

Our Faith-filled Experience of Jesus Christ and his Mission from God

A Faith that Drives Mission

Three Presuppositions

This talk will presume three things. A new attitude or consciousness is spreading in our world today, since the early 1980's that is generally referred to as postmodernism. A spirituality for our times is one that empowers and inspires, is relevant for our times, and is faithful to a Catholic tradition of faith in God. Faith in God through Jesus Christ is inseparable from sharing in the continuation of his mission.

Postmodernism is strongly felt in educated circles of developed secular societies, but is a consciousness that affects all people to some degree throughout the world. Rather than a modern attitude that still recognised general principles and accepted ways of doing things, postmodernism is characterised by a focus on the particularities of history. Postmodernism emphasises the dignity and freedom to choose of every person. It is highly critical of social injustices and any oppressive use of authority.

Postmodernism is very aware of the globalisation of the world that is happening in our times through travel, more effective means of communication, and through commerce. The expanding nature of the universe and its unimaginable immensity, that modern astronomy is discovering, compounds the impact on people of globalisation. Postmodernism is also focused on the increasing pluralism of the world that encourages personal creativity and distinctiveness rather than conformity and following accepted patterns from the past.

The new consciousness that is spreading through the world is driving believers in God to question radically, and to rethink their ways of understanding God and practising their faith. This is especially true for Christian believers, the ones who have come to believe in God and are sustained in their faith by the memory of Jesus and their present experience of him as the Christ. It has been estimated by some that an increasing minority of Christians in Western societies under the influence of postmodernism are seeking to understand their faith in God through Jesus Christ in very different way.

While remaining within the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy, many Catholics, about 20% at present according to some observers, are today seeking to centre their faith more on the historical particularity of Jesus and his faith in God, as the leader and completer of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus is seen not primarily as the Second Person of the Trinity become human, but as one fully human as we all are, who mediates to us the saving presence and action of God's Word and Spirit. The primary question about Jesus is then not how can God without ceasing to be God become human, but rather how can a human being like us become divine without ceasing to be human.

To approach the human Jesus from below through our living experience of him in our lives today, rather than from above through the doctrine of the Trinity, approaches Jesus in a new way. It is a way that is more helpful for one doing the Ignatian Exercises, who seeks a lived experience of Christ. The divine grace working in Jesus of Nazareth can then be more fruitfully grasped as a unique but not exclusive grace for Jesus alone. The mystery of the incarnation of God's Word, and God's Spirit is a grace we are all destined to share through the revelation of God's hidden mystery in the humanness of Jesus.

Introduction

In the new focus, frame and freedom of our postmodern world where can we as believers in God through Jesus Christ in the Ignatian way find models that continue to inspire us, be relevant, and are faithful to our Catholic tradition? Models that acknowledge a new attentiveness to God as creator, present and acting in all things, a new open-ended frame for the story of our globalised and pluralistic world, and suggest new contemporary opportunities to experience the truth that Jesus promised will make us free.

In Francis Xavier, Peter Faber and Ignatius Loyola we have such empowering, inculturated and traditional models for the expanding horizons of our postmodern world in its heightened reverence for particularity. The fiery faith of Xavier that inspired others to mission, the gentle faith of Faber that adapted to persons and cultures, and the visionary faith of Ignatius that saw God in all things and in every situation, were all nourished from the threefold source of their response to Jesus as he is presented in the Gospels, in their devotion to the Eucharist, and in their experience of the Spiritual Exercises.

Their faith was in God as the mysterious origin, continuing foundation and final destiny of each and every human being and of the wonderful world and awesome universe we all share. It was a faith in God revealed to them through the human life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ revealed in the Gospels, whom whenever possible they experienced daily in the celebration of the Eucharist, and to whom they had been finely tuned by the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises.

Let me reflect in turn with you on each of these three sources for Ignatius, Faber, and Xavier of their faith in God, so that these same three sources may be sources of our faith in God in our times. Our need today is for a faith in God that empowers and inspires us in a way that is both relevant in our postmodern times as we begin the twenty-first century, and at the same time faithful to our Catholic tradition of the gospel of God that Jesus Christ revealed.

Our faith in God today as Christians will remain a christo-centric faith, that is a faith in God mediated by Jesus Christ. I believe, however, that our continuation of the mission of Jesus today will need to have a theo-centric vision of reality. A theo-centric vision of the world, rather than a christocentric vision is more faithful to our postmodern times and is more faithful to the vision of Jesus himself. It will need to be a vision of reality that is

centred on God's hidden action in our world, always and in every place creative, redeeming, and reconciling for all persons, individually and collectively.

