

Why Young Adults Need Ignatian Spirituality

Tim Muldoon

How can a spirituality that was developed in the 16th century help young people today to “develop a vocabulary of faith”? Tim Muldoon describes the distinctive appeal of the spiritual teachings of St Ignatius Loyola, and suggests that Ignatian spirituality is uniquely placed to meet the needs and questions of today’s young adults.

There have been a number of articles and books in recent years that have addressed a basic concern among Church leaders: what will the Church look like in twenty years? Underlying this basic concern is an awareness that the generation of young adults has not (it seems) appropriated Catholic faith according to the models of earlier generations, and thus have not the same commitment to our faith that would seem to be necessary for the future well-being of the Church. Writers such as Tom Beaudoin and Jeremy Langford have contributed articles to *America* suggesting that there are legitimate faith questions that young people still raise, and that the Church needs to develop a greater understanding of our generation if it is to effectively minister to us. What I offer here is a reflection on how Ignatian spirituality in particular can speak to young people, and help us to develop a vocabulary of faith.

Why Ignatian spirituality? There are two major reasons: the first practical, the second theological. The practical reason is that it is available. There are many Jesuit high schools and colleges in the US, more than any other religious community sponsors, and thus there is a long history of addressing the spiritual and intellectual growth of young people. Ignatian spirituality works because we have learned how to encourage young people to use it. The theological reason emphasises this point even further: Ignatian spirituality emphasises faith as an ongoing dialogue between the person and God, and thus represents the kind of dynamic approach to faith that young people often intuit for ourselves. To see spirituality as that which demands exercise, work, is to see it as more than an either/or proposition – and this latter position is too often presented as the traditional view (‘if you don’t believe in God, you’re going to hell’). Young people live in a world in which we must constantly confront ambiguity and change; Ignatian spirituality recognises this on a very deep level, and invites us to engage in a process of ongoing conversion. This resonates with our experience of confronting the question of God. Many have grown suspicious of facile answers and arrogant claims to authority, and instead need an invitation to consider more clearly the personal question: who is God for me?

There are five elements in Ignatian spirituality which young people today can use to grow in the understanding of their faith:

1. The first principle and foundation

In a postmodern world, the very notion of ‘foundation’ is shaken – can anything be regarded as ‘foundational’ when it seems that everyone believes something different from everyone else? Robert Ludwig has written in his

Reconstructing Catholicism (Crossroad, 1995) that younger Catholics have grown up in what he calls a ‘deconstructed’ context and seek a ‘constructive worldview.’ Practically, this means that younger adults have a harder time with anything that can be claimed as incontrovertible truth – even the existence of God – but that we long for clarity. Paradoxically, then, Ignatius’s first principle and foundation can be seen in such a context as remarkably refreshing. It is disarmingly simple: *we are created to praise, glorify, and serve God, and by this means to achieve our eternal destiny.* Such a suggestion cuts to the heart of our longing for truth, and offers a simple solution: live as though this first principle and foundation were true. Here I am reminded of Ignatius’s own counsel regarding his spiritual exercises: trust God as if everything depended on you, and at the same time work as if everything depended on God.

I recently had an experience which illustrates the attractive power of the first principle and foundation. During an introductory philosophy class, I was addressing how philosophy begins with the sense of wonder at the ‘limit questions’ that confront us as human beings. Among these are questions about death and suffering, love and the meaning of life. Looking out over a room full of only partly interested students, I threw out the offhand comment, ‘You know, the meaning of life is easy: we are created to praise, glorify, and serve God, and by this means to achieve our eternal destiny!’ Immediately, the collective posture of the room changed; everyone sat up straight and began writing, ‘Can you say that again?’ they asked, ensuring that I repeated every word slowly. I had, of course, only lobbed out this comment to catch their attention, but they were fascinated at the idea that one could encapsulate the meaning of life in a handy sentence.

Because we live today in a world where truth claims are constantly weighed and judged against one another, young people have been given very little reason to think that any one way of living is better than any other. Sharing an articulation of Christian faith that is so direct challenges people to consider what sort of truth claim it is, and what kind of life it offers.

2. God in all things

While the notion of ‘God in all things’ is not uniquely Ignatian, it is characteristically so. Among the figures of the last century and a half who have lived this worldview are the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, the anthropologist Teilhard de Chardin, and the theologian Karl Rahner. All of these figures had a strong sense of what Hopkins called ‘the dearest freshness, deep down things’ – that sense that God’s grace animates the whole of the created order to the extent that one cannot but encounter it if one is attuned to it. The celebration of God’s grandeur appeals to the young mind, which sees a panorama of people, traditions, beliefs, and styles among people, and can draw meaning from places very different from the traditional sources of Catholic worship. In short, young people today draw their spirituality from many non-traditional places, especially those in pop culture, as Tom Beaudoin has written in his *Virtual Faith* (Jossey Bass, 1997).

