocturnal moth, wanders in shadows,

[6] A contrasting approach can be found in Psalm 141, where the blows of righteousness are invited rather than rejected as they are here: 'Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips …. Let the righteous strike me; let the faithful correct me. Never let the oil of the wicked anoint my head, for my prayer is continually against their wicked deeds..' (141: 3, 5)

might be raised up too. However, the writer misses this insight, instead answering the question proposed at the end of the first stanza—*How ephemeral am I?*—with the conclusion: 'all humanity is mere breath'.

We are Guests of Life (vv. 13–14)

In other psalms, it is God who guards the way of the just, but since this writer has attempted to guard his own way, he now realises that he cannot manage without God's help.[7] A formulaic parallelism introduces the final stanza, in which the word for 'hear', √שׁמע, returns the reader to the beginning of the poem through its resemblance to 'guard', √שׁמר:

> 'Hear my prayer Lord / and my cry for help!
> Give ear to my tears, / do not be deaf!
> For I am a stranger to you, / a sojourner like all my ancestors.' (v. 13)

The first line of this formula contains four stresses in the first half followed by just one in the second, breaking the rhythm of the psalm and allowing the word 'Lord' to resound, before the latent stress builds to a crescendo at the words 'do not be deaf!' in the second half of the second line. A parallelism further defines the prayer, as 'my prayer' develops into the emphatically isolated 'my cry for help'. In Hebrew the words for 'my cry for help' and 'my tears' rhyme, drawing the lines together. The imperative 'Hear' parallels 'give ear' in the next line, a phrase often used in moral reproaches, and the word 'my prayer' parallels 'my tears', recalling the distress of v.2. The whole formula takes on new significance in light of the self-imposed silence of the writer at the beginning of the psalm, becoming a prayer for God to open God's senses. In a final ironic twist, the writer calls upon God not to be deaf when he himself has been intentionally silent up to this point.

In the next line the phrase 'I a, a stranger' is expanded and intensified by its parallelism with 'a sojourner like all my fathers' to include all the people of Israel. The theme of liminality is reiterated as the writer recognises himself and his people as strangers on the threshold of belonging to the land, echoing themes from exilic literature. It places the distinction between the ephemerality of all humanity and that of the individual on the level of the national identity of Israel. Moreover, if

[7] See Psalms 12: 8; 97: 10; 141: 3 and so on.

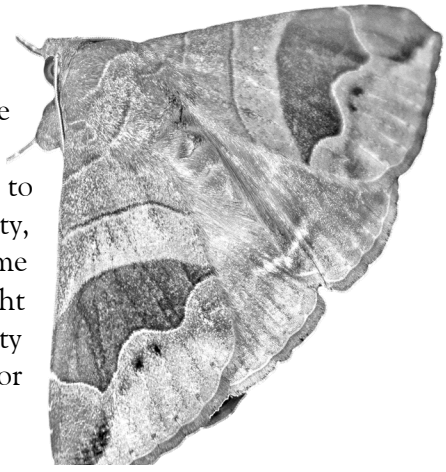
the writer is a stranger in his own land, he is also a guest waiting to leave at the threshold of life. The concluding phrase of the psalm inverts the motif of the divine countenance as a sign of blessing (Psalms 27, 102, 67 and so on), making *relief* from the divine gaze the last sign of hope:

> 'Look away from me, so that I brighten / before I go and am no more.' (v. 14)

The writer realises that this relief can paradoxically only bring death, for the final assertion of the psalm resolves the question that he has longed to answer from the beginning: *How ephemeral am I?* The final line returns to a balanced pattern of stresses, resolving the tensions that have been evoked. In the most insignificant way possible, he comes to a simple conclusion: *I am nothing*. So, the psalm moves from the ephemerality of the individual's life to humankind's infirmity, before arriving finally at the threshold of fragile human existence.

Liminality, Fragility and Hope

Liminality is the axis of this psalm, which explores the boundaries encountered in life and the limit set by death as perspectives on human fragility. The central idea is that all human beings are ephemeral, despite their efforts to change. God's unrelenting rebuking of pride fosters an awareness of this fact, but for the writer the persistence of this rebuke has become intolerable. The key moments of the writer's response to God are brought to light through the development of a series of questions. The conclusion of the poem subverts the motif of the gaze of God, appearing to turn away from the very last threshold of optimism.



Yet there are moments of hope in the honest emotional response of the writer and his searching; in the possibility of redemption from his intolerance of rebuke; and in the shadowy solidarity of all humankind. The simile comparing God's rebuke to the moth acts as an emblem of human ephemerality, but also hints at the possibility that through the same persistence shown by the tiny moth, humanity might achieve deliverance. In his distress, this possibility does not occur to the writer, but lies implicit for the listener to discover.

