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ANGLICANS AND IGNATIUS

Nicolas Stebbing

IN 1983, I COMPLETED the three-month course in Apostolic Spirituality at St Beuno's Ignatian Spirituality Centre, hoping thereafter to be able to give individually guided retreats. So it turned out; moreover what I learnt was extraordinary, and the experience of giving retreats and the full Exercises over more than thirty years has been a rich one. How would I sum it up?

I arrived at St Beuno's with quite a small knowledge of Jesuits. How would they deal with me as an Anglican? Would they be steely-eyed fanatics, full of counter-reformation zeal? Would I find Ignatius very different from all I had learnt so far? The answers to these questions were a really pleasant surprise. First of all, the Jesuits were delightful! The team at St Beuno's, led by Gerry W. Hughes, dealt with the ecumenical problem of the presence of three Anglicans by ignoring it. They treated us simply as fellow Christians on a journey with Christ. That was very refreshing. Once or twice a problem arose, but was quickly solved. They and the others on the course showed wonderful acceptance of us and seemed to think we were just as Christian as they were.

The Search for Unity

This way of approaching ecumenism has been immensely important to me. Since 1991 I have been involved with the International Interconfessional Congress of Religions.¹ Every two years we meet as Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and Anglicans in different religious houses where we simply celebrate the unity we already have as religious. There are usually about sixty of us, embracing different languages and charisms. We

¹ See my 'International Interconfessional Congress of Religions', *One in Christ*, 42/2 (December 2008), 407-410, available at <http://www.oneinchrist.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/INSET-Dec-08-TO-USE.pdf>, accessed 19 August 2017.

pray the offices together. We celebrate the Eucharist together according to our different traditions. There is usually some problem about who can and cannot receive communion, and that tests our charity. Apart from that, we all have our eyes opened to the riches of religious life in other traditions. We form friendships, have a lot of fun and go on our way rejoicing. We make no pronouncements and nor do we discuss much ecumenical theology. We simply live together and pray in the religious life, and that is the contribution we can make to the search for unity.

The search for unity has, indeed, turned out to be more complicated than we thought it would be in the euphoria after Vatican II. Then it seemed a simple linear progression, as commissions got together, sorted out misunderstandings and restated theology, that would quite quickly evolve a new structure embracing more and more Churches in one Church. This has not happened. The theological commissions have made great progress and are essential to the process, but they only account for one part of it. There is a long history to be dealt with. We have spent 500 years persecuting each other, being rude about each other or ignoring each other. That long history cannot simply be abandoned. The story needs to come together. Hurts must be healed and misunderstandings cleared away. We make friendships, pray together and work together; then slowly we find the Churches moving together, like ships on a great ocean. Will they crash, or simply go on in parallel? Or will they some how learn to join together?

As we found that the theological commissions were going to take much longer than we thought, so it became more important to do nothing apart that we could possibly do together. It is here that Jesuits have made one of their most generous gifts to the ecumenical process. Instead of talking about ecumenism, they have given us the Exercises. Not only did they share this gift with us few Anglicans on the St Beuno's course, but they encouraged us to share it too, with others well outside the Roman Catholic fold. That is practical ecumenism. It has transformed the lives of untold numbers of Anglicans and other kinds of Christians.

Learning to Pray

Such ecumenism has been particularly important in recent years as traditional Anglican structures of prayer have disintegrated. It is easy to idealize the past, but for much of the twentieth century Anglicanism had a spirituality based on sober sacramental life. *preached retreats and*

We make friendships, pray together and work together

regular prayer. It was undramatic, but solid and sustaining. Various influences since then have eroded this spirituality, and prayer has become sentimentalised, influenced by the current secular world in which what matters is what I like. Prayer must be a good experience. If it is not then I must give it up, or look for another way of doing it. Individually guided retreats have helped many people rediscover the seriousness of prayer, and that it involves work! They learn that prayer is something that starts from God and is directed to God. It is not all about what makes me feel good. Of course, the personal aspect has a part to play, but Ignatian spirituality gives us a context in which we can create a healthy, balanced diet of prayer.

When I arrived at St Beuno's I expected that the Exercises would include a lot of spiritual square-bashing, since Ignatius was a soldier. Of course, they are not like that at all. As I expect all our readers know, they are a wonderful walk through the life of Christ, with Christ himself showing the way. Doing the Exercises, I found that the Old Testament was not all about a God of violence and retribution, but also about a God of gentleness, tenderness, compassion and love. Doing the Exercises, I found that Christ was a real person who went to parties, wept, laughed, got angry and did wonderful things as well. In fact, I really came to know and love the Bible through the Jesuits—rather a surprise for someone of an Anglican (though not Protestant) tradition.

