



## Spirituality and Virtue in Christian Formation: A Conversation between Thomistic and Ignatian Traditions

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### Abstract

This paper reflects on Christian formation, the growth of the disciple into the image of Christ, from two traditions, the Thomistic and Ignatian. The Thomistic tradition offers a rich theological theory of virtue, but seems to require a more convincing narrative of how ‘infused’ virtue develops in the Christian life. The Ignatian tradition offers a more experiential spirituality, but today needs to explain how spiritual experience can be lived out. It is argued that the two traditions can be seen as mutually complementary, and that, by understanding the relation of virtue to the practice of spiritual discernment, a fuller account of Christian formation is possible.

### Keywords

Virtue, Infused virtue, Discernment, Spirituality, Formation

“Christian formation” refers, not to being forced to fit a pre-determined mould, but to the growth of the disciple into a unique image of Christ.<sup>1</sup> The paradigm of this process lies in the Gospels, between the calling of the disciples and their being sent out, during which time they are continually challenged by Jesus into a new way of perceiving and living. While Christian formation cannot be restricted to any one period, it does therefore characterize especially that between vocation and mission: the call has been discerned, a life commitment has been made, and yet the task remains to become the kind of person who can live out that calling to the full. No less than the aspiring athlete or soldier, the disciple needs to engage in an *ascesis*, a training, before running the race, before fighting the battle.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the term ‘Christian formation,’ see Joanna Collicutt, *The Psychology of Christian Character Formation* (London: SCM Press, 2015), Chapter 1.

How best to understand and facilitate this process? My reflection on this question is informed by two traditions that speak of the relationship between spirituality and virtue in Christian formation. The first is the Thomistic. For the last thirty or forty years, Thomistic scholarship, in the context of a broader renewal of virtue in ethics, has been recovering Thomas's rich account of the virtues in the *Summa Theologiae*. This is not to say that Thomas was a "virtue ethicist" in a narrow or exclusive sense, as though his entire ethics can be reduced to a consideration of the virtues: his accounts of natural law, grace, human action, and beatitude all play a significant role as well. Nevertheless, the balance of some Thomistic moral theology had tipped towards a narrow focus on law and sin, and we are now in a better position to appreciate Thomas's general account of virtue (*Summa Theologiae* (ST) I.II.49-70) as well as his account of specific virtues and their opposed vices (II.II.1-170). Now that Thomistic virtue has been in the process of recovery for some time, scholars are increasingly drawing out the theological character of Thomas's account of virtue, and its place in his "spirituality". There are contested questions of exegesis here, as well as conflicts about how best to construct an account of Christian formation today. The issues coalesce around the idea of "infused virtue" that comes through grace: how is infused virtue related to the "acquired virtue" that arises through habituation? There is also a puzzlement concerning the nature of infused virtue itself. If, from a Thomistic perspective, Christian formation happens largely through the infusion of the theological, moral and even intellectual virtues, how to interpret this graced process of development in the lived experience of the Christian? Unless we answer this question, we are left with a rich theological ethics, but without a livable spirituality of virtue.

The other tradition of Christian formation that informs my approach originates with Ignatius Loyola. Ignatius's primary tool of Christian formation, both for trainee Jesuits and others, was the *Spiritual Exercises*, applied differently in different contexts, but in its fullest form constituted by a thirty-day period of seclusion and prayer. The *Exercises* are designed to offer a way of "preparing and making ourselves ready to get rid of all disordered affections so that, once rid of them, one might seek and find the divine will in regard to the disposition of one's life for the salvation of the soul" [Exx 1].<sup>2</sup> Today, they are variously understood as a school of prayer, a way of making a life-decision, and a training in spiritual discernment. However they are interpreted, and clearly none of these hermeneutics are mutually exclusive, they are meant to enable a potentially formative,

<sup>2</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. by Michael Ivens (Leominster, England: Gracewing Publishing, 2004).

