



What Psychological Insights and Spiritual Assistance Might We Find In The Spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola?

I like to agree that St. Ignatius can be considered the first practitioner of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in recorded history. In C.B.T., damaging thought processes are targeted and challenged with a “new narrative” to help alleviate emotional and behavioral patterns which fuel depression and other forms of mental illness. In his autobiography Ignatius’ first post-conversion crisis, as he is heading to Montserrat, has spiritual, psychological and physiological elements, and he resolves it with a method like C.B.T. Briefly, here is the backdrop of the crisis and his resolution.

Ignatius was contemplating a lifetime of abstinence and asceticism to overcome the intense spiritual and psychological milieu of sinful pride, passions and addictions typical of his first 30 years, and was rightfully paralyzed by fright. In light of this problematic history and a fragile yet maturing faith, Ignatius is tempted by a rather disturbing thought, representing the difficulty of the life he was leading. While he is considered by some the first practitioner of “Cognitive Behavioral Therapy” (CBT), he had heard the “voice of the enemy” taunting him, causing fear and dread at the thought of suffering for seventy years without the illicit pleasures and addictions of his early life. He decisively confronted the thought and its attendant threat: “You poor creature! Can you promise me even one hour of life?” Using a cognitive approach, Ignatius challenges the “disturbing thought” and overcomes the temptation to fear. He proclaims the “truth” out loud that the temptations are mirages that only promise life but cannot satisfy his authentic human nature. In this discovery he regains sanity, clarity, peace and direction.

This spiritual insight has many psychological and physiological implications. We might say that thoughts, whether positive or negative, have spiritual, psychological and physiological implications for the soul and the body in the listener. Ignatius’ graced insight to challenge these false internal narratives and, in so doing, challenging “the enemy of human nature” has made a lasting contribution to Christian spirituality and discernment techniques.

An effective case can be made that Ignatian spirituality is the most popular and portable spirituality in the Catholic tradition. And it is used by more individuals in the church and other Christian professions than any other single spirituality. What is the reason for this continued relevance, even in our own 21st century? I believe one reason is that God used Saint Ignatius’ dysfunction to uncover a path to holiness that, at its core, is simply the Gospel path to conversion summarized into an effective and pragmatic method. So, it retains its relevance and popularity because it is an authentic response to the Gospel call to repentance and to initiate a new path for life.

Always authentic to the Gospel, Ignatian spirituality, as codified in the guidelines for a director at the front of the Spiritual Exercises, focuses not on coercing an individual to conform to rules and laws but coaches one on how best to open to God, who will lead one to freedom. In this, St. Ignatius was an astute observer of the human condition. He understood that effective evangelization rests upon the individual personally and freely encountering the living Lord where one is most in need so as to experience God’s mercy in Jesus.

I would make a distinction between what people “like best,” or what is most “popular” about Ignatian spirituality, and what dimensions of Ignatian spirituality might work best for sustaining spiritual growth. The impressions here of what are central to Ignatian spirituality or what “works best” are the foci on gratitude and thanksgiving, freedom of the individual and care for their uniqueness or “finding God in all things.”

But one must also recognize the more challenging aspects of Ignatian spirituality and the *Examen* that invite one to explore one's history and personal life that are difficult to confront. These aspects of Ignatian spirituality invite us to let Christ touch our wounds and bring us healing. Jesuit guide, George Aschenbrenner, has affirmed for years that the Examen is avoided by both Jesuit and laity alike because it is not easy to allow ourselves to walk daily with the Lord where we need "saving" the most. The encounter facilitated by the full Examen and the Spiritual Exercises between the sinner and Jesus Christ might not be that popular. Still, I find it the most useful in bringing lasting gratitude and interior freedom to the ready participant. Individuals do fall in love in a quite absolute and final way with Christ when He is experienced as loving them where they did not feel loveable.

The distinctive approach I take towards Ignatian spirituality is a conviction that the power of the Exercises need not be administered by professionals at a retreat house or in a SEEL (Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life) program, but can be both experienced and led by laity in any church community anywhere.

The main challenge one will face is staying faithful to a twice-daily practice of the *Examen*. The *Examen* gives me the substance for my conversations on what is happening to me spiritually and keeps my heart focused on what I need to address and confess. It is a focus that will give each of us a unique and powerful insight into God's role and my response in the tasks and triumphs of discerning God's way in my world.

So, in light of my experiences in Ignatian spiritual development, what's the best advice to someone who wants to try the Ignatian spiritual path for the first time? The best advice I can give is to find an authentic method of the Ignatian Examen and start doing it daily for five minutes each day and then build from there. And ask for help as you discover you need it along the way! Good travel!