Wherever there is life-giving activity in the world, or action that heals and frees people from their brokenness, self-inflicted or otherwise, or wherever there is unity in diversity through sharing of differences, the presence and action of God, the Kingdom of God, is becoming visible in our world today.

1. A Mission received from Jesus Christ

In their different activities or 'missions', a favourite word for Ignatius, Xavier, Faber and Ignatius himself were deeply aware of their personal union with Christ in continuing his mission from God in their own lives. Jesus asked all his disciples to continue this mission.

The final episode of the Gospel according to Matthew presents Jesus on a mountain in Galilee initiating this continuation of his mission. Before a diminished and disheartened group of disciples, some of whom are doubting the continuing living reality of Jesus in the world, Jesus does not call them to himself as he used to do, but he comes to them where they are. Emphasising the source of his mission from God and its universal significance, Jesus sends them to continue his mission from God among all nations and social groups. *All authority whether its hidden in heaven or visible on earth has been given to me by God, so go and continue my mission.* Jesus lists four ways.

To be truly his faithful disciples, persons who respond in the way Jesus himself responded to the hidden mystery of God acting in the world, they must also be his apostles, persons conscious of being sent by Jesus. They are to continue his mission first of all by 'disciplelising' people in all the nations of the world. Leading a person to become a disciple of Jesus is not the same as teaching them or giving information. To 'disciplelise' a person is to share one's own faith in God present and acting in each one's life in the way Jesus himself did. A person then begins to experience God and live life in a new way, the way Jesus experienced God and lived his life. To be a disciple of Jesus it is not simply to know what Jesus taught. It means becoming a person who more and more experiences God and relates to others in the way Jesus himself did.

The hidden presence and action of God in the world and the response that this divine presence and action evoked was at the heart of all the preaching and teaching of Jesus. Jesus called it the 'kingdom' or 'reign' of God. Later, Paul and the first Greek-speaking Christians in the Gentile world renamed this same divine reality the 'gospel' or good news of God. Jesus shared with his disciples his own faith experience of God, as it must have been, by his words, his actions, and by his very person. By his words, especially through his parables. By his actions, especially through his capacity to heal human hearts as well as minds and bodies. But above all, by the personal witness of his life and his habitual way of relating to all other who touched his life. 'Disciplelising' persons, the word actually used by Matthew, is a verb. It means what we mean by 'evangelising' or 'gospeling' someone.

The second step in mission Jesus gives his disciples is Baptism, and by implication its sequel the Eucharist. Jesus tells his disciples to baptise those who wish to become his disciples. Baptism with water is a public celebration and divine confirmation of a person's desire to live in a personal union with Jesus Christ and in communion with the body of his disciples, the Church. It is to be a baptism into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism celebrates and seals a profession of faith that brings a person into a new personal relation with God in three distinct but inseparable ways. What Baptism initiates, the Eucharist will continue to nourish and deepen. The threefold Christian experience of God as Mystery, as Word and as Breath is the experience of God's hiddenness, yet paradoxically at the same time it is the experience of God's speaking personally to each one in the way God spoke in Jesus, and it is the experience of being interiorly empowered and energised by sharing with Christ in God's interiority, the Holy Spirit, which is God's own divine loving.

The two foundational sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist have been celebrated by Christians from the beginning, even before they were called sacraments. In recent years, however, in our increasingly pluralistic and globalised world, we have become more aware of how all sacraments are celebrations that make present and strengthen our grasp of realities already present elsewhere in our lives. All Christian sacraments signify and point to realities beyond themselves. They make present these realities through symbolic words and gestures, seen and heard in faith. Sacraments in themselves are not necessary for salvation, as the realities are which they signify and celebrate. Francis Xavier mistakenly thought baptism was necessary for salvation.

The third step in Christian mission is teaching. Christian teaching follows 'disciplelising'. It presumes an initial personal response to the presence and action of God, as this is revealed in the human life, death and resurrection to new life of Jesus. Teaching is meant to deepen this personal response by helping a person come to a deeper appreciation of what faith in God through Jesus Christ implies. It is as Saint Anselm of Canterbury (+1104) aptly described 'Faith seeking understanding'. Teaching what Jesus taught presumes faith in God through Jesus Christ, already begun and incorporated into the community of disciples by Baptism and Eucharist. Without this prior 'disciplelising' and incorporation, teaching remains ordinarily the least effective of the three ways to 'gospel' another person.

