

IGNATIAN AND HESYCHAST SPIRITUALITY: PRAYING TOGETHER

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Some time after his work with St Makarios of Corinth (1731–1805) on the compilation of the *Philokalia*,¹ St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain (1748–1809) worked on a translation of an expanded version of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola.² Metropolitan Kallistos Ware has plausibly suggested that the translation may have been motivated by Nikodimos' intuition that there was something else needed to complement the hesychast tradition, even if only for those whose spiritual mastery was insufficient to deal with its demands.³

My interest in this article is to look at the encounters between the hesychast and Ignatian traditions. Clearly, when Nikodimos read Pinamonti's version of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, he found in it something that was reconcilable with his own hesychast practice. What are these elements of agreement and how can two apparently quite distinct traditions be placed side by side? I begin my response with a brief introduction to the two traditions. I will also suggest that spiritual traditions offer the chance for experience to meet experience. Moreover, this experience is in principle available to all, though in practice the beneficiaries will always be relatively few in number. I then look in more detail at some features of the hesychast

1 See Kallistos Ware, "St Nikodimos and the *Philokalia*," in Brock Bingaman & Bradley Nassif (eds.), *The Philokalia: A Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9–35, at 15. On the writing of the *Philokalia*, see also John Anthony McGuckin, "The Making of the *Philokalia*: A Tale of Monks and Manuscripts," in Bingaman & Nassif (eds.), *The Philokalia*, 36–49.

2 The version was that of Giampetro Pinamonti (1632–1703).

3 See Kallistos Ware, "St Nikodimos and the *Philokalia*," in Dimitri Conomos & Graham Speake (eds.), *Mount Athos the Sacred Bridge: The Spirituality of Holy Mountain* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 69–121, at 90–92. This is almost identical to the essay cited in footnote 2 above. See also John Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1974), 138–39.

and Ignatian traditions. Both, I note, are Christ-centered, and have a particular relationship to the Scriptures. They also have views on discipleship, on the church, and on the world. And what does it mean to speak about either tradition or innovation in terms of spirituality?⁴ And given this, can spirituality serve as a test case for the discussion around the nature of tradition and innovation?

Introducing the Traditions

I am interested here in hesychasm as a spiritual practice with very deep roots.⁵ It has provided a way of entering into the presence of God, or allowing God to enter into the hesychast's heart, through constant attention to God. A key part of the practice has often been the Jesus prayer.⁶ Its Greek and Russian variants are closely related, but not entirely identical.

Ignatian spirituality is named after St Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), a Basque, whose own journey of conversion led him to realize that God works with human beings in particular ways and that each person who wishes to follow Christ is called on to enter into a deeper relationship with him, involving faithful response to that call. Ignatius underwent a series of spiritual experiences that would later become crystallized in his *Spiritual Exercises*, a way of discerning and realizing God's will. The chief aim of the Exercises can be summed up in the first few sentences of its opening statement of intent, the Principle and Foundation, describing Ignatius' theological anthropology:

The human person is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by so doing to save his or her soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings in order to help them pursue the end for which they are created.⁷

4 On this and more generally, see Roger Gottlieb, *Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

5 See Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 25–33 and 44–69.

6 For a good brief introduction to the meaning and history of hesychast practices, see Christopher Johnson, *The Globalization of the Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer: Contesting Contemplation* (London–New York: Continuum, 2012), 15–45.

7 Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings* (eds. Joseph Munitiz SJ & Philip Endean

Both traditions proscribe particular ways in which all human life is to be included in prayer. At the same time, though, these “prescribed” practices admit of a great deal of flexibility and freedom.⁸ To the extent that either is a method, each also makes it clear that a method is not identical with its aim and that we should use it to the degree that it helps us toward achieving the aim and not otherwise.