To speak about God in all things is to admit that no doctrine, no tradition, no scripture alone can exhaust the mystery that is God. It is to remember that our theology, our prayer, our teaching is limited in its ability to convey this mystery, and that as a result we must ultimately stand in awe before God. We who have grown up in a pluralistic world have seen good things in people of varied backgrounds; we know that any talk of ultimate truth must be humble before the vastness of human experience and of creation. On the flip side, to speak of God in all things is to remind us that ours is a sacramental understanding of God – God among us in the face, the word, the gesture that makes present the reality of grace. It is to emphasise that God is not distant and ‘other’, but present and intimate with us. It is to underscore a belief that our lives are not beyond the scope of God’s love, but rather they are already the objects of God’s care.

3. Walking with Christ

Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises* asks the retreatant to enter deeply into the stories of Jesus’s life, to use the imagination to place oneself into the Gospel stories. This spirituality is about sharing in the story, not only by remembering it but also by taking part in it, in order that one might more fully come to know Jesus. Today, this counsel is still valuable to young people, many of whom know the gospel only second-hand. I have had many experiences in which people have commented on how surprised they were by the Jesus of the Gospels, because they had never had the chance to meet him directly. Too often young people rely on the faith of parents, and so never are given the opportunity to really confront for themselves this attractive figure (‘Who do you say that I am?’), and to answer the fundamental call: ‘Come, follow me.’ Young adults undergo a period of distancing themselves from their parents, and part of this distancing involves religion. They need the chance to appropriate their own mature faith, and asking them to consider the real Jesus can be an important step.

4. Consolation and Desolation

Perhaps the most important part of the spiritual journey that young people need to understand is that it is not a straight, easy path towards enlightenment, but rather a struggle that involves highs and lows. Ignatius’s writing on the discernment of spirits is helpful, because it gives us an understanding of how both consolation and desolation are part of the life of faith. Ignatius shows God as one who loves us deeply, but who moves us toward growth even in the periods when God is distant. In short, Ignatius shows us that spiritual suffering is part of the life of faith, and that it forces us to confront the false images of God that prevent us from growing as human beings. For young people, this is a hard message, but so necessary in a culture that says, avoid all suffering. My generation has grown up in a sound-byte, throw-away culture, and we have learned that it is possible to insulate ourselves from reality by turning our short attention spans to the next interesting thing. We need a spirituality that emphasises that faith is sometimes about choosing to confront reality, to trust God even when God is hard to understand – for example, in the face of such mysteries as the death of a loved one or experiences of failure and loss.

5. Social Justice

An important final element in Ignatian spirituality that distinguishes it from so many 'self-help' spiritualities in the marketplace is that of social justice. Jesuit education has stressed that Christian faith reaches out to others, and does not rest content with a doctrine of personal fulfilment. As much as young people today are criticised for our self-centeredness, many of us long for the sense that we can make a difference in the world. Having inherited an individualistic worldview, we find that it can be difficult but rewarding to show concern for others. One benefit of living in a pluralistic world is that we have come to appreciate the legitimate differences among people, and so we have a sense that all people share a basic moral equality. We must be reminded, though, that in spite of our culture's tendencies to exalt the individual, we are called to reach out to people who are left out.

Jesuit institutions have led the way in making the spiritual teachings of St Ignatius available to all people. In my own experience, the so-called '19th annotation retreat' described in the *Spiritual Exercises* is a great way to offer students the opportunity to learn about and practise this spirituality. I have made the retreat at two different Jesuit institutions, and have helped run it in a university Newman centre, and so I know that it can attract people from different walks of life and help them to grow in their faith lives. Perhaps more than anything else, the invitation to try authentic Christian spirituality is vital if we want to encourage the faith of young people. Ignatian spirituality is good because it offers such an invitation – that people might come to know for themselves what it means to follow Christ.

Tim Muldoon is a Catholic theologian and author of several books, including The Ignatian Workout, an adaptation of Saint Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises. He is married with three children, and teaches at Boston College, where he also serves in the Division of University Mission and Ministry.

This is an amended version of an article published originally by America in February 2001. Reprinted with permission.

From "ThinkingFaith"