

## *‘Ignatian Spirituality as a Way of Living for All’*

It was the topic proposed for my sharing *‘Ignatian Spirituality as a Way of Living for All’* that drew me to accept the invitation to be here. Because in my accompanying people on a personal level I have come to discover that there are certain elements of Ignatian Spirituality that are vital and essential for any person who would like to unfold towards a fullness of life, and which ultimately is life with and in God.

I will be focusing on five points which are like *‘living streams’* that help nourish this process of life unto fullness.

These are drawn primarily from *St. Ignatius’ own experience of life*, because a spirituality is first lived before it is in some way articulated and shared.

Moreover, based on his life experience Ignatius composed the *Spiritual Exercises* in order to help others come to experience, in their unique way, what was so liberating and life giving for him. So I will be basing what I say on the Spiritual Exercises, the experience of which is foundational for a person who wants to enter upon the Ignatian path of life.

At times, I will also be referring to what has come to be known as *the Autobiography of St. Ignatius*. Where we find, what towards the end of his life he narrated to one of his companions as to how he felt God dealt with him since his conversion.

The ‘five streams’ I referred to are:

- I. Being aware of and living in contact with one’s inner self.  
*“The inner feeling and relishing of things.”*[Sp. Ex. 2]
- II. The liberating experience of a God who sets life free.  
*“Allow the Creator in person to deal directly with the creature ...inflaming him/her in his love.”*[Sp. Ex. 15]
- III. The humanness of Jesus shows us the path to fullness of life in God.  
*“Interior knowledge of Our Lord who became human for me that I may...follow him more closely.”*[Sp. Ex. 104]
- IV. Our unfolding unto the fullness of life takes place in and through the concrete circumstances of one’s life.  
*“God labours and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth.”* [Sp. Ex. 236]
- V. The ‘pedagogy’ to live the ‘Ignatian way of life’.  
*“The Contemplative in every action”*

I. Being aware of and living in contact with one's inner self.

*"The inner feeling and relish of things."* [Sp. Ex. 2]

Where does what we call *'Ignatian Spirituality'* have its origin? Where does it all start? It starts in the heart of the man Ignatius. And so it is here where we do need to start.

It was what Ignatius came to realize and experience within him while convalescing at Loyola that became the basis from which he would eventually come to live and help integrate all that would happen in his life.

Confined to bed, and not being able to get hold of anything that could help him run away from his inner boredom, Ignatius now finds himself being drawn, or perhaps compelled, to start listening to his inner self.

And by listening to what was taking place in his heart Ignatius starts sensing that he was coming in contact with life.

It is in our inner self that *'Ignatian Spirituality'* starts to be lived because it is from our inner self where all life is lived.

Sensing this, Ignatius expresses in astonishment, *"What new life is this that we are now beginning?"* [Auto. 21]

In using the word *'life'* here Ignatius is not referring to events or to the story of his life, but to that mystery that makes all of us human beings a living reality.

At this very moment, each one of us here, by becoming aware of the sentiments of one's heart, can sense if one is alive or not.

There have been times when someone started his/her personal sharing with me with these words, *"Father I am dead!"* .... At least the person had come to this point of realizing this, which was already a step to life.

As for Ignatius, so for each one of us, it is this listening to one's inner self that can become the compass that will guide us on our journey through life.

Three times in the *'Autobiography'* we find him making this affirmation,

*"What he said in this way he felt in his heart,"* [Auto. 35, 40, 42].

Here within him was the source that was guiding him in what he was doing. He was not simply following a teaching, a doctrine, or an ideology.

He is learning to respond. He is learning to open himself to the invitations of life within him. For it is only through coming in contact with what arises within our heart that we can come in contact with life.

## I. Being aware of and living in contact with one's inner self. .../2

And as Ignatius learns to become more and more transparent to the inner movements of his heart, he also gradually starts noticing that there is a difference to what is taking place within him. The difference between what is life-giving and what is not life-giving.

At *“one time his eyes were opened a little,”* he tells us, *“and he began to marvel at the difference, .... realizing that some thoughts left him sad and others happy,”* [Auto. 8].

Ignatius is here on the verge of, what I would dare call, his most fundamental discovery at Loyola, which he will eventually bequeath to us.

Namely, → not only was he becoming aware that by listening to the inner sentiments in his heart he was thus coming in contact with life,

→ but he was also coming to realize that the different movements in his heart were also a language through which God speaks.

