

# Ignatian Spirituality and Ecology: entering into conversation

*By Joseph Carver SJ*

The tradition of Ignatius provides a foundational dimension to the spirituality of the contemporary Church. In examining aspects of this spirituality, we can allow our 'kinship' with the Earth and all of creation to inform our encounter with the Incarnate Christ. Ignatian spirituality demands a critical awareness of the environment in our daily lives, moving us from a sense of mere stewardship of the Earth to a deeper covenant of membership in the order of creation. This view is not merely instrumental but sacramental: the very relational quality of God as actualized in creation. This perspective recognizes that we are engaged in a relationship with the Incarnate God, and must therefore see ourselves as kin with all creation, both biologically and spiritually. This point of view demands an ecological conversion by which we address the current environmental crisis with a fresh recognition of our kinship with all creation. This newfound communion enables us to overcome abstraction and know the bonds of Heaven to Earth, of Spirit to Matter.

Any contemporary theology that claims to address the ecological crisis will need to be a theology that understands the human person as part of the natural world. My assertion is that Christians have a particular role in the environmental movement because of our understanding of both the Incarnation and communion. A communal theology, which takes seriously the incarnational grounding of our human identity, transforms humanity's relationship to the natural world and inspires an enriched approach to the ecological movement. Ignatian Spirituality offers a unique point of entry into ecological spirituality and thus the restoration of creation. When the great themes of Christian theology, such as covenant and incarnation, are brought to our contemporary understanding of ecology with an attitude that is critical yet respects the beauty and depth of both disciplines, they raise our ecological vision from one of mere materialism to one of reconciliation, re-creation, and ultimately resurrection. What follows is a very brief consideration of the topic. I do not pretend to offer a full realization of what will come from this meeting of Ignatian Spirituality and an ecological imagination, but I hope to offer a two initial steps.

The daily examen and Ignatian imaginative prayer are two clear ways to cultivate an ecological sensitivity in one's interior life. We are well aware that God continually draws each one of us to Himself in and through Christ. We experience God's action in our feelings, moods, actions and desires. We believe that God reveals Himself in our feelings as much as He does in our clear and distinct ideas. Allowing God to draw us more intimately, we must first let Him draw us at the core of our being, which means becoming more aware of our feelings. Here we recognize God's ceaseless invitation to come closer, to be more like God, to be one with God. Additionally, we become conscious of our resistance to God, which arises from sin in ourselves and in the world about us. Using the technique of the examen with an ecological lens allows us to reflect prayerfully on the events of the day. We are able to witness our relationship with creation, and to detect God's presence and discern God's direction for us. The goal of the examen is a discerning heart. The purpose of the Ecological Examen is discerning how God is inviting us individually to see how we are responding with greater sensitivity.

The five movements in the Ecological Examen parallel the traditional examen. We begin with thanksgiving and gratitude for the covenant God offers in the gift of God's self in all creation. Second, we specifically request to have our eyes opened by the Spirit as to how we might care for creation. Third, we review the challenges and joy experienced in this care. Asking God: "How was I drawn into God today through creation?" How were we being invited to respond to God's action in creation? Is there some part of our relationship with creation that is in need of change? Fourth, asking for a true and clear awareness of our sinfulness, whether it be a sense of superiority or a failure to respond to the needs of creation. Finally, hope. We ask for hope in the future, asking for greater sensitivity to trust in God's living presence in all creation.

**Ecological Examen by: Joseph Carver, SJ**

*All creation reflects the beauty and blessing of God's image. Where was I most aware of this today?*

*Can I identify and pin-point how I made a conscious effort to care for God's creation during this day?*

*What challenges or joys do I experience as I recall my care for creation?*

*How can I repair breaks in my relationship with creation, in my unspoken sense of superiority?*

*As I imagine tomorrow, I ask for the grace to see the Incarnate Christ in the dynamic interconnections of all Creation.*

