



The risen Christ, the consoler

Iona Reid-Dalglish

The gospels tell us that the disciples were profoundly changed by their encounters with Jesus after his resurrection. ‘Ignatius’s firm conviction was that, to this day, encounters with the risen Christ will similarly be typified by experiences of hope, joy and life, even amidst the darkest times’, says Iona Reid-Dalglish. What does the framework of Ignatian spiritual direction tell us about how we meet the risen Christ in our everyday lives?

Pope Francis, in a recent address to his Jesuit brothers, encouraged them to pray persistently for consolation for themselves.¹ Initially we might respond in surprise at that sort of petitionary prayer. It doesn’t seem very self-less. ‘God, please console me’, can come across as selfish and thoroughly me-focused, generally not traits held up as Christian virtues. So what is consolation, and why do Ignatius, the pope, the Jesuits, place so much emphasis on choosing to follow its path?



mention the dog. When I get back from work I am mostly knackered and all I want is a glass of wine and to zone out. And I’m getting up so early to get into work that there’s just no time for prayer. I miss spending time with God. The weekends aren’t much use either because they’re the only time I get to spend with the kids and my husband. I don’t want to be taking myself off somewhere alone to pray in the few precious hours I get with them. It all feels a bit hopeless, what can I do?

I would like to suggest four key things that Ignatian spiritual direction might tell us about encountering the risen Christ, which offer a possible answer. Firstly, that we encounter Christ **in the reality of our lives**. Secondly, that Christ enters into that reality **as consoler**. Thirdly, that **this consolation is how Christ enables people to live lives of discipleship**. Fourthly, that **Christ calls us to collaborate in that same consoling action of his today**. If these are the case, then they invite a response. By opting for the path of consolation, indeed asking for the grace of consolation, Ignatius, the pope and the Jesuits are choosing to find and respond to the action of the risen Christ in the world.

I would like to begin unpacking this idea with a thought experiment. Imagine someone comes to you and says something like the following:

I’m really struggling at the moment. I am so busy after a recent promotion at work meaning much longer hours, with three kids at home, not to

What would your initial response be to this person?

Most people would feel for them, and want to help find a solution, fix the problem. You might suggest a series of options they have not thought of, or explore whether they need to re-think their work-life balance. Or if you’re an Ignatian person, how about [Pray as you go](#)? It’s perfect for busy people! All of these are legitimate responses. However, they would not necessarily be thoroughly Ignatian responses, or at least they would not be the first port of call or prime focus in Ignatian spiritual direction. Why not? Because Ignatius had a firm conviction that the first thing anyone should do when paying attention to another, or indeed themselves, is to look for where Christ seems to be with that person *now*, and what Christ might be up to there. In Ignatian language, we are looking for the ‘spiritual consolation’, or a more contemporary translation describes it as looking for the ‘movement of God’ (that which moves us towards rather than away from God). Importantly, Ignatius assumes that Christ is already active and doing something with

each person, regardless of how busy they may be, or how distant they may feel from Christ at the moment – Christ *is* there and *is* active. One of the core roles of an Ignatian spiritual director is to hold onto that fact, to the hope that Christ is present and active, particularly when it feels as if the opposite is true. **So we encounter the risen Christ in the present reality of our lives**, not in some fantasy of how we might like our lives to be, or feel they *ought* to be in order to encounter Christ. The risen Christ comes into the mess and complexity of real life. As Gerry W. Hughes SJ puts it, ‘God is in the facts’. Similarly, Walter Burghardt describes prayer or contemplation as a ‘long, loving look at the real’. Again, the important word in this sentence is ‘real’. The risen Christ is active and present in the reality of my life and the world, despite how often it may seem to be far from the case.

Secondly, Christ enters into this reality as consoler. In his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius of Loyola had a very clear notion of the primary way in which **the risen Christ meets and works with people: namely ‘in the office of consoler’**. Towards the end of the Exercises, he invites the retreatant to use their imagination to pray with the gospel accounts of encounters with the risen Christ and to, ‘Consider the office of consoler which Christ our Lord carries out, and compare it with the way friends console one another’ (*Spiritual Exercises*, §224). We see the women in Matthew’s Gospel, ‘filled with awe and great joy’ at hearing the news (28:8). The two disciples on the road to Emmaus move from ‘faces downcast’ as they talked of all that had happened, to exclaiming in wonder, ‘did our hearts not burn within us as he talked to us on the road?’ (Luke 24:32). The disciples, having seen the risen Christ, ‘went back to Jerusalem full of joy’ in Luke’s Gospel (28:52). John’s Gospel describes Mary ‘standing outside the tomb, weeping’ and then an instant of recognition and transformation when she hears him say her name, ‘Mary!’ (John 10:16); and the shift in the disciples from fear to being ‘filled with joy at seeing the Lord’ (John 20:20). There is a distinct change in the affective experience of those who knew Jesus when they encounter his risen self: from grief, sorrow, fear and hopelessness at his death, to hope, life, joy and energy to go out and tell others after his resurrection.

