

Living Competence, Conscience, and Compassion

SPIRITUALITY

by Andrew Bullen, S.J.

Ignatian Network introduces the third in a series of briefing papers entitled *Living Competence, Conscience and Compassion* that highlight different aspects of the Ignatian School Renewal. The briefing papers will appear from time to time as a stimulus to principals and teachers.

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"*Spirituality*" is a word I rarely use. To my mind, it is too disembodied, too ethereal to do justice to my sweating self. But yes, it works if it means getting into contact with the network of values I live by. It certainly works if it means the exercising of a relationship, of the crucial relationship in my life, the relationship with God.

That "*my spiritual life*" meant the exercising of my relationship with God was a liberating discovery for me. What underlies it is the conviction that I cannot reach God where God is, and so God must reach me where I am. The Tower of Babel, to name one disaster, comes from our trying to reach God where God is. Magic is another, and it is still prevalent in the modern world. But if God reaches me where I am - and the Incarnation, to be theologically flash about it, reassures me that this is the case - I have to be where I am. If I can find out where I am, then God is awaiting me there. And this indicates to me the source of a fair bit of my trouble. Where, on earth, am I?

There are vast philosophical, historical, psychological answers to this, but the long and the short of it, as far as my spiritual life is concerned, is that I am where I feel that I am. And if this remains tricky, at least I have plenty to pray about, plenty of feelings to winnow through, so that I can find the deepest currents of feeling in my life. So here was the liberation, because I could bring the full gamut of my feelings into my prayer: anger, boredom, playfulness, exhaustion, love, jokiness, delight, quiet peacefulness. Sometimes prayer might be Sunday-best prayer, but usually it is casual-wear prayer (sloppy at the edges, a little frayed, a tad grubby), because that is how I am inside, as well as outside. So, daunting as it sometimes is, I take off the mask, denude myself of my various "*acts*", and abandon good manners, which so often I use to keep the situation under control. If I take strength from the idea that the glory of God is man and women fully alive, and that means me fully alive, I need this strength, because in finding myself I often start moving in a direction where I would rather not go. Why, to put it bluntly, does finding myself drive me up the slopes of Calvary, and why is it at such a spot that God in Jesus has long been awaiting me?

Taking another tack, finding where I am has something to do with my telling my story - in my way, at my pace, with my range of tones. Usually this entails staying with the snatch of the story that is vivid for me now. I have my sorrowful stories, and my joyful ones - I am not so certain about the glorious ones. But in telling these, to myself, sometimes to a friend and even to God, I discover the mysteries of my life, and thank God I can tally them with the traditional Mysteries I have been hinting at. After all, I am a small mystery and God is the biggest of all mysteries, and our relationship is about how these two bump into each other. The story of Jesus' life illuminates mine, often giving me comfort, often posing me challenge; never more so with either than when I find in my life the pattern of the Lord's death and resurrection. I find that the pattern of the Lord's death and

resurrection actually works, actually runs true to my own experience. This "*happy ever after*" for me was paid for "*once upon a time*" at the price of his life.

Of course, finding the pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection in my life doesn't just happen. Taking a phrase from Ignatius of Loyola, I have to do my spiritual exercise - prayer is aerobics for the spirit. It is the exercise of faith. After all, I know that my experience is very ambiguous, that it can be read in many ways. Many people would agree that saying life is a journey is a useful working metaphor, even a cliché. But for some it is a tourist trip, for others an exploration, for others a long drift, for others a hard slog mostly uphill, for others an attack into hostile territory, for others a retreat from precious ground, and so on. For each of us it probably feels like each of these and more from time to time, but as a Christian I exercise my faith and say it is a pilgrimage, and know there have been times when that is how it felt. I have had the feeling I was on the way to a holy place, I have reached there, been marked by it, and left it. With the Christian version of the metaphor, I gain an understanding of where I am when I feel, for example, adrift; I also have a clue about how I am to assess the feeling.

If I were put to the task, I could probably tell the story of how I have grown to the fullness of life. I could give what understanding I have of my way to God, my pilgrim's progress. And you could do the same for me. Fortunately the Christian tradition has given us some people whose ways have been readily translatable into the lives of others. So we have the spirituality that is characteristic of Dominic, Francis, Teresa of Avila and many others. Since I am a Jesuit, you might as well get the pure oil on Ignatius, or at least the drops that have touched my life.

Ignatius wants me to find God in all things by finding how the Spirit is moving in me, and I am drawn to this by the desire to do the loving action. I live, he says, in a world of tensions, which pull me this way and that, and yet I am capable, if I listen to the shifts of the spirits within me, of acting as a free agent. To find the right way to move, I have to discern these spirits. Even on ordinary days, if I pause to take soundings in myself about how the day has been, I will recall and often discover that there were moments of delight and also moments of dismay, moments when I was energised and others when I was deflated. These bear looking at. The delight is often a moment of true blessing, in which the goodness of a value I hold was actually sensed, or in which I happily sensed some habitual withdrawal or inhibition that once trapped me was again overcome, or in which my spirit was lifted by seeing someone smiling, or etcetera. The moments of dismay may well be associated with the violation of my values, or the shadows of the trap, or marks of rejection on a face, or etcetera. More complex are those moments when an initial boost of energy, perhaps through an image that excites me, leads on to an uneasiness, even a revulsion: on reflection I realise that I am susceptible to being beguiled, but if I am alert enough I can also sense the hidden taint and be on guard against it. How often, for example, even my apparently good deeds, originally

