

## Ignatius in Lutheran light

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**Introduction** The Feast of St Ignatius Loyola on Sunday 31st July will be celebrated by followers of the Ignatian tradition the world over. In an article written for the Ignatian jubilee year in 1991, Philip Endean SJ compared Ignatius with another 16th century figure in whose tradition millions of Christians continue to practise their faith: Martin Luther. How did these two contemporaries find themselves on differing paths?

During the years immediately following his death, Ignatius Loyola's followers became fond of contrasting him with Martin Luther. In 1562, Jerónimo Nadal, a key figure in the early development of the Society of Jesus, spoke of how,

God called our Father Ignatius in about the same year that Luther left his convent and contracted his scandalous marriage. ... From this fact we understand in a special way how the Society was raised up to help the Church in Germany, in India or wherever. And so: in that same year that Luther was called by the devil, Ignatius was called by God.

Two years later Juan de Polanco, Ignatius's secretary, wrote the following:

... at the time when God, because of our sins, permitted Martin Luther in Germany to declare war on the apostolic Holy See and the Catholic religion ... at the very same time, more or less, his divine Providence began to prepare an antidote, so to speak, to counter this poison, in the striking conversion of Fr Ignatius Loyola.<sup>1</sup>

One titters nervously. We live today in an age where the Christian denominations have learned at least to be polite about each other, and therefore find texts like this faintly embarrassing. It will not do for Catholics to see their friendly neighbourhood



Anglicans or Presbyterians as incarnations of Satan. Moreover, many who are not Catholics now make Ignatius's Exercises, with great profit. Perhaps the best and fullest description of what it is like to make an Ignatian retreat has been written by an Evangelical Anglican.<sup>2</sup> But, below the surface, the idea of Ignatius as a *Counter-Reformation* figure, as a man whose main aim was to resist the forces of the Protestant Reformation – this

idea is still deeply lodged in our folk-memory. What follows is an attempt to dislodge it – at least a little. If we regard Ignatius simply as the hammer of the heretics, our understanding of him is significantly impoverished. This way of looking at Ignatius has its origins not in Ignatius's most formative experiences of God, but in the situation of his Society at a later period. Serious Ignatian scholars are now agreed that Ignatius himself lacked any burning impulse to counteract Lutheranism.<sup>3</sup> Our most valuable source for the conversion and student years of Ignatius comes not from what his first followers wrote, but rather from an account of his life which he dictated in the years just before his death: the so-called *Autobiography*. There is no mention of Luther or Lutheranism in this text at all. And yet the setting of most of the narrative is in Spain between 1521 and 1527, and then in Paris up till 1535. This period in Spain saw all kinds of measures being taken to stop the infiltration of Luther's innovations into the

country; in Paris Ignatius overlapped with Calvin, and the university was riven with controversies arising from Lutheran ideas. Yet all we hear is of Ignatius's personal experiences of God, his desire to go to the Holy Land, and his subsequent dedication to a life of what he calls poverty, of study, and of ministry. On several occasions he is accused of being a heretic himself. It is only after the Society is founded in 1540 that combatting heresy looms large in the collective consciousness of Ignatius and his followers. Even so, this was always one form of ministry among others. And Ignatius's instructions to Jesuits working among Protestants often sound strikingly eirenic:

They should make efforts to make friends with the leaders of their opponents, as also with those who are most influential among the heretics ... . They must try to bring them back from their error by sensitive skill and signs of love. ... They should defend the Apostolic See and its authority, and attract people towards true obedience to it, in such a way as not to lose credibility, as 'papists', through ill-judged partisanship. On the contrary, their zeal in countering heresy must be of such a quality as to reveal love for the heretics themselves, and a compassionate desire for their salvation.<sup>4</sup>

I would suggest, however, that it is possible to go further. There are in fact important parallels between Ignatius and Luther. In what follows, I want to point to three important points of resemblance. Firstly, there is a remarkable similarity in the way they both, as old men, looked back on their most formative experiences of God. Secondly, they both tried to establish a new ideal of ministry and pastoral care within Western Christianity. Thirdly, both had difficulties reconciling conscience and authority.

