

Finding God in All Things and All Things in God

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The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola is regarded as an all time classic by many. It has been responsible for the transformation not only of Jesuits, but of so many who had the privilege to 'make' or 'do' the Exercises.

In its simplest form, the Exercises are divided into four 'weeks', where a week is not a period of seven days, but a set of meditations dedicated to particular themes. Thus in the 'first week' of the Exercises, the focus is on Sin and Repentance. Repentance here is interpreted as the unconditional love of God which fills the heart of the exercitant or retreatant and allows him/her to look at things in a new way. This experience of the magnanimous and unfathomable love of God leads the

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exercitant in the 'second week' to cease focussing on self and to gaze instead on Christ the Lord and King. The Mission of Christ who came to do the will of the Father no matter what the consequences ends with his Passion

and Death, which is the focus in the ‘third week’. However, death is not the end of the story. The ‘fourth week’ is devoted to the Resurrection of Christ and his constant and continued presence in the world. In order to become aware of this, the final meditation proposed by Ignatius in the Exercises is titled “The Contemplatio” or “The Contemplation to obtain Love”.

The first line of the poem “God’s grandeur” by the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins reads, “The earth is charged with the grandeur of God”. In the first four lines of the poem he laments that humans have not been able to see and feel God’s presence in creation. It seems to me that this poem was influenced by “The Contemplatio”.

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‘The Contemplatio’ is a
mediation that consists
of four parts. The first
of these is gratitude to
God for all that God
gives, the second is to
see how God dwells in
everyone and
everything and in me,

the third is to see how God continues to labour in things,
persons and me preserving and sustaining and the fourth is to
see how God becomes present in the gifts that God gives.

There is a gradation in the four parts of the Contemplatio where
the end of the first becomes the means to the second and so on,
till finally the exercitant is able to see and find God in all things
and all things in God. The movement is from gratitude to love
and finally to union with God and all of creation.

In the first of the four points above, God wants to hold nothing
back and God’s gifts range from creation (Gen 1:1-2:4a) to
redemption (Rev 21:1-5a). We encounter here a God who wants
to give everything. Since, however, God gives freely and
without reserve the only proper response to this giving, the only

just response is not only to receive, but also to give in return. This is why at the end of this part we realise that each one of us is a 'trustee' and must behave as trustees caring for and concerned about God's creation. Selfishness goes out of the window and is replaced instead with selflessness, giving and sharing.

Thus in the second point, one moves to the ability to see and find God in all things, persons and events who are also an integral part of God's creation. This means that everything is sacred. As the Jesuit palaeontologist, philosopher and theologian Teilhard de Chardin put it so beautifully, "there is no reality that is only profane for those who know how to look". It means therefore, that we avoid 'clear' distinctions that we sometimes make of the sacred and the secular and the holy and the unholy. It means that we look at the world and people as

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Christ would have looked, as when he saw in the tax collector Matthew a potential disciple (Mt 9:9) and in the woman whom everyone else regarded as a sinner, one who loved much (Lk 7:47). Our response then, to God's creation must be awe and reverence

much like the Psalmist who is able to see and experience God's presence in the whole of creation (Ps.8).

Since God loves the world and all in it unconditionally, God does not leave the world to its own design, but constantly 'labours' in the world. This is evident in the fact that though we have so often abused rather than used God's creation, God continues to send messengers, prophets and heralds to lead us back to God (Heb 1:1-4). The 'labour' of God reached its zenith in the sending of the Son. By doing so not only did God grace

our humanity, but also showed us our true selves, namely that we are divine because of Jesus.

This realization is the final point of the Contemplatio – we become one with God who is “Father of all, who is above all, and through all and in all.” (Eph 4:6). Here we go beyond the gift to the giver of all gifts and offer everything back to him with the words, ‘Take Lord and receive... all we have and possess. Give us only your love and your grace and that is enough’.

The meditation on the Contemplatio is thus a meditation on God, creation and self. It is not only a meditation on finding God in all things, but also on letting God find us. It begins with an awareness of our creatureliness and moves to an awareness of our divinity. It also makes us aware that the divine dwells in all of creation and we can find the divine if we know how to look.