The turns of the spiritual conversation between the writer and God offer a model for all those who are searching for meaning. For me as I write this, four years since the beginning of the global pandemic, the image of a muzzled mouth in the first verse evokes the sensation of wearing a surgical mask. The psalm reminds contemporary readers of what we have all experienced in our current crises: human life is fragile and depends upon God. We are not supposed to place our trust in the things in which we delight, but in the God who delights in us. If we place our trust in God, our persistence might just bear fruit.

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CONVERSATIONS WHERE GOD IS EXPERIENCED

Marion Morgan

'SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION' is a very wide term. It covers everything from an arranged appointment with a spiritual director, a meaningful conversation with a person we trust, to a casual encounter with a stranger. They can all 'count' as a form of spiritual conversation: a conversation where God is experienced. We all have them. Needless to say, such conversations are a gift—a precious gift from God. We cannot force them and often our efforts to create opportunities all come to nothing. We simply have to wait patiently until a new relationship is given. For most of us, these come and go. Someone with whom we can have deep and meaningful conversations moves away or, worse, dies. Our own circumstances change and we find it is no longer possible to carry on a particular relationship as we have been doing. The sources of these deep conversations dry up and we are forced to stumble along in the dark for a while.

The casual encounters can be surprising: a conversation at a bus stop which suddenly turns serious; a chance encounter with someone we used to know some years ago; an exchange with a fellow passenger in a railway carriage. Sometimes in such encounters, when I have been listening to someone, he or she will ask about me. Am I married? Do I have children? How do I spend my time now I am elderly? Their reactions when I explain that I am a consecrated woman in the Roman Catholic Church range from genuine interest to sheer astonishment to total bewilderment. But when we part, who knows what this new thought may lead? And I also gain much from these conversations with strangers. They widen my outlook and often open my heart.

Some of the most helpful conversations can be with friends who share our outlook and who are also looking for conversation with meaning in it. The advantage of this is that the most trivial of our experiences of our everyday life can be shared over a coffee (or whatever) without embarrassment and this can often lead into something deeper. It is far less daunting than an arranged meeting with a spiritual director,

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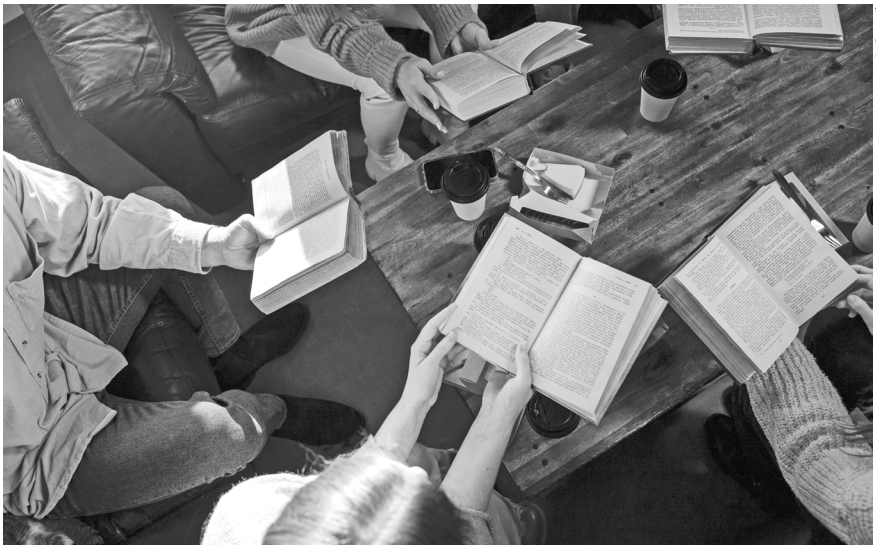
when we may feel that we need to have some sort of agenda and the conversation may be far more focused. A chat with a friend can start with the most ordinary bits of news, the sharing of how we feel, the telling of funny happenings or jokes, and then, when we have relaxed, can lead on to our prayer life, our church life and our general attitude to life in general. This can all be healing in its own right, and can lead to a decision to take some small action in a new direction.

As we all know, it is simply not possible for many people to go on a retreat or even attend a particular day of prayer. Sometimes it is the cost which prohibits this; sometimes it is the absence of available time because of domestic or other responsibilities. Realistically, we need first of all to *want* assistance in our spiritual lives, even though the issues we have might seem fairly minor compared to the great challenges and evils around us. There is always the underlying rogue thought: is it really worth all this energy and effort and cost of arranging this? Are my problems really that serious?

