

“Why Young Adults Need Ignatian Spirituality”

BY TIMOTHY P. MULDOON

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A number of articles and books over the last few years have asked: What will the church look like in 20 years? Underlying this basic concern is an awareness that today's young Catholic adults have not, it seems, employed the models of earlier generations to appropriate the faith and lack the commitment to that faith that would seem necessary for the future well-being of the church. Writers like Tom Beaudoin and Jeremy Langford have contributed articles to *America* suggesting that there are legitimate faith questions that young people raise and that the church needs to develop a greater understanding of our generation if it is to effectively minister to us. What I offer here is a reflection on how Ignatian spirituality in particular can speak to young people and help us develop a vocabulary of faith.

Why Ignatian spirituality? There are two major reasons; the first is practical, the second theological. The practical reason is that this spirituality is available. There are many Jesuit high schools and colleges in the United States, and they have a long history of ministering to the spiritual and intellectual growth of young people. Ignatian spirituality works because we have learned how to encourage young people to use it.

The theological reason for focusing on Ignatian spirituality is that this tradition emphasizes faith as an ongoing dialogue between the person and God. It thus represents the kind of dynamic approach that young people have often discovered for themselves. To see spirituality as a demanding exercise and work is to see it as more than the either/or proposition that is too often presented as the correct view: if you don't believe in God, you're going to hell.

We young people live in a world in which we must constantly confront ambiguity and change. Ignatian spirituality recognizes this at a very deep level and invites us to engage in a



process of ongoing conversion. This invitation resonates with our own experience in confronting the question of God. Many of us have grown suspicious of facile answers and arrogant claims to authority. What we need instead is an invitation to consider more clearly the personal question: who is God for *me*?

There are five elements in Ignatian spirituality that today's young people can use to help themselves grow in an understanding of their faith. To list them in an abbreviated style, they are: the first principle and foundation; finding God in all things; walking with Christ; the experiencing of consolation and desolation and the ideal of social justice.

The Principle and Foundation

In a postmodern world, the very notion of a foundation is questioned: Can anything be regarded as foundational when it seems that everyone believes something different from everyone else? Robert Ludwig has written in *Reconstructing Catholicism* (1995) that younger Catholics have grown up in what he calls a “deconstructed” context and seek a “constructive worldview.” Practically, this means that younger adults have a hard time with any claim of incontrovertible truth, even the existence of God, but long for clarity. In this context, what Ignatius in his book of spiritual exercises called the first principle and foundation can be seen as remarkably refreshing. It is a disarmingly simple proposition: We are created to praise, glorify and serve God, and by this means to achieve our eternal destiny. Such a suggestion cuts to the heart of our longing for truth and offers a simple recommendation: Live as though this first principle and foundation were true. Here I am reminded of Ignatius' own advice for the making of his Spiritual Exercises: trust God as if everything depended on you, and at the same time work as if everything depended on God.

I recently had an experience that illustrates the attractive power of this first principle and foundation. During an introductory philosophy class, I said philosophy begins with a sense of wonder at the so-called “limit questions” that confront us as human beings. Among these are questions about death and suffering, love and the meaning of life. Looking out over a room full of only partly interested students, I threw out an offhand comment: “You know, the meaning of life is easy—we are created to praise, glorify and serve God, and by this



means to achieve our eternal destiny!” Immediately, the collective posture of the room changed—they all sat up straight and began writing. “Can you say that again?” they asked. I repeated every word slowly. I had, of course, only lobbed this comment to catch their attention, but they were fascinated at the idea that the meaning of life could be encapsulated in a handy sentence.

Because we live today in a world in which truth claims are constantly weighed and judged against one another, young people have been given very little reason to think that any one way of living is better than any other. Sharing an articulation of Christian faith that is so direct challenges people to consider what sort of truth claim it is and what kind of life it offers.

God in All Things

While the notion that God is to be found in all things is not uniquely Ignatian, it is characteristically so. Among the Jesuits of the last century and a half who lived this worldview were the British poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89), the French paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) and the German theologian Karl Rahner (1904-84). They all had a strong sense of what Hopkins called “the dearest freshness, deep down things”—that sense that God’s grace animates the whole of the created order so that one cannot but encounter it if one is attuned to it. This celebration of God’s grandeur appeals to the youthful mind, which encounters a panorama of people, traditions, beliefs and styles and draws meaning from sources different from those of traditional Catholic worship. Indeed, young people today draw their spirituality from such non-traditional places as pop culture, as Tom Beaudoin noted in *Virtual Faith* (1997).