Tradition and Traditions

What is a spiritual tradition, and how does it relate to Tradition (whatever precisely that is)? A spiritual tradition is not the same as a doctrinal or creedal tradition, where there is less space for what is optional—we cannot lay aside the doctrine of the incarnation, say, just because we find that it does not help us very much. In this sense, then, spiritual traditions are perhaps closer to liturgical or ritual traditions. And, indeed, both hesychasm and Ignatian spirituality are part of a broader context of Christian life and prayer. Ignatian spirituality molded into a particular fashion of prayer and attitude towards God some earlier features, such as elements from Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitatio Christi*, or the Franciscan influences of Cardinal Cisneros,⁹ though Ignatius was not formed in a deep knowledge of particular textual traditions, and thus there is a great deal of freshness

SJ) (London: Penguin, 1991), 289 (= “The Spiritual Exercises” [23], *Principle and Foundation*). All future translations from the Spiritual Exercises will be to this book, but referring to the Exercises in the form SpEx [23], where the number in square brackets is the standard paragraph reference for the Exercises.

- 8 See for example, Nil Sorsky, “The Monastic Rule (*Ustav*)” in George Maloney SJ (ed. & tr.), *Nil Sorsky: The Complete Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2003), 46–115, at 65: “Paying attention to all of these ways [of guarding the thoughts], each of us should undertake the battle according to what is the best way for himself.” See also George Maloney SJ, *Russian Hesychasm: The Spirituality of Nil Sorsky* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), 146. Similar sentiments can be found in the Optina Elders: see Macarius, Staretz of Optina, *Russian Letters of Spiritual Direction 1834–1869* (ed. & tr. Iulia de Beausobre) (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1975), 40. Ignatius says that “what is given to each exercitant should be in accordance with his or her dispositions.” See SpEx [18].
- 9 See on the background Lu Ann Homza, “The Religious Milieu of the Young Ignatius,” in Thomas Worcester (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 13–31.

about his Spiritual Exercises.¹⁰ Hesychasm is an amalgam of practices, with some core features of silence, withdrawal, and some element of continuous prayer (most often in the form of the Jesus prayer).¹¹ In the writings of spiritual fathers such as Nil Sorsky or in a work like the *Philokalia*¹² we find this tradition reflected and passed on.

The Addressee of the Two Traditions

Who are these traditions for? Neither requires a particular state of life within the church, so St Nikodimos could say that the *Philokalia* was for all Orthodox.¹³ And yet, of course, it is clearly not for everyone, and most of the writers urge that only a few should embark on such a path, because it is so demanding.¹⁴ The two points are not so much contradictory as talking about different levels of inclusivity or exclusivity. In principle, anyone could engage in hesychast prayer, but equally, and certainly in practice, not everyone can. This is partly because the eremitical life is not for everyone.

Ignatius, on the other hand, sees that his form of prayer, and especially the first week of the Spiritual Exercises, could be for anyone.¹⁵ The remaining parts of the Exercises are to be offered less readily,¹⁶ partly because they aim to help the exercitant in making a choice of life and the kind of fundamental choice he presumes is not one that can be made that often! The way of praying, though, is more readily accessible, and many of the Exercises can be adapted for different situations where a fundamental decision is not being made,

10 On the history of the Spiritual Exercises and their antecedents, see Philip Endean, "The Spiritual Exercises," in Worcester (ed.), *Companion*, 52–68, especially at 63–64.

11 See on this Johnson, *Globalization*, 15–30.

12 G. E. H. Palmer, Phillip Sherrard, & Kallistos Ware, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979, 1981, 1984 and 1995).

13 See, for example, Kallistos Ware, "Seek First The Kingdom: Orthodox Monasticism and Its Service to the World," *Theology Today* 61.1 (2004): 14–25, at 16–17.

14 See, for example, Nil Sorsky, "The Tradition," 40, or "The Monastic Rule," 47.

15 See SpEx [18], where Ignatius considers that for many people the First Week will suffice. See also Michael Ivens, SJ, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 19.