Contact with life opens us to contact with God.

Marveling at the different effects that certain thoughts caused in his heart he states, *“Little by little he came to recognize the difference between the spirits that agitated him, one from the demon, the other from God,”* [Auto. 8].

Listening to one's inner self not only brings us in contact with life, but also disposes us to come in contact with God.

Ignatius will still have to grow in sharpening this awareness. But it is out of this communion with his inner self that he now feels urged to move out transforming his journey into a pilgrimage through life.

At this stage Ignatius has not yet encountered the living God. This will happen later at Manresa. But at Loyola he has found the path that will eventually lead him to God. And this passes through his / our inner self.

So based on this foundational realization Ignatius will affirm at the very beginning of the Spiritual Exercises that, *“it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul but the inner feeling and relish of things,”* [Sp.Ex. 2].

Here Ignatius is not only pointing as to where the whole process of the Spiritual Exercises is to unfold, that is in our inner self, but is also revealing the depth from which we are being asked to live.

## I. Being aware of and living in contact with one's inner self. .../3

In being invited to live life in contact with “*the inner feeling and relish of things,*” we are being offered the secret as to how to live life, live it fully and live it deeply.

For it is through this awareness of, and by staying in contact with, our inner self that I place myself in the unfolding process of this mystery we call life.

In other words, I will never be able to live life except by being in contact with life. And this can only take place by living in contact with my inner self.

Moreover, it is precisely by coming in contact with the way I am being affected within me at the present moment that I will be able to sense where God could be inviting me to greater fullness and deeper freedom.

Our heart is the door that opens to a fullness of life that leads to contact with God.

This is why contact with one's inner self is where the whole process of *Ignatian Spirituality* starts.

Once Ignatius came to live his life rooted in his inner self, this not only placed him on the path of life, but also disposed him for an eventual liberating experience of God.

## II. The liberating experience of a God who sets life free.

*“Allow the Creator in person to deal directly with the creature ...inflaming him/her in his love.”* [Sp. Ex. 15]

*‘Ignatian Spirituality’* precisely because it is ‘spirituality’ is meant to help us find our fullness of life in God.

Who or what is this God Ignatius constantly keeps referring to and talking about? And what difference does it make in our life?

The living spring in *‘Ignatian Spirituality’* is that this reality we call God can be encountered, that is, God can be personally experienced.

Every encounter with God is an experience or else it is not an encounter.

And to experience is not just to know, but to be touched in one’s heart. Outside the heart there are no experiences. There are events, there are happenings, and there is the story of my life. But an experience only takes place within me.

This is why living in contact with one’s inner self can gradually dispose me for an encounter with God, since every encounter with God is an experience.

The most liberating experience in the life of Ignatius came about through his personal encounter with God that took place at Manresa.

To be able to understand the significance of this experience and its consequence for Ignatius and for us, we need to understand a little bit as to what was the driving passion of his life till then.

This will help us sense what difference God will come to make in his life, and is meant to make in ours.

Till he comes face to face with God at Manresa what drove Ignatius through life was, as he puts it in the very opening words of the Autobiography, his *‘desire to win fame’* [Auto. 1].

That is, there was a longing within him to be recognized and considered as *‘someone worth’* in the eyes of a significant other.

So we find him driven by a passion to do outlandish things in order to try to impress. Whether it was to impress the ‘lady of his dreams’ or to impress God, he was still being driven by the same passion.

And this can only lead to self-destruction. For this compulsion to win recognition, makes one a slave and makes one blind. It was this that brought Ignatius on the verge of being killed at Pamplona.

And we find him in the same situation at Manresa.

Initially at Manresa he embarks on trying to win God's favour by his own efforts, by trying to make himself acceptable in God's eyes.

And there is nothing more enslaving in one's life, than trying to win the acceptance of someone who already loves you.

This can only lead you to despair. So it is not surprising that Ignatius came on the verge of pondering the possibility of suicide out of the despair of not being able to be at peace with himself and his God, [Auto. 24].

Until, when totally broken and shattered, Ignatius finally lets go of his being obsessed with himself, and allows himself to be embraced in God's gratuitous mercy. And in that embrace, as Ignatius himself puts it, "*the Lord wished to awaken him as if from a dream,*" [Auto 25].

Why does he say '*awakened from a dream*'?

