Ignatian spirituality as ecclesial spirituality

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A notable feature of contemporary spirituality is the distinction often made between spirituality and religion. The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, a major resource for spiritual direction, can seem to confirm this dichotomy with its emphasis on seeking God in the inner movements of the heart. At the same time, Ignatius was very much a man of the Church, who included “Rules for Thinking and Feeling with the Church” (*Sentire Cum Ecclesia*) within the Exercises.

This paper argues that the Exercises are irreducibly ecclesial. They are not simply a program for personal spiritual growth if this is taken to mean such growth independent of the Church’s life. The argument does not depend on the Rules for Thinking with Church, which present their own hermeneutic difficulties, but proceeds by a detailed textual analysis of the main body of the Exercises noting the place of ecclesial elements throughout. It does so under five headings: the place of the Church in the Election; the doctrinal specification of the person of Jesus; the role of the sacraments; the communion of saints; and various traditions on which Ignatius draws.

**Keywords:** Ignatian spirituality, Spiritual Exercises, ecclesiology

Contemporary spirituality, in a number of its manifestations, strongly distinguishes itself from organised religion. This gets expressed in a variety of distinctions which readily become dichotomies: between Jesus and Church (Jesus – Yes; Church – No); between personal faith and doctrine; between immediate relationship with God and mediated relationship; between freedom in the Spirit and being bound by structures; between experience of God and unthinking acceptance of dogma. We find this kind of disjunction posited in some forms of New Age, Indigenous, ecological, charismatic, and eastern spiritualities. It is supported also by the general suspicion of institutions and their will to power.

Some would see the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola as supporting this alienation of personal spirituality from organised religion. After all, does Ignatius not emphasise that the Creator deals directly with the creature? Does he not tell us we can find God at work in the inner movements within our hearts? Does he not invite us on a journey into an intimate personal relationship with Christ? Moreover, there is little explicit mention of the Church in the main body of the Exercises themselves. Michael Buckley raises a number of questions arising from these realities. Do the Exercises confirm “this widespread alienation” by fostering an indifference to the ecclesial community as something peripheral”? Or “does the Church function vitally in the radical encounter with God in the Exercises”? (Buckley, 1995, p. 442)

My answer to this last question, like Buckley’s, is Yes. Of course, at one level, if we look at the text of the Exercises in their entirety, that answer is evident. For the text ends with the

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rules *Sentire Cum Ecclesia* – for thinking or feeling with the Church – where Ignatius makes abundantly clear his views on the Church and its centrality. Even the inclusion of these Rules along with the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, which are rightly taken to be a key expression of Ignatius’ emphasis on personal discernment, gives us pause for thought about the dichotomies we have noted in some contemporary spiritualities. Still, I wish to argue in this paper from the main body of the Exercises, with only passing reference to these Rules. This is for three reasons. Firstly, the Rules are perhaps the most time-bound text in the Exercises, with their particularities tied very much to the Reformation disputes of Ignatius’ time. I certainly believe they contain an attitude to the Church which needs more emphasis in our time and in contemporary spiritual direction. But dealing adequately with them would require a precision of historical and hermeneutical analysis which lies beyond the scope of this paper. Secondly, the Rules do not appear to be an essential part of the experience of the Exercises for each person. Michael Ivens points out that the early Directories, which offer comment on the giving of the Exercises, “insist that the rules be given not as a matter of course, but only to those who need them” (Ivens, 1998, p. 250).

Most importantly, though, by not basing my argument on the Rules *Sentire Cum Ecclesia*, I wish to make clear that the ecclesial sense of the Exercises does not depend exclusively on those explicit guidelines. Even had Ignatius not penned those Rules, the Exercises remain an ecclesial document, imbued with elements drawn from various aspects of the Church’s life. I will show this by offering a close reading of the text of the Exercises under five headings: 1. the Church’s role in the election; 2. the presentation of Jesus in ways that are doctrinally specified; 3. the role of the sacraments; 4. the communion of saints; and 5. various traditions on which Ignatius draws.

