

Call and response in St Ignatius and St Francis

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On the Feast of St Ignatius of Loyola, and in the year of the 800th anniversary of the founding of the Franciscan order, Brian Purfield compares the spiritual experiences of the founder of the Society of Jesus with those of Francis of Assisi. What similarities are there to be found between the Spiritual Exercises and Bonaventure's recollection of the life of St Francis?

The life of Francis of Assisi can be understood as a series of calls to which he was invited to respond by the Lord. These calls and his responses are set forth in *The Major Life of St Francis*¹, the biography by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, the eighth Minister General of the Friars Minor. Bonaventure took the data of earlier biographies of St Francis and subjected them to the principles of theology. In doing so, he provided a classic study of Franciscan spirituality within the context of the life of Francis. He has given us a valuable tool which is of great use for those involved in contemporary spiritual direction.² I wish to suggest in this article that the dynamic of call and response recorded in the *Major Life* can easily fit into the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola.

There are some striking similarities between the way the *Major Life* and the *Spiritual Exercises* are set out in terms of call and response, and indeed between Francis and Ignatius themselves. Compare, for example, the description of the cave experience in their lives. Francis is described thus by Thomas of Celano, his first biographer:

He withdrew for a while from the bustle and the business of the world and tried to establish Jesus Christ dwelling within himself ... There was a certain grotto near the city...when he came out again to his companion, he was so exhausted with the strain, that one person seemed to have entered, and another to have come out.³



Ignatius' biographers pay much attention to his spiritual experience on one occasion by the river Cardoner, near the cave at Manresa where he had done penance and had been tempted even to the point of suicide:

It is impossible to set out in detail all that he then understood, and the most he can say is that he received so great an enlightenment of mind that, taking together all the things he has learned and known during the whole course of his life up to the age of 62 years now passed, he

does not think they amount to as much as he received from that one illumination. It left him with a understanding so greatly enlightened that *he seemed to himself to be another man, with another mind than that which was his before.*⁴

The dynamic of call and response in the Major Life

The *Major Life* is ordered according to the three stages of the spiritual life: purgation, illumination and perfection or the unitive way. The first two chapters correspond to the purgative way, chapters three to twelve to the illuminative way and chapters thirteen to fifteen the unitive way. It is this order which brought to mind the pattern I set forth here.

The purgative calls and responses

Francis' early life before his conversion is described somewhat briefly in all the biographies. In common with other accounts of Francis' life, the *Major Life* opens with a call to search for love before Francis' conversion. This is seen in the incidents of the dreams

that Francis has: the vision of the palace full of military weapons with the insignia of the cross of Christ, and the corrective vision at Spoleto when Francis cries out: 'Lord what will you have me do?' (LM I,3). I will refer to this period later as the 'Prologue'.

This is followed by a call to conversion and a fitting response which is typified by the San Damiano crucifix experience. The Lord calls to Francis: 'Francis, go and repair my Church...' Francis, we are told,

prepared to obey, gathering himself together to carry out the command of repairing the church materially, although the principal intention of the words referred to that Church which Christ purchased with his own blood (LM II, 1)

The final call of the purgative dynamic is a call to serve the Lord. Here the *Major Life* describes the scene of Francis and his father before the Bishop of Assisi. Francis, in stripping before his father, makes a choice to respond to the call to serve the Lord:

Until now I have called you father here on earth, but now I can say without reservation, 'Our Father who are in heaven', since I have placed all my treasure and all my hope in him. (LM II,4)

This call to serve the Lord, and the response, prepares us for entry into the illuminative dynamic in which the main characteristic is discipleship.

The illuminative calls and responses

Francis had decided to call God Father and to follow him. But this call must be further specified. In the illuminative dynamic there is a series of calls which further clarify and deepen Francis' commitment and discipleship.

Firstly, there is a call to gospel life. Francis was living as a hermit when he heard the Gospel read at the Portiuncola on the feast of St Matthias, February 24, 1208. His response to the word of God is: 'This is what I want, this is what I long for with all my heart' (LM III,1). When he is joined by others who wish to lead the same life, there is another call and another response asked for: the call to community in poverty. When Bernard comes to Francis, both go to the church of St Nicholas and opening the gospel three times, Francis makes his response: 'This is our life and our rule... and the life and the rule of all who wish to

join our company' (LM III,3). Francis speaks of enduring humiliations and hardships for love of Christ. Bonaventure remarks that 'they had come to the school of the humble Christ to learn humility' (LM VI,5).