Confession in our local parish church is always an option and can sometimes be really helpful. But sometimes it isn't, even when we believe that the grace of God can work through the very action of going. In such cases it really is worth shopping around to find a location where it might prove to be more helpful. Most importantly of all, we need to bring our whole situation to the attention of God in our prayers and ask God for help. And ask Mary, and Joseph and any other saint or deceased friend to whom we relate for assistance, too. Such prayers are always answered. We just have to wait a little.

Gatherings with friends—one, or maybe sometimes a group—can seem very small in the grand scheme of things. But so is a mustard seed. The great advantage is that these opportunities are open to anyone. We simply have to find a compatible friend and decide to spend part of our social time together in a slightly more focused way—which often happens quite naturally in the course of our conversation.

The fruitfulness of such conversations is greatly helped if a certain amount of 'homework' is done in preparation. A book serving as spiritual reading can be shared and discussed as part of the conversation. We can keep a note of special moments in prayer—of consolation, when we feel the Lord close or receive an insight at just the right time, or of desolation, when we feel thoroughly fed up, or worse. When we share these moments, it can bring relief and even laughter, as well as cementing our attitudes of awe and thanksgiving. A helpful way of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getting such a conversation started might be to share whether or not we have a favourite scriptural text and why it means so much to us.

Some of the conversation can be spent on discussing our experience of our local church—if we still have one. The difficulties and problems of accessing the sacraments are always a good starting point! We can share information and logistics and discuss how to overcome any problems. There is always a way. Maybe we could share transport and arrange a visit to somewhere a little beyond our usual orbit. All these chats confirm in our conscious mind the enormous importance of making time and space for our own spiritual development.

Talking in a secular environment, such as a coffee shop, has its own advantages. It can sometimes make the whole conversation more easily pass into our conscious mind, rather than be stored or 'filed' in a separate section of memory labelled 'religious thoughts'. When we are aiming to 'find God in all things', then it can awaken a renewed awareness and help us to explore more deeply. This is not the same as being able to contemplate deeply in a more protected and compatible environment. For a start, you need to remain conscious enough maybe to catch the right bus home! But it is all grist to the mill, especially in a situation where other options are not open to us.

When making a retreat or even being free to attend a day of recollection presents what appear to be insurmountable difficulties, then remember: a spiritual conversation with a friend who we trust can be enormously fruitful in its own right, and is accessible to all of us.

Sowing Seeds

The preliminary to any really fruitful spiritual conversation is the sowing of the seed. At the end of the gospel passage about the woman at the well, Jesus says:

> The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps'. I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour. (John 4:36–38)

When I was at grammar school in the 1950s we had a really good English teacher in the second form. She was speaking about poetry and we studied Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'Pied Beauty'. I was entranced by it. That was the only time I heard his name for many years afterwards. It became a sort of 'mantra' for me, defining why I felt different from my contemporaries (who had never heard of him). The family used to tease me a bit about it. My mother kept confusing him with Gerard Hoffnung.

Years later, after I had left home and moved to Bristol and was at a low ebb, I went to the young people's club at St Mary-on-the-Quay. I was a practising Anglican. Fr Kavanagh SJ came and sat with me and asked me about myself. 'I am odd', I replied, 'I like people like Gerard Manley Hopkins'. 'Did you know he was a Jesuit?' he asked: 'No' I said. A year later, when I was at the end of my tether, I remembered this and thought: 'At least they knew who Gerard Manley Hopkins was.' And I went once more to the club, met a different priest, and asked for instruction as a Roman Catholic. The rest is history. But that small seed in my second year at grammar school had remained and begun to grow.

All of us can sow seed. We may not see the results, but there is no reason at all to be discouraged. The potential for growth is in God's hands. Mustard seeds are highly recommended by the most reliable of sources.

Marion Morgan was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1969 and has since been involved in ecumenism at local and national levels, parish work, freelance writing and caring for an autistic adult. She is a parishioner of St Mary-on-the-Quay in Bristol and is a member of the Order of Consecrated Virgins.

IGNATIAN SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION AND SYNODAL EXPERIENCE

Julia Violero Álvarez

FROM THE BEGINNING of his apostolic wanderings, Ignatius of Loyola understood the complexity involved in conversing with others about spiritual topics in an informal way. After 42 days imprisoned by the Inquisition in Alcalá, the verdict that finally put him at his liberty was accompanied by the condition that he no longer spoke about matters of faith. Ignatius was disconcerted and felt as though a door, even heavier than that of the jail, had closed in on him (see *Autobiography*, n.63). His zeal to help souls was obstructed and began to stagnate.