### 1. The Church in the election:

Outside of the Rules for Thinking with the Church, the most significant way in which the Church features explicitly in the Exercises is in the Election. This is the process by which the exercitant chooses a state of life or, if such a choice has already been made permanently, how to reform how one lives within that state. Ignatius outlines his basic criteria for what might be discerned about in his first point:

> It is necessary that everything about which we want to make an election should be indifferent, or good, in itself, and should be allowed within our Holy Mother the hierarchical Church, and not bad nor opposed to her (Exx 170).*

Here, as Buckley points out, there are two criteria, each expressed first positively and then negatively. Anything we wish to make an election about should, first, be “indifferent, or good, in itself”, or, put negatively, should not be bad. This is fundamental. We discern between goods, or at least between things which are indifferent. We do not discern to do something immoral or bad, since discernment is about discovering where God is leading, and God never leads to evil. Given that this first criterion is fulfilled, there is another important criterion for Ignatius, situating the election within the life of the Church: what we discern “should be allowed within our Holy Mother the hierarchical Church” or, put negatively, not be “opposed to her” (Buckley, 1995, p. 444).

What is “allowed within” the Church is more literally translated by Buckley as what should “militate within” the Church – i.e. any way of life chosen needs to be “located within the
struggle engaging the Church” (Buckley, 1995, p. 444). This struggle is outlined in the Call of the King and in the Two Standards – the struggle which goes through the heart of each person as spiritual forces seek to shape our lives and decisions. Participation in the struggle of the Church on earth, the Church militant, conditions the validity of any choice we make in the election. “There is no room for the ecclesially indifferent” (Buckley, 1995, p. 444). This point is echoed in the third time for making an election where one “chooses as means a life or state within the limits of the Church, in order that he may be helped in the service of his Lord and the salvation of his soul” (Exx 177). We also catch a hint of it in the Rules for Scruples. When a virtuous person, desiring to do some good, is tempted not to follow it through because of possible vainglory, Ignatius presumes that what the person is wanting to do or speak will be “within the Church, within the understanding of our Superiors, and … for the glory of God our Lord” (Exx 351). If not, then we don’t even get to first base in terms of discerning.

Through his analysis of various images that Ignatius uses for the Church, particularly Spouse and Mother, Buckley will go on to conclude: “In sharing in the relationships between the entire Church and Christ, the contemporary exercitant is drawn into a deeper union with God, into a personal embodiment of the nature and the mission of the Church” (Buckley, 1995, p. 463). The reasons for that conclusion go beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to point for now to the reality that the Election, so central to the Exercises, is very much about how one is to live one’s life in Christ within the Church.

2. Jesus the Incarnate Redeemer:

The Exercises do not present us with a Jesus we can simply shape in our own image and Ignatius does not direct us to Scriptural passages and suggest we do with them as we will. Rather, in the graces he would have us pray for, he presents a vision of Christ marked by the Church’s articulation of Christian doctrine. In particular, in terms of the person of Christ, we are presented with Jesus as God Incarnate, and in terms of his work, we are presented with him as the Redeemer who frees us from our sins.

The Incarnate God

The theme of Christ as God incarnate appears already in the First Week, in the Colloquy before Christ on the Cross. There I am to consider “how from Creator He is come to making Himself man, and from life eternal is come to temporal death” (Exx 53). This theme picks up pace, understandably, as we move into the Second Week with its focus on the life of Christ. In the Call of the King, Jesus is not simply human but is “King Eternal and universal Lord” (Exx 97) and the “Eternal Lord of all things” whom we pledge to follow and whose injuries, abuse and poverty we pray to share (Exx 98). The Contemplation on the Incarnation presents us with the Trinity contemplating the world and seeing humanity’s need for salvation. They determine “in Their Eternity, that the Second Person shall become man” (Exx 102) and set to work out “the most holy Incarnation” (Exx 108).