16 See SpEx [20], and Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 21.

but some important choice is still being pondered. Nevertheless, it is not for everyone, and there are those who will find Ignatian spirituality detrimental to their spiritual growth.

Beyond the question of the addressee or the meeting of experience with experience, there are other even more fundamental points of unity between the two traditions. Clearly almost by definition, the experience of Christian prayer will have Christ at its center in some form or other, but both these spiritual traditions make explicit the following of Jesus as their goal. To reduce hesychasm to the recital of the Jesus prayer would be to do it an injustice.¹⁷ On the other hand, its use can be seen as offering a summary of what hesychasm is about¹⁸—becoming centered on Christ through constant prayer, thus giving one’s life to Christ in utter faithfulness and obedience, so that, in the words of Paul to the Galatians (2:20), “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises are divided into four unequal parts, known as “weeks.” The first week brings the exercitant face-to-face with the reality of sin, in their own life as well as in the structures of the world, but one of the underlying questions that runs through this week, and through the daily living out of Christian life in the light and spirit of Ignatian spirituality is the following: What have I done for Christ, what am I doing for Christ, what ought I do for Christ?¹⁹ The second, third, and fourth weeks of the Spiritual Exercises are an even more direct and close encounter with Jesus in his life, death and resurrection.

The Role of the Scriptures

Both traditions also have a particular way of relating to the Scriptures. In *The Way of the Pilgrim*, the pilgrim asks his elder whether the *Dobrotolyubie* is more important than the Bible. The elder answers:

17 See Mary Cunningham, “The Place of the Jesus Prayer in the *Philokalia*,” in Brockman and Nassif (eds.), *The Philokalia*, 195–202.

18 See Johnson, *Globalization*, 19.

19 SpEx [53].

No, it is neither more important nor holier than the Bible, but it contains clear exposition of the ideas that are mysteriously presented in the Bible and are not easy for our finite mind to understand.²⁰

This explanation is more generally helpful as a way of seeing what we look for in a spiritual tradition, something that will help to give clarity to the encounters with God that we have, and with the way in which extraneous (or at least apparently extraneous) forces seem to stand in the way of those encounters.

For Ignatius, the relationship to the Scriptures is on the surface somewhat different. The major experiences that he would eventually distil into the Spiritual Exercises happened to him not long after his conversion, and his knowledge of the Bible was much less than that of the spiritual fathers of the hesychast tradition. Thus, most of the scriptural references in the Exercises²¹ focus on the gospels, and in particular on the Synoptics, combined with elements of folk piety and the images that adorned the churches of the time or other versions of the *Biblia pauperum*.²²

But in fact, Ignatius is also offering a way into understanding the mysteries of the Scriptures, by entering into them ever more profoundly.²³ The meditations and contemplations given to the exercitant during the Spiritual Exercises encourage her or him to engage at an existential level with the story of Jesus and with the story of God's interaction with his creation from beginning to end.

20 *The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way* (tr. Helen Bacovcin) (New York: Image, 1992), 19. See on this also Tim Noble, "A Writ Good Guide: The Bible in *The Way of the Pilgrim* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*," *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 12.1 (2011): 20–35.

21 At the end of the text of the Exercises, which exists as a guide book for the giver of the Exercises, not for the exercitant, there is a list of helpful passages to be used for contemplating the mysteries of Christ's life (SpEx [261–312]). There are three references to 1 Cor 15:6–8 (the appearances of Jesus after his death), one to the Acts of the Apostles, 13 to John's gospel, and 43 to the Synoptics.

22 See Homza, "The Religious Milieu ..." for more detail on the background to Ignatius' Catholicism.

23 In the second annotation of the Exercises (SpEx [2]), he writes: "For it is not so much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but rather the intimate feeling and relishing of things." See on this Ivens, *Understanding*, 4.