### *Luther's Tower and Ignatius at Manresa*

After his initial conversion on his sickbed, Ignatius resolved to go to Jerusalem. On the journey, for reasons that remain unclear, he was waylaid, and spent almost a year at a small Catalan town called Manresa. There he went through powerful, utterly transformative experiences, recorded – however puzzlingly – in his *Autobiography*. Shortly before arriving Ignatius has made a general confession. But he remains in torment:

... still it would sometimes seem to him that he had not confessed some things. And this was giving him much affliction because, although he would confess it, he would not be left satisfied. So he began to look for some spiritual men who might cure him of these scruples, but nothing was helping him. Finally, a Doctor of the Cathedral, a very spiritual man who used to preach there, told him one day in confession to write out everything he was able to remember. This he did - and after making his confession still the scruples were coming back, things each time becoming more nit-picky, with the result he was in a very troubled state.<sup>5</sup>

Ignatius even feels tempted to commit suicide. Yet a sudden change comes, even as the narrative of despair is in full swing:

And so, like something unravelling itself, he was carrying on thinking of sin after sin from the earlier time - it seemed to him that he was obliged again to confess them. But, at the end of these thoughts, there came to him some distastes at the life he was leading, with some impulses to leave it; and with this the Lord willed that he woke up as if from sleep.<sup>6</sup>

He realises that his scruples are coming not from God but from an evil spirit. With that he becomes free of them, holding that our Lord in his mercy had willed to liberate him.

The turning point comes quite suddenly in the rush of the narrative – indeed it is not clear exactly where. But it marks the beginning of a new life – a life in which God deals with Ignatius like a schoolmaster with a child.<sup>7</sup> Ignatius then lists a number of further, more positive experiences that he went through during the year. The last of these seems to have been particularly significant:

One time he was going in his devotion to a church, which was a little more than a mile from Manresa ... and the way goes along by the river - and going thus in his devotions, he sat down a little with his face towards the river, which was deep below. And being sat there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened: not that he saw some vision, but understanding and knowing *many* things, spiritual things and matters of faith and learning alike - and this with

an enlightenment so strong that all things seemed new to him.<sup>8</sup>

The details of the experience are left curiously understated: Ignatius's real memory is one of a total transformation of his religious understanding.

Like Ignatius, Luther also reminisced about his conversion in the years just before his death. And he too seems to have gone through the same kind of inner torment leading to total transformation:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously ... I was angry with God, and said 'As if, indeed, it is not enough that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!' ... At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night ... I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous person lives by a gift of God, namely by faith ... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me ...<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the differences, there are marked similarities. A crisis of intense, almost pathological guilt is suddenly relieved by a sense that it is God who does the real work of our redemption, and God who accepts us exactly as we are. In both cases, this leads to a complete transformation of the understanding. For Ignatius all things seem new; for Luther, a totally other face of the entire Scripture shows itself.

This similarity is not to be exaggerated. The external results of both experiences were very different. But one further point is worth making. Experiences of this kind were not unusual in the sixteenth century, and a young man in Italy seems to have had one in 1511, before Ignatius or Luther. His name was Gasparo Contarini. As Lutheran ideas about the justice and righteousness of God spread into Italy, Contarini became heavily influenced by them. He,

however, never believed that Luther's experience provided a basis for splitting the Church. Towards the end of his life he became an influential cardinal at the Curia, and worked hard to promote a position on justification which was largely Lutheran apart from a basic commitment to remaining within institutional Catholicism. He died in 1542, four years before the Council of Trent defined a position that ran counter to these efforts.

I have already suggested that Ignatius and the Society became more self-consciously anti-Protestant in the first decades of its existence. The same can be said of the Church as a whole. There is some evidence that when Ignatius and his companions came first to Italy, they were most welcomed by those who wanted to keep what was good in Lutheranism within the bosom of Catholicism. A letter of Ignatius's describes Contarini as 'our most devoted patron'.<sup>10</sup> Tragically the efforts at mediation failed, and the church-political situation became very different in the years immediately after the Society's foundation. It is just possible that the Society became very different too.

### *Preti Riformati*

Luther and Ignatius were both clerical reformers. We have a manuscript of the Society of Jesus's foundational charter with a note of Contarini's on the back, as if to remind him what the pieces of paper are. Translated into English it runs, 'brief of the most holy Lord Paul III regarding the reformed priests (*preti riformati*) of Jesus'.<sup>11</sup> Even when charges of heresy were flying around Rome only too easily, the early Jesuits were not ashamed of such a title.