In this way, the scene is set for our encounter with Christ, the pre-existent Son of God now made flesh. In the colloquies of this week, I am to consider conversing with “the Eternal Word Incarnate”, with the aim of following and imitating him “so lately incarnate” (Exx 109). Moreover, the grace we pray for throughout this Second Week is “interior knowledge of the Lord, Who for me has become man, that I may more love and follow him” (Exx 104) or, as Ignatius puts it elsewhere, “to know the Eternal Word incarnate, in order to serve and to follow Him more” (Exx 130). When it comes to the Application of the Senses, we are to “smell and taste … the infinite fragrance and sweetness of the Divinity” (Exx 124).
The mystery of the Incarnation emerges also in the subsequent weeks when we are pointed to the ways the Humanity and the Divinity of Christ are at work. In the Third Week, we are directed to consider what “Christ our Lord is suffering in His Humanity” (Exx 195). The next point highlights the role of the Divinity of Christ in his Passion as we are led “to consider how the Divinity hides Itself, that is, how It could destroy its enemies and does not do it, and how It leaves the most sacred Humanity to suffer so very cruelly” (Exx 196). Once again, the Christ we are contemplating is the Incarnate One, fully human and fully divine, even if his divinity is hidden and holds back its power. At the same time, though He is God, Christ truly suffers, and “cruelly,” in His Humanity. The situation is very different in the Fourth Week where “the Divinity, which seemed to hide Itself in the Passion, now appears and shows Itself so marvellously in the most holy Resurrection by Its true and most holy effects” (Exx 223).

It is in the Fourth Week, too, that we find the following doctrinally-laden passage:

Christ expired on the Cross, and the Body, always united with the Divinity, remained separated from the Soul, the blessed Soul, likewise united with the Divinity, went down to Hell, and taking from there the just souls, and coming to the Sepulchre and being risen, He appeared to His Blessed Mother in Body and in Soul (Exx 219; cf. 311).

Ignatius directs us to a number of doctrines here. Firstly, Christ truly died. He experienced that separation of body and soul which all humans experience in death (cf. Exx 208). Secondly, despite this separation of body and soul, Christ’s humanity is never separated at all from his divinity – his body remains “always united with the Divinity” and his soul “likewise united with the Divinity.” That is, even in death, when his humanity is split asunder, the reality of the Incarnation, of the hypostatic union, can not be undone. Thirdly, after the Resurrection, Christ’s humanity is restored to its unity, and he appears once more as a unity of body and soul, the Risen Incarnate One.

**The Redeemer**

Besides the fact of the Incarnation, Ignatius also emphasizes the purpose of the Incarnation, which is our Redemption. He does so in a way which is strikingly similar to Luther’s pro me – that the Gospel needs to be heard and received as good news for me. Already this redemptive pro me is placed before us in the First Week, in that Colloquy before Christ crucified, where we are told that God became human “to die for my sins” (Exx 53). When we come to the Contemplation on the Incarnation, Ignatius notes the Trinity gazing on the world in all its brokenness and desiring, not to punish, but “to save the human race” (Exx 102). This decision is expressed in terms of redemption: “Let Us work the redemption of the human race” (Exx 107). Throughout the Second Week, then, we do not simply contemplate the Incarnate One as remote from my reality. Rather, Ignatius always directs us to “the Lord, who for me has become man” (Exx 104). In the Nativity scene, too, one is encouraged to reflect on the difficulty and labours of the Holy Family, all directed at ensuring “that the Lord may be born in the greatest poverty; and as a termination of so many labors -- of hunger, of thirst, of heat and of cold, of injuries and affronts -- that He may die on the Cross; and all this for me” (Exx 116). It is not simply the cross that is pro me, but the entirety of what the Lord has borne for us throughout his life and ministry, culminating in the cross.

The same ‘for me’ feature, of course, in the meditations on the Passion. There, in the first contemplation, I ask for the grace of “grief, feeling and confusion because for my sins the
Lord is going to the Passion” (Exx 193). In the course of the contemplation am to consider how He suffers all this “for my sins” (Exx 197). In the second contemplation I ask for “tears and interior pain at such great pain Christ suffered for me” (Exx 203).

This theme of redemption continues in the Fourth Week, where we are urged to make use of whatever will help the soul “to be joyful in its Creator and Redeemer” (Exx 229). The Contemplatio invites us to be overwhelmed as we savour all that God has done for us. In the first point for consideration, I am directed again to Christ as Creator and Redeemer, being invited “to bring to memory the benefits received, of Creation, Redemption and particular gifts, pondering with much feeling how much God our Lord has done for me” (Exx 234). Likewise, the third point asks me “to consider how God works and labors for me in all things” (Exx 236). In all of this, Christ is not simply a friend, nor simply a prophet or good person to be imitated and edified by, but God Incarnate and Redeemer of the world.