motivated by values and vision that drew me on, are now somehow hijacked so that I am *driven* to do them, usually with unacknowledged resentment. Or how my desire to do the best can be the occasion for my denigrating the fairly good I do, and even more that others do; this makes the attaining of the ideal even less likely. There's a whiff of sulphur about all this, and something snaky in the grass. So even in the daily flow of my life I am either tempted to abandon my freedom, often unwittingly, or called to exercise it responsibly, sometimes happily and sometimes with a touch of courage. To use Ignatius' potent imagery, I am daily beset by the strategies and tactics of Babylon, but I can be saved from them, and indeed further the Kingdom of God, by resorting to the strategies and tactics of Jerusalem.

When I am faced with an important decision, these shifts of the spirit can reveal to me where my true freedom lies and also what seeks to undermine it. On such an occasion, Ignatius is particularly concerned that I should sound out these shifts of the spirits honestly and carefully. His Spiritual Exercises seek to lead me to take a decision that is pleasing to God: the various exercises are structured so that I see how I respond to a loving God, how I exercise my freedom correctly and how I can compromise it. With a self-knowledge that has been over-hauled, I am able to consider what would be the best motivation for the decision at hand, and this is to follow Christ as closely as possible. In the light of this, my decision will, according to Ignatius, be free, responsible, loving and it will give glory to God. However vivid my imagining of Christ's life, however deeply stirred I am in my feelings by contemplating his life, my following of Christ is most truly shown by my imitating what he does. This, Ignatius insists, will lead me to death and resurrection. If I love someone, then I want to be with the beloved, wherever that may be. Or to put it more accurately in this instance, the beloved has gone through death and resurrection to meet me where I am, and I have to go there to be truly where I am.

There is comfort and challenge inextricably united in all this. Nor is there an indulgent and exclusive "*Jesus-and-me*" relationship. The closer I get to Calvary and Empty Tomb, to put it more vividly, the more human company I find. The places are thick with my brothers and sisters, and a ragged lot we are. I find, somewhat to my dismay and certainly to my ultimate liberation, that the Lord has placed himself especially with the kind of people I reject, and indeed the people I have rejected (I am not very good with drunks). In fact, as the Gospels repeatedly show and tell, the Lord has identified with such people, and if I want to be with him, I have to be with them. Spirituality, it appears, brings me to this pass: I have to change, and do so by pulling down my carefully erected and well-maintained barriers, within which I live so safely, and move out to meet my rejected brethren and my Lord, and, also as the psychologists would tell me, the part of myself I do not acknowledge. It is a

wry comfort to know that this challenge is before each of us, and that every human group is faced with it too. The newspaper is full each day with the darkness of human entrapment, and occasionally tells about how this can be overcome. It is, however, the strongest of comforts that the Lord's grace enables us

to undertake these challenges. Spirituality, in bringing us towards the Lord, takes us into the throes of human events and history and enables us to participate in bringing about the Kingdom of God. It draws me to hear the Good News in a heartfelt way and then to proclaim it.

Spirituality has much more to do with free time than with spare time. The time I deliberately and consciously spend with the Lord is central to my discipleship; every significant relationship needs what we nowadays call "*quality time*" spent on it, or it withers. What happens in that time will have its own phases, and over the years, as with any relationship, the modes of communication will differ. The sign that a relationship is growing is often that the partners are growing quieter and quieter together. But a measure of quietness seems to be essential to this relationship throughout, because this enables me firstly to become more attentive to what is happening within me, and then through such attention, to open myself to God. This in turn often means waiting for God. After all, I cannot force God's hand, grace cannot be snatched.

Much of my holy time can be spent in the age-old creaturely (and Judaeo-Christian) experience of waiting and waiting for God, and a tough asceticism it can be. On the other hand, since God is God, interventions of grace, gentle or forceful, can happen with or without my attentiveness. To some degree, I will always be taken by surprise. The experience of this relationship is bound to be volatile, unnerving, freeing. There may be moments of intense communion, and there is more likely to be something of the peace that surpasses understanding. God's movements are indeed likely to be so gentle they are almost imperceptible; after all, open-heart operations without anaesthetic require a deft surgeon. Often it is only on reflection over a period of time that I realise what God has done to me. However, even if I am aware of being vigorously treated, I know eternal movements do not last forever, though the energy they give me can sustain me for a long while and their effect in me can be permanent. On the level of experience, I will eventually lose the intensity and gradually return to an ordinariness, even a dullness, that so often precedes a renewed hunger to become attentive again.

Sometimes, to bring all this to a close, I can sense myself as a pilgrim as I go about it. I have known something of the expectancy that precedes the arrival at the holy place, and I have exercised some of the discipline the long journeying demands. No less memorably, I have had to leave the holy place too, and this requires a poignant discipline of its own. God calls each of us to keep moving; staying put is the first step to idolatry. I even have a length of a branch that I treasure as my pilgrim's staff; scrip and scallop I do not have. But even housebound at home and work in ordinary life, I can catch traces of this pilgrim's life, as the inner journeying is never done. Spirituality is what keeps it a pilgrimage.

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