The fourth and final step in mission activity is to school disciples of Christ in an ever-deepening spiritual awareness of the continuing companionship and presence of Jesus Christ. This happens through the gift of Holy Spirit, whom the risen Jesus mediates for his disciples. The Holy Spirit, which is the holy interiority, or the holy loving of God, filled Jesus at his resurrection. Now it enables him to share already, however incompletely, this risen existence with his disciples by a new kind of bodily presence in the material world. The risen Jesus is no longer submitted to the material world and its physical and chemical laws, as he once was, but is now transforming our material world from within it.

2. A Mission publicly celebrated together in the Eucharist

By the repeated celebration of the Eucharist the continuing mission of Jesus Christ is recognised, nourished, and renewed in a public manner. For a time in the early centuries, when the Christian Church was a very small minority of people in the Roman Empire, the Eucharist was celebrated by Christians in secret, in private homes or in underground cemeteries. Its central action were kept secret even from the catechumens who were preparing for Baptism. Throughout the greater part of Christian history, however, the celebration of the Eucharist has been public, a very public witness of the faith of Christians. Christians believe in the reality of the continuing presence and action of God in their lives through Jesus Christ, and God's action throughout the whole world at all times and in every situation.

At the beginning of the celebration of the Eucharist, the presiding priest welcomes the gathering with a blessing. At the end of the Eucharist after a blessing, the priest or the deacon concludes the Eucharist by missioning the gathering back into their lives. Christians are sent from the Eucharist to live in their lives at all times and places the mystery of faith they have celebrated together in the Eucharist.

This final missioning, reminds us what the whole of the Eucharist does for us – Christ himself through the symbolic words and actions of his Church gathered in that place sends us as his broken but faithful disciples to continue his mission from God in the world. The mission of Jesus Christ revealed by his words, his actions and most of all his life, death and resurrection discloses for us the loving action of God hidden within creation from the beginning. It is an action that is always creative, redemptive and reconciling for all people. God's action is a love without limit. Divine love is the power to enliven, free and unify each and every human being with one another and with the whole of the awesome universe.

In the Liturgy of the Word, we are spoken to by God. A dialogue takes place between God and ourselves. The proclaiming of God's Word from Scripture is meant to link with and make us aware of the hidden word of God in each one's life. We are reminded in every celebration of the Eucharist that mission today, however it may have been understood and practised in earlier times, is meant to be a sincere witness to our faith in God through Jesus Christ by respectful conversations with others. It is to be a listening and speaking with one another, that is not an obsessive wish to convert others to become baptised and 'eucharistised' members of the Church.

(1) The Offertory of the Eucharist, now sometimes called the preparation of the gifts, is not yet the time to offer ourselves to God. Rather, it is the moment in the Eucharist when, with the offering of the symbolic gifts of bread and wine and with the collection that is taken up, we offer ourselves, but at this stage not directly to God. Rather we first offer ourselves to the church gathered in that place, the different gifts that each one possesses. The different gifts of each become the one gift of all. The prayers that the presiding priest who receives the gifts makes over the bread and wine are not prayers of offering but of thanksgiving. We thank God that we have these gifts to offer. By this offering of ourselves to the church, we offer ourselves for the mission of the church. The church is at its foundation a mission, even before it is a community. At the Offertory we

sacrifice ourselves for mission. The Offertory time, therefore, is a time to celebrate and renew each one's sacrificial participation in the mission of the church.

(2) The Consecration of the Eucharist is now rightly understood not only at the moment of the solemn repetition of the words of Jesus at his last meal with his disciples. The Consecration is the whole of the Eucharistic Prayer, from the call to thanksgiving at the beginning of the Preface to the concluding Doxology with its dramatic and symbolic gesture of the elevated sacraments. The Eucharistic Prayer proclaimed by the presiding priest, representing Christ himself and the whole congregation gathered in that place, consecrates our gifts of bread and wine by offering them to God's consecrating action by the Holy Spirit. This is done, as the final Doxology makes clear, through Christ, with Christ and in Christ. Together with our gifts of bread and wine, now offered to God with Christ as the one gift of the whole community, the whole of our lives lived in Christian faith and community are also consecrated to God. The Consecration is a consecration not just of our gifts of bread and wine, but even more significantly the whole of each one's life with others, which the gifts signify. Like Jesus Christ himself in the Consecration we are all consecrated again for mission. We become a people missioned again by Christ to continue his mission from God in our world.

(3) At the Communion of the Eucharist the community processes forward to receive the sacraments of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This real sacramental presence points to Christ's real "physical" presence in the lives of all those who come to communion. Through the sacrament of eating and drinking together the sacramental bread and wine, each one is drawn into the real living unified and unifying body of Jesus Christ, which this sacramental communion signifies and makes really present sacramentally in every celebration of the Eucharist.