In the gratuitous embrace of God's mercy Ignatius comes to discover what he always longed to experience and what was always his, but had not yet acknowledged it.

He comes to experience that he **IS** someone of worth in the eyes of a significant 'Other', of God, and so he does not need to continue wasting his energy in trying to prove himself. This is so liberating!

But till then he was blind. He was living from the illusion that he needed to prove himself in order to be accepted and considered of worth in the eyes of the other. Hence the destructive desire '*to win recognition*' in order to survive, but which in the end would bring him on the verge of despair.

Every human person, each one of us, in some way or other is affected by this illusion namely, that my ultimate worth is dependent on my being accepted or recognised by others.

Every time I experience a feeling within me that blocks me from life is a clear sign of the presence of this illusion that thinks that one's worth is being threatened.

While in the loving embrace of God, Ignatius comes to experience himself as someone who is precious in his very being. And no one and nothing can touch this.

It is this that now awakens him from the dream he was living so far and is now able to start living his real life, to live it freely and live it fully.

And in this liberating encounter with a God that drew him from the precipice of despair, Ignatius comes to experience in the marrow of his bones a God who liberates, a God who offers life, a God who affirms.

He now experiences as he himself puts it, his heart “*inflamed by God*” [Auto. 9], and so from a man totally obsessed with himself he passionately seeks to get involved with this reality that brought him to life.

*‘A heart Inflamed by God’* is the Ignatian expression of what defines ones relationship with God.

I think one need to sense in some way the anguishing depth in the heart of Ignatius that brought him on the verge of suicide, in order then to be able to sense what this reality we call God, would eventually come to mean to him, and is meant to mean to each one of us.

So whenever Ignatius uses the word ‘God’ he is referring to this reality that liberates that expands and offers life. This reality about whom St. Paul could affirm, “*In him we can live and move and have our being!*” [Acts 17. 28;]

However this will not take place just by knowing about God, but by experiencing his liberating presence in one’s life.

Ignatius knew about God when he left Loyola for Manresa. However the way he tried to live his relationship with this God brought him on the verge of death.

If you take God seriously in your life and you only know God without having experienced his presence, there is very much the danger of coming to experience this God as a burden that can also lead you to guilt and heaviness of heart. It is only the experience of God that liberates and saves.

So at the very beginning of the Spiritual Exercises Ignatius warns the director to “*allow the Creator in person to deal directly with the creature ...embracing him/her in his love,*” [Sp. Ex. 14], for he knows the anguish he had gone through till he came to experience this God who liberates.

And so in the first stage of the Spiritual Exercises Ignatius tries to dispose the one doing the exercises for the grace of experiencing God’s gratuitous mercy which in turn reveals one’s worth in God’s eyes and so brings about true freedom of heart.



## II. The liberating experience of a God who sets life free... /4

This is why we will never be able to live our real life free from the illusion that I have to gain my worth and dignity, unless and until we allow ourselves to be touched by love and come to experience what this love is revealing of us. Namely that I am someone of worth just because I am me!

Ignatius discovers what God's word through the Scriptures constantly faces us with. Namely, that I do not yet fully believe in the real God until I come to believe in myself, (that is: who I am to God). And I will never be able to come to believe in my real self until I encounter this God who offers us life and freedom.

I am fully convinced that the God who brought this freedom into the heart of Ignatius has also touched each one of us here in our life.

However if one is not in contact with one's inner self, then all that one notices are the footprints of God in one's life, that is, notices the signs of his presence after he has passed, while not as yet having been able to see God face to face, and experience his freedom.

### III. The humanness of Jesus shows us the path to fullness of life in God.

*“Interior knowledge of Our Lord who became human for me that I may...follow him more closely.”* [Sp. Ex. 104]

The experience of the *‘Spiritual Exercises’*, as I mentioned, is the foundation for someone who would like to walk along the *‘Ignatian path’* to fullness of life in God.

At a certain stage in the process of the Exercises we are invited to ask for this grace : *“Interior knowledge of Our Lord who became human for me that I may...follow him more closely.”* [Sp. Ex.104]

Here we are already being presented as to how to approach Jesus. We are being invited to look at Jesus in his humanness.

And through this our intimate contact with him, (what Ignatius calls *‘interior knowledge’*), we will be drawn to follow him. To follow him where?

The Gospels make us aware that Jesus came that *‘we may have life and be able to live it to the full’*. So this invitation *“to follow Jesus more closely,”* is meant to lead us with Jesus to this fullness of life.

