



Ignatius of Loyola: Our Way of Falling in Love with God

One of the challenges of the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola was his ability to find God in all things. It was because he fell – and stayed – in love with God; and through the gift of the Spiritual Exercises, he is still helping all of us to do the same! In the past few weeks, Pope Francis again invited us all to hear the continuing invitation of Ignatius to discern a way to love Jesus and to ‘live the present with passion’, in all the ways that God invites us during this year of St. Ignatius. Pope Francis might well have had the founder of his Jesuit order in mind as a pretty good example of this practice. In his note he challenges his readers with the following question: ‘Is Jesus really our first and only love, as we promised he would be when we professed our faith?’ Because he goes on to say: ‘Only if he is, will we be able to love, in truth and mercy, every person who crosses our path. For we will have learned from Jesus the meaning and practice of love. We will be able to love because we have Jesus’ own heart.’

Many of us are not very comfortable with the idea of living the present – or, indeed, anything else! – with passion. Be that as it may, it seems clear that anyone who wants to get to know and understand Ignatius of Loyola better accept that this was a man who lived with passion, fought (literally) with passion, and over time grew to love (God) with passion. This passion spurred him to want to serve that God and Lord, whom he had initially grown to love through the biographies of saints that he devoured while recuperating from a knee wound sustained at the battle of Pamplona. And yet, enamored and admiring though he was of Francis, Dominic, and others because of that reading, it does not seem to have occurred to him to join either of their, or any other already-existing, religious orders. The idea of a dedicated life, let alone founding an order, does not seem to have been part of his thinking until Ignatius was well along the path of his own spiritual journey – and even then, possibly more at the urging of others, his first companions, than through any direct inspiration in his own heart and soul.

Instead, being a man who seems never to have been introduced to the concept of doing things by halves, he threw himself into a personal scheme of prayer and penance. This was his means both of proving to God and to himself that he was serious about changing his life, and of seeking to establish what it was that God wanted from him in his life. Those who know the life of Ignatius will know that there followed several key ‘staging posts’ on his journey from long and dirty hair and nails in Manresa to his rooms beside the church of the Gesù in Rome, where he spent so many years writing his Constitutions and thousands of letters to his members and to others.

By far the most important of those ‘staging posts’ was, of course, the Spiritual Exercises, born of Ignatius’s personal encounters with the God with whom he had fallen in love. In the Exercises, Ignatius hit on the idea of meeting of sacred scripture with the scripture of a person’s own life, mediated through imaginative contemplation of the scripture and a personal entry into the scenes of Our Lord’s life. Through that encounter, which from his own experience he knew the potential of a life-changing experience which a person can be given which is more filled with the love of God, while, paradoxically growing in an understanding of the nature of love as a completely free and unconditional gift of God. In the Spiritual Exercises we can grow in intimacy with ‘God our Lord’ through meeting God in the scripture, through allowing God’s gaze to fall on us as it fell on those whom Jesus encountered in His public life and returned that gaze of love steadfastly and without feeling the need to “twaddle” in His presence.

There is a lovely quotation, attributed to St Augustine, which says, ‘The sacred scriptures are our letters from home.’ They certainly were for St Ignatius. And what do we do when we get letters from home (even now in our digital age)? We take them somewhere quiet so we can be by ourselves and concentrate on what is written; we settle down and read them, and then we read them again and again – because we know that they are clear evidence that we have

been thought about, that we are cared for, that through them we are still gazed upon with love. But we only come to know that through attentiveness and listening, through our insertion into the scenes of the scripture, which the Person with the loving gaze wants to say to us.

At the same time, in the Exercises and in Ignatian prayer and most notably in the examen, there is that other strand of our contemplation – the invitation to gaze lovingly but honestly, with the presence of the loving gaze of God, on the scripture of my own life. What has the word of God been in my life and what has been my response to that word of God? I bring that response before the Lord of the road to Emmaus, so He can make some sense of it with me and, by doing so, enable me to get back on the road and continue to play my part in building His Kingdom through my words but, more importantly, through my life, with that remarkable Ignatian characteristic of ***‘finding God in all things’***.

The day-to-day tool for ‘finding God in all things’ is what Ignatius calls ***discreta caritas*** – discerning love. It is a love that has its origins in our faith that God loved us first. And it ought to be our fundamental disposition to want to return that love. It is not by chance that the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius’s gift to his first companions and to all seeking to find God in all things, end with a ***Contemplation for Attaining Divine Love***. The Note at the beginning of it is commonly called the ***‘Contemplatio.’*** With these intentions.

First, love is to be put more in deeds than in words and second, love consists in an interchange between the two parties: in the lover’s giving and communicating to the beloved what he has or out of what he has or can act. That is the *caritas*. The *discreta* (discerning/discriminating) qualifies the *caritas*, in terms of learning to discern/discriminate those interior dispositions that draw me away from that love that is ‘put more in deeds than words’ and that prevent me from giving what I have or can to the beloved’, whether God himself directly or for ‘every person who crosses [my] path’. In our own time, our growing understanding of the integrity of creation and our relationship to it, expounded so beautifully and convincingly in ***Laudato si’***, (from Pope Francis) adds another dimension to the meaning of discerning love. Interestingly, Ignatius was ahead of the game in that area, as the remainder of the ‘Contemplatio’[v] makes clear, with its frequent mention of the gifts of God in creation and the gratitude that our consideration of them should elicit.

The ***‘Contemplatio’*** – and what it offers us – is the culmination of the Spiritual Exercises. It is no accident that Ignatius ends with love because that is where he began all those years before on his convalescent bed. As the words of T. S. Eliot in the ***Four Quartets*** offer: ‘...the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time’. Ignatius’s whole life was an exploration of the love of God and how best to respond to that love in my life. In the ‘Contemplatio’ he arrived where he had first started and in it, he closed the circle between Manresa and the Camerette.

We began this article with the pope’s question about falling in love, which is, of course, precisely what Ignatius did, spending the rest of his life living out the consequences of that ***“falling in love.”*** The legacy of these consequences is the Spiritual Exercises and, for those in the Society of Jesus and other Ignatian religious audiences, his Constitutions. I believe we might end profitably with the words of another son of St Ignatius, who has lived into the present with passion, Pedro Arrupe, the General Superior of the Society of Jesus who served that mission until 1983. These words might be key to understanding Ignatius and his followers into our “now.”:

*Nothing is more practical than finding God: that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute way.
What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.
It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekend,
what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.
Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.*

For Ignatius it did decide everything. It was that ***falling in love with God***, and staying in love with God, that were key to being able to find God in all things and by trying, daily, through prayer and ***discreta caritas*** to seek and do God’s will, both for himself and for his ‘least society’. As it was for him may it be so for us, all!