

## Reexamining Our Faith Fundamentals



by Patrick E. McGrath, SJ

One of my favorite images of Ignatius of Loyola is how he worked patiently with Peter Faber for four years before leading him through the Spiritual Exercises. This man who would eventually become one of the first Jesuits and a superb retreat director was simply not ready. It seems Faber was a scrupulous chap operating with a rather fierce notion of God. Ignatius knew that Faber could not fully enter the movement of the Exercises with such a threatening image of God. His basic faith assumptions were out of

whack. We, too, can benefit from a closer examination of our faith fundamentals.

Ignatian spirituality is often characterized as a way of proceeding that seeks to find and experience God in all things. In the ways we pray and engage the world, Ignatius encourages us to seek and celebrate our personal connection with God. As companions of Jesus, he would say, we will see the world differently and come to know God more deeply. In the process, we will be freed to become the people God creates us to be.

Because Ignatius was a practical mystic he offered instruction on how we might go about our God quest. *The Spiritual Exercises* lay out a prayer roadmap which a retreat director can use to assist retreatants as they are drawn to deeper friendship with Jesus. Spending time with God reviewing our lives, imaginatively entering into the story of Jesus in the New Testament, and praying for the grace to be more loving and generous in service are a few of the themes and exercises we encounter in this great work of Ignatius. But what is behind it? What fundamental faith assumptions does he make? Let me offer a few.

First, Ignatius operates from what Howard Gray, SJ, describes as “a hermeneutic of appreciation.” The world is good! God continually creates it—and us—out of love. As Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ, would say, “the world is charged with the grandeur of God.” Imagine that. What an extraordinarily positive view of things. Everything, Ignatius states in the First Principle

and Foundation, is created so that we might come to know and serve God more deeply and creatively. How can we not be appreciative and grateful?

Second, Ignatius knew from his own experience that God was constantly laboring in the world. The world has not been abandoned by God. God is always drawing you and me closer to God’s very self at every moment of our existence. Each day is shot through with sacramental moments which, when seen with the eyes of faith, allow us to connect more deeply with the Creator. We, too, have this experience. We have known God’s presence in people, nature, and the events of our lives. Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, described it this way, “By means of all created things without exception the divine assails us, penetrates us, and molds us.”

Ignatius also knew that as God draws us, so does the evil spirit. The movement of evil in the world seeks to draw me away from God. Sometimes we have trouble with this concept. While a quick review of the day’s headlines confirms the reality of evil, we wrestle with how this actually plays itself out in our lives and our choices. But for Ignatius, this tangle with evil was a very real and personal challenge.

For Ignatius, these basic faith assumptions are the foundation upon which the structure of the *Exercises* is built. Like Peter Faber, we can benefit from a re-examination of our own deepest notions of who God is and how God works. Only then can we truly appreciate the spirituality of St. Ignatius. ■



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