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Say WHAT?!

The Ambiguity of Ignatian Terminology

By David Nantais

Language can be confusing, but spiritual language can be particularly confounding because its specialized terminology can take on several different meanings for the casual listener. Ignatian spirituality is not immune to this problem. Those who read *Conversations* are likely familiar with several Ignatian terms, such as “Magis,” “AMDG,” and “Examen,” that are parlayed about at meetings, on retreats, and in casual conversation on the job. Those of us who use these terms may assume that those to whom we are speaking understand loud and clear what we are communicating. This may not be the case.

One valuable resource for all students of the Exercises is the excellent book by Michael Ivens, S.J., *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Gracewing Press, 1998). Ivens goes step-by-step through the Exercises and explains in detail what Ignatius was attempting to communicate to retreat directors (and indirectly to retreatants) through his language. Ivens is particularly helpful in explaining the terms *indifference*, *consolation*, and *desolation*.

Ten years ago I wrote a piece for the journal *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* titled, “‘Whatever!’ Is NOT Ignatian Indifference: Jesuits and the Ministry to Young Adults.” I recall at the time hearing young adults use the term “Whatever!” often to imply a lack of concern or a “blowing off” of something they had no time or patience to confront. I formed an image in my mind of an elderly Jesuit walking through a college campus, hearing students utter this term, and reflecting, “How wonderful that our young people today are so open to ‘whatever’ the Lord desires of them!” This was my tongue-in-cheek attempt to illustrate that not only do ministers need to understand young people’s language, but that we also

need to translate our antiquated terminology so they can understand it. “Indifference” is a particularly troublesome word, as Ignatius’s intended meaning is so radically different from its use in the contemporary vernacular.

The word *indifference* appears in the Principle and Foundation at the beginning of the Exercises right after the annotations. According to Ivens, “indifference” need not possess a negative meaning. “The indifference of the Exercises is a stance before God, and what makes it possible – and also something quite other than either apathy or stoicism – is a positive desire for God and his will.” Indifference is a grace that ultimately opens our hearts to God so that we choose that which is the most good.

The late Dean Brackley, in his exquisite book *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, also attempts to clarify the meaning of indifference. “Indifference means inner freedom. It is the capacity to sense and then embrace what is best, even when that goes against our inclinations.” The most significant misunderstanding about indifference is that it means lack of passion or apathy. Not so, writes Brackley, “It means being so passionately and single-mindedly committed, so completely in love, that we are willing to sacrifice anything, including our lives, for the ultimate goal.” (Brackley, 12)

Consolation and *desolation* are also frustratingly ambiguous terms. When someone loses a loved one, we try to console them, meaning ease their pain and provide comfort. In common parlance, desolation implies despair or depression. Ignatius’s use of the terms consolation and desolation means something different entirely. These are spiritual terms, not derived from textbook psychology.

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Ivens sheds light on the intended meaning in the Exercises: “In the last analysis, consolation ‘consoles’ because whatever its form, whether unambiguous or implicit and discreet, it is a felt experience of God’s love building up the Christ-life in us. And what characterizes every form of spiritual desolation is a felt sense of dissonance which is the echo in consciousness of an influence tending of its nature to undermine the Christ-life, and hence in the case of a person who remains fundamentally Christ-oriented to contradict their most deep-seated inclinations.” (Ivens, 206)

Brackley also fleshes out the meaning of *consolation* and *desolation*. “Though pleasant, consolation is different from pleasure. Whereas pleasure passes with its stimulus, consolation produces abiding peace and joy.” (Brackley, 48) Consolation can feel like an intense high or it can be a subtle warmth. Brackley writes that consolation is definitely not equated with happiness, as it can also come in the form of “redemptive sorrow that heals

and unites us to others – for example, when we are mourning the death of a friend and wish to be nowhere else but there, sharing that family’s loss.” (Brackley, 49) On the other hand, “Desolation drains us of energy. We are attracted to the gospel of self-satisfaction. We feel drawn backward into ourselves. Life feels burdensome, the thought of generous service repugnant, devotional practices boring and distasteful. God seems absent, God’s love unreal.” (Brackley, 49-50)

Language is fluid, which makes it both fascinating and frustrating. This is especially true of spiritual language, which needs to adapt to changing times while simultaneously maintaining aspects of the original intention of the author. In *The Book Thief* author Markus Zusak writes, “I have hated words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right.” I share this sentiment, and I think Ignatius would concur. If not, then, “Whatever!”. ■