

All My Liberty

Chapter 3: The Call of Christ the King

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The contemplation on the Kingdom of Christ has been accurately called the heart of Ignatian spirituality. It epitomizes two ideals to which the exercitant is invited to aspire and which, if he follows, will bring him to “the pinnacle of perfection in the imitation of Christ.” The first is a willingness to go beyond mediocrity in the service of Christ, the Son of God; the second a projection of personal love into the world outside, so that other souls may also “yield a higher than ordinary service to Christ their King.”

Gospel Origins and Principles

There is no speculation on where St. Ignatius got his concept of the royal invitation of Christ to His followers. All the Saviour’s teaching was somehow identified with the *Basileia*, or the Kingdom, of the evangelists, from the opening of His public life when He began to preach repentance, “for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” to His dying profession before Pilate that: “My kingdom is not of this world, ... my kingdom is not from here.” [1] Christ used the word “Church” only twice to describe the society He was founding. He spoke of His “kingdom” in almost every chapter of the Gospels, so that whatever light they cast on the social aspects of Christianity must be looked for in this notion of the kingdom. If Ignatius emphasized the interior qualities of discipleship, it was only because he recognized the priority of personal dedication to anything like mass movement or communal enterprise. The kingdom must first be implanted

in the hearts of individual Christians by their own dedicated love of the Saviour.

Two possible emphases may be placed in the contemplation on the Kingdom, depending on the relative stress given to the pursuit of one’s own perfection or to the Christian apostolate in its various forms. Viewed in one sense, the meditation is directly concerned only with self-conquest and growth in holiness, and indirectly with the apostolate by generating a spirit of zeal for the salvation of others. Viewed from a different angle, the exercise considers both functions simultaneously: to produce high sanctity in the imitation of Christ’s virtues with relation to God, the apostolic zeal by imitating His virtues in the interest of mankind.

[2] Perhaps the difference between the two viewpoints is more verbal than real. But the latter approach has the advantage of not seeming to compartmentalize the spiritual life, as though Christ could be followed on separate levels, the personal or apostolic, instead of conceiving Christian perfection as an organic unity which seeks to imitate the whole Saviour in the whole range of His human existence.

The ancient Directories (official manuals of instruction on the Exercises) speak of the Kingdom as “a kind of Foundation or Prologue of the entire treatise which follows, that is, a summary or compendium of the life and labors of Christ the Lord in the work committed to Him by the Father.” [3] It may therefore be regarded as an historical embodiment of the ideas set forth in the first Foundation, in such a way that the main principles are now clothed in the existential context of the person and actions of Jesus Christ. Where the Foundation considers man in relation to God, the Kingdom places him in the presence of the God-man; and instead of limiting his gaze to his own salvation, he is now bid to share with Christ in the redemption of others.

As explained by the 16th century *Apologia* of the Exercises, “St. Ignatius placed this meditation at the beginning of the Second Week as a basis for

the subsequent reflections on the life of Christ in order to inspire us to imitate Him.” Everyone is intended to share in this meditation: “people in the world as well as religious, those who make the election and those who do not.” All must meditate on the life of Christ “with complete indifference of will to embrace the divine will and with a firm desire to attain that which is more perfect and pleasing to God. According to each person’s disposition, this is accomplished by doing what is better and more in conformity with the life of Christ—whether it means the choice of a certain vocation or undertaking other good works for the greater glory of God.” [4]

The imitation of Christ as proposed in the call of Christ the King forms the bedrock of the Spiritual Exercises. Actually the concept is nothing new, but goes back to the teaching of Christ, “Learn of Me ...” and of Ignatius of Antioch, “Be imitators of Jesus Christ, as He is of the Father.” [5] St. Paul exhorted the Corinthians, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ,” and according to St. Augustine, a man is perfect if he follows Christ perfectly, while to follow perfectly is to imitate. [6] What Christian tradition had taught for centuries, St. Ignatius developed into an organic method of asceticism. Thus among the writings which most deeply influenced his spiritual outlook was the *Imitation of Christ*, where we read in the opening paragraph: “He that follows Me does not walk in darkness, says the Lord. These are the words of Christ, whereby we are admonished how we must imitate His life and conversation if we would be truly enlightened and delivered from all blindness of heart.” [7]