To speak about finding God in all things is to admit that no doctrine, no tradition and no Scripture can exhaust the mystery that is God. It is to remember that our theology, our prayer and our teaching are limited in their ability to convey this mystery, and that as a result we must ultimately stand in awe before God. We who have grown up in a pluralistic world have seen good things in people of varied backgrounds; we know that any talk of ultimate truth must be humble before the vastness of human experience and of creation. On the flip



side, to speak of God in all things is to remind us that ours is a sacramental understanding of God—God among us in the faces, the words and the gestures that make present the reality of grace. It is to emphasize that God is not distant and “other,” but present and intimate with us. It is to underscore a belief that our lives are not beyond the scope of God’s love, but rather they are already the objects of God’s care.

Walking With Christ

Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, a handbook for the making of a retreat, asks the retreatants to enter deeply into the stories of Jesus’ life and to use their imaginations to place themselves in the Gospel scenes. This is a spirituality about sharing in the story, not only by remembering it but also by taking part in it, in order that one might more fully come to know Jesus.

Today, this counsel is still valuable for young people, many of whom know the Gospels only secondhand. I have often heard people say how surprised they were by the Jesus of the Gospels, because they had never had the chance to meet him directly. Too often young men and women rely on the faith of their parents and never have the opportunity to confront for themselves this attractive figure (“Who do *you* say that I am?”) and to answer the fundamental call: “Come, follow me.” Young adults undergo a period of distancing themselves from their parents, and part of this distancing involves religion. They need, therefore, the chance to develop their own mature faith. Asking them to consider the real Jesus can be an important step in this growth.

Consolation and Desolation

It is important on this spiritual journey for young people to understand that this is not a straight, easy path toward enlightenment, but rather a struggle that involves highs and lows. Ignatius’ teaching about what he calls the discernment of spirits is helpful, because it helps us understand that both consolation and desolation are part of the life of faith. Ignatius reminds us that God loves us deeply, but also moves us toward growth even when we think he is distant. In short, Ignatius shows us that spiritual suffering is part of the life of faith and that it forces us to confront the false images of God that prevent us from growing as human beings. For young people this is a hard message, but very necessary in a culture that tells us



that all suffering is to be avoided. My generation has grown up in a sound-bite, throw-away culture. We have learned that it is possible to insulate ourselves from reality by turning our short attention span to the next interesting thing. We need a spirituality that emphasizes that faith sometimes requires us to confront reality and to trust God even when God is hard to understand—for example, in the face of such mysteries as the death of a loved one or experiences of failure and loss.

Social Justice

An important final element in Ignatian spirituality that distinguishes it from so many self-help spiritualities in the marketplace is that of social justice. Jesuit education has stressed that Christian faith reaches out to others and does not rest content with a doctrine of personal fulfillment. Although young people today are criticized for self-centeredness, many of us long to make a difference for the better in the world. Having inherited an individualistic worldview, we find that it can be difficult but rewarding to show concern for others. One benefit of living in a pluralistic world is that we have come to appreciate the legitimate differences among people, and so we have a sense that all people share a basic moral equality. We must be reminded, though, that in spite of our culture's tendencies to exalt the individual, we are called to a concern for those people who have been left out. Jesuit institutions have led the way in making these spiritual teachings of Saint Ignatius available to many. In my own experience, the so-called "19th Annotation retreat" described in the *Spiritual Exercises*—one that is made part-time, so to speak, while continuing one's ordinary pursuits—is a great way to offer students the opportunity to learn about and practice this spirituality. I have made this sort of retreat at two different Jesuit institutions and have helped conduct it in a university Newman center, so I know that it can attract people from different walks of life and help them to grow in their faith lives. The invitation to try authentic Christian spirituality is vital if we want to encourage the faith of young people. Ignatian spirituality offers just such an invitation so that people may come to know for themselves what it means to follow Christ.



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