He hoped that things would improve when he moved to Salamanca, but it was not to be. His own confessor drove him into a trap, an interrogation by the Dominicans, which ended once again in imprisonment. Ignatius was asked, 'What do you preach?' To which the pilgrim responded with the clarification, 'we don't preach, but speak about the things of God with certain people in an informal way, such as after a meal with some people who invite us' (*Autobiography*, n.65). This is an early indication that spiritual conversation was Ignatius' preferred form of apostolate.

The same pilgrim relates how, in Manresa, many people went in search of this type of conversation:

> At this time, he still used to talk sometimes with spiritual people, who thought he was genuine and wanted to talk to him, because, although he had no knowledge of spiritual things, still in his speaking he showed much fervour and a great will to go forward in the service of God. (*Autobiography*, n.21)

In the first instance, it seems that it was Ignatius himself who was looking to speak with spiritual people, with the desire to learn and share his experiences. But, little by little, the fervour conveyed by his speech began to attract quite a few people, who desired to listen to him and to take the measure of his experiences.

St Ignatius in conversation with Xavier in Paris
artist unknown

Years later, in Paris, Ignatius understood that it was necessary to reduce his ministries to focus on his university studies. He did not leave spiritual conversation aside completely, but spent long periods conversing, as much with his roommates, Francis Xavier and Pierre Favre, as with others. But he intentionally disrupted his apostolic rhythm to make time for himself and his studies, even though he desired just as much as before to return to his conversations. This was what he revealed to Dr Frago, who was surprised that no one was coming to see him, as that had previously been normal. Ignatius responded: 'The reason is because I'm not talking to anyone about the things of God. But when the course is over we'll be back to normal.' (*Autobiography*, n.82). Ignatius was noting that, to help one's neighbour through spiritual conversation, neither fervour nor good will were sufficient. Studies were also necessary, as was the search for the opportune moment and preparation of the manner and content of the conversation.[1]

All this experience was transmitted to the group of seven companions in Paris. In this way, they began to assimilate spiritual conversation as a habitual practice to find the will of God, not only at a personal level but also collectively: 'We determine to join together some days before we part from one another to discuss with one another our vocation and way of life.'[2] In Venice, Ignatius continued to give the Exercises alongside 'other spiritual conversations' (*Autobiography*, n.92). Already a connection can be observed to exist between the two apostolic activities.

[1] Compare Dario Restrepo, 'Para conversar', *Manresa*, 68 (1996), 379–394.
[2] 'Deliberación de los primeros padres', 15 April 1539, MHSJ Const. 1, 1–7.

Spiritual Conversation as Ministry

Ignatius was confirming, throughout these first years, 'that individuals had to find the way that suited them best, but he and the other first Jesuits saw that all methods should lead to "familiar conversation" with God'.[3] This is how John W. O'Malley put it in his study, *The First Jesuits*. He emphasizes that, for Ignatius and those with him, 'the conversation was to be intimate, conducted in the "language of the heart"'.[4]

According to O'Malley, all the ministries that the first Jesuits practised were somehow related to each other and mutually influenced each other. What remains to be seen is how conversation was present in each of them: 'Indeed, discourse was a hallmark of almost all the Jesuits' ministries …. It was, in fact, a hallmark of the way they understood themselves.'[5] For his part, Germán Arana underlines that it was precisely the direct and personal relation established in Ignatian spiritual conversation that would contribute the greatest novelty to the apostolate of the Society of Jesus in its beginnings.[6]

Personal encounter, the adaptation to each person in his or her circumstances and the familiarity that it lent to spiritual conversation were the keys to the consolidation of the Ignatian charism. It transpired to be a ministry characterized by flexibility and personalisation. In addition its universal character excluded no one: 'according to our vocation, we converse with everyone'.[7] This demanded the development of particular skills, but also the proper dispositions for conversation.