We legitimately ask why the imitation of Christ should be so essential for Christian perfection. The answer lies in the finality of the Incarnation, since this was one of the reasons why God Became man, to be followed by men as a norm of sanctification. In the words of St. Augustine, “The Son of God who in the Father is ever the truth and the life, by taking upon Himself man’s nature became the way ... By Him you are going

to Him. Seek not to come to Him by any other way than Him.” [8] Since mankind needed to be taught the way to God, “it had to be formed after some model. Hence the first thing necessary was that a standard and pattern of discipline be available. This was done by the divinely appointed method of the Incarnation, which is properly to be ascribed to the Son, in order that from it should follow both our knowledge, through the Son, of the Father ... and the interior sweetness of despising all mortal creatures, which is a gift properly ascribed to the Holy Ghost.” [9]

Although there are many ways that Christ can be imitated in His human nature, they may all be reduced to His practice of the virtues—mental and volitional, internal and external, personal and in relation to others. St. Ignatius gives full scope to these in detail, through the fifty meditations which form the substance of the Second and Third Weeks of the Exercises. But in the contemplation on the Kingdom he singles out one aspect of Christ as man which not only underlies the other virtues, but which synthesizes His mortal life as Redeemer of the human race. This is the aspect of Christ in the role of willing sufferer through humble obedience to the will of His heavenly Father.

With no sign of coercion, the eternal King invites us to follow Him in labor and pain, not for the sake of suffering but as the mysterious means ordained by God for the salvation of a fallen humanity. Conceived in this way, the Kingdom meditation opens a panorama of profound insights into the meaning of the cross in the economy of Redemption. A logical relation thus arises between Christ’s invitation to “follow Me in pain,” and His promise, “to follow Me in glory.” For if Christ is our model and the way to the Father, then the labor and suffering He underwent are a pattern for us to imitate if we wish to attain eternal happiness in His company.

Sanctity as the Fruit of Labor and Suffering

There is also a close correlation between effort and pain as exemplified by Christ, and the sanctity to which He calls His elect. Their causal connection may be explained in terms of supernatural merit, on the basis of what elements contribute to an increase of merit in this life and a corresponding increase of glory in the life to come. Theologians commonly recognize three such factors, and subdivide the third into two parts.

According to St. Thomas, “The efficacy of merit can be measured from grace, from the will and from the object. For as an act is informed by greater charity and grace, it is to that extent more meritorious; also the more voluntary is the act, the more it has of the essence of merit and is more praiseworthy; and finally, the more arduous is an object, the higher is the merit of the act—though the comparison is always understood about one of these factors, with the others being taken as equal.” [10] Applying these norms to the matter at hand, we see how naturally the following of Christ in His labor and sufferings produces greater merit in the acts of virtue thus performed.

Assuming that a person is in the state of grace, by placing an action from a motive of pure love for God, the merit he derives becomes greater than it would be if he had acted from lower motivation and with less supernatural charity.

In like manner, the greater willfulness in performing a good action, the greater liberty it indicates and the higher its merit, just as in bad actions increased advertence and freedom mean greater culpability. The imitation of Christ toiling and suffering implies a high degree of conscious deliberation, and, in spite of repugnance from the lower passions, a corresponding liberty in the human will. As the action becomes not only deliberate but also

joyous with untrammelled generosity, its voluntariness increases along with the merit.

Since the sublimity of an object determines the value of its corresponding act, the more noble the object of a particular virtue the greater its supernatural merit. In general, a virtue is more noble as it approaches more closely to God. Thus, *ceteris paribus*, acts of faith, hope and charity are more meritorious than those of the moral virtues. And among the former, charity is most meritorious. The faithful following of Christ, poor and humble, means the practice of the noblest virtue—love—toward its highest object—God—with no selfish interests involved. Merit in the form of grace and a title to glory is measured accordingly.