even transformative spiritual experience. It is also necessary to note that the Ignatian concern with Christian formation goes well beyond the *Spiritual Exercises* themselves. Ignatius's "autobiography", or reminiscences of his life, which he reluctantly agreed to give after much persuasion by the early Jesuits, was seen by them as important precisely because they saw in his life the "first form and grace" of the Jesuit way of life. For Jerome Nadal, "The whole life of the Society is contained in germ and expressed in Ignatius's story".<sup>3</sup> The *Autobiography* itself, therefore, becomes an important tool for formation, as it displays the process through narrative: it shows what it looks like in one person's life experience. Ignatius's *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* is developmental in its structure as it uses, as its organising principle, the stages of the process of Jesuit formation, from the first conversations of a candidate with the Society onwards.<sup>4</sup> This is not a monastic understanding of formation, according to which someone is initiated into the religious life by joining a well-ordered monastery, but rather a new working out of the kind of formation required for life in a missionary body. While the temporary seclusion of the *Spiritual Exercises* is seen as the most important moment, the other "experiments" or testing experiences of the novitiate, such as pilgrimage, serving the dying, and catechizing children, and also the extended period of pastoral ministry ("Regency") as well as studies themselves, are all integral aspects of formation for mission. The *telos* of the process is seen in a chapter that describes the qualities that the general superior of the company ought to have.<sup>5</sup> While the primary function of this chapter is to provide criteria by which to elect a new general, it also provides an image of the kind of person every Jesuit should be aiming to become. Ignatius constructs this portrait, as it were, through the virtues.

What can the Ignatian tradition of Christian formation offer to us today? One central contribution, but also difficulty, comes from the way the Ignatian spirituality is practised today. The renewal of Ignatian spirituality over the last forty years or so, brought about in part by a scholarly return to the original sources, but also by a renewed practice of the individually guided retreat on a model closer to that of Ignatius's original intent, has emphasized spiritual discernment, and the attentiveness to faith experience that

<sup>3</sup> John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.65.

<sup>4</sup> *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms: A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Book IX, Ch.2. See Antonio M. De Aldama, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: The Superior General*, trans. by Ignacio Echaniz (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1999).

it presupposes, as a central practice. This lends, then, an experiential focus to Ignatian prayer and way of life. The preached retreat is no longer the archetype, but rather an individually guided retreat in which there is a dialogue between the one making the *Spiritual Exercises* and the one giving them. The spiritual director requires not so much a scholarly knowledge of the stages of the mystical life as a capacity to attend carefully to the experience of another person's prayer and spiritual experience, and to discern where the Spirit may be leading. The testimony of those who have undergone the long retreat, and of those who accompany others who do so, is that the Four Weeks of the *Spiritual Exercises* are indeed a potentially transformative experience of prayer. From my perspective as a theological ethicist, what is less clear is what may be called "the problem of the fifth week": once the experience is over, how does one continue to live out of that foundational experience? The incipient transformation of the *Spiritual Exercises* still needs to be incarnated, so to speak, in the concrete details of a person's life.<sup>6</sup> The assumption that an authentic spiritual experience "just will" bear fruit in a person's life does not satisfy me. As we know from the Gospels, there is a requirement not only to hear the Word but also to do it, and so we need some account of the "bridge" between spiritual experience and action. What we have is a spirituality of experience, but do we have a spirituality as a way of life, a path to be walked?

Both the Thomistic and Ignatian traditions, therefore, are valuable loci for reflection on the relationship between spirituality and virtue in Christian formation, yet, as they are currently understood, both leave us with an incomplete picture. What I want to explore in this essay is whether a conversation between these two traditions can be enlightening, indeed, whether they may be mutually complementary. Thomistic ethics offers an overarching vision of the growth in virtue through the Spirit, but currently lacks the narrative detail of how that is displayed in the experience a Christian life. Ignatian spirituality, on the other hand, offers us an experiential spirituality of discernment, but currently lacks an account of how that is to be lived out in the rest of life. Might the two together enhance our understanding of Christian formation?

### Thomistic Perspectives

Thomas's theology is inexhaustibly rich. I will highlight just two facets of Christian formation or growth in virtue that he can help

<sup>6</sup> I develop this point in Nicholas Austin, 'Mind and Heart: Towards an Ignatian Spirituality of Study', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 46.4 (2014).

us with: its dynamism, and its origin in grace. I will suggest that Thomas also leaves us with some questions.

### *The dynamism of Christian formation*

The first time I attended a class in moral theology by James Keenan SJ, many years ago, he was talking about Thomas Aquinas. I still vividly remember the last sentence: “And that is why many moralists turn to Thomas: his vision of the moral life is so dynamic”.