For himself, Ignatius instructed those with him with very specific guidelines that had to be adapted to different subjects and contexts. One piece of evidence is the guidance that he sent to Fathers Broët and Salmerón when, just after placing themselves unconditionally at the disposition of Pope Paul III, they were sent to Ireland in 1541. The Pope hoped that these fathers would take the appropriate measures to counter the heretical demands of Henry VIII. They had to visit bishops, reform the monasteries, reanimate the faithful and converse with people of authority. On this occasion, Ignatius wrote a letter describing how they had to act. In it he exhorted them to put themselves at the

[3] John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard U, 1993), 48, quoting MHSJ Exx 2, 170.
[4] O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 48, quoting MHSj Exx 2, 198.
[5] O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 91.
[6] See Germán Arana, 'Spiritual Conversation: A Privileged Apostolic Instrument of the Society of Jesus', *Review of Ignatian Spirituality (CIS)*, 36/1 (2005), 22–49, at 28.
[7] Ignatius to Jacob Mironi, 1 February 1553, MHSJ EI 4, 627.

disposition of everyone and to attract others through conversation, making use of charity and prudence. At the same time, they were to develop the capacity, 'in imitation of the enemy, to enter with the other in order to leave your own way.'[8]

Later, in 1546, Pope Paul III again asked Ignatius for some fathers to go to the Council of Trent. On this occasion Laínez, Salmerón and Favre were sent, to whom Ignatius also gave guidelines about how to proceed.[9] They may be summarised as follows:

- Listen more than speak, above all at the beginning, with consideration and feeling.
- Adapt yourself to the person before you, to his or her character, temperament, circumstances and state of soul.
- Give the proper appearance of humility, leaving the way open to a more authoritative judge.
- Speak with neither haste nor passion.
- At the end of the day, rejoin your companions to converse about what you have done.
- Ask the others to tell you how you can improve.

Ignatius was clear that the art of spiritual conversation is a grace that comes from the Spirit. Nevertheless, his own experience told him, it would be necessary to 'open the way with some advice that helped and disposed' to receive the unction of this Spirit.[10] That is to say, Ignatius understood that this form of apostolate required the same preparation as any other, or even more, and could not be entrusted to good will or apostolic zeal alone. In turn, all the counsels and guidelines were useful to the extent that the subject became obedient to the Spirit, true animator of 'spiritual conversation in the Lord'.

However, even though spiritual; conversation was *de facto* an essential ministry in the emergent Society, it did not become clearly institutional until Jerónimo Nadal, on his tour of the different works and communities, stressed its importance in his talks and conferences.[11] For

[8] Ignatius to Pascal Broët and Alfonso Salmerón, September 1541, MHSJ EI 1, 180.
[9] Ignatius, 'Instruction for the Journey to Trent', 1546, MHSJ EI 1, 386–389.
[10] Restrepo, 'Para conversar', 6.
[11] 'Although the practice is commended a number of times in the *Constitutions* [for example Examen, 6.4 (115), IV.4.6 (349), VII.4.8 (648)], it had never attained the technical status of a ministry. With

example, in 'On the Way of Proceeding in the Society', Nadal indicated that it is proper for the Jesuit to have 'joyful, clear, devoted, easy, familiar and common conversation'.[12] In fact, at the origin of Nadal's own vocation, spiritual conversation had been decisive in his determination to enter into the Society, as he himself relates. With his gentle manner and adaptation to Nadal's melancholic character, Ignatius got him to reveal the concerns of his heart and leave aside the interior impediments that prevented him from following Christ.[13] Nadal admired the zeal that Ignatius had for the salvation of persons, and the sincere appreciation and respect that guided him in his proceedings.[14]

Spiritual conversation constituted for Nadal the origin of the Society itself and the point of departure for its whole apostolate. He considered it to be the most effective, even more than preaching, since through it the Jesuits were able 'to enter gently and with love into the thoughts of a specific individual'. For his part, Juan de Polanco in the *Chronicon* offers many examples that endorse spiritual conversation 'as a normal and significant part of the daily work of every Jesuit' and thus a ministry in its own right.[15]

Nadal and Polanco in turn refer to another type of conversation that was also practised by the first Jesuits. They called it colloquially 'going fishing', in an allusion to the gospel expression 'fishers of men'. It consisted in going out, generally in pairs, in public squares or other places such as prisons or porticos, not preaching but trying to make familiar contact with people one to one. In this way, they started 'devout conversation' whose aim was to make the subject desire 'a spiritual Christian life'. Ordinarily they invited the person to a sermon or a confession while another Jesuit would remain at the door of the church to continue the conversation.[16]

Nadal it did, and it thereby more formally entered the canon of the *consueta ministeria*.' (O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 111)

[12] MHSJ MN 4, 614–619.

[13] Nadal narrates how Ignatius invited him from time to time to eat and converse sweetly with him. The delicate and respectful way in which Ignatius inspired such confidence in Nadal that one day the Majorcan was overcome by sincerity, saying, 'These Fathers fill my head with the subject of the Exercises, and I realise myself what they expect, that I will change my state and way of life and join you. On this matter I want you to know that there are many things about me that do not think would make me apt for the life of your institute.' (MHSJ MN 1, 15)

[14] José Carlos Coupeau, 'Los dialogos de Nadal. Contexto histórico–literario y hecho rhetórico', *Ignaziana*, 3 (2007), 10.