Perhaps the most authoritative Catholic historian of the Church in this period was a German priest called Hubert Jedin, who died in 1980. He argues in a number of places that clerical reform in the sixteenth century amounted to the establishment of a new ideal of holiness and professional pastoral care. This replaced the concept of the priest as one who possessed a benefice, but who did not necessarily bother to carry out any of the religious duties theoretically attached to it. Francis Borgia, third superior general of the Jesuits, was viceroy of Catalonia before joining the Society. In that position he had to deal with a bishop of Barcelona who had enjoyed the revenue of the see from 1531 onwards, but who was ordained or

consecrated bishop only in 1545, just before his death.<sup>12</sup> According to Jedin, things changed in the 1500s:

The reformed Orders, together with the longer-established reform circles, produced people of a new kind, a kind which the Papacy needed for the reform of the Church. ... What was new was that the salvation and well-being of souls now gradually came to be grasped as the highest unwritten law at the centre of the Church. People came to realise that it was wrong to think first of those requiring patronage, and then find bishoprics and benefices for them. Rather, one had to find pastors and leaders for the Catholic community. People's imaginations began to work in terms of a new ideal of priest and bishop.<sup>13</sup>

Both Luther's movement and Ignatius's attempted to create this new kind of reformed priest. We have some records of how the early Lutheran reformers approached parish life.<sup>14</sup> The point which may surprise us is that they concentrate, not on what we see as specifically Lutheran doctrine, but on the basics of Christian living. Prior to Luther's reform, all that the average Catholic diocese in Luther's part of Germany seems to have required is the ability to say the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed, knowledge of what the seven sacraments were, and enough Latin to be able to say Mass. The records of one parish may indicate what happened as the Lutheran reform made progress. In the visitation of 1526, the concerns are still basic, if rather better than the situation earlier: making sure the pastors know the ten commandments, giving them some skills for helping people in distress, instilling some principles regarding marriage. Seven years later the official inspectors have higher standards: they want to know whether the pastor has a bible of his own. Does he read it and study it daily? The concern is not with partisan doctrine, but with inculcating basic Christian practice – a concern which, rightly or wrongly, Luther saw the Catholic hierarchy of his time as unable to meet.

Of course Luther did retrieve the biblical notion of the priesthood of all believers. His purpose in doing so, however, was not to defend a wholesale congregationalist understanding of Church authority. He is simply fighting to establish the right of the lay nobility to depose an unworthy priest in extreme

circumstances. He certainly had no belief whatever that a congregation could normally survive without clerical direction.

Seen against this background, the Society of Jesus appears as another example of the same kind of phenomenon. It trains its recruits seriously, well before Trent made some kind of seminary training a prerequisite for ordination. Its aims, as set out in its foundational charter, are clearly what we would now call pastoral: the spreading of the faith, the instruction of the ignorant, and the spiritual consolation of Christ's faithful through hearing confessions and administering the other sacraments. The Spiritual Exercises are in one sense for any seriously motivated Christian in doubt about how they should shape their lives. Ignatius's text, however, suggests that his original target may well have been worldly clerics. He often returns to the image of the man who takes a benefice, not for the love of God our Lord but out of greed for money. That is Ignatius's favourite example of the wrong sort of attitude.<sup>15</sup> And of course one of Luther's main complaints was the fact that priests and other religious functionaries exploited people's good faith by the scandalous sale of indulgences.

Luther and Ignatius can be seen as variant versions of the same phenomenon. One respected Catholic author has written of how, in the sixteenth century, Christianity *became* 'predominantly evangelical' – gospel-based.<sup>16</sup> People became concerned with the problem of salvation, with personal experience of God, with the Bible. This movement occurred among Catholics just as much as among Protestants. This idea of Christianity 'becoming' gospel-based may seem paradoxical – but one should remember that only in the sixteenth century, after the invention of printing, did it become possible even for highly-placed people actually to read the Scriptures. Christianity before that must have been very different from anything we can imagine. And both Luther and Ignatius had conversion experiences based on the reading of a printed book.

We tend to look at the Reformation with hindsight. We see the late medieval Church as being in disarray and hopelessly corrupt: a papacy preoccupied with politics and money; bishops not living in their dioceses; an ignorant clergy and an uninstructed laity. The Reformation is thus the restoration of what had

declined, the re-forming of what had become deformed. That is the sort of picture one finds in any conventional text book. However, this kind of judgment on pre-Reformation Christianity, inevitable and well-established though it may be, is to some extent anachronistic. We are imposing standards arising from our own religious sensibilities that would have been quite unintelligible at the time. Another kind of interpretation is possible. Europe in the sixteenth century was going through a period of convulsive cultural change, change profoundly affecting the ways in which religion shaped consciousnesses and functioned in society. In this light, Luther and Ignatius appear, not so much as opponents, but as models of a new kind of piety and a new kind of priesthood. What counted as Church life prior to the Reformation was so alien to our expectations of religion that we would not in fact recognise it as Christian at all. Ignatius and Luther were not about a Reformation so much as a Formation – the Formation of our whole sense of what it is to be religious. The influence of what we call the Reformation, and of Ignatius and Luther in particular, is so all-pervasive that we have to think before we realise that it may once not have been there at all. Ignatius and Luther were creative, influential prophets – perhaps even complementary ones.