Some of the early Fathers of the Church taught in different ways that when we receive the sacramental body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, it is the sacrament that goes into us. The sacrament is in itself the chemical substance of bread and wine. It goes into us and is digested in the normal way of ordinary bread and wine. The reality, however, of that sacramental bread and wine, the living presence of Christ in our world, does not go into us. Rather the movement of reality is the other way. We who eat and drink the sacrament pass into the reality of the living Christ. This union of each in Christ can only be a communion or shared union with all the others who share the sacramental communion with us. Even further, in some way we must be drawn into union with all persons throughout the world whom God in Christ touches and in some way links with God's self, even where it remains simply an unanswered call to faith in God.

Once again, by this act of union with Christ and the consequent communion with others at Holy Communion, just as at the Offertory, and at the Consecration, the Eucharist, Christ renews his call to the gathered community as a whole and to each one in particular to continue in our times his mission from God to 'disciplelise' the nations of the world. The Offertory shapes the sacrificial and communitarian character of Christian mission, the Consecration consecrates us with Christ for mission, and Communion more than a time of personal union with Christ, becomes for the community an intimate personal re-missioning by Christ.

3. A Mission personally shaped by the Spiritual Exercises

Sharing in the mission of Jesus Christ implies a spirituality, a heartset and a mindset that is conformed to Christ. The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises have as their goal a heartset and mindset that is personally committed to Jesus Christ in his mission from God. A postmodern pluralistic society has already begun to be in Australia, a mindset probably in all of us, consciously or not. Historical particularity is imperative to be relevant. Our faith in God more than ever needs to be rooted in particular history and experience. Christian faith can no longer be relevant and attract if it persists in explaining itself by beginning from a doctrine, however true that doctrine may be for Christians.

Christian faith in God through Jesus Christ Christians does have such historical roots and particularity. It begins not from an ideology however exalted, but from the person of Jesus Christ. It is through both the memory of the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, combined with a personal experience by Christian faith of his continuing transformed presence and action in our lives that we Christians recognise and respond to the mystery of God. Some critics of the Exercises even accused Ignatius of displacing God by Jesus. Yet it is the mission of Jesus from God that is the key to a true understanding and experience of Jesus Christ.

The Exercises illuminate our understanding and personalise our experience of sharing in Christ's mission from God. Reference to some of the core experiences of the Spiritual Exercises show how central mission is to the Exercises. For Xavier and for Faber, as they were for Ignatius, the Exercises generated and fuelled their sense of mission, a mission which they lived in three very different ways.

The Fifth Annotation, which is a precondition for one about to enter the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, underlines the importance of magnanimity, a great openness of heart, and openness to the immensity and mystery of God, which is disclosed in the immensity and complexity of the universe and of our own planet Earth. The overwhelming harmony of all things points to its one, invisible, divine source. Exuberant diversity points to God's delight in difference, a difference that is enriched by the harmony it shares and helps to create. One about to do the Exercises is asked to feel already some reflection of this divine magnanimity in oneself in a large-hearted openness to all persons and cultures, a missionary openness.

The Fifteenth Annotation reminds us that this same God, who is the source of the awesome universe, also deals directly and immediately with each person in a personal and particular way. God meets each one as they are and where they are, in their own character and experience of life. This of course always happens through created symbols, for this is the only way we can know God and personally experience God in this life. God does not have to come into things or into ourselves. God as the creator is already there, and there also as saviour. We humans, however, are the only creatures, it seems, who can recognise this invisible presence and action of God, and respond to it personally. The personal action of God in each human life was at the source of the

mission of Jesus, and this personal action of God is the source in each of his disciples for continuing this mission.

The Supposition comes just before the First Principle and Foundation in the Exercises. It reminds both the one doing and the one giving the Exercises how important in the Exercises is a sincere and respectful personal dialogue. Spiritual Conversation, along with times for personal prayer and discerning reviews, are the three essential processes for the authentic Ignatian Exercises, whether the full Exercises or Selected Exercises. Before Ignatius himself went through the Exercises, he had already developed the practice of Spiritual Conversation. Respectful conversation about God with another person different from oneself is at the heart a truly Christian mission.