The dynamism is evident in the justly famous Prologue to his *Treatise on Morals*, where Thomas explains that the subject matter of his ethics is “the human being made to God’s image,” *homo factus ad imaginem Dei* (I.II.pr).<sup>7</sup> As Fergus Kerr OP comments, “The little word ‘ad’ is decisive . . . . A small bit of grammar carries a good deal of theology.”<sup>8</sup> Thomas had earlier explained, “the human being is not only said to *be* the image, but also *towards* [*ad*] the image, by which the *motion* of someone tending towards completion is designated” (ST I.35.2 ad 3). The human person is made to the image of God in two senses, therefore: she is modelled on the exemplar, and is also moving towards being a more perfect likeness. With this bivalent preposition *ad*, Thomas therefore conveys a process in which the created image moves towards becoming the perfected image in glory through grace, virtue and its acts (I.93.4c). The subject of study, then, is the human person on the way, *in via*, in motion. As he himself puts it, his theological ethics is “about the motion of the rational creature into God” (ST I.2 pr). Thomas’s moral theology is an ethics, not merely of the merely *entitative* but of the *dynamic* image of God.<sup>9</sup>

So Thomas sees the Christian life as a journey towards likeness of the divine exemplar through grace, virtue, and its acts. Given the infinite distance of the divine from humankind, however, can God serve as the exemplar of human virtue in any practical way? Thomas recognizes this problem of distance, and appeals to the Incarnation as the necessary bridge:

This exemplar, God, was previously truly remote from us. As it is said, “What is a human being, that he could follow the King his maker?” (Ecclesiastes 2.12) And therefore he willed to become a human being, to present to humans a human exemplar.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Translations from the Latin text are mine.

<sup>8</sup> Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p.164.

<sup>9</sup> Jacobus M. Ramirez, *De Hominis Beatitudine: In I-II Summae Theologiae Divi Thomae Commentaria (QQ. I-V)* (Madrid: Vives, 1972), pp. 88–9.

<sup>10</sup> Super I Cor., cap. 11 l. 1.

The process of Christian formation is therefore a process of becoming, through virtue, more like God humanized, *Deus humanatus* (*Summa Contra Gentiles* IV.54).

Virtues, for Thomas, are to be understood in this dynamic context, that is, precisely as principles of the human actions by which we arrive at our last end (I.II.6 pr; 49 pr). They are important because they are qualities of the soul that help us to move forward, by becoming more like Christ, on our journey to God. The image of “formation” could be understood to suggest a static endpoint, like the pottery that came from the clay, but the Christian formation in virtue that Thomas envisages is more like the training of an athlete: its end is to walk a journey, even to run a race.

### *Christian formation as graced*

Thomas recognizes an important datum of the Christian faith, namely, that our faith, our hope, our love and even our other virtues come from God. The virtues flow from grace. That is, it is by God’s loving self-communication that, through the virtues and their exercise, we enter more fully into relationship with God, and even become more like God in his goodness. At the same time, Thomas acknowledges Aristotle’s insight that virtue can be acquired through the repetition of virtuous action: “a human being becomes just by doing just deeds and temperate by doing temperate deeds. But no one may become good by doing nothing or applying no zeal for this”.<sup>11</sup> This presents an important theological, spiritual and practical question: is my growth in virtue up to me or God? The danger is either to emphasize grace so much that we are tempted to leave it all to God; or alternatively to overemphasize our efforts and forget that grace comes first.

Thomas’s solution is to distinguish two kinds of virtue: infused virtue, which is generated and increased in the soul by God alone, and acquired virtue, developed gradually by our efforts (ST I.II.63). The acquired moral virtues, in particular, are the qualities we need to achieve the natural human good in the challenging material of human life, disposing us to give the other her due, stand firm in the face of dangers and obstacles to the good, moderate and integrate our sensible and emotional attractions so that they do not destructively overrun their bounds but serve human flourishing, and wisely direct our actions here and now in the light of the overall end of human life (I.II.61.3). The infused virtues include faith, hope and charity, the theological virtues that have as their object God himself; but they also include the infused moral virtues, which, like their acquired

<sup>11</sup> *Sententia Ethic.*, lib. 2 l. 4 n. 8.

counterparts, respond well to the challenges of human life, but do so with a view to the ultimate end of the direct vision of God.