The sources Ignatius uses to do this are not patristic—to a lay person in northern Spain in the first quarter of the sixteenth century these would have been inaccessible. Nevertheless, he did draw on what he had read and no doubt heard and seen, as well as on the wisdom of spiritual guides or confessors²⁴ who helped him to reflect on what God was doing in his life. And this tradition is one that is embedded in the Scriptures, but that also saw the need to understand and make clear the riches contained in them.

There are also differences of stress and emphasis between the two traditions, but these need not be regarded as antagonistic. In the Ignatian tradition, the basic presupposition is that the person praying is engaged in an active life of Christian discipleship, be it as priest, religious, or lay person.²⁵ Over against this, hesychasm is aimed more at those who have reached a level of spiritual maturity and have, for the most part, found a way of withdrawing from the world.²⁶ Although this division is not absolute, and the example of the Optina Elders demonstrates perfectly well that living in a withdrawn place is not the same as absencing oneself from engagement in life outside,²⁷ it does lead to certain different emphases and understandings of what it is to follow Christ. For the Ignatian tradition discipleship happens much more through interiorizing the will of God revealed through the encounter with the other. For hesychasm, it involves much more going deeper into the self, till there is nothing left to run away from because it has been all given over to God. Both of these are legitimate, but they are not identical.

Shared Features of the Two Traditions

Hesychast and Ignatian spiritualities can be seen as guide books for the journey of divinization. As with all guide books, they are necessarily partial, informed by the background of their writers

24 This is a recurring theme in his autobiography. See Ignatius, *Personal Writings*, 21–27 (= Autobiography, or Reminiscences as this translation calls it, paragraphs 19–31).

25 See, for example, Ivens, *Keeping in Touch*, 47 and 95.

26 See Johnson, *Globalization*, 15–16.

27 See, for example, Macarius, *Russian Letters*, which shows the wide contact Makarii had with the world around him and people who visited who corresponded with him.

and practitioners, in dialogue with the Scriptures and a broader hermeneutic community. However, as guide books of a journey that is in some sense the same, we might reasonably expect that there will be some shared features. The relationship to Scripture and tradition is one such feature. Another is that both are fundamentally ecclesial traditions. Bulgakov once remarked that the Elders of Optina never sought to create an alternative church, but were in complete accord with the hierarchy.²⁸ And Ignatius famously included “Rules to follow in view of the true attitude of mind that we ought to maintain within the Church militant” as one of the appendices of the Exercises.²⁹ Of course, neither of these instances is quite so simple as it seems, but both are indicative of an underlying truth. Moreover, the ecclesial dimension of the two spiritual traditions is not exclusive. The Church is not only disciples gathered around a *starets*, the local church community, or the hierarchy. To think with the Church, or to be in accord with the hierarchy is, for both traditions, necessarily to turn also to all who come in need and to the whole of creation.

As members of the Church, though, all are called on to be people of prayer. Jerome Nadal (1507–80), one of the early Jesuits who helped initiate the practice of the giving of the Exercises, described the aim of the Jesuits as being contemplatives in action. This arises from Ignatian spirituality. The companion of Jesus is the one who picks up his cross and is placed by the Father with the Son, and is constantly attentive to the call of the Father in the Son through the Holy Spirit.³⁰ Thus, although the lifestyle is very different to that of a skete monk or a hermit or wanderer, the idea of constant prayer, of a perpetual state of awareness of God’s presence or absence in one’s life, is also there. The hesychast, we might say, is active in contemplation, always seeking to become closer to God, praying

28 Sergei Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, “The Hierarchy,” www.pravoslavnaolomouc.cz/ODK/CIOT/theo/buor.htm#_Toc45589054 (April 21, 2013).

29 SpEx [352–370]. See Ivens, *Understanding*, 248–64.

30 See on this Ivens, “The Trinity,” in *Keeping in Touch*, 47–50, and the following section “Vocation,” pp. 50–53.

quite literally in and through the name of Jesus the merciful.³¹ Both forms of spirituality presuppose that God is at hand, and that he makes known his will and that, despite the temptations that stand in the way, his will may indeed be done.