**Conclude with the prayer of Jesus:**

*The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (Jn 17:22-23)*

The examen, like the Spiritual Exercises, progresses to the point of exhorting us to a total commitment to the life of Christ. Inspired by the Spirit, looking at the events in our lives and on the earth from an ecological perspectives moves us to deepen our commitments, returning to daily life with enthusiasm, inspired to transform, heal and recover the natural environment. In my experience the practice of the Ecological Examen has led to profound experiences of gratitude, for the gifts of creation most especially. This examen teaches us our ultimate purpose "to praise, reverence and serve God" in such a way that a Christian environmental response is part and parcel of everything we do. The goal is therefore to make this response part of our service to each other, to our communities, and to all creation. Like the traditional examen, the Ecological Examen leads us to three steps: awareness, appreciation and commitment. Awareness involves taking off our

societal blinders that keep us focused on our own pursuits. From awareness comes appreciation; we cannot appreciate what we are unaware of, or not in relationship with. Appreciation leads to respect and love; all creation has value because God made it thus. In this way we learn to appreciate those things we would only previously tolerate, and treat as objects; now we begin to see and learn of their critical importance to the rest of the community of creation. Suddenly we find we are imitating the dung beetle in our kitchen composting, and building turbines that mimic the flippers of humpback whales. Creation becomes an indispensable teacher rather than an intolerable scavenger. Finally, appreciation leads us to committed action. We move beyond reuse and recycling, beyond stewardship, to restoration and renewal.

Similar graces come from using our imagination in prayer to contemplate scenes from the gospel, and not simply from a human point of view. A short time ago, as I sat with a retreatant, it was clear to me that he was spinning. He was on day 6 of the Third Week of the Exercises, preoccupied not with Christ but with the intensity of His suffering, speaking again and again of the gruesomeness of the contemplations. As we came to the end of our time, I invited him to place Christ in the tomb by the end the day. He agreed. Though I rarely give this directive, holding on to my piece of gneiss, I felt compelled by the Spirit. I invited him to consider imagining himself as the tomb itself in the contemplation. Again, he agreed. When we met late the next day, he tearfully said 4 words: "*Christ rose within me.*" Deeply consoled and joyful, he went on to recount the powerful contemplation he had experienced at the tomb.

A resurrection-centered approach to the environment begins in God moving us toward the realization of this love in all created things. This paradox of love resides at the very centre of the gospel and core of the Exercises. The centre of Ignatius' spiritual experiences is the awareness of Christ's divine love present and at work in the world. Therefore, finding God at work in the creation for Ignatius does not begin with creation and ascend from there by some form of purification of the senses, but begins in God and moves into and through creation. Developments since the era of high scholasticism have not fundamentally changed this basic mystery of God's relationship to creation. Teilhard de Chardin, for example, thought it his life's work to reintegrate spirituality with the Earth. He accomplished much towards that end; however his thinking ends by subsuming all material creation within human transformation. As he writes: "In a convergent universe, every element finds its fulfillment, not directly in its own perfection, but in its incorporation into the unity of a superior pole of consciousness in which it can enter into communion with all others. Its worth culminates in a transmutation into the other, in a self-giving excentration."<sup>[1]</sup> Or again, "the end of the world; the overthrow of equilibrium, detaching the mind, fulfilled at last, from its material matrix, so that it will henceforth rest with all its weight in God's Omega."<sup>[2]</sup> These and other passages indicate that Teilhard saw the universe as being subsumed into human fulfillment in Christ. Thus we are invited to enter into the scene as if we were part of the natural world - a seed planted, the hewn rock tomb of Christ, the oil anointing Christ's feet. With literally hundreds of opportunities in the gospels and seemingly endless examples when we include the Hebrew scriptures and the Psalms, these contemplations cannot help but provoke feelings of gratitude and compel us towards action on behalf of creation. Contemplating such scenes evokes courage and a new kind of reverential humility for the gift of creation - the same virtues Jesus cultivated in following the will of God. Combining this new language of images with the wonder and grace of creation has the power to heal.

Two years ago, when directing an eight day retreat, I invited a woman to prayer with Mark 4:26-29, the parable of the growing seed. She was grieving deeply over her inability to conceive and for many years suffered from a profound sense of shame and guilt. Entering into this contemplation as the soil, she experienced a profound sense of healing. She returned the following day filled with joy to recount how she "had given birth to God's Word...a living Word!" She spoke of the profound sense of being both a disciple and mother. (I have often wondered if any physical healing came from this spiritual grace. Whether or not it did, her "healing" gave her a mission, and in living this mission she remains a healing presence in the world.)

