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The Call of Gerald Manley Hopkins as Priest-Poet

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In spite of my great interest in Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Father of Modern English poetry, I have been asking in the silence of my heart a pertinent question: Hopkins being yet another poet of Western culture, apart from the fact that he is a Jesuit, how does he strike a chord with me in my Indian culture which is almost in sharp contrast to the culture in which Hopkins lived and wrote. It was then that I happened to come across Hopkins's own words quoted in A Devasaham's book that show the Jesuit poet's love of Indian culture and people. While studying philosophy at Stonyhurst, on 22 March 1872, Hopkins wrote to his friend William Garrett who was then working in Bengal in the Indian Educational Service: "I have a yearning towards Hindoos and mentioning 'Brahmapootra' feels enchanted by the very sound of the word – 'refreshing billowy majestic name! the next best thing to bathing in it'. He goes on to affirm: '… the Vedas and Hindoo philosophy are what I should hugely like to go in for'" (Devasahayam 13).

Being a great scholar, when Hopkins indirectly expressed his yearning to bathe in Brahmaputra, he certainly knew what he was talking about. He perhaps did know that Brahmaputra flowed through the Himalayas and that at a later stage it met the River Ganga. It also means that he knew the religious or cultural significance of these rivers for the people of India. From Hopkins's own words it is only reasonable to assume that

he read about and knew well the rich Indian culture. Had he lived longer, he would, perhaps, have visited India, learnt more about this ancient culture, and even wrote poetry in Indian languages like other Indian Jesuit poets Constantius Joseph Beschi, popularly known as *Veeramamunivar* in Tamil, Johannes Ernestus Hnaxleden, known as *Arnos Padiri* in Malayalam and Thomas Stephens in Konkani who is called the Father of Christian Literature in India. His unabated love for the people of India is clear from the following lines of his poem on a Jesuit missionary in India which he wrote in Latin: "*Sed miserere tuis tam multis millibus Indis,/ iam miserere tuis,Quamque rogare alium prosperant peccantque salute/ da Deus interea*. (But be merciful to your multitudes of Indians,/ now be merciful to yours,/ And that another ask for the prospering and sinning/ salvation, grant, God, meanwhile). With my new understanding of Hopkins, reading his works became a more enriching experience from an intercultural perspective.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the eldest among the nine children of pious High Church Anglican parents, Manley Hopkins and Catherine, joined the Society of Jesus founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola. If Hopkins' turning point in life was his conversion from Anglican faith to Catholicism, the pivot in Ignatius' life was his conversion from a soldier of highly worldly desires to a devoted servant of Christ, poor and humble. Ignatius, a knight from Loyola Castle, Navarre in Spain, having realized the futility and meaninglessness of worldly glory, sets out as a pilgrim seeking deeper meaning in life, discerning the will of God, envisioning a newer world! The gracious God was propitious to the pilgrim, blessing him bounteously. Thus was born the band of Jesuits, the companions of Jesus. The spirit of Ignatius continues its pilgrimage, marching beyond time and space, delving into diverse cultures across the globe, enlivening and infusing in people of every kind the spirit of discernment and the spirit of generosity to live for others. Inspired by the Jesuit ideals and Ignatian spirituality, Hopkins joined the Jesuit

Novitiate of English Province at Manresa House, Roehampton in September 1868.

When Hopkins joined the British Province of the Jesuit Order, more than five decades had passed since its restoration. The Society of Jesus, which remained suppressed all over the world by Pope Clement XIV's bull *Dominus ac Redemptor* in 1773, was officially restored in 1814 by Pope Pius VII through the bull *Solicitudo omnium*. But still there were serious objections and hesitations from the part of the Bishops and governments in most parts of the world, especially in England, to hand over the institutions back to the Jesuits which were established by them before the suppression. It was in the 1850s that the Jesuits succeeded in getting back most of their prestigious institutions across the world. With this the name and fame of the Jesuits suddenly began to spread far and wide. A renewed spirit marked the restored Jesuit Order and people everywhere, particularly the intellectual class, began to look up to the Jesuits for their spiritual and educational formation. As a result a steep rise in the number of young men joining the English Jesuit Province breaking all past history was evident. The present archivist and historian to the English Province, Francis Edwards says, "In 1867 the juniors were distributed between Belgium and Stonyhurst to make more room for novices who now stood at about twenty-four. A year later, they had grown to forty, an unprecedented number for the Province. . . Unusual in most other ways was Gerard Manley Hopkins, admitted in 1868" (Edwards 191).