What are the implications of this understanding of how, in the Christian life, we grow in virtue? Thomas's account highlights two important principles. First, any virtues we possess are primarily gifts from God rather than human achievements. This is evident for the infused virtue, but note that Thomas thinks that even acquired virtue is not due to human action alone: "Those things we do through ourselves, God causes in us, not without us acting, for he works in every will and nature" (I.II.55.4 ad 6). Virtue – all virtue – is more God's gift than our own achievement: "a human being does not have his excellences from himself, but they are, as it were, something divinely inspired in him. And therefore, for this reason, the honour is due principally, not to himself, but to God" (II.II.131.1).

The second principle is that we do have a role, albeit a secondary one, in our own growth in virtue. In the natural order, for Thomas, God brings about virtue in us through the mediation of our cooperation. In the supernatural order, we can actively *dispose* ourselves to receive an increase of infused virtues from their divine source, especially by acting virtuously.<sup>12</sup>

What can we make of this account today? There are questions about the distinction between infused and acquired virtues, and especially the claim that they "differ in species", i.e. in kind. One may wonder whether this idea is faithful to Thomas's deeper theology of grace, according to which nature and grace are not two separate orders, operating independently of each other; rather, grace perfects nature. Does Thomas unwittingly generate a "two tier" account of natural and supernatural virtue? One may also question whether the claim that some virtues are caused by God alone, without the mediation of human action, is consistent with the Thomas's "concurrentist" insight that grace and free will are not to be seen as intrinsically competitive, but as potentially co-operative. It is not immediately clear why virtue need be caused either by grace or by natural human action: why not graced human action?

These are important questions, and there are different approaches to answering them. Some attempt to downplay or elide the distinction; others privilege either acquired or infused virtue; yet others reinterpret the distinction as contrasting, not two kinds of virtue, but two perspectives on understanding virtue, both equally legitimate: to see virtue as both something to which we contribute by our own free will, and as a gift that comes to us from God. Others of a more unreconstructed bent defend the distinction between infused and acquired in much the same fashion as the seventeenth century scholastics of

<sup>12</sup> *De Virtutibus*, 1.11c.

the Thomistic school. Yet whatever we make of these questions, this is not the place to explore them. From the point of view of our focus on Christian formation, there is a more fundamental question simply to do with Thomas's key claim that, in the Christian life, the virtues, or at least the specifically Christian virtues, are 'infused' by God through grace. How to make sense of this puzzling idea?

Here we meet an important lacuna in the Thomistic account: it lacks a convincing narrative of how, in Christian experience, graced growth in virtue happens. "Infused virtue" seems to imply a sudden and discontinuous intervention, as though God acts like someone flicking on the light switch. Indeed, Thomas apparently thinks that the infusion of virtues happens all at once, at the moment of baptism (II.II.47.14 ad 3). He has, therefore, to explain how a baby can have an infused virtue, such as prudence, without the ability to exercise it.<sup>13</sup> He also has to explain how an adult who is baptised supposedly suddenly possesses all the infused virtues, even though their exercise lacks the facility and delight that normally accompanies virtue.<sup>14</sup> Due to his theoretical commitments to the idea that all the virtues are interconnected and to a theology of baptism that draws the line rather more clearly between "before" and "after", and between Christians and others than we might today, Thomas's narrative of the way the Spirit works in Christian experience to generate and deepen the life of virtue seems unconvincing. It seems we need to look elsewhere for narrative of how the developmental process of growth in virtue happens in the lived experience of the Christian.

### Ignatian Perspectives

For Thomas, Christian formation is a dynamic and graced process of growth in virtue, but we are left with the question, "What, in lived experience and practice, does that look like?" We now turn to a more inductive, experiential tradition. I shall focus on one key aspect of Ignatian practice, namely, spiritual discernment as found in the *Spiritual Exercises*. I draw especially on the work of Robert Marsh SJ, a contemporary practitioner and theologian reflecting on

<sup>13</sup> He says that a baby can possess infused prudence, say, 'in habit, but not in act' (II.II.47.14 ad 3).

<sup>14</sup> I.II.65.3 arg 2. For an attempt to defend Thomas, see Michael S. Sherwin, O.P., "Infused Virtue and the Effects of Acquired Vice: A Test Case for the Thomistic Theory of Infused Cardinal Virtues", *The Thomist*, 2009, pp.29–52. While my own sense is that the Thomistic theory fails the test, I appreciate Sherwin's attempt to address the question of narrative head on. See Nicholas Austin, "Is the Concept of Infused Moral Virtue Really Necessary?" (unpublished STL Thesis, School of Theology and Ministry, Boston College, 2010).



the practice of spiritual accompaniment, and put his insights into discernment together with some thoughts about the virtues.