A careful distinction should be made regarding difficulty as a factor which increases merit. Much depends on the source of whatever hardship is experienced in the practice of virtue. If the source is extrinsic to the action, i.e., if it arises from culpable personal defects such as bad habits, uncontrolled passions, evil inclinations or lack of prudent vigilance, then, clearly, difficulties lower merit instead of increasing it. If, on the other hand, they are intrinsic to the action or at least not culpable in the person, the difficulties experienced add to the merit that we gain before God. Thus if the work to be done is arduous or sublime of its very nature, if its accomplishment requires overcoming severe temptations and external or even internal obstacles arising from temperament or physical conditions—then (assuming that God wishes the action to be placed) merit increases. Unlike charity and voluntariness, however, difficulty is not of the essence of merit. Yet the two are closely related either because an exalted object is difficult of attainment for being exalted, or at least “what is difficult calls for greater attention and requires greater effort of the will,” so that merit increases indirectly by way of nobility of object or greater voluntariness. [11] By psychological necessity, therefore, the following of Christ in poverty and affliction gives an

assurance of higher merit than the practice of virtue independently of this object and motive. Not that any merit attaches to difficulties in themselves, but because this imitation of Christ means the practice of sublimest virtue and evokes the exercise of profoundest love.

Spirit of the Apostolate

The apostolic implications of the Kingdom may be inferred from the words of Christ inviting His followers to join in the enterprise of conquering the whole world for His Father at the cost of much suffering and labor. But more radically it appears from the whole purpose of Christ's life upon earth, which was to save souls.

Consequently if we are to follow Christ faithfully, our purpose must be the same as His, namely, not only to develop His Kingdom in ourselves but also cooperate with divine grace to establish the same in others. On the last day, the just will be called to possess the Kingdom because they had loved Christ in His members by serving their bodily and spiritual needs. Another name for the practice of these works of mercy is the Christian apostolate—at once a condition of salvation and an opportunity for practicing the highest virtue in imitation of Christ who went about doing good for others even to the death of the cross. We may ask, when did Christ perform the most arduous labors and suffer the greatest pain if not in the years of His public life, when preaching the Gospel to an evil generation, and in the days of His passion, which crowned His apostolate as “the cause of our reconciliation with God”? [12] Our own labor and pain, therefore, in union with Christ the Redeemer are also joined to the apostolate, and can no more be separated from the following of Christ than His sufferings can be divorced from His role as the Saviour of mankind.

It is not easily apparent why Christ should invite us to imitate His practice of poverty and suffering in order to conquer the world for the glory of His Father. Why not directly invite His followers to join in proclaiming the word of God

to the ends of the earth? Why this preoccupation with personal sanctification and the emphasis on mortification of carnal and worldly love? The reason is two-fold: one based on the nature of man and the character of the apostolate, and the other derived from the providence of God in the order of grace and the supernatural.

Without invoking any authority, common experience teaches that successful work for souls, in whatever form, requires the practice of the moral virtues in a high degree. There is need for patience in bearing with weakness and ignorance in oneself and others; courage to surmount difficulties arising from one's own temperament, from opposition, or natural circumstances; industry in willingness to sacrifice comfort and ease for the benefit of others; self-control in restraining disordinate affections and repressing unreasonable fears. Without these virtues it is quite impossible to convert people from a life of sin or lead them to spiritual perfection. If nothing else, they need our example to know that what we ask them to do is not impossible and worth the effort of striving for.