The radical following of Christ also involves dealing with temptations, and here again there is a great deal of overlap between the two traditions. Perhaps the most famous meditation in the Spiritual Exercises is that of the Two Standards,³² which happens at a crucial point when the exercitant is being asked to make a choice of what kind of life they wish to follow. Ignatius suggests a thought experiment, imagining two great gatherings, one under the Standard of Lucifer, the other under the Standard of Christ. The temptations are summed up as follows—the craving for riches, which, once possessed, will lead to one's being honored, and thus to a sense of pride in one's own achievements. Over against this, Christ offers poverty, that leads to contempt and insults, which in turn leads to humility. The hesychast fathers contain constant references to overcoming pride, seen as the culmination of all sinfulness.³³

The two traditions are also, as noted, complementary. So, for Ignatius the use of the imagination is a powerful aid to prayer, whilst for hesychasm the aim is to break through images, words, thoughts, to the encounter with the divine energies.³⁴ Ultimately, these are two different ways of being present to God. Even in its most distilled form, the "Examen," a time of recollection to discern the movement of the Spirit in one's daily life,³⁵ Ignatian spirituality urges this wholly embodied presence, re-running the events, observing, reflecting, listening, and learning. The hesychast tradition seeks to take the one praying beyond the limits and temptations of words, images, ideas, to submit oneself more and more to the mystery of God.

31 See Johnson, *Globalization*, 28, for some remarks on this.

32 SpEx [136–148].

33 Cf., the comments of Nil Sorsky, "The Monastic Rule," 85: "Anyone who surrenders himself to this vice becomes to himself a devil and his own enemy. He carries in himself the seeds of his own destruction."

34 See on this Maloney, *Russian Hesychasm*, 103–10.

35 On the "Examen," see Ivens, *Understanding*, 33–41 and *Keeping in Touch*, 76–77.

In conclusion, I want to return to some issues concerning tradition and innovation in these traditions. The successful implementation of the hesychast and Ignatian traditions has been through their orthopraxis, through their use for the service of God and God's Church. Whether we call this renewal or innovation, it will demand always new responses in new situations, because the Holy Spirit is experienced time and again in freedom and in hope. This pneumatological dimension of spiritual traditions has always been troubling for some. This should not be taken as a purely negative comment, since there have been times when the boundaries between freedom and libertinism have become blurred, and the Spirit has been used as an excuse for all sorts of behavior. And yet freedom in the Spirit remains crucial to both Ignatian spirituality and hesychasm.

In Conclusion

Ignatian spirituality fashioned both traditional and new spiritual exercises into a particular vision and program of prayer. Ignatius was living in a time of great and fundamental change, and one might see this as God's gift of a new way of encountering him in this new situation. Tradition is rightly seen as something that must renew itself constantly. In prayer, though, given that every person is a new creation, there is always something innovative, completely new, about the encounter with God. This is true in hesychasm, where there is no fixed advice for everyone, but where each case deserves to be heard as it is. The traditions are like a musical composition that draws on tradition, on established rules and practices. But each time a composer writes with these rules and in this tradition, something new is created, faithful in its own way and yet absolutely unprecedented.

Thus spiritual traditions, such as hesychasm or Ignatian spirituality, can be seen as setting the boundaries of orthopraxis within which God can be encountered. These boundaries are governed, first, by belonging to the wider ecclesial body. They are also governed by the world in which we live, whether as contemplatives in action in

the Ignatian tradition, or active in contemplation in the hesychast tradition. We are intimately linked with the world in which we live. Both traditions teach us that within this world there is also freedom for the Spirit to move us and for us to encounter the living God. And the resemblances between the two mean that in each we can encounter something that will help us, without having to argue that one is superior or better than another. All are gifts of God and for that we can be truly thankful.