



Allocutio



Presentata Curia 23rd October 2008

Allocutio: St Francis and St Ignatius

I have been reading a book recently about Catholic Spirituality. It looks at seven of the main spiritual families in the Church and the vision of their founders and their approach to God. Tonight I'll borrow from Francis of Assisi and Ignatius of Loyola.

But before I engage with them it is worth observing that the engagement with God arises from two experienced realities. Certainly God begins the call by making the soul aware of its disenchantment with the world and the pleasures it offers. Coupled with that the soul may slowly perceive that God is touching it in some way. God is often sensed in silent moments when we contemplate nature of some beauty or even in the innocent good of another human being. And then what happens is that the soul who has become sensitised to the touch and call of God has a dilemma: how to engage with this real God in the middle of all the ups and twists and dizziness of life. By the way this does not always happen to us in a necessary organised, pat, way. Sometimes the soul looking back sees what has happened.

Francis and Ignatius illustrate two different paths that can be taken. Francis heard a call to retreat from the world and went and dwelled in the ruined Church of San Damiano and slowly began to unravel what God was calling him to. There he was joined by others who felt attracted by his vision and they too abandoned the world. Ignatius on the other hand was very immersed in the world of the University of Paris at the time of the Reformation and by his enthusiasm for Christ and what the Gospel held he won adherents around him. He did not retreat from the world but opted to engage with it.

Francis made a radical option about life that challenges us: he decided to take for absolute real the goodness of God. When he handed over his cloths to his father in the square he made a complete act of trust in God and stayed with it to the end. Francis radically left the world and its ways and its class system. But if so he wasn't turning his back on human beings. It was so that by deepening his sense of God's goodness and love he could bring all of that to others.

He sensed God speaking to him through everything in creation. But he was awestruck by the fact that God had adopted our world and made it his own through Jesus who made himself part of it. He marvelled at the humility of God who would become one with us, who though Creator would stoop down to wash creatures feet and who would submit to a horrible death at their hands. And this set his agenda. Let me quote from him: "Give praise to him since he is good and exalt him by your deeds for he has sent you into the entire world for this reason: that in word and deed you might give witness to his voice and bring everyone to know that there is no one all-powerful except him. I counsel, admonish and exhort my brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ, that when they go about in the world, they do not quarrel or judge others; rather let them be meek, peaceful, and unassuming, gentle and humble, speaking courteously to everyone as is becoming. Whoever comes to them, friend or foe, rogue or robber, should be received with kindness. As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that greater peace is in your hearts. Let none be provoked to anger or scandal through you, but may everyone be drawn to peace, kindness and harmony through your gentleness."

While Francis felt the need to reject the world Ignatius did not. For Ignatius this world with all its messiness is precisely the world Jesus came into. He was radically a layman who wanted a way for lay people. He felt there must be a way of being in contact with God in this world. So he gave the spiritual exercises to the company around him and to all of us. Ignatius felt the great need to reflect on the life and Passion of our Lord. He found it very helpful to try and put himself in the scenes of the Gospel so as to



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get a real sense of what the Gospel was saying to us today. Of course that requires finding a space in which we can really become lost in the Gospels.

Let me now quote from my author about the method of Ignatius. “If he wanted to help individuals to grow he found it helpful to know where they were on the road, where each one was coming from, what they were seeking, what was each one’s mastering desire, how strong was his desire. Everything hinged on desire. The search for God is an encounter of two freedoms, of two desires: God’s desire to give himself and the desire of the human heart for God ... It has been said that to understand St. Ignatius you have to see him as always in movement. He is always aware of process. Of growth. He took people where they were explored with each one where they decided to go, suggesting what might help a person to the next step of growth, to where the action of God was calling them now. So you do not take a sinner already in despair at his own wretchedness and batter him with the demands of heroic sanctity. People are taken where they are and encouraged to aspire to what God enables them to manage ... St. Ignatius is clear. That kind of prayer is best for each one where God desires to communicate himself more. “God sees and knows what is best for each one and as he knows us all he shows each the road to take.”

One of the great lessons of St. Ignatius is that great flexibility must be allowed in this area. Any direction of souls requires that we try to understand that soul and be aware that how God deals with is may be very different from my own.

To sum up: in these two saints we see two differing approaches. Both men were raised up by God to respond to a real crisis in the Church at their times. Both sought the ways of the world first until they sensed distaste at the world and heard another voice. After that they threw everything into the cause of Christ. May they by their prayers help us to have a deeper sense of God and how he is to be made real for the people of our times.

Amen.

Fr Paul Churchill