Deepening the call to discipleship, expressed as a call to gospel life, there is a further call in the illuminative dynamic. Francis experienced a call to discern. He was in a dilemma over the choice between the active or contemplative life. He sought to respond to this by asking direction from his own friars, Silvester and Clare (LM XII,1-2).

The unitive calls and responses

The key note of the unitive dimension is compassion and discipleship in terms of wanting to be with Christ no matter what the cost. There is a call to 'suffer with' ('compassion') Christ. It is seen most clearly on La Verna and Francis' reception of the stigmata (LM XIII, 2-3). Bonaventure describes this call as being that Francis 'should be conformed to him [Christ] in the affliction and sorrow of his passion before he would pass out of this world' (LM XIII,2). Having undergone the passion, he is called to be with the risen Christ. Francis' response is his passover or *transitus* to Christ (LM XIV, 3-5). Bonaventure recounts Francis saying near his death: 'I have done my duty, may Christ teach you yours' (LM XIV,3).

The dynamic of call and response in the Spiritual Exercises

The Spiritual Exercises are divided into four 'weeks'. These do not correspond to a period of seven days, but rather to the three stages of the spiritual life we have been examining. The First Week corresponds to the purgative dynamic, the Second Week to the illuminative, the Third and Fourth Weeks to the unitive. In the Third Week the focus is on the passion and death of Christ, the call to 'suffer with' Christ, while in the Fourth Week the focus is on the resurrection, the call to 'be with' the risen Christ.

Before the First Week proper of the Exercises, Ignatius has the Principle and Foundation. This is not so much points for meditation as a basic context and presupposition for all the meditations and contemplations. I see it as corresponding to what I termed the 'Prologue' or first call to Francis. The latter is a call to search for love and comprised his journey of dreams.

The Principle and Foundation states:

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created.⁵

The search to experience God's love spurs the individual (as it did Francis) to set out on a journey, an *iginerarium*, to find the meaning of life. Ignatius states the journey will take the individual through all of creation to God.⁶

The First Week of the Exercises (Exx 45) corresponds with the call to conversion in Francis' life. At the end of the meditations for the First Week and before the Second Week, there is a meditation on The Call of the King (Exx 91). In the Exercises this acts as a bridge between the First and Second Week. The focus is not on any specific call but simply a call to serve and labour with the Lord in spreading his kingdom here on earth. It is the transition to the illuminative dynamic, the transition from the call to conversion to the call to discipleship with Jesus and his work in building his kingdom. This can be linked with the call to serve the Lord in Francis' life. Furthermore, shortly afterwards, Francis is beaten by robbers who ask him who he is. He replies: 'I am the herald of the great King!' (LM II,5) – the very terminology Ignatius uses at this stage of the Exercises to describe this call.

The Second Week of the Exercises (Exx 101) corresponds to the illuminative dynamic. Ignatius focuses here on discipleship. Discipleship calls for a deeper knowledge and friendship with the Lord. It is gained through a contemplation of the public and private life of the Lord. With discipleship comes the decision to commit one's life to the Lord's service so that one can 'know him more clearly, love him more dearly, follow him more nearly' (Exx 104).

In the Second Week there are three structural pieces to prepare the individual for the contemplations on the following of Jesus in his public life. They are to help the individual imbibe Jesus' attitudes towards God, persons and the world. This style of praying provides the necessary context for discernment and decision-making during the Second Week: to what state of life or what kind of lifestyle is the Lord leading the individual to or confirming him or her in?

After the individual prays through these three structures, he or she is ready to follow Jesus in his public life with, firstly, understanding of Christ's identity and virtues (the Two Standards meditation [Exx 136]); secondly, a willingness and readiness to follow Jesus (the Three Classes of Persons [Exx 149]); thirdly, a deep desire for the grace to rejoice and delight in an intimate union with Jesus reflected in external poverty, insults and rejection, and to be considered a worthless fool (the Three Kinds of Humility or Three Levels of Discipleship [Exx 164]).

The focus of the meditation on the Two Leaders or Two Standards, is to understand the deceits and strategies of Satan in leading us to riches, honour and pride, as compared to Jesus leading us to pray for and choose poverty, insults and humiliations leading to true humility. Such a choice also faced Francis and is described for us by Bonaventure, who records that when Francis was approached by Bernard, he said 'We must ask God's advice about this' (LM III,3). Later this incident also incorporates the description of the Three Classes of Persons in the Exercises when Francis, as Bonaventure says, opens the Gospel book three times and has a description of his life and work.

The call to abandonment in Francis' life is also mirrored in the Exercises with the call to total surrender as set forth in the meditation on the Three Kinds of Humility or Three Kinds of Discipleship. The individual faces how closely he or she wants to be identified with Jesus.