[15] O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 111; and see MHSJ MN 5, 1573–1576.

[16] O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 112–113; MHSJ MN 1, 123.

At the same time, between 1563 and 1565, Nadal wrote a very particular work: the *Dialogues*.[17] He was inspired to respond to the protestant theologian Martin Chemnitz, who had published a text in which he questioned the Society of Jesus.[18] Nadal was distant from the theological disputes taking place in Trent so, wanting to give answer to Chemnitz from the city where he was, he chose an altogether different genre of writing. The *Dialogues* would have been four conversations between three people; Nadal did not finish the work and wrote only the first two.

Their originality consists not in employing an apologetic discourse to defend the Society but rather, through their characters, in opening a space of dialogue which included the listener. Nadal chose a way of responding to Chemnitz that distanced him from the provocations and personal attacks and opted for a moderated tone and friendly conversation.[19] The *Dialogues* of Nadal constitute another 'practical example of how to appropriate the dialogic spirit that Ignatius admired' and which he exhorted others to practice in spiritual conversation.[20]

We have already indicated how conversation was a prior step to being drawn to the Exercises. But the same Exercises were conceived as a spiritual conversation that extended throughout the four Weeks, adapted and personalised to the one making them.[21] It was a conversation primarily with the Triune God, but also with the accompanier, whose function is very well defined in the Annotations. The Presupposition (Exx 22) describes the necessary context for the conversation between the one who makes the Exercises and the one who accompanies. A basic trust is the propitious atmosphere that enables the subject to discover the will of God in his or her life. The contemplations, the petitions, the colloquies, including the Examens, are all proposed within the context of a spiritual conversation.[22]

[17] MHSJ MN 2, 494.
[18] See Martin Chemnitz, 'Theologiae Jesuitarum brevis ac nervosa descriptio et delineatio', in *Loci theologici* (Frankfurt and Wittenberg, 1690).
[19] See Coupeau, 'Los dialogos de Nadal', 27.
[20] Coupeau, 'Los dialogos de Nadal', 16.
[21] 'Ignatius displays in the Exercises a whole array of possible uses of the word to try to clarify hat most helps a person in his or her circumstances at that moment' (José Garcia de Castro, *La voz de tu salud. Accompañar, conversar, discernir* [Santander: Sal Terrae, 2019], 102).
[22] 'The Exercises, by making us reflect, meditate, contemplate, examine and discern the word of others as if it were our own, are the true school to train us in handling spiritual conversation' (Restrepo, 'Para conversar', 6).

In the same way, the sacrament of reconciliation would begin to be known by the Jesuits as a personalised conversation. The same thing happened to all the 'ministries of the word': catechesis, teaching, evangelization ('fishing') and help for the dying. All of them began and developed in the form of spiritual conversation.[23] With all of these, even though spiritual conversation is not mentioned explicitly in the Formula of the Institute, there is no room for doubt that it was marked out by the phrase 'any other ministration whatsoever'.[24] In fact, it was not just one more ministry but the ministry that impregnated and characterized all the others.

José Garcia de Castro indicates that the primacy that Ignatius and his first companions accorded to spiritual conversation, in all its forms—and to communication in general—did not only have a ministerial aim, but also achieved cohesion, organization and conservation for the institute.[25] Effectively, conversations not only kept the Jesuits informed and connected, but also nourished the affection and union among them as 'friends in the Lord'.

The Trinitarian Inspiration of Conversation

I will dwell for a moment on a circular entitled 'The Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism' written by Pedro Arrupe in 1980 when he was Father General. In it he invited the Jesuits to recuperate the trinitarian inspiration that animated Ignatius as source of renovation and apostolic impetus for the whole Society. In this letter he indicated how Ignatius 'conceives everything as issuing from and going back to the Trinity'.[26] According to Arrupe, all the elements of the Ignatian charism are illuminated by this trinitarian light.

In the same way, recalling the intuition of Arrupe, I would like to contend that spiritual conversation, as a fundamental element of the Ignatian charism, can only be understood in a trinitarian light. Certainly Arrupe reminds us how each of the trinitarian persons,

[23] O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 365.
[24] '… whenever Nadal explained to his fellow Jesuits the meaning of the "any other" in the Formula, he spoke principally about "devout conversation" in its many forms—including how it was practiced in the sacrament of Penance and in "helping the dying"' (O'Malley, *First Jesuits*, 112–113).
[25] See García de Castro, *La voz de tu salud*, 112.
[26] Pedro Arrupe, 'The Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 33/3 (May 2001), n. 69.