God certainly enlightened Ignatius as to the Trinity in creation. "One day while reciting the hours of our Lady on the steps of some monastery...he saw the Holy Trinity under the figure of three

[organ] keys,"<sup>[3]</sup> The fullness of the chord and the harmony drew forth tears. (This is the first time Ignatius speaks of tears.) He could not stop talking of the Trinity and spoke of his visions of rays, the manner in which God created the earth, and the luminosity of creation. It is hard to ignore the experience of the Cardoner; there is little doubt that Ignatius related this experience and all these things as God's way of guiding souls more deeply into the principles of discernment.<sup>[4]</sup> Whether it was from the rooftop of the Curia in Rome or at the starry heavens of Loyola, he certainly beheld the stars with new eyes as well as "the other things on the face of the earth." [SpEx 23]. It is not surprising that right up to the end of his life Ignatius references these unifying visions in the Exercises, letters, the Constitutions, and in all sorts of decisions. I cannot help but believe that Ignatius would delight in the beautiful ironic truth that he himself is composed of stardust. The stars that taught him so much about reverence, awe, and wonder are composed of the very same elements of which he himself is composed -- God delighting in the very same elements in each.

When the 35<sup>th</sup> General Congregation of the Society of Jesus sought to articulate the mission of the Society today, it spoke of our need to create right relationships, especially in three areas: first, reconciliation with God, second, reconciliation with one another, and third, reconciliation with creation. (I am reminded of Pope Paul III's charge to Ignatius to include the hearing of confessions when he sought approval of the founding documents of the Society.) While the first two have a long history in the Church, the last has often been forgotten, emerging only today in a time of grave ecological challenge and profound new insight into the richness of our incarnational heritage. The Congregation, realizing this new reality, challenges Jesuits and all those inspired by the spirituality of Ignatius to "move beyond doubts and indifference to take responsibility for our home, the Earth."<sup>[5]</sup> This investigation is my attempt to take the call of the Congregation seriously; but more, to show how this call to a Eucharistic ecology emerges from-and has often been overlooked within-the long sacramental tradition of the Church and the incarnational spirituality of Ignatius, especially as seen in the Spiritual Exercises.

In his letter promulgating the Decrees of General Congregation 35, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Adolfo Nicolás wrote: "The task now at hand lies with the whole Society. It is our responsibility to 'receive' the decrees and to give them life in our ministries, communities and personal lives. Our experience has taught us that the success or failure of a General Congregation does not lie in documents but in the quality of lives which are inspired by them. Because of this, I earnestly exhort all Jesuits to read, study, meditate on and appropriate these decrees. Likewise, I encourage you to enrich them with the depth of your own faith and insight."<sup>[6]</sup> In this brief article, I have attempted to respond to the call of Father General and engage in the mission offered by the Congregation.<sup>[7]</sup> Today, as the world can no longer sustain the dichotomies of spirit versus matter, or ecology versus spirituality, it is up to us-perhaps especially those of us graced by the gift of Ignatian spirituality-to reconcile these opposites for the life of the world, thus responding to the encouragement expressed in the letter of promulgation for the General Congregation. I have tried in this work to take the various inspirations found in our tradition, and "give them life" through my own "faith and insight".

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<sup>[1]</sup> See Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, trans. N. Denny (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1959), 76.

<sup>[2]</sup> See Teilhard de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, 287f.

<sup>[3]</sup> Spiritual Journal, *Obras Completas de San Ignacio* (Madrid, 1952), 748.

<sup>[4]</sup> *Obras Completas*, 669.

[5] Documents of the 35<sup>th</sup> General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, Decree 3: Challenges to our Mission Today "Reconciliation with Creation" accessed March 1, 2009.

[6] "Letter of Promulgation" accessed March 1, 2009  
<http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/GC35/prmlgtn>

[7] This mission is succinctly presented in the opening quotation and initial paragraphs of Part II (page 24).