### Conscience and Authority

I do not, however, want to suggest that if Luther had been a Spaniard he would have founded the Jesuits, nor that a German Ignatius would have led a schism. When all is said and done, Luther remains a Protestant, one who let his frustrations with the inadequacies of the Church lead him into forming a new Church. Ignatius stayed within the fold of Catholicism: he saw that his new kind of experience of God somehow had a place within what must have seemed to him a most unattractive institution. Nevertheless, I want to point to a similarity even within this difference.

Conventionally Ignatius appears as a man of absolute obedience to the Church and its office-holders. We forget all too easily that he repeatedly had acute difficulties with Church authorities from the time of his studies onwards. In 1545 there seems to have been some kind of rumour campaign in Portugal against the Society, and Ignatius wrote to the King of

Portugal setting out the whole history of his problems. He had to go through four trials in Spain, two in Paris, one in Venice and one in Rome – although the last was against the whole Society, when rumours spread through the city that the companions were, of all things, disguised Lutheran preachers.<sup>17</sup>

All of these proceedings resulted in Ignatius being cleared, and Ignatius leaves the King in no doubt. But the crucial point, I suggest, is that the charge of heresy must at least have *looked* plausible to somebody. And it is not hard to see why. This man talks about God dealing with the individual mind and heart, about God placing decisions within the soul, about the creature experiencing God without any kind of mediation.<sup>18</sup> And the question cannot but arise: if God works directly with the soul, who needs Church authority? What happens when authority and conscience come into conflict? What happens when God puts a decision into the soul which the local bishop or the Pope does not think right? God, or so we believe, speaks through them also.

What Ignatius actually said about these issues is conventionalised. It sounds outrageously authoritarian and hardly corresponds with his practice. When Popes and emperors wished to make his men bishops, a step which he saw as disastrous for the Society, Ignatius's attitude was a complex one – and anything but obedience to the least sign of his superiors' will.<sup>19</sup> The significant factor, rather, is Ignatius's ability to build relationships within the sixteenth century Church: his diplomatic skill, his personal leverage, his ability to win trust. Ignatius knew that God spoke in the human conscience; he also knew that the Church and its hierarchy were a privileged means through which God works in the world. He was prepared to be a pilgrim, to keep going in relative blindness, to rely on good personal relations without demanding total clarity on the underlying principles.

Some people might call this procedure hypocritical, a charge which has often surfaced in the Jesuits' history: equally, it can be seen as eminently sane and reasonable. Our relationship with the Church is a living one. As such, it is unfinished and in some respects unclear. We have to work at it. The sentences through which we express our love relationships – 'you are the only one in the world for me' – become sheer nonsense if taken as some kind of

scientific statement, prescinding from the relational context that gives them life. What Ignatius says about loyalty to pope and hierarchy needs to be understood in the same kind of way: as expressions of love and respect, to be taken seriously as such – but not as systematic theology. The theoretical issues regarding the relationships between conscience and authority were unresolved in Ignatius’s day, and not much progress has been made on them since. If Ignatius was a pilgrim, we are a pilgrim Church. The answer to these questions is still to be discovered.

Luther was a much more abrasive, clear-cut figure than Ignatius. When Ignatius could live with grey, Luther needed black and white. Hence he made a split with Rome – though after the split he was capable of maintaining, against Anabaptists, some very authoritarian positions on his own behalf.<sup>20</sup> Luther could not do what Ignatius did: live with the tensions and rely on his ability to make relationships. That was partly a matter of temperament, partly a matter of social position. Ignatius was a Latin, educated near the royal court in Spain. He was able to get personal access to people who mattered in the way that Luther never could. There are junctures in the history of his movement at which, arguably, its very survival depended on that ability.

Ignatius and Luther had different answers to the problem of authority and conscience. But they faced basically the same question, and with an acuteness that was quite new, arising from their personal experiences of God’s mercy. How does one adjudicate between two voices which are always liable to come into conflict: prophetic conscience and ecclesiastical authority? Neither Ignatius’s nor Luther’s solution is as one-sided as they first sound.

We should not take from them a simple preference for one answer over the other, but rather a challenge: a challenge to find a deeper understanding of the ways in which God’s spirit moves within the whole Church. If we can achieve that, then maybe we can reconcile the truth and discard the nonsense contained within both positions.

### *Ongoing Reformation*

This has been an article about the sixteenth century. What should it mean for us today?

