

Note: Marsh uses autism as a running metaphor through this essay in a way that is problematic in terms of more recent understandings of neurodiversity.

Excerpts from

Looking at God Looking at You: Ignatius' Third Addition

By Robert Marsh, S.J., *The Way*, 43/4 (October 2004), 19-28

*A step or two in front of the place where I am to contemplate or meditate, I will stand for the length of an Our Father, raising my mind above and considering how God our Lord is looking at me, etc., and make an act of reverence or humility.*¹ (Exx 75)

THIS IS ONE OF THE IGNATIAN 'ADDITIONS' or 'Additional Directions'—general guidelines 'for making the Exercises better and finding more readily what one desires' (Exx 73.1). Ignatius has just been mentioning the remote preparation for a day of prayer—what to do on falling asleep and what to do on rising. He will go on to talk about posture, about the review of prayer, and about the maintenance of a suitable mood in the retreat situation. Here, however, he is discussing what will help someone make each exercise better, what will help them find more readily what they desire. What Ignatius says here is intended for *every* prayer or spiritual exercise we make.

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[W]hen my spiritual director asks me how God has *responded* to my inner talk, I tend not to know. I have not let God interrupt me. I don't just mean that I talk and talk and never listen—'Listen, Lord, your servant is speaking'. But even when I am *trying* to listen, even when I am sincerely asking for an answer to some deep question, I tend in fact to ask, and then go straight on to mulling over several possible answers that God might have given already, rather than asking God and waiting for an answer.

I am, by nature, mind-blind where God is concerned. I do not really expect God to have a point of view about my inner experience—or about my outer experience for that matter. On the odd occasion when I get beyond this blindness, I still approach God's point of view abstractly. I wonder what kind of thing God *ought* to see or feel or believe, rather than trying to discover what God is actually seeing, feeling and believing. I am concerned with what God *would* say rather than with what God *does* say. And even when I expect more, even when my heart has been opened to the possibility that God might appear in my prayer as a real person with real feelings, desires and needs—even then, all the rituals of my inner autism are so strong that following through is a struggle.

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¹ ... un paso o dos antes del lugar donde tengo de contemplar o meditar, me pondré en pie, por espacio de un Pater noster, alzado el entendimiento arriba, considerando cómo Dios nuestro Señor me mira, etc., y hacer una reverencia o humiliación.

Ignatius and Modernity's Pitfalls

Ignatius and his *Spiritual Exercises* date from the beginning of the cultural trend that we call modernity. Ignatius has one foot firmly planted in the medieval world, with the other standing in the modern era. Ignatius' genius, I believe, is to offer an outlook, a spirituality, which is at home in modernity and yet avoids its pitfalls. The third Addition sums up his outlook. Here Ignatius is giving not only an orientation for any kind of prayer or spiritual exercise, but also a pointer to how we should shape our whole way of life. We are to begin by spending a moment considering how God is looking at us, and we are to respond with an act of reverence. Very simply, Ignatius is inviting us constantly to include *God* in our theory of mind, constantly to let God be really real.

We do not begin our prayer alone as individuals; we begin with *someone else* looking at us. . . . [F]irst we experience, for a moment, that *we are desired*, that we begin outside ourselves, that who we are is not self-generated. We are not self-made men and women. *We receive* ourselves, in the eyes of another. In this way, Ignatius defuses our individualism.

He subverts our doubt, too. We start our epistemology with doubt; Ignatius begins his with trust—not trust as the opposite of doubt, but trust that subverts doubt. We doubt our senses. We doubt the facts. We doubt ourselves. But Ignatius does not want us to start our prayer in the realm of facts and data and things; he points us towards the realm of relationship. Relationship, to be real, always begins in trust, and breathes trust as its atmosphere. We are right to doubt *things*, but right to trust *persons*.

All relationships demand a basic trust. Trust can be tempered by experience; in some cases it must be toned down, or even withdrawn. But unless we can trust at least some of the time, we remain alone and isolated. As is well known, Ignatius is no advocate of credulity. Not all our experience is experience of God. We are moved by many spirits, good and bad, and Ignatius provides the guidelines for telling them apart in his methods of discernment. But discernment only operates in an atmosphere of prior trust—only when we admit an experience and let it develop do we have the grounds for discernment. You cannot discern from a distance. You have to get involved, to take the risk; only on that basis can you assess the feedback and make the adjustment. Discernment implies relationship.