This brief reflection on the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, is made at a time when there is a similar kind of renewed spirit for the Jesuits all over the world. For the first time in history a Jesuit Pope – Francis I – leads the Catholic Church who makes a great impact in the world in Christian leadership by following Christ poor and humble. And surprisingly enough the Jesuit Pope has taken for himself a name after the name of St. Francis of Assisi. It is interesting to note that Hopkins felt tremendous excitement and joy when he found confirmation of his idea of

inscape in the writings of Duns Scotus, a thirteenth century Franciscan philosopher and theologian. Just as Pope Francis finds in Francis Assisi the greatest model of Christian discipleship, so too in Scotus, the Jesuit poet finds a pointer to the lost harmony of town and country, of spirit and sense, of mind and matter: "He ... who of all men most sways my spirits to peace" ("Duns Scotus's Oxford"). Hopkins' appreciation of the theological positions of this Franciscan was not only a brave act but also a risky one, for it was a time when Scotism and Thomism, as theological systems, were meant to be almost deadly rivals for orthodox Christian thought. It was a time when the Church believed that everything that Thomas Aquinas said was the whole truth and the only truth and that any thought that did not fully agree with Thomas Aquinas was unacceptable for the Church. Hopkins failed in his theology examination partly because of his appreciation for this disciple of Francis Assisi.

Looking closely into the life of Hopkins after his conversion to Catholicism in October 1866, it is evident that he was fully living *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Every effort was made on his part to be totally faithful to the letter and spirit of this guide book. This book was so important in his life that he even wrote a commentary on it. To a large extent everything concerning Hopkins the Jesuit, including his creative writings, was centred on *The Spiritual Exercises*. A month Long Retreat based on *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius which Hopkins made, first in the novitiate and later during his tertianship, changed his view so radically that the body of his verse is nothing but a commentary on those exercises. "Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess / Thy terror, O Christ, O God; / Thou knowest the walls, alter and hour and night: / The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod" ("The Wreck of the Deutschland"). It was this profound religious experience which enabled him to make the fusion of faith and love of nature, though there was considerable continuity between the way Hopkins reacted to nature in his Oxford days and the way he responded after he left. The major and crucial

exception is the absence from his Oxford prose and poetry of any vital connection between his faith and his love of natural beauty. Hopkins's originality as a poet is closely related to his Ignatian vision of world and art. He believed that the beauty of the world honours God simply by existing. He strongly felt that the inscapes in nature were manifestations of God's presence in the world. This priest-poet felt great delight in the observation of nature since it was singing the glory of God. Thus it is obvious that the Society of Jesus was central in enabling him to make the fusion of aesthetic beauty and Catholic faith which is at the core of the poetry he wrote.

Professor K. Ayyappa Paniker, who is regarded as an icon of modernist culture and thinking in the field of literary criticism, holds that it is impossible to overstress the importance of *the Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius in the study of Hopkins. Paniker goes to the extent of viewing Hopkins' poems as spiritual exercises in the Ignatian sense as several of them conform to the structural sequence of prayer, preludes, points and colloquy, 'the Wreck of the Deutschland' providing the most comprehensive specimen of an Ignatian exercise. The critic further says, "Hopkins's major poems are all spiritual exercises on the pattern set by St. Ignatius. They illustrate the methods and processes by which the speaker-protagonist achieves freedom from the self and starts the quest for truth and ends up with a fuller understanding of God's ways and the relishing of His infinite mercy" (Paniker 2). Hopkins is a poet by nature. However Ignatius' meditative method of seeing with the eyes of the imagination is the most profound influence on Hopkins' poetry. The total configuration of many of Hopkins' poems has such correspondence with the structure of the Ignatian meditation that it can hardly be denied that Ignatian methods and meditative patterns became the fiber and fabric of his poetry.

Contradictions co-exist in human life. One often wonders at the inevitable paradoxes in the life and works of this Jesuit poet. Hopkins who, as a schoolboy, was awarded the Poetry Prize at

Highgate and the Governor's Golf Medal for Latin verse, and later became the star of Balliol College, Oxford, who graduated with a double First in Classical 'Greats', failed in his theology examination. After 14 years of training in the Society of Jesus when he took the Final Vows he was denied the status in the Jesuit Order as Professed Coadjutor, but rather was relegated to the status as Spiritual Coadjutor. Hopkins' biographer and Jesuit, Martin comments:

> It was the first public indication since leaving St. Beuno's of the change in Hopkins's status that had come about as a result of having done poorly in his examinations there. Unlike the Professed, he could never hold a major office in the Society, nor would he be able to participate in general congregations or take the special vow of obedience to the Pope (Martin 344).

However we have no reason to think that Hopkins ever regretted becoming a Catholic and a Jesuit priest. Robert Bridges did attack Hopkins' decision to become a Catholic and a Jesuit. But Hopkins reproached him, asking if he doubted his sincerity. On the other hand Hopkins always cherished his great dream of converting Bridges to Catholicism. And in spite of the horrible depression Hopkins was going through at Dublin, he is said to have uttered "I am so happy, I am so happy" as his final words before be breathed his last.

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