

A Constant In the Change

IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AND THE FREEDOM TO GROW AND CHANGE



by Patrick E. McGrath, SJ

CHANGE can be a difficult thing. We like our trusted habits and familiar patterns and when life demands an adjustment, we often struggle to adapt. Embracing change requires us to let go of something and to work through a transition before arriving at our new destination, attitude, habit, or way of proceeding. It's not easy and we resist.

In the rapid fire information age, change has become the status quo. The business world has learned the lesson that organizational agility is a prerequisite for success. Change is a constant which creates new demands at a moment's notice. Business journals are chock full of the latest theories of change and consultants are paid whopping sums to assist organizations as they strategize for change. Psychologists and talk show hosts fill the airwaves with strategies for growth and change.

Adaptability and an openness to change have been characteristics of Jesuits since 1540. The mission of the Society of Jesus as envisioned by Ignatius of Loyola was to go wherever they could do the most good. Ignatius set forth a template for reflective discernment that would guide the community to those places in the world where the Catholic Church most needed their services. From the very beginning, Ignatius sent Jesuits to the most remote places in the world as perceived in the 16th century. Francis Xavier, for example, was sent to Asia in order to share the Christian gospel, while other early Jesuits journeyed to the New World—present-day Peru and Chile and Paraguay (and even Florida!). Ignatius wanted his men to be comfortable in a world of change. Their ability to adapt to varying cultures and situations would be crucial to their early success.

What is it in the spirituality of Ignatius that equips us to live so that we're ready to move on to the next opportunity to serve God? Ignatius prized adaptability and openness to the world because he was so utterly convinced of God's presence in all things. His insistence that Jesuits be agile in their thought and work was based not on a master organizational design but upon his personal experience of how God works with each of us. In the early pages of the *Spir-*

itual Exercises, in the First Principle and Foundation, he insists with vivid clarity that this world has been created by God and is good. Further, God is constantly drawing us to himself and we must be open to whatever direction God might lead.

Looking back on our lives, can any of us honestly say we knew exactly the path our lives would take? Isn't it true that God has moved about in each of our lives and surprised us with all manner of twists and turns we could not have predicted or perhaps even desired? Ignatius reminds us that we must remain ever open to the new ways God is inviting us to live our lives. If anything impedes our ability to remain open, then we must prayerfully consider what to do. When Ignatius instructs us not to fix our desires on health over sickness, for example, he prods us to consider whether our faith allows us to trust that God can be experienced even in frailty and sickness—and that good can come of it.

Jesuit spirituality begins with an effort to cultivate an internal orientation which is fundamentally open to the world and its possibilities. The *Spiritual Exercises* invite us to remain open to the ways God might be calling us. Simultaneously, they root us deeper in our friendship with Jesus and our desire to follow Him. This dynamic of being tethered to the core but free to move where necessary in service to the mission makes us agile and open to growth and change. ■



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