In the third Addition, Ignatius invites us into a complex, relational reality. If God is looking at us, God is in relationship with us. As we try to understand this relationship, we can focus either on God or on ourselves. We can consider what it is like to be looked at. How am I feeling? We can also consider the God who is looking, and what that God is like. How is God feeling? As we move between these two ways of responding to Ignatius' invitation, they begin to fuse, to enrich each other, to be woven into something intricate and beautiful. I am looking at God looking at me looking at God. When I look at the God who looks at me, it is not a matter simply of seeing the other as one object among many, but of looking, gazing, contemplating. *We see* each other. The look transforms—it is *encounter*.

This encounter is a touchstone. Modernity doubts that God can act, and doubts that God is a person. Ignatius is asking whether we can move beyond our doubt. Can we *discover* a God who

can act and who *is* a person? When I pause and consider and look at God looking at me, who do I find looking back? That is a question for experience, not for theory.

Some translations of the third Addition read ‘consider *that* God is looking at me ...’. This reading is linguistically possible, but it misses the real point. The brute fact in itself might be enough to dispel the problem of individualism and the problem of doubt, but we need something more. We need to see *how* God is looking at us. Not in general, not in principle, not in the abstract—but here and now and specifically. Is our God is a living person with thoughts and feelings of God’s own, and not just an extension of our own thinking and feeling?

Once people have discovered the living God, they often discover too that their experience in prayer is not totally malleable. It has a stubborn shape. The God of their prayer is not totally projected. Prayer starts to get surprising. The bush burns, but it is not consumed. You ask a question, and get an answer that shocks you. You search in one place, but God is in another. You are feeling one thing, but God feels another.

When prayer becomes an encounter with the living God, it becomes unpredictable. You thought you were doing something relatively safe—praying—and instead you find yourself face to face with someone real. Fierce or fond, bright or dark (who knows?), but it is someone other and someone real—not yourself. Ignatius wants every spiritual exercise to be an encounter with the living God, another knot in the web of relationship woven in the gaze that passes between you and God.

Today God is smiling. Tomorrow God is sad. The day after God might be sleeping, or dancing, or weeping, or angry. I cannot know how God is looking at me without looking at God. I cannot make up the answer, or guess it, or remember how it was. The only way to do what Ignatius asks is to turn the inner gaze on God and see, here and now, how God is actually looking back ... at me.

It is in this way that Ignatius wants each one of us to step into prayer every time. All Ignatian prayer begins with the encounter with the living God. Only thus can the identification of personal desires be more than selfishness or individualistic therapy. Thus it is that Ignatian colloquy can become real conversation, ‘friend to friend’, rather than a hesitant monologue. . . . Can I discover myself in the eyes of God? Can I come to see myself the way God sees me—honestly and benevolently? Me, with all the fragments, all the shame and all the glory, caught in a gaze of love, and invited into companionship with Jesus?

This article has been couched in the language of vision throughout—looking, gazing, seeing, contemplating. But you could substitute any of the other senses. Many of us know God imaginatively through sound: we hear God speak. Others sense God by touch; they could not tell you how God looks at them for all the tea in China, but they know the weight of God’s hand on their shoulder. It is the communication that matters—how it happens is secondary. Ignatius does not simply say, ‘considering how God our Lord is looking at me’; he adds what is a favourite word of his, ‘etc.’ Some translations take the ‘et cetera’ to refer to further thoughts we might have. But a richer interpretation sees it as referring to further activities in which *God* may be

engaging. God is not only looking at us but interacting with us in a wide range of ways: enlightening us, communicating Godself to us, embracing us.²

Thus the third Addition offers more than an introductory gambit in the game of prayer. Ignatius' God is an active God, a God not content to be a distant observer, a God intimately engaged with every person who prays. This God is miles away from the cultural caricature I presented earlier. This God can be encountered, known. This God feels, acts, interacts. This God has personality.

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² Willem A. M. Peters, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: Exposition and Interpretation* (Jersey City: Program to Adapt the Spiritual Exercises, 1968), 22-24.