3. Sacraments:

If the Exercises invite us contemplate the Christ whose true identity the Church’s teaching makes clear for us, so too do they lead us to involvement in the Church’s life through the sacraments, especially Eucharist and Reconciliation. For those wanting simply “to be instructed and to come to a certain degree of contentment of soul,” Ignatius encourages the director to offer some basic forms of prayer and to recommend that the person “confess his sins every eight days, and, if he can, … receive the Blessed Sacrament every fifteen days, and better, if he be so moved, every eight” (Exx 18). Retreatants “from whom not much fruit is be hoped” should be given some simple exercises until they make their confession. Then they should be given some ways of examining their consciences and of going to confession more often than was their custom so that they might preserve the good they have gained (Exx 18).

To those doing the 19th Annotation Exercises, Ignatius makes particular mention of giving points on how “to confess and to receive the Blessed Sacrament” (Exx 19). Later on, he will provide some of these points in his General Examen of Conscience, whose aim is “to purify oneself and to make one’s Confession better” (Exx 32).

Next, Ignatius turns to those doing the full Exercises. One benefit of their living away from their usual situation while doing the full Exercises is the ability to enter into the Church’s liturgy more readily, “to go each day to Mass and to Vespers” (Exx 20). Ignatius also points out the advantages of the retreatants making a General Confession at the end of the First Week – i.e. a confession of all the sins of one’s past life, whether previously confessed or not. The advantage is a “greater actual sorrow for all the sins and wickedness” in the context of the greater clarity about our sinfulness gained from the First Week exercises. This allows for a better Confession and hence a better disposition for receiving Communion, which is “an aid not only not to fall into sin, but also to preserve the increase of grace” (Exx 44).

Ignatius’ love for the Eucharist is evident in how he presents the Last Supper scene in three different places: Jesus gives us “His most Holy Body and Precious Blood” (Exx 191); he gives us “the Blessed Sacrament” (Exx 209); and he institutes “the most sacred sacrifice of the Eucharist, to be the greatest mark of His love” (Exx 289). Again, we are not simply presented with a Gospel scene and told to make of it what we will. Instead, Ignatius draws us into the significance of the scene in a way which links it to the sacramental and doctrinal life of the Church. His points for contemplating the two disciples meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus make the same link speaking as they do of Jesus “giving them Communion” and of
these disciples sharing with the others back in Jerusalem how “they had known Him in the Communion” (Exx 303).

Finally, the Rules for Thinking with the Church urge us to “praise confession to a Priest” as well as reception of communion (“the most Holy Sacrament of the Altar”) at least once a year, though monthly is “much more” to be praised, and weekly is “much better” (Exx 354). So too are we to praise the frequent hearing of Mass (Exx 255).

4. The Communion of Saints:

The Saints

Another element of Catholic Church life which features prominently in the Exercises is devotion to the Saints. It is clear that they form a treasured part of his Christian worldview, as we glimpse in the second exercise of the First Week where I am to situate myself, as a creature, within the whole universe of being. I do this by comparing myself to the whole of humankind; then comparing humankind “to all the Angels and Saints of Paradise”; then comparing the whole of Creation – humankind, Angels and Saints together – to God (Exx 58).

For Ignatius, the Saints are those who are present to and alive with Christ. Having been united intimately with him in their earthly life, they share with him the glory of the heavenly court. Also, we might note, they share with Christ in being the object of the “wailings, howlings, cries, blasphemies” of the damned (Exx 67). At three points in the Exercises, Ignatius places us in the presence of Christ and his saints in heaven. The first is in the crucial Contemplation on the Call of the King, where we are invited to offer ourselves completely to the “Eternal Lord of all things.” We make this solemn offering in the presence not only of Jesus himself, but also of Mary and “of all the Saints of the heavenly Court” (Exx 98). Soon after, in the Meditation on the Three Classes of Person, I again see “how I stand before God our Lord and all His Saints” (Exx 151). Further on, I enter into the culminating exercise of the Contemplatio aware of “how I am standing before God our Lord, and of the Angels and of the Saints” (Exx 232).