The First Principle and Foundation is generally understood to be the formal beginning of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. God's wonderful plan for the world that Jesus Christ has revealed is laid open for us. It is God's plan to share with all human beings not only life and existence as creatures of God, but to share God's own self with them, God's own freedom and life. God's action as creator is inseparable from God's action as saviour. God offers to every single human being a share in God's own interiority. This is God's own unlimited loving. The almighty power of God is God's limitless love. We already begin now in our lives to learn how to share God's love and freedom by sharing ourselves with others in the way Jesus has shown us. Such a desire to share ourselves with others is the greatest service we can offer another. It is the greatest service we can offer God. Gratitude to God is at the heart of motivation for mission. A grateful love for God sown in praying the Principle and Foundation comes to full flower in the wonderful climax at the end of the Exercises, the Contemplation of God's love.

The Kingdom Exercise begins the Second Stage or Week of the Exercises. Some see it as the second foundation of the Exercises, and with good reason. The Kingdom introduces a direct focus on the person of Jesus calling one doing the Exercises to share with him his mission from God. Jesus asks one who responds to his call to serve with him in all kinds of different situations and circumstances with the same total openness to God's presence and action as Jesus himself felt. The whole world is the field of Christ's Mission. It is served best by those who like Jesus himself are prepared to offer themselves totally for mission, writing God through Jesus Christ a blank cheque. A total commitment to mission with Christ is at the heart of the spirituality generated and nourished by the Spiritual Exercises.

The Exercise of the Two Standards complements the Call of the Kingdom. It explores the practical working out of a total commitment with Christ for mission. This means becoming involved in the way Jesus himself described his mission in reply to the disciples John the Baptist sent them to observe who Jesus was (Luke 7:22-23 & Matthew 11:2-5). Jesus included the poor, underlined the need to respect and serve the dignity of each person. Negatively, wealth must not become one's master but befriended by sharing with others whatever wealth one possesses. Honours as far as possible are to be avoided and never ambitiously sought for their own sake. Disciples of Jesus must learn to discern the opposing influences in their lives: discernment to recognise the great

difference between the humble way of Jesus that seeks to serve and the way of world that seeks self-sufficiency.

Most of the Second Stage or Week of the Exercises consists of contemplating the life and ministry of Jesus in selected passages from the Gospels. The grace that is asked is an 'Interior Knowledge' of Jesus Christ. It is interior in two senses. It is the grace to look deeply into the interior feelings and motivation of Jesus as we contemplate the Gospel stories. It means also the grace for a knowledge of Jesus that touches the deepest interiority of the one making the Exercises. We ask for the grace to become aware within ourselves of the way Jesus habitually felt as he carried out his mission. We seek the grace to recognise and own in oneself the same outreaching love of God that so totally illumined and energised the mission of Jesus.

An interior grasp of the inner life of Jesus comes to a new intensity in the Exercises of the Third Stage or Week. There we ask to feel in the sufferings of our lives and the lives of others today what Jesus interiorly felt in his sufferings and death.

In the Fourth and Final Stage of the Exercises an interior knowledge of Jesus Christ that we ask becomes a wonderfully grateful and joyful-filled sharing of the limitless gift of God's own loving. This is the loving that flooded the human heart of Jesus at his Resurrection. We share this divine loving in Christ especially in the Church, by word and sacrament, and by the whole life of the Church. Even more generally, we can share this love that is in Christ in every situation of our lives. This love comes to us always in God's gift of the Holy Spirit, which is God's interiority, which is God's loving. This divine loving is planted deep within us through the resurrected mediation of Christ, in his bodily presence and transforming action in the world.

Conclusion

Personal devotion to Jesus Christ is incomplete without a conscious sharing with him in his mission from God for the world. When we do what Jesus asked us to do in remembrance of him in the Eucharist, through our sacramental meeting with him Christ renews our share in continuing his mission. The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises lead us into a prayer and a holiness that are inseparable from Christ's call to continue his mission from God. They lead others today to similar heights of heroic holiness which they shaped in the missionary lives of our three saintly companions, Ignatius Loyola, Peter Faber and Francis Xavier.

For a faith-filled experience of Jesus Christ in his continuing mission in the world today, it is to this threefold source of the life of Jesus, as he is experienced by us through Scripture, in the celebration of the Eucharist, and in the Spiritual Exercises, that we can confidently turn to live for God today and to serve others, in the ways that Ignatius Loyola, Peter Faber, and Francis Xavier lived in their times.

For some thought-provoking writing on the challenge and opportunity that postmodernism offers Christians to live their faith in God, here are two recently published books:

What is the Point of Being a Christian?

by Timothy Radcliffe op

London: Burns & Oates, 2005 (with 3 reprints in 2006). pp 218 & \$27.95

Secularity and the Gospel, Being Missionaries to our Children

edited and authored by Ronald Rolheiser omi

New York: Crossroad, 2006. pp 237 & \$35.95

John Reilly sj.
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