These do not seem like surprising responses to getting back a loved one who had been lost, but these encounters do tell us something about the way in which the risen Christ acts with people – by rekindling lost

hope, bringing joy, easing fear and enabling a lived response of continued discipleship. Ignatius’s firm conviction was that, to this day, encounters with the risen Christ will similarly be typified by experiences of hope, joy and life – in his language, spiritual consolation – even amidst struggles and the darkest times

It might be helpful to give a sense of what spiritual consolation was for Ignatius. He does not offer a single concise definition, instead he gives various examples of what he means by it in regards to people ‘of good will’ (people who have a core orientation towards God). Loosely summarised, for Ignatius, spiritual consolation is any experience that: leads to love of God, and love of all people and things in God; increases our faith, hope and love; leaves us feeling joyful, peaceful and tranquil in a deep and abiding way in our sense of God. There is something about spiritual consolation that orients us towards God, helping us move closer to God, and it often involves a healthy moving outwards, from self towards others, in love. Importantly, spiritual consolation may not always feel pleasant. Hard spiritual consolation exists, for example in the grieving of a loved one: although it feels deeply painful and sad, and Christ doesn’t change that, there is a sense of Christ feeling it with us and holding us through it. Consolation is not about pleasure but about a deep sense of Christ’s presence, and an orientation towards Christ that enables the person to live with whatever struggle or pain is being experienced rather than being overwhelmed by hopelessness and despair.

In Ignatian spiritual direction, there is a strong focus that echoes this conviction about the way God works, about the way we meet the risen Christ. The Ignatian director will acknowledge and possibly name spiritual *desolation* in a person’s experience – the thoughts, moods and feelings that come when we are under the influence of things that move us away from God; a being out of tune with God’s Holy Spirit – but choose to focus on the spiritual *consolation*: the moments of movement towards God, moments of hope, life, light, energy. This may sound like a hedonistic focus for spiritual direction, even anathema to the Christian life – seek only comfort, avoid suffering. And clearly, as can be seen from any human life, and indeed Jesus’s own life, being fully myself in God is not a ticket to a pain-free path. And yet...! Ignatius still had a deep sense that the way in which Christ works and is encountered is the way of consolation, and importantly consolation can exist and act in the midst both of sorrow and

death, as well as joy and life. If anything, this is what the resurrection is about – that the consoling, life-giving, loving action of God is stronger than all that opposes it, even death.

Interestingly, as human beings, we seem to be hard-wired to prefer desolation. [Spiritual desolation is endlessly fascinating](#) – many problems to be fixed, something we can really get our teeth into. There is a parallel in psychological research: ‘Bad emotions... and bad feedback have more impact than good ones. Bad impressions and bad stereotypes are quicker to form and more resistant to disconfirmation than good ones’.² Indeed, it apparently takes five times as many ‘good’ comments to overpower a ‘bad’ comment in someone’s psyche. Now this is all a little binary and, as I’ve said, Ignatian spiritual consolation isn’t synonymous with good/pleasant experiences, but there is something important to note here: people receiving spiritual direction find it difficult to stay with, relish and savour consoling experiences in life and prayer.

Ignatius specifically encourages relishing, savouring, going back and dwelling with experiences of spiritual consolation. When I am able to help a person in spiritual direction stay and explore experiences of consolation, I can visibly see shifts, growth, new life emerging in them. Most noticeably, more often than not, whatever desolation was around is also transformed, has a new light cast on it, and becomes far less powerful and ensnaring. Staying with and focusing on the consolation tends to lead to freedom, because it is in moments of consolation that they are most in touch with the risen Christ, who is far better at untangling their lives than we are. Pope Francis puts this eloquently in *Laudato si’*, quoting Pope St John Paul II: ‘The Holy Spirit can be said to possess an infinite creativity, proper to the divine mind, which knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs, including the most complex and inscrutable’.³

By giving them this freedom, **Christ consoles people into life and discipleship**. The way in which Christ makes disciples, calls and sends people to build the kingdom of God, is by consoling them into these responses. So, if we are to collaborate with this action of Christ in the world, then we, too, must have an eye for the consolation of Christ and tarry there a while to let it blossom. This is why in Ignatian spiritual direction we have a preference for noticing and staying with the spiritual consolation in a person’s experience. It is

Christ doing the healing and transforming: all that the director is doing is using listening skills to help them say more about the particularities of the consolation, to help them get more deeply in touch with what that experience was like, affectively – and what Christ might be like in that experience, too. And, time after time, as they say more, an experience of encounter with the risen Christ takes place.

It is not just Ignatian spiritual directors, but **all people who are being invited to collaborate in the consolation of the risen Christ**, to opt for that spiritual consolation, in both our lives and the lives of those we listen to and encounter. It has been said of an early Jesuit, famed for being the best giver of the Spiritual Exercises, that:

To each individual soul he was redemptively attentive. And through this attentive submission to the reality of other people, combined with a passion for their restoration, [Pierre] [Favre](#) obtained the charism of spiritual direction, a charism which enabled him to discern and uncover in all whom he met the point at which salvation was coming to them from God.⁴

The risen Christ is at work, but importantly we are relational beings, and we are called into this ministry of consolation, to collaborate with the work of the risen Christ in our relating to self, God and others. We are also asked to choose ‘the path of consolation that fortifies our faith, hope and love’, because this is where we encounter the risen Christ, and collaborate in Christ’s mission.⁵

Iona Reid-Dalglish is a spiritual director and a member of the retreat team at [St Beuno’s Jesuit Spirituality Centre](#) in North Wales.

¹ Pope Francis, [Address to 36th Congregation of the Society of Jesus](#) (24 October 2016).

² Roy F. Baumeister, a professor of social psychology at Florida State University, summarises these findings in an article, ‘[Bad Is Stronger Than Good](#)’, *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 5. No. 4. (2001), 323-370.

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’* (2015), §80.

⁴ Michel de Certeau SJ, ‘[Pierre Favre and the Experience of Salvation](#)’, *The Way*, 45/4 (October 2006), 21-40.

⁵ 36th Congregation of the Society of Jesus, [Decree 1: Companions in a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice](#) (2016), §12.