### *Movement and Spiritual Discernment*

At the Jesuit retreat centre in Guelph, Ontario, there stands a statue of Ignatius by the sculptor William McElcheran. The figure leans forward, one foot ahead of the other, his cloak billowing behind: the Pilgrim. Many have used the image of pilgrimage to express the Christian journey to God; this image has particular resonance for Ignatius, not least because the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, embarked upon shortly after his conversion, is so central to his story. Brian O'Leary SJ notes that while Ignatius has been seen variously as the soldier-saint, the mystic, the leader, his preferred self-description is that of the pilgrim.<sup>15</sup> It is not surprising, then, that images of journey and movement permeate Ignatian spirituality, and that Ignatius's hope is always for "progress in the Lord."<sup>16</sup>

The dynamism of Ignatius's vision of the Christian life finds expression in Ignatius's understanding of spiritual discernment, as Marsh points out. Ignatius entitles his guidance on the discernment of spirits as follows:

Rules by which to perceive and understand to some extent the various movements produced in the soul: the good that they may be accepted, and the bad, that they may be rejected. [Exx 313]

The raw data of spiritual discernment is therefore constituted by the "movements", the intellectual, volitional or affective impulses of the soul, "the to-ing and fro-ing of affect, desire and understanding".<sup>17</sup> Marsh comments, "For Ignatius, our experience is never static, and rarely spiritually neutral; it has, rather, both a spiritual origin and a spiritual end. Our experience is in motion, and the 'motions' we experience have a significance."<sup>18</sup> The movements are already going on in the life of a prayerful Christian; what spiritual discernment requires is to notice and understand them.

Most interpretations of Ignatian discernment emphasise the need to discriminate between consolation and desolation, but Marsh prefers to reinterpret these in terms of two kinds of interior movement. For it is

<sup>15</sup> Brian O'Leary, *Sent into the Lord's Vineyard: Explorations in the Jesuit Constitutions* (Oxford, UK: Way Publications, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Philip Endean, "The Ignatian Spirituality of the Way", *The Way*, 42.1 (2003), pp.7–19.

<sup>17</sup> Robert R. Marsh, 'Imagining Ignatian Spiritual Direction', *The Way*, 48.3 (2009), pp.27–42 (pp. 31–2).

<sup>18</sup> Robert R. Marsh, 'Receiving and Rejecting: On Finding a Way in Spiritual Direction', *The Way*, 45.1 (2006), pp.7–21 (p. 10).

not always easy to distinguish the “consolations” that can be trusted from those that are false, and the “desolations” that are to be avoided from those that may be signs of new life: “what looks good can be deceitful, what feels terrible can be a place of grace”.<sup>19</sup> The crucial thing to notice and understand about these interior movements, for Marsh, is not only their felt quality, but also and especially their origins and their ends.

The origins, according to the *Spiritual Exercises*, are the “good angel” or “good spirit” and the “evil spirit”. This is not a language we are always comfortable with today. Are spirits real? Marsh distinguishes four attempts to answer this question. *Cosmological realism* about spirits takes the language at face value, but struggles with the fact, for many today, “angels and spirits are no more real than pixies and elves”.<sup>20</sup> *Pragmatic agnosticism* bypasses the speculative questions on the grounds that the language is found to be helpful, but lacks any explanation of why this is the case. The *theological* option reinterprets ‘good spirit’ in terms of the Holy Spirit, but once again dodges the cosmological question. And finally *anthropological reductionism* reinterprets talk of spirits in human terms, as experiences of “consolation” and “desolation”, but finds it difficult to distinguish between what is to be trusted and followed, and what not. Marsh himself, controversially, takes the option of cosmological realism, adapting it in the light of modern cosmology and epistemology. For it is necessary at least to attempt to answer the question, “What must the world be like if we are not deluded in our sense that discernment actually works?”<sup>21</sup>

Yet however we understand the language Ignatius uses for the origins of the interior movements of the soul, it is even more important to understand, for Marsh, the endpoint of each movement, that towards which each movement leads: either union with God, or alienation from God. This insight is helpful for our reflection on Christian formation, because it brings Thomas’s overarching understanding of the Christian life as dynamic and oriented to an end down to an experiential level: it is the very desires, emotions and thoughts inspired by the good spirit that help to move us forward. The task of spiritual discernment is to sift the motions that lead towards God from those that lead away, and to accept the former and reject the latter, thereby moving ahead on the pilgrimage of the Christian life.