It does not mean that we can all become one Church tomorrow, but rather, I suggest, that we are ourselves in the throes of a cultural shift just as radical, if not more so, than that which occurred in the sixteenth century, throwing up Ignatius, Luther and many others as models of a fundamentally new way of being religious. The real question for us is this. Are we prepared to let God mould us anew, as he remoulded the medieval Church through figures like Luther and Ignatius? Are we prepared to let God be who God will be for us in a radically new way? If so, we do not know where we shall be led. But, if we accept God’s new calling, we might come to *discover* more fully the unity we in one sense already possess – in the one whom Ignatius loved to call Creator and Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu* (MHSJ) MN V, 780; FN II, 306-307. Nadal's rhetoric ignores some niceties of dating. For further texts in the same vein see: Terence O'Reilly, 'Ignatius of Loyola and the Counter-Reformation: The Hagiographic Tradition', *The Heythrop Journal*, 31 (1990), 439-470, at 441-442; Jos E. Vercruyssen, 'Nadal and the Counter-Reformation: An Anti-Protestant Interpretation of the *Constitutions*'?, CIS, 20.3 (Autumn 1990), 80-90.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Netherwood, *The Voice of this Calling: An Evangelical Encounters the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, (London, 1990). See also a number of articles in *The Way Supplement*, 68 (Summer 1990): *Ignatian Spirituality in Ecumenical Context*. I have attempted to reflect on the theoretical issues raised by this development in 'Ignatius and Church Authority', *The Way Supplement*, 70 (1991), 76-90.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, O'Reilly, 442-448, on which I draw heavily here. On the broader historiographical issues, see John W. O'Malley, 'The Jesuits, St. Ignatius and the Counter Reformation: Some Recent Studies and their Implications for Today', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 14.1 (January 1982).

<sup>4</sup> MHSJ EI XII, 243-244. Translation in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, translated and edited by Joseph A. Munitiz SJ & Philip Endean SJ

<sup>5</sup> Autobiography (Aut), 22. Translation in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, translated and edited by Joseph A. Munitiz SJ & Philip Endean SJ

<sup>6</sup> Aut 25.

<sup>7</sup> Aut 27.

<sup>8</sup> Aut 30.

<sup>9</sup> Luther, Preface to Latin Writings (1545), cited from *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, edited by John Dillenberger (Garden City, 1961), 11.

For the general comparison, I am indebted to Rogelio García-Mateo, a Spanish Jesuit scholar living in Munich. See his two articles: 'Ignacio de Loyola ¿Antiluterero?: Consideración ecuménica de su confrontación histórica', *Manresa*, 57 (1985), 251-259; 'Martin Luther - Ignatius von Loyola - Teresa von Avila: Ökumenische Gemeinsamkeit in spirituellen Grunderfahrungen', *Geist und Leben*, 59 (1986), 343-358.

<sup>10</sup> MHSJ EI I, 156. On Contarini and his circle, see Dermot Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy: Cardinal Pole and the Counter Reformation* (Cambridge, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> Pietro Tacchi-Venturi, *Storia della Compagnia di Gesù in Italia*, 2 vols (Rome, 1930-1951), 1.2, 179-180.

<sup>12</sup> Cándido de Dalmases, *El padre Francisco de Borja* (Madrid, 1983), 44.

<sup>13</sup> Hubert Jedin, *Katholische Reformation oder Gegenreformation* (Luzern, 1946), 30. A convenient summary in English of Jedin's position is his essay, 'Did the Council of Trent Create a Prototype of the Priest?', in *Priesthood and Celibacy*, edited by J. Coppens and others (Milan, 1972), 153-180.

<sup>14</sup> For what follows, I draw on Susan C. Karant-Nunn, *Luther's Pastors: The Reformation in the Ernestine Countryside* (Philadelphia, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> *Spiritual Exercises* 16, 169, 171, 178, 181. For general background on Jesuit priesthood, there is a helpful study by Luis de Diego: *La opción sacerdotal de Ignacio de Loyola y sus compañeros (1515-1540)*, (Rome, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> MHSJ FN I, 50-54.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, *Spiritual Exercises* 15, 180.

<sup>19</sup> On this the most important study is Raymund Schwager, *Das dramatische Kirchenverständnis bei Ignatius von Loyola* (Zurich 1970) - summarized and slightly extended in my 'Ignatius and Church Authority'.

<sup>20</sup> This point underlies John O'Malley's illuminating account of the dispute between Luther and Erasmus: 'Erasmus and Luther: Continuity and Discontinuity as Key to their Conflict', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 5 (1974), 47-65.