The Saints, though, are not merely present with Christ in the heavenly court. They are active – “interceding for me” as the Contemplatio puts it (Exx 232). In the First Week already we were led to wonder at how, despite my sinfulness, I have the support of these saints who “have been engaged in interceding and praying for me” (Exx 68). Moreover, Ignatius presumes that we are able to communicate with the Saints in general (Exx 3) and with Mary in particular, as we shall see further below.

Finally, drawing on his experience of the importance of the example of the saints in his own conversion, Ignatius sees the value of the example of the saints for those still in the Church militant. During the Exercises, especially during the Second Week when we are seeking to follow Christ more fully, we are encouraged to read “books of the Imitation of Christ, or of the Gospels, and of the lives of Saints” (Exx 100; cf. 215). Mary in particular is mentioned as worthy of imitation (Exx 248). Moreover, devotions involving the Saints – “relics of the Saints, giving veneration to them and praying to the Saints” (Ex 358) – are amongst those things to be praised by those who have a proper attitude in the Church.

In two places in his rules for dealing with scruples, Ignatius supports a point he is making by quoting saints, St Gregory on the value of being sensitive to one’s faults, and St Bernard on dealing with the voice of the evil spirit accusing us of vainglory when we wish to do some
good (Exx 348, 351). Ignatius also draws from more legendary accounts of the saints. In encouraging us to simplicity of life, he refers a story about Sts Joachim and Anna, the names tradition gives to Mary’s parents. This account claim that they divided “their means into three parts, gave the first to the poor, and the second to the ministry and service of the Temple, and took the third for the support of themselves and of their household” (Exx 344). Ignatius is also happy for us to contemplate scenes involving Scriptural characters but not mentioned in Scripture – e.g. the Risen Christ’s appearance to Joseph of Arimathea, which Ignatius notes comes from the lives of the Saints (Exx 310).

Mary
This reference to Mary leads to our discussion of Ignatius’ treatment of Mary, in particular amongst the Communion of Saints. The prayer to Christ in the call of the Kingdom situates him, as we have seen, in the presence of his “glorious Mother and of all the Saints of the heavenly Court” (Exx 98). Mary naturally appears in a number of the Gospel contemplations in the Second Week, particularly since Ignatius spends a considerable time on the Infancy narratives and hidden life (Exx 101-109, 110-117, 162, 263,264, 266,268, 269, 270, 271, and 276). We come across Mary as well in the Third Week at the foot of the Cross with John (Exx 297).

Ignatius also includes Our Lady in scenes which move beyond the biblical narrative. Scripture recounts Christ’s circumcision in only one verse (Luke 2:21), but the Exercises elaborate this with the following point: “They gave back the Child to His Mother, who had compassion for the Blood which came from her Son” (Exx 266). In the contemplation on the baptism, Christ first takes leave of his mother (Exx 273). And in the passion, Ignatius mentions Mary at the descent from the Cross (Exx 298), and would have us visit her house after the burial and reflect on her loneliness, grief and fatigue (Exx 208). In the Resurrection contemplations, Ignatius gives Mary particular prominence, with the first contemplation of the Fourth Week devoted to Christ’s appearance to her (Exx 218-225). This contemplation is further elaborated in the list of points for meditation later. There, Ignatius famously answers anyone who would challenge this addition by saying that this story “although it is not said in Scripture, is included in the saying that He appeared to so many others, because Scripture supposes that we have understanding, as it is written: ‘Are you also without understanding?’” (Exx 299). Any right-thinking Christian, in Ignatius’ view, would understand that, given Jesus’ intimate relationship with his Mother, he would appear first to her.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Mary’s prominence in the Exercises is the important intercessory role she is given in the triple colloquies. When seeking a grace that is particularly important or that we particularly desire, Ignatius would have us speak first to Our Lady about this grace, asking her to intercede with her Son for it, and pray a Hail Mary. Then we are to go to Jesus, asking him to intercede with the Father for this grace, and pray the Soul of Christ. Finally, I go to the Father asking him for the grace, concluding with the Our Father (Exx 63, 147, 148, 199).