As a retreat director, I have enjoyed passing this on to others. Anglo-Catholics arrive with clear ideas about a very sacramental Christ, one who dresses up in vestments and is very hierarchical. They are astonished to find a scruffy, peasant Christ; a baby Christ who laughs and cries, and does poos; sometimes even a stropky, teenage Jesus. Evangelicals doing the Exercises have a lovely relationship with scripture, though some find it a real problem to pray it. Often, so they tell me, they study scripture and do exegesis primarily in order to teach it to others. Using scripture imaginatively in the Ignatian way can be a real adventure beyond exegesis. Curiously, Mary does not often turn out to be a problem. Once they meet her in the stories she takes her rightful place as the Mother of Jesus. One or two have struggled a bit to find her in the Triple Colloquy: a lady Baptist minister told me 'I cannot possibly pray to Mary'. I said, 'Well, just try'. When she came back she said to me, 'That was wonderful. Now I have a friend in heaven who understands me as a woman!'

The Exercises always amaze me. St Ignatius is so clever, so subtle, so penetrating. I am amazed, too, by my retreatants, who seem to do the Exercises so much better than I did. It is very moving to listen to a young priest, with two toddler children waking him up every night, who still manages the morning hour of prayer, or to see a student embracing hours and hours of prayer and discovering depths and riches of God which he had never suspected were there.

There are so many of these moments that reassure me of the presence of the Holy Spirit. One, which never fails, is in the First Week when the retreatant's prayer suddenly breaks down into emptiness and a terrible consciousness of sin. I say, a bit smugly, 'Well, you were praying for shame and confusion, or a deep knowledge of your sin. God has given it to you.' Time and again you find the Spirit really is there.

The Exercises and Justice

At St Beuno's, with Gerry Hughes, we were encouraged to see the Exercises as one of the ways we have of engaging with issues of justice. This was meat and good beer to me: I grew up in Zimbabwe and knew racial injustice at first hand. In the war of independence I was on a mission near St Paul's, Musami. There I visited the Jesuits often, scrounged meals and sometimes a bed off them. We passed each other on our motorbikes as we went to our postings. We shared the same dangers, exchanged gossip and news. And I went to their funeral when they were shot, along with four Dominican Sisters, by an unidentified group of assailants on 6 February 1977. I remember that funeral for its mixture of sorrow and pride—sorrow for the friends we had lost, and a touch of fear for all of us as we faced an increasingly violent future, but pride and thankfulness that we had known such martyrs. These Jesuits and Dominicans had offered themselves to God and the offering was accepted, if not quite in the way intended. I remember being shamed by one of my own African sisters a few weeks later when I despaired of the fighting ever coming to an end: 'Father, do not you believe our friends from Musami are praying for us?', she asked.

In South Africa, we likewise struggled together against apartheid, supporting young white boys who tried to avoid conscription into the regime's armed forces, and encouraging young black people not to throw their lives away in violence, but to find better ways of resisting the evil of apartheid. After independence in both countries the world...

injustice remain. It no longer has a clear colour code: the greed for money, power and honour infects people of all backgrounds.

Every time I give the Spiritual Exercises, the Two Standards makes a particular impact: the devil offers wealth, honour and power while Jesus offers poverty, dishonour and humility. It is so obvious! This is where all the evil starts and where the Christian cure for it can be found as well. Jesus said it two thousand years ago. He fought the devil on exactly the same terms in the wilderness. Ignatius puts it into the Exercises over and over again in one form or another. Yet we go on being taken in by the Enemy of human nature: tyrants in Zimbabwe, black plutocrats in South Africa, mega-rich executives in Europe, the US government led by Donald Trump. Even the Church is infected by it. Do we never learn?



The Tempter, by William Blake, 1816–1818

What Is Ignatian?

A group of us have been giving week-long individually guided retreats for years now. Our clientele is very varied: largely Anglican, but from a surprising range of traditions. Some have very odd ideas of Church and God. Is what we give them Ignatian? Mostly, we give them scripture and encourage them to pray in imaginative ways, so that ticks one of the Ignatian boxes. Occasionally, we give them something from the Exercises: the Call of the King and the Two Standards are often appropriate. Sometimes their prayer is just walking the labyrinth or sitting by the fish pond thinking about God.

Perhaps what makes it Ignatian is that all of us giving the retreats have done the Exercises and have that in the background of our minds.

We take seriously Annotation Two, where Ignatius tells us just to outline the prayer matter and not give lots of information—the Holy Spirit can be trusted to do that—and Annotation Fifteen, where Ignatius firmly tells us not to direct the person's life but to leave that to God. Maybe the most Ignatian thing we do is to trust the Holy Spirit of Christ. He is present; he will be there.

And now, of course, we have Francis, the first Jesuit Pope. A Jesuit told me that a groan went round the world when they heard he had been elected, yet what a surprise he has been! A group of us religious brothers and sisters went to Rome: two Anglicans, two Catholics, a Lutheran, a Swiss Reformed and an Orthodox, all come together to listen to a Jesuit Pope. I think Ignatius would have liked that. This really is the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation as we rediscover our Christian life together and pray for the day that we will all be one.

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