Bonaventure records the active-contemplative dilemma in Francis' life, the discernment of a particular call; correspondingly, at the end of the Second Week of the Exercises, there is the Election (Exx 169). It is a call to discern, to choose, and is placed at the end of the illuminative dynamic, before going on to the unitive way of the Third and Fourth Weeks.

In the Third Week of the Exercises (Exx 190) the individual is called to stay with Jesus in his sufferings of the Passion. The individual experiences a desire for a more intimate relationship and revelation of Jesus. They ask the Lord to share with them his suffering self, that he let them into his suffering and death so that they can be sorrowful and compassionate with him. At this stage in the Exercises there are meditations on the events of the Passion.⁷

Bonaventure expresses this dynamic in Francis' life beautifully:

... the man (Francis) filled with God understood that just as he had imitated Christ in the actions of his life, so he should be conformed to him in the affliction and sorrow of his passion, before he would pass out of this world. And although his body was already weakened by the great austerity of his past life and his continual carrying of the Lord's cross, he was in no way terrified – but was inspired even more rigorously to endure martyrdom. His unquenchable fire of love for the good Jesus had been fanned into such a blaze of flames that many waters could not quench so powerful a love. (LM XIII,2)

The Fourth Week of the Exercises (Exx 218) calls the individual to be with the risen Christ, to share in the joy of Christ in his victory over death. The individual wants to be with the risen Lord in sharing this news with others. In the *transitus*, as he lay dying on the ground, Bonaventure tells us that Francis was lost in the serene contemplation of the glory of heaven, his reward for his perfect imitation of Christ, but he is careful to console his followers.

Conclusion

One final remark. At the end of the *Exercises*, Ignatius has a beautiful prayer and meditation entitled The Contemplation to Attain Love (Exx 230). It describes a mutuality, the experience of God's love for the individual and the love of the individual in gratitude for God's love. If the Principle and Foundation is a 'prologue' to the *Exercises*, the Contemplation is like an epilogue.

The same experience is present in Francis' life: the prologue in Francis' life was a call *to search for* love; the epilogue is a call *to* love. It is a deepening, as in the *Exercises*, of the original love which makes the journey possible in the first place. The sentiment is expressed in the *Major Life*, though out of sequence with the argument of this article. In chapter 9, Bonaventure captures the spirit of two mutual lovers, Francis and God, as expressed in one of Francis' favourite sayings: 'Greatly should the love be loved of him who loved us so greatly' (LM IX, 1).

Bonaventure set this mutual love down strongly in the climax and final chapter of the *Soul's journey into*

God. It is a journey inspired by the life and experience of Francis, which is begun in Christ and ends:

With Christ crucified let us pass out of this world to the Father so that when the Father is shown to us, we may say with Philip: 'It is enough for us'. Let us hear with Paul: 'My grace is sufficient for you'. (*Soul's journey*, VII,6)⁸

Is not this an expression of the prayer of Ignatius at the end of the *Exercises*?

Take, Lord, receive all my liberty, my memory, my intellect and all my will – all that I have and possess. You have given it to me: to you, Lord, I return it! All is yours, dispose of it according to your will. Give me your love and grace, for this is enough for me. (Exx 230)

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¹ The Latin title is *Legenda Maior S. Francisci*. References in this article will be abbreviated thus: LM followed by the number of the chapter in Roman numerals and the section in Arabic numerals. The English translation is taken from Ewert Cousins (trans and ed): *Bonaventure*, New York, 1978.

² I acknowledge my debt of gratitude to Tom Speier OFM, as my insights were gained during a three-month internship programme in Franciscan spiritual direction and directed retreats that he conducted.

³ 1 Celano 6. See Habig, Marion A. (ed): *St Francis of Assisi: writings and early biographies. English omnibus of the sources for the life of St Francis*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, 1973; hereafter abbreviated as *Omnibus*.

⁴ Cited by Thomas E. Clark SJ., in 'The Ignatian Exercises – contemplation and discernment', in *Review for religious*, vol 31 (1972/1), p 63. No reference is given. Emphases added.

⁵ Fleming S.J., David L. : *The Spiritual Exercises: a literal translation and a contemporary reading*, Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, 1978.

⁶ Bonaventure sets this out in *The soul's journey into God*.

⁷ E.g. The Last Supper (Exx 289); the Agony in the Garden (Exx 200); Jesus dies on the Cross (Exx 297).

⁸ *The soul's journey into God* VII,6. Chapter VII is entitled 'On spiritual and mystical ecstasy in which rest is given to our intellect when through ecstasy our affection passes over entirely into God'.