5. Various other ecclesial elements:

In this final section, I will bring together a number of diverse ways in which Ignatius in the Exercises draws on ecclesial elements of various sorts. The key point I am making is that the Exercises presume more than simply the retreatant and Jesus, but a whole ecclesial way of life from which Ignatius draws in a range of ways – the more significant ways already mentioned, and the following series of smaller ways which fill out the picture further.
Church councils
At one point, Ignatius quotes from the Third Council of Carthage (397), which determined “that the furniture of the Bishop be cheap and poor.” This text appears in the Rules for Giving Alms, and he uses it to emphasize the importance of living simply “in all manners of life.” Ignatius quotes this Council as a specification, in the teaching of the Church, of the Gospel call to a simplicity and poverty modelled after Christ “our model and rule” (Exx 344).

Order of the day and time
For Ignatius, the order of the day for the retreatant is based not just on the cycles of nature (“at midnight” or “at dawn” or “in the morning”) or on cultural patterns (“the hour of supper”), but also on liturgical rhythms. Thus prayer times are often correlated with “the hour of Mass” or “the hour of Vespers” (Exx 72, 128, 129, 133, 148, 159, 204, 209, 227). In a similar fashion, common prayers measure durations of time. We are to reflect for the space of an Our Father (Exx 75), or of a Hail Mary (Exx 73), or “the space of time one says the Our Father and the Hail Mary three times” (Exx 241).

Religious life
Ignatius presents religious life or the way of “evangelical perfection” as something about which a good Christian will be drawn to discern. His preamble to the consideration of states of life presents the state of “evangelical perfection” as one option to be considered (Exx 135). During the Exercises, it is true, the director must not influence the retreatant one way or the other, and the retreatant should be counselled not to make hasty decisions (Exx 14-15). But outside of the Exercises “we can lawfully and with merit influence every one who is probably fit to choose continence, virginity, the religious life and all manner of evangelical perfection” (Exx 15).

Traditional prayers
Ignatius does not see his emphasis on interior prayer, meditation and contemplation, and the unique action of God in each person as conflicting with a knowledge and use of traditional prayers. There is, of course, the Scriptural Our Father, which he recommends as a way of concluding most prayer exercises (Exx 43, 54, 61, 63, 71, 111, 117, 118, 126, 147, 198, 237, 241, 248). But there are also other prayers from the tradition, especially the Hail Mary and the Anima Christi or Soul of Christ which are recommended for use in the significant Triple Colloquy, as we have seen.

In the Exercises, Ignatius suggests two ways of praying traditional prayers which can deepen our appreciation of them. One is to pray slowly through the prayer, one word at a time, considering that word as long as one finds fruit there (Exx 252). The other way involves praying each prayer to the rhythm of one’s breathing, one word per breath (Exx 258). In this regard, Ignatius points to the three prayers already mentioned - the Our Father, Hail Mary and Anima Christi – but adds the Creed, expressing the core faith of the Church, and the Hail, Holy Queen, a traditional Marian prayer, used, for example, at the conclusion of the Rosary (Exx 253, 258). Furthermore, people can be encouraged to pray on other aspects of Church devotional life or teaching, such as the “Deadly Sins, Precepts of the Church, Five Senses, and Works of Mercy” (Exx 18).

Conclusion
We have seen, then, a variety of ways in which the Exercises are imbued with an ecclesial dimension even if we leave aside the Rules for Thinking with the Church. Elections are only to be made about things in harmony with the Church. Christ is presented in a way shaped by the Church’s doctrinal tradition - the pre-existent Son made incarnate for our Redemption and
now inseparably and fully human and divine. The sacraments are important and helpful aspects of Christian life to which retreatants are directed. The Church triumphant - i.e. the communion of saints, and particularly Mary - stands in solidarity with the Church militant, present, interceding, and offering examples to be imitated. Finally, we saw how Ignatius draws on other elements from the tradition, such as conciliar teaching or traditional prayers. All of this suggests in Ignatius an ecclesial mindset inextricably bound up with his passionate and personal commitment to Christ. It also suggests that this is what Ignatius hopes the Exercises will engender in those who do them - the same appreciation and love for both Christ and his Body in their unbreakable union.

* The translation of the Exercises used herein is the one listed below, by Elder Mullan. I have cross-referenced the standardized paragraph numbers to Mullan’s text, which pre-dates them. The citations are in-text in the form (Exx n) where ‘n’ denotes the paragraph number/s.

References