And the path that we are invited to take with Jesus is in and through his humanness. We are invited to follow Jesus *“who became human for me”*. The humanity of Christ becomes the medium through which we unfold with Christ unto our fullness.

Based on what Ignatius strongly experienced at Manresa, (Cfr. Auto 29), the humanity of Christ became very central and important to him.

Jesus is the enfleshment of the Divine. Jesus as a man born of a woman reveals God and the path to God. So it is in and through the humanness of Jesus that I can encounter God and come to share in the fullness of life God offers me.

It is very insightful to notice the way (the method of prayer) Ignatius employs at this stage in the Exercises in order to take us in this unfolding process with Jesus.

He does not ask us to meditate or reflect on the life of Jesus. He does not ask us to examine our life in the light of the life of Jesus. He does not invite us to apply to our life what we find inspiring in the life of Jesus, or to make any resolutions or decisions to change our life.

He simply invites me to be with Jesus in the mysteries of his life through my imagination, while (and this is very important) also becoming aware what this my imagination is bringing to life within me, within my heart.

Without my being aware as to what is happening within me when I am with Jesus then my imagination becomes useless fantasy.

While through my being aware as to how I am affected within me while being with Jesus through my imagination, I am gradually being brought in deeper contact with my inner self. I am being brought in contact with what my involvement with Jesus brings to life within me.

The imagination is now being rooted in the reality of my being.

And it is by being invited to return and take time to stay in contact with what came to life in my heart while using my imagination with Jesus, that gradually a transforming process starts taking place from within me.

It is precisely this that starts transforming me from within, in my inner self, into a disciple of Jesus.

So the following of Jesus in '*Ignatian Spirituality*' is not simply an external following. But the following of Jesus takes place by undergoing an inner transforming process of one's life towards a fullness I am invited to at this present stage of my life.

This is why it is not enough to imitate Jesus, and not even enough just to worship or adore him. But I need to get involved with him in and through his humanness.

And as I accompany Jesus in his journeying to fullness life and Jesus tells me, '*follow me*', – he is inviting me to follow him in the very unfolding of **my own life** into my fullness.

As I accompany Jesus in his unfolding into total freedom and he invites me to follow him – he is inviting me to follow him in the unfolding of **my own life** into freedom.

So when Jesus tells me '*Follow Me*' he is not simply saying come behind me or imitate me. But he is exposing me and inviting me to live my life to **the depth** that he lived it, to live my life to **the fullness and totality** that he lived it. Then we shall meet with him in life, life in fullness, which ultimately is life lived in the fullness of God.

III. The humanness of Jesus shows us the path to fullness of life in God. .../3

This is why the following of Jesus is not just some addition to one's life, but takes place in the very unfolding of my life towards a deeper fullness and greater freedom. And through my contact with the humanness of Jesus he shows us the way for this our human life to be lived in fullness.

The mystery and the wonder is that as I encounter Jesus in his humanness, slowly and sacredly I am being brought in contact with the Divine within me.

In *Ignatian Spirituality* the human is the door to the Divine.

IV. Our unfolding unto fullness of life takes place in and through the concrete circumstances of one's life.

*"The things on the face of the earth are created as helps to the pursuit of one's end,"* [Sp. Ex. 23].

*"God labours and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth."* [Sp. Ex. 236]

Where does our unfolding unto fullness of life take place?

From the Spiritual Exercises we are made aware that our growing towards a fullness of life takes place in and through the concrete circumstances, in and through the concrete situation of one's life.

In other words you do not have to run away from the context you are living in in order to grow to one's fullness of life in God.

The Spiritual Exercises begin with the fundamental affirmation that we human beings are created for God. This is a dynamic affirmation.

That is, constitutive of our very being is this orientation towards God. (As a mango seed is oriented by its very being to becoming a mango tree).

So our unfolding in the direction of God brings us to our fullness. While at the same time our growing into fullness of life places us in the direction of God. There is no competition between God and my fullness.

On the other hand, at the very end of the process of the Sp. Exercises we are presented with God's movement towards us human beings.

Creation is God's labour of love. God is lovingly reaching out to us, which as in all love, is also an expression of the desire to become one with the one loved – us human beings.

Now central in all of this is **the Ignatian conviction** that both these movements, from us to God and from God to us, do take place in and through the concrete situations of one's life. [Cfr. Sp. Ex. 23 & 236.]