Marsh, again controversially, interprets Ignatius as recommending a preferential attentiveness to the movements that come from the

<sup>19</sup> Robert R. Marsh, ‘Discernment of Spirits: A Cosmological View’, *The Way*, 48.1 (2009), pp.9–24 (p. 18).

<sup>20</sup> Marsh, ‘Discernment’, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Marsh, ‘Discernment’, p. 14.

good spirit and lead to God. He rephrases Ignatius's basic rule to accept the good movements and resist their opposite, as follows:

If we use 'movement' as a shorthand for those Godward strands and 'counter-movement' for their opposite we can express a strategy for spiritual direction succinctly: 'Stay with the movement and avoid the counter-movement.'<sup>22</sup>

Nor is this a strategy for the spiritual director alone, but an accurate prescription for all spiritual discernment. For "discernment is a matter of asking the dynamic and practical question about which aspects of experience to encourage and which to set aside or resist."<sup>23</sup> It often comes down to a simple but momentous choice in the spiritual life: in what do I invest my attention?

The question, of course, is how we recognize, in the mass of experiential data in a person's life, what is movement towards God, and what counter-movement. Marsh uses the metaphor of "tracking": "looking, sniffing, feeling for the spoor and signs of God's passage."<sup>24</sup> I suggest that virtuous inclination is one of those signs.

### *Virtue and Ignatius*

I argued earlier that the Thomistic tradition provides us with a rich theology of virtue, but leaves us with the question of what a spirituality of formation looks like in the narrative of a Christian life. With Ignatian spirituality we are faced with the opposite problem. While Ignatius provides us with an experiential spirituality of discernment, one amply recovered in contemporary practice as interpreted by Marsh and others, it is less clear how this spirituality leads to an "ethics", a way of life to be lived. Might virtue fill the gap?

As with Thomas, Ignatius sees growth in virtue as integral to the dynamic movement of the Christian life. In the *Autobiography*, when looking back on the period immediately following his Loyola conversion, Ignatius recognizes his earlier spiritual immaturity: "He never took a spiritual view of anything, nor even knew the meaning of humility, or charity, or patience, or discretion as a rule and measure of these virtues."<sup>25</sup> Just as spiritual immaturity lies in the absence of these virtues, spiritual maturity lies in their possession. The role of "progress in virtue" in Ignatius's thought could be examined further,

<sup>22</sup> Marsh, 'Receiving and Rejecting', p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Marsh, 'Receiving and Rejecting', p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Marsh, 'Receiving and Rejecting', p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Ignatius Loyola and Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, *St Ignatius' Own Story: As Told to Luis González de Câmara; With a Sampling of His Letters*, trans. by William J. Young (Chicago: Regnery Co., 1956), p. 14.

for example, in his letters and the *Constitutions* themselves. A recent book by Gerald M. Fagin SJ, however, examines the *Spiritual Exercises* through the lens of virtue. He shows, for example, how the *Principle and Foundation* characteristically inculcates a gratitude and reverence; the *Two Standards* help towards prudence; and how in the Third Week, in which there is an extended meditation on the passion and death of Christ, the exercitant is characteristically led by the Spirit to a deeper compassion. As Joseph Tetlow SJ explains in the Foreword to Fagin's book:

While you pray the Exercises . . . the Spirit is shaping in you habits of the heart such as compunction, generosity, joy, and love. When you *enact those habits of the heart* in your everyday life after you have finished the Exercises, you are becoming what the Spirit hopes you will become . . . .<sup>26</sup>

The contribution of the virtue perspective, then, is to connect the four weeks of the Exercises with the “fifth week” of the rest of life, where the task is to enact the virtues that Jesus enacted, virtues learned in the contemplative encounter with Christ. The *Spiritual Exercises*, at their best, provide an incipient formative experience; the “spirit” still needs to be “embodied” in the life and action of everyday life.<sup>27</sup>

Let us see, then, whether putting the understanding of spiritual discernment together with this key Ignatian theme of the virtues can help us to understand better what spiritual growth in virtue might look like.