> … is not 'in itself', nor does it belong to itself except inasmuch as it is simultaneously related to and gives itself completely to the other two. The being of each of the three Persons is a pure and complete *extasis*, a going-out, a self-giving, a vital impulse toward the other two.[27]

Traditionally, the movement in the Trinity has been described as a dance of love (*perichoresis*): a ceaselessly circulating communicative love. Spiritual conversation, more than being just an apostolate, aspires to be a reflection of trinitarian love. In this love it is founded and justified, and it is characterized by the same love. In the Contemplation on the Incarnation,

> Ignatius makes us pass from the contemplation on the Trinity to the contemplation on 'all the goings on of the earth' seeing the variety of persons. In the same way, he makes us pass from the conversation among the Trinity to spiritual conversation with different people.[28]

At the same time, Arrupe refers to the availability of the Jesuit as 'based on that supreme Trinitarian ideal by which the divine Persons communicate fully, accept, and enrich one another fully'.[29] In parallel, Ignatian spiritual conversation is energized by the same ideal and drinks from the same source, given that it equally supposes a high degree of availability:

> Feeling myself in the other, feeling the other in myself, accepting him and being accepted are an ideal of supreme perfection, especially since I know that he is God's dwelling, that Christ is in him, suffers and loves in him, is waiting for me in him. An apostolate conceived that way is of a purity without limits, of an absolute generosity. It is the plenitude of baptismal power communicated to us by the grace that binds us to the Trinity and to the community of all men, equally created and redeemed by God and destined to share in his divine life.[30]

Later Arrupe indicated that Ignatius' prayer was characterized by God's descent from above to God's creatures as the end point of

[27] Arrupe, 'Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism', n. 86.
[28] Restrepo, 'Para conversar', 6.
[29] Arrupe, 'Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism', n. 88.
[30] Arrupe, 'Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism', n. 88.

divine action, rather than by the elevation of creatures to their Creator.[31] Effectively, spiritual conversation achieves its fullness when it can be recognised as God working among God's creatures (Exx 236). All the guidelines and conditions necessary for a good conversation are put into play in such a way that the trinitarian love flows and dances across human words.

Ignatius Loyola Has a Vision of the Trinity, *by Hieronymus Wierix, c.1611*

Spiritual conversation is, in this sense, fully contemplation in action, because it is a disposition and a self-gift, and at the same time recognition of all the good received (Exx 230). The search for the freedom of God, the principal and only aim of spiritual conversation, carries with it God's justice and liberation, and restores in us the pattern of the trinitarian relation.[32] Spiritual conversation remains, then, contextualised uniquely in the trinitarian light, for only in this light is it possible to hand over liberty completely.

Spiritual Conversation and Synodality

The words of Pope Francis in his opening discourse of the Synod on Synodality clearly refer us to the trinitarian dynamism of which we have spoken. According to Francis:

> This process was conceived as an exercise in mutual listening [*dinamismo di ascolto reciproco*]. I want to emphasize this. It is an exercise of mutual listening [*dinamismo di ascolto reciproco*], conducted at all levels of the Church …. It is not about garnering opinions, not a survey …. To hear God's voice, to sense his presence, to witness his passage and his breath of life.[33]

[31] Arrupe, 'Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism', n. 77.
[32] Arrupe, 'Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism', n. 91.
[33] Pope Francis, to the faithful of the diocese of Rome' 18 September 2021.

Francis speaks of *dinamismo*, dynamism. In the previous section, we referred to the trinitarian movement. The dynamism of the synod can only be inspired by the Spirit. Twice Pope Francis repeated the expression *dinamismo di ascolto reciproco*. He explains that this is not about gathering opinions or information. He warns us definitively not to remain in the mere exposition of facts or the inclusion of doctrine. The finality of this synod is encounter, listening and interior transformation at all levels of the Church.

As Pope Francis says, we need 'to hear God's voice, to sense his presence'. Perhaps where it was never imagined that God would be present, God is there: Jesus 'shows us that God is not found in neat and orderly places, distant from reality, but walks ever at our side. He meets us where we are, on the often rocky roads of life.'[34] The synodal process is the fruit of the *culture of encounter*, promoted by Francis throughout his pontificate: 'the growth of a peaceful and multifaceted culture of encounter'.[35] Francis asks us to be experts in this art of encounter: 'a culture that privileges dialogue as a form of encounter'.[36] We need to recall and take into account that 'dialogue and encounter are for the Church its way of existing and being in the world'.[37] In this context, the Synod on Synodality invites us to place ourselves together on the same road, to meet one another as a Church.