The Ignatian conviction is that everything that affects us, touches us, surrounds us can be of help to the pursuit of our fullness, to the pursuit of one's end in God.

While also everything that affects us, everything that touches us and surrounds us, is also the medium through which God reaches out to us.

In other words it is useless to try to seek the fullness of one's life outside the very context, the very reality that one is living. While also, it is an illusion to try to open oneself to God by running away from the reality of one's life.

Our unfolding movement towards God, and God's reaching out to us, both take place in and through the same concrete situations of one's life.

What does this imply?

That everything that is part of my life, everything that I have experienced in life, everything that has happened to me in the story of my life, positive or negative, can become a stepping stone in my unfolding towards the fullness of life, can become a steppingstone in my unfolding towards my destiny in God.

You do not have to deny anything of what has happened to you; you do not have to run away from anything that has taken place in your life, in order to live and breathe life.

This is why in the unfolding journey of my life there is always hope. Whatever has taken place in my life, positive or negative, need not be an obstacle to continuing my unfolding unto fullness of life, and so also nothing need block me from continuing my relationship with God.

Life, and so also God, denies nothing, rejects nothing and can integrate everything.

This hope is even strengthened by the Ignatian affirmation we find in the Spiritual Exercises that God's presence is an active presence. God '*labours and works,*' in all things, '*that is he acts in the manner of one who is labouring,*' [236].

There is nothing, absolutely nothing that affects me in life, or in the world around me, that is not touched by this labouring presence of God.

And the surest sign of this '*labouring presence of God*' is precisely where creation or humanity is still wounded and has not yet come to its fullness. Or else there would not have been the need for God to labour.

God in creating did not produce a product, but launched a process. And God is still very much part of this process.

This is why I say today that my tears are not just my tears but are also part of the labouring presence of God struggling with me as I seek to grow into my fullness.

V. A pedagogy for a person who lives according to the Ignatian way of life.  
*'The Contemplative in action'*

Having talked as to *'where'* our unfolding unto fullness takes place, now I would like to conclude with the *'how'* this can take place.

Here again I find the answer in the Spiritual Exercises.

Underlying the method of prayer presented to us that has come to be known as the *'Ignatian Contemplation'* we can also discover a way of living for anyone who wants to live the Ignatian path of life.

The method of prayer known as the *'Ignatian Contemplation'* proceeds in four steps.

i. First there is a period of prayer where through my imagination I get fully involved with Christ in one of the mysteries of his life.

ii. Then once the prayer is over, I am asked to stop and examine where and how I had been interiorly affected in my heart during my prayer.

iii. Having become aware of this, I now move to stay in touch with what had affected me during my previous prayer period.

For as I mentioned earlier, it is by staying in touch with this that I am gradually being transformed or purified.

iv. And finally at the end of the day I am asked to get a sense of the overall feeling I am left with after these hours of prayer and allow my whole being to absorb and be soaked by this.

In this way the whole experience is now becoming me and mine.

Underlying this prayer process is actually a way of living that is being applied to prayer.

So in my daily life:

i. I **give myself and get fully involved** in whatever I might be doing...

(working, eating, playing, teaching, studying ... whatever I might be doing).

ii. Be **aware as to how I am being affected** within me while I am involved in what I am doing.

Without this awareness I am not yet living, but life is just passing me by.

iii. Then I **need to return and stay in touch** with what came to life in me while being involved in whatever I am doing.

In the beginning this will require a little bit of an effort. However as you grow in this you will notice that you can be in touch with your inner self even while you are fully involved in something exteriorly.

iv. And finally get the **overall sense of what you are left with at the end** of all that you do.

You have finished a work, an engagement, you have come to the end of the day; ‘What is the overall feeling you are left with at the end?’ Let this soak you and be the base from which you move on to whatever you have to do next.

When Ignatius at the very beginning of the Spiritual Exercises tells us that, “*it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul but the inner feeling and relish of things,*” [Sp.Ex. 2], he is presenting us with the key for anyone who wants to live the Ignatian path to life.

It is by making this a way of life, that I come to live life fully, live life deeply, and slowly start opening up and nourishing the contemplative dimension of my heart.

It is through this *‘Ignatian way of proceeding’* that will help me grow into becoming a contemplative wherever I am and in whatever I am doing.

For being a contemplative ultimately does not simply depend on how much I pray but much more on how deeply I live.