### *Virtue and spiritual discernment*

Ignatius shares with some evangelical or charismatic approaches a belief that God does speak, does act, in ordinary Christian experience; he does, however, emphasize the need to carefully discern what is truly from God and what may only seem to be. The personal, subjective spiritual experience of a person is crucially important, but the wheat needs to be separated from the chaff. Can virtue help in this sifting?

The primary criterion of discernment for Ignatius seems to be that, for those making progress and advancing from good to better in the service of God, the good spirit tends to inspire “consolation”, whereas the bad spirit “desolation”. We noted earlier that Marsh hesitates to use of this language, because it can too easily be misinterpreted as “feeling good” and “feeling bad”, and prefers to think more in terms of movement and counter-movement. At the same time, it is worth

<sup>26</sup> Gerald M. Fagin, *Putting on the Heart of Christ: How the Spiritual Exercises Invite Us to a Virtuous Life* (Loyola Press, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> On the movement from “spirit” to “body” see O’Leary, op. cit., pp. 22–3.

returning to Ignatius's original characterisation of consolation and desolation.

Ignatius does not offer a succinct, scholastic definition, but various multi-layered descriptions. It helps to notice that there are at least three levels to these characterisations: that of phenomenology, of encounter, and of increase in virtue.

First, there is a phenomenological level: the what-it-feels-like of consolation as opposed to desolation. For example, consolation includes "all interior happiness which calls and attracts to heavenly things" [Exx 316]. This level is the one that those on their first silent retreat are most likely to focus on and, at least initially, to find most easy to identify. If I feel drawn to godly things, that experience must be from the good spirit, surely?

Not necessarily. One problem with remaining on the phenomenological level is, as Marsh observes, that sometimes an experience can feel good, and yet it may not be moving one to God. Ignatius identifies the former as the false consolation that is the product of the enemy masquerading as the "angel of light", for example a facile optimism that lacks the realism of Christian hope or an over-drawn sense of duty that leads to anxiety, resentment and burn-out. False consolation is often identified best by noting, not its immediate feel, but by tracking its trajectory, its beginning, middle and end: "if the course of the thoughts suggested to us leads us finally to something bad or distracting . . . all this is a clear sign of the bad spirit, the enemy of our progress" [Exx 333].

Another reason why the what-it-is-like of an experience is often not a sufficient criterion for discernment is that there is such a thing as 'hard' consolation, a difficult experience that nevertheless points Godward. For example, the felt experience of praying the cross can be dark, painful and lonely, in which place, nevertheless, there is a desire to remain, as expressive of faithful union with the Lord. Because of the possibility of both false consolation and hard consolation, then, the feel of an experience is not always enough to identify a genuine movement Godwards.

A second level of consolation is the I-Thou encounter with God, for example, when the soul is left "quiet and at peace in her Creator and Lord" [316]. It helps here to recall the famous fifteenth annotation, where Ignatius advises the spiritual director that she "should leave the Creator to deal with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord" [Exx 15]. This is not an insight-focused spirituality, then, but one centered on the living God who desires to relate to us in friendship.<sup>28</sup> It is this personal, individual, creative and graced

<sup>28</sup> William A. Barry, "What Is Spiritual Direction? A Retrospective Reflection", *Presence*, 21.2 (2015).

encounter that potentially changes everything. Lights and insights may be fruits, but without communion with this God – who not only can be met, but is actively working to meet us and remove obstacles to that meeting – they are very much second prize.<sup>29</sup>

While Ignatian spirituality, therefore, has an almost scandalous confidence that this encounter with the mysterious divine other is possible, indeed is common, there is also a recognition that this encounter often lies hidden in a person's experience, and therefore requires spiritual discernment to draw it to consciousness where it can grow and bear fruit. As Marsh puts it, the one who listens to others in spiritual direction quickly learns that “buried in there, among the mess [of a person's experience], there are usually one or two nuggets of pure gold: encounters with a God who is beautiful and attractive and bold and unsettling”.<sup>30</sup> So, once again we are left with the question: how to notice the signs, the fingerprints of God, as it were, in a person's prayer and life, so as to bring what is implicit to light?