According to Julio Martínez, it is likely that Francis's culture of encounter puts down its roots most deeply into the Contemplation on the Incarnation in the *Spiritual Exercises*. The trinitarian spirit present in this contemplation leads us to believe that every 'human person is called to take on "trinitarian dynamism", going out of him- or herself to live in communion with God, with others, and with all creatures'.[38] It relates then, as we see it, to the trinitarian inspiration that animates Ignatian spiritual conversation. We could say that spiritual conversation creates a culture of encounter, in the most theological sense possible, and thus activates the deepest principles of synodality.

Francis invites us to work for a culture of encounter, 'just as Jesus did: not only seeing, but looking; not only hearing, but listening; not

[34] Francis, 'Opening of the Synodal Path', homily in the basilica of St Peter, 10 October 2021.
[35] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 220.
[36] See Pope Francis, 'Opening of the Synodal Path'; Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 239.
[37] Julio L. Martínez, *La cultura del encuentro. Desafío y interpretación para Europa* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2017), 52.
[38] Martínez, *La cultura del encuentro*, 55, quoting Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 240.

only coming into contact with people, but lingering with them'.[39] His words connect perfectly with the instructions for conversation that Ignatius gave to his companions. Ignatius, just as much as Francis, underlined the conviction that conversation or dialogue constitutes the theological act in which we can perceive our interlocutor as an object of trinitarian love.

We ask ourselves, therefore, what emphases can be placed on Ignatian spiritual conversation to invest ourselves more fully in the synodal process. In what follows are some keys—based on those in the Ignatian practice of conversation of the first Jesuits—that may be of use in the present synodal moment.

1. Revitalise the consciousness that all encounter is marked by trinitarian dynamism. When this happens respect for other people is realised as sacred ground.

2. Search for relations of nearness. Though obvious and simple, this is most often the first thing forgotten. We need to recover personal encounters without digital mediation: looking at each other, listening to each other, dedicating our quality time. Great forums and congresses or multitudes of meetings fulfil certain necessities and have their function. But we cannot neglect personal conversations and small groups, because nearness is otherwise lost and with it communication and communion.

3. Clothe ourselves in humility. Humility is the key to all conversation, to every encounter. Before a humble person our prejudices are demolished and we can feel connected. This humility which helps so much at a personal level must be recuperated also at an institutional level. As Ignatius indicated, we must always be open to listen to a judgment more certain than our own, or an opinion that sheds new light on our limited vision of reality. The synod invites us to discover that we are walking together—that we are all searching, that we are all lacking and we therefore need to walk together.

4. Reinforce the conviction that, like Ignatius, our principal preoccupation must be to discover the will of God and that

[39] Pope Francis, 'Por una cultura del encuentro', homily at morning Mass in the chapel of the House of St Martha, 13 September 2016, cited in Martínez, *La cultura del encuentro*, 52.

this is found more easily when we open ourselves to dialogue and encounter.

5. Generate trust. The Ignatian presupposition invites us to begin with a trust based on our conversations and encounters. This means that we are to trust without preconceived motivations. We trust because we desire to trust as God trusts in us, because we see in the other a brother or a sister and we take a chance on the innocence of our creaturehood, as clay that recently left the hands of God. This attitude supposes an authentic going out of ourselves, of our securities and prejudices. Ignatius understood that we have to be disarmed in order to be embraced by God.

6. Re-evaluate the conversations and encounters of daily life as occasions for transmission of the faith. The familiarity that Ignatius pursued in his conversations is the ideal climate to open ourselves to deep themes and existential questions that touch the depths of our beings.

7. Systematize encounters. If it is necessary, on one hand, to gain familiarity and take advantage of encounters in the moment, on the other hand it is necessary and urgent to systematize and structure certain spaces of deliberation or communal discernment. In this type of encounter it helps to follow a few steps and guidelines that facilitate listening and the participation of all, in a climate of serenity and mutual respect. It is about giving a modality and order for key moments, such as taking important decisions in communities that desire to know where the Lord is leading.

8. Examine our dispositions of thought and action in conversation and encounter, above all with those outside our immediate circle. We are to evaluate our words and interventions, taking as a criterion whether what we say favours communion or not. We are to identify what impedes good communication and acquire the necessary skills to achieve it.

9. Adapt ourselves always to the reality of the person with whom we find ourselves. We are to strive to understand that person's life situation, the means at his or her disposal, his or her

yearnings. As Nadal said, it is necessary to introduce ourselves gently and affectionately into the thoughts of others. In turn a purification of our interests is required so that we can seek only to help our neighbour.

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