But the apostolate is not only a work of nature. It is pre-eminently in the realm of grace, where supernatural help in the form of light and strength and infusion of faith, hope and charity are the direct operation of the Holy

Spirit. Here especially must be sanctity in the human instrument to cooperate successfully with God for the sanctification of others. “To one who wishes to qualify himself for apostolic work,” said Benedict XV, “there is one thing he must acquire before everything else, as being of the highest importance, it is ... sanctity of life. Let him therefore be an example of humility, obedience, chastity, chiefly of piety, prayer and constant union with God. The better united he is with God, the greater will be his share of divine grace and assistance. Let him heed the Apostle's counsel, ‘Put on, therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, a heart of mercy,

kindness, humility, meekness, patience' (Col.3:12). It is by these virtues that truth finds an easy and straight access to souls, and that all obstacles are removed. There is no obstinacy of will that can resist them." [13] According to St. Vincent de Paul, "We must hold it as an infallible axiom that in proportion as we labor for our inward perfection, we enable ourselves the more to bear fruit for our neighbor." [14]

St. Ignatius explains the relation between holiness and the apostolate by analogy with natural causes:

The law which God has made to govern the process of generation in the natural order, obtains, proportionately, in the supernatural order as well. Philosophy and what we see around us go to show that, besides the general or universal causes, such as the elements, a special and immediate cause of the same species is further needed, in order that the animal or man produced be of like kind with the agent producing. In the same way, therefore, it is the will of Divine Wisdom that the immediate cause employed, such as the preacher or confessor, be himself humble, patient and filled with charity. Consequently, if you would perfect others, be perfect yourselves first. For though great learning and great virtue are to be sought after, and perfection looked for in both, yet virtue must always be given the preference. [15]

Theologically, the influence of personal sanctity on the apostolate may be described in terms of supernatural merit. It is common teaching in the Church that a person in God's friendship can truly, though not in strict justice, merit actual and sanctifying grace for others. The Scriptures often stress the need for this spiritual altruism ... "pray for one another," St. James urges, "that you may be saved. For the unceasing prayer of a just man is of great avail" (James 5:16). In the Christian apostolate, this prayer may be explicit as petition or implicit in the labors and efforts undergone for the salvation of souls. However, what is most significant for our purpose, its efficacy in the

form of grace obtained for others is the merit-value it has in the eyes of God. And all the norms which regulate the increase of merit in general are equally valid here. As an apostle's charity becomes more ardent, his freedom less impeded by inordinate attachments, his object less selfish and more noble, in a word, the more holy he is, the more efficacious becomes his prayer of action and petition to obtain grace for those in whose interest he labors.

We may therefore look upon the Kingdom meditation as a call to follow Christ in the conquest of our carnal and worldly desires; the more generous the effort the more closely we approach to His own divine perfection and become daily more eligible for the glory that awaits us in His company. At the same time, in the very act of following the Master through self-conquest, we are cultivating those virtues which advance the kingdom of God on earth and increase its population in heaven. As members of the Mystical Body our union with Christ is itself a petition for divine mercy for those in need; and among the instruments of the apostolate none is more effective than prayer and sacrifice offered with the Redeemer on behalf of souls.

Chapter 3

References

[1] Matthew 4:17; John 18:36-37.

[2] The technical distinction is between the virtues of Christ *ad intra*, as the Incarnate Son of God, and His virtues *ad extra*, as Redeemer of the human race.

[3] *Monumenta Historica*, "Exercitia Spiritualia," p. 1046.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 694-695.

- [5] St. Ignatius of Antioch, "Letter to the Philadelphians," *The Apostolic Fathers*, New York, 1947, p. 116.
- [6] St. Augustine, "Sermo 142," PL 38, 783-784
- [7] *Imitation of Christ*, Book I, chap. 1.
- [8] St. Augustine, "Sermo 141," PL 38, 777.
- [9] St. Augustine, "Epistola XI," PL 33, 76.
- [10] St. Thomas, *Super Sententiarum* II, dis. 29, q. 1, a. 4.
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q. 49, a. 4.
- [13] Benedict XV, Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*, November 30, 1919, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, Vol. II, pp. 449-450.
- [14] *St. Vincent de Paul* (Complete Works), Paris, 1920-1925, Vol. XI, p. 28.
- [15] *Monumenta Historica*, "Monumenta Ignatiana," Series 1, Tomus 1 (Letter dated May 7, 1547), Madrid, 1903, pp. 508-590.

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