In Ignatius's characterisation of consolation, we find not just the levels of phenomenology and of encounter, but a third level as well: that of the virtues.<sup>31</sup> He states: “I give the name ‘consolation’ to every increase of hope, faith and charity” [Exx 316]. The theological virtues, therefore, provide another way to sift movement from counter-movement, true from false consolation, and even hard consolation from desolation. These virtues are the qualities we need to move forward on our pilgrimage. Any experience involving an increase of faith in a loving and provident God, hope and confidence in the God who draws us and all things to himself, and love of the loving God, is necessarily from the good spirit that helps us forward on our way. Equally, a loss of virtuous inclination is a sign of counter-movement, of the bad spirit. For desolation is whatever is contrary to consolation: “All this leads to a lack of faith in which one feels oneself to be without hope and without love” [Exx 317].

It is here, at this third level, that I suggest we may find what we need: an experiential spirituality of growth in virtue. The graced encounter with God forms a person in the virtues. In prayer, for

<sup>29</sup> There is a tendency today to reduce the first great commandment to the second without remainder, claiming that the only way to love God is by loving our neighbour. I assume that it is also possible to develop a direct relationship with God, because of God's loving initiative towards us. For a theological defence of this position, see Edward Collins Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Robert R. Marsh, “Id Quod Volo: The Erotic Grace of the Second Week”, *The Way*, 45.4 (2006), pp.7–19 (p. 18).

<sup>31</sup> On some other thoughts about consolation and the virtues, see Nicholas Austin and Roger Dawson, “The Consolation of Character Strength in Ignatian Spirituality and Positive Psychology”, *The Way*, 53.3 (2014), pp.7–21.

example, one person experiences a loving rebuke of the Lord, and is left humbled; another, amazed at the miraculous catch of fish, so to speak, moves from a spiritual sloth to an openness to the great things the Lord does; yet another, like Peter, experiences a compassionate glance from Jesus, and so becomes more disposed to compassion for others. And every true consolation leads to a desire to give thanks. Humility, magnanimity, mercy, gratitude: these dispositions, these virtues, are increased, precisely through the formative encounter with a God who is always searching for ways to relate to us.

There are two benefits to connecting virtue to spiritual discernment in this way. The first is that the vocabulary of the virtues and vices, explained so well by Thomas Aquinas, helps to sharpen discernment. For the “good spirit”, however we interpret that term, is the spirit of the virtues, and the evil spirit that of their countefeits. Thoughts, desires and emotions – the movements of the soul – that indicate an increase in faith, hope, love and the other virtues, are sure signs of a genuine encounter with God.

The second benefit is that we begin to see how the “problem of the fifth week”, of bridging spiritual experience and action, might be resolved. The key is to put Marsh’s insight about movement and countermovement together with Ignatius’s characterisation of consolation in terms of the virtues. It then becomes possible to sense what it might mean to follow the movement and sidestep the countermovement. For just as a vapour trail remains after the passing of the aircraft, so the vector of the Godward movement persists long after the spiritual experience itself is over. The glow of consolation will fade; what remains is a direction to follow.

### Final reflections

What, then, can this conversation between the Ignatian and Thomistic traditions offer us in our attempt to understand the relationship between spirituality and virtue in Christian formation?

Ignatian spirituality benefits when it is reconnected with the tradition of the virtues represented by Thomas. For the virtues give us a way of sharpening the spiritual discernment that enables us “to perceive and understand” the movements and counter-movements of the spiritual life, as well as a way to live out the “vector” of those movements by exercising the virtues that direct us toward God.

Similarly, Thomistic ethics benefits from dialogue with a spirituality that offers an experiential and practical way of cashing out the insight that Christian virtue must necessarily be “infused”. Infusion is not about pouring some mystical substance into the soul, but about the way relationship with God is formative and even transformative. To understand the relation between spiritual experience and virtue

in this way makes spiritual growth messier, but also more real and exciting, than Thomas's narrative of "simultaneous infusion" makes it seem (or even than a one-to-one correspondence between parts of the *Spiritual Exercises* and certain virtues would suggest). The good spirit works in a creative and unpredictable manner. A Master's degree in the stages of the mystical life may not be needed. Rather, what is required is the *habitus*, developed through experience, prayer, and grace, of recognising movements and counter-movements, and the courage to wager that the one who "touches the soul gently, lightly, and sweetly", is eminently more worthy of attention, and indeed of being followed, than the one who makes a splash [Exx 335].<sup>32</sup>

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