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On Fire and Desire: Some Aspects of Ignatian Spirituality for Our Times

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ON FIRE AND DESIRE

SOME ASPECTS OF IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY FOR OUR TIMES

La triste réalité de l'Afrique fait d'elle une terre piétinée et pillée, un continent blessé et crucifié. Ceci devrait logiquement pousser chaque individu à se demander ce qui est en droit d'être fait pour remédier à ce désastre. A la lumière des métaphores du "feu" et du "désir", A. E. Orobator entreprend une relecture de la spiritualité ignatienne et relève trois aspects qui répondent de façon urgente et adéquate aux besoins et signes des temps. Ainsi, la spiritualité de saint Ignace est avant tout militante puisqu'elle pousse inégalement à un choix et à l'engagement dans la lutte contre la misère et l'ignorance. Elle est ensuite globale, avec des mains ouvertes aux réalités du monde, conçu comme une totalité. Enfin, elle s'auto-transcende et fait face à l'impossible : de fait, loin de se contenter des bonnes intentions, elle prône la compétence, l'efficacité et la vigueur dans l'engagement. Une telle relecture constitue une lumière pour la situation actuelle et, en même temps, un stimulant pour l'avenir du continent.

Gazing upon a crucified and wounded Africa, a contemporary rereading of the Ignatian spiritual outlook provides a guiding light for the present situation and a formative force for the future. Though the metaphorical fundamentals of fire and desire A. E. Orobator highlights three characteristics of Ignatian spirituality that speak urgently and powerfully to the needs and signs of our times. It is first a militant spirituality, one of unavoidable choice and commitment in the war against poverty, ignorance, disease ... It is then global, that is with open arms whereby one tries to see the world comprehensively as global. It is a last self-transcending and discerning because "More is not impossible", it excludes every form of mediocrity and requires not only good intention but, all the more, competence and energetic commitment.

I would like to present some fundamentals of the Ignatian spiritual legacy and their relevance in the context of Africa and of globalization. This spirituality is not ossified or frozen in the past; nor is it like a lifeless relic that only needs to be aired out from time to time in front of motionless devotees. Therefore, talking about the spirituality of Saint Ignatius is not an exercise of archaeology. I am in complete agreement with those writers who have suggested that while the spirituality of Saint Ignatius may be "a mirror of the past", it provides at the same time, a guiding light for the present, and "a formative force for the future". [Hans Wolter... 1977, 134] Therefore, "fire" and "desire" will work as helpful metaphors for accessing some elements of the spirituality of Ignatius.

My principle message being that the spiritual outlook of Ignatius was born of a particular desire. His was a heart on fire, propelled by a singular desire to accomplish a heroic service to God and the people of God. How pertinent and critical are some aspects of his spirituality for our times?

Annotation: Fall and Conversion

To understand the significance of these two terms, 'fire' and 'desire', in the spiritual outlook of Ignatius, it would help us to look back at a particular experience, which marked the beginning of his spiritual journey, that is, the experience of his fall and conversion. Like Paul of Tarsus, Ignatius was violently knocked off his well-planned course of life. Unlike Paul, Ignatius was injured in a military not a religious battle. At the age of twenty-six, his dreams were shattered, when a cannonball smashed his legs, as he stood against good reason to defend a fortress that was under siege. The fortress fell, so did Ignatius, seriously wounded. The period that followed his injury in battle throws an important light on what I prefer to call the 'seedbed' of his spirituality. Before that incident, Ignatius' greatest desire was to become a knight; after the fall, his passion was to dedicate himself to the service of an unnamed noble lady, a Dulcinea; a person to whom he could pledge all his energy, loyalty and undying affection. The thoughts of this lady filled up his senses and consumed his consciousness. Ignatius' heart was on fire; he was overcome by this irresistible desire, even though, as he would later admit, it was 'a great and vain desire to gain (worldly) honour and glory.

Ignatius began to experience a new kind of fire and a new kind of desire. This new development came in form of a desire to imitate the saints, whose lives he was compelled to read in his sickbed. When Ignatius pondered the heroic deeds of the saints, he was left with only one consuming desire: 'St Francis did this, so I must do it; St Dominic did this, so I must do it.' As he describes it himself: 'At that time I had an immense desire to accomplish great things in the service of God our Lord, like St Onophrius (or Humphrey) and other saints who gave themselves completely and wholeheartedly to Him'. It was at this point that he nursed a desire to ascetic missionary life, even though at that time his idea of asceticism did not amount to more than going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem barefoot, doing penance for his past sins and surviving on bitter herbs. But, it was also here, during his conversion experience, that Ignatius began the first steps of his Spiritual Exercises, which, in their written (codified) form, would become the most significant and influential book of Ignatian spirituality. On the evidence of his life and works, we know that the spirituality which Ignatius developed in the Spiritual Exercises is anything but a crazy imitation of St Francis and St Dominic.

Once a Soldier, Always a Soldier

Ignatian spirituality is a militant spirituality. I use this expression with an enormous

amount of caution. In today's world, we have to be very suspicious of any religious outlook that advocates militancy as the preferred means of realising God's plan for the world. From Khartoum to Kandahar, from Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda to Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Mobile Forces ... religious militancy inflicts untold calamities on innocent lives; properties are destroyed in dreadful acts of terror, all in the name of God. So, we have to be careful the way we talk about and understand Ignatius' spirituality as a militant spirituality.

According to one metaphorical evaluation of the history of the Society of Jesus, '*Ignatius set up the Society of Jesus as light cavalry.*' After his death, the third Superior General, Francis Borgia, turned the Society into an infantry brigade, that is, foot soldiers. Then came the fifth General, Claudio Aquaviva, who put the Jesuits into barracks. During the reign of the twenty-first Superior General, Jan Roothan, all military leave was cancelled. It got worse with the twenty-sixth General, Wlodmir Ledochowski: he put the Jesuits into concentration camps. Finally, in the 1960s, as the fresh air of *aggiornamento* was sweeping across the Church, the twenty-eighth General of the Society of Jesus, Pedro Arrupe, ordered all Jesuits to fall out of line and march into the world.

By definition, cavalry is a military unit on horseback, constantly ready for battle. In the mind of Ignatius, as a militant unit, the chief goal of the Jesuits was '*to strive especially for the defence and propagation of the faith*' (Formula of the Institute, 3). Some aspects of Ignatius' spiritual outlook would seem to suggest that he took this military dimension seriously. For example, we have anecdotal evidence that he once thought that a dagger might well be a better tool for settling a theological dispute with a Muslim. Fortunately, one of his first acts of devotion, after his conversion, was to deposit his dagger and sword at the feet of the Madonna of Montserrat.

For Ignatius, joining the Society of Jesus was the equivalent of enlisting '*to serve as a soldier of God under the banner of the cross*'. Ignatius not only shared the worldview of the Crusaders who preceded him; he also embraced the spiritual outlook of anti-Reformation, the context in which his vocation and mission were fashioned.

Anybody who has experienced the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius cannot fail to notice the strong martial images used in some of his meditations and contemplations. For example, in one of his meditations, '*The Two Standards*', he invites the person making the retreat to visualise the army of Christ, the Supreme Commander, set in battle array against the army of Satan or Lucifer, who, according to Ignatius, is the deadly enemy of our human nature. Like any army, each of the two commanders, Christ and Satan, has a banner; both commanders and their respective armies are engaged in a battle for the soul of the retreatant. This martial metaphor has several distinctive qualities, which radically differentiate it from the kind of spiritual militancy that I criticised above.

In the first place, not all those who chat '*Onward Christian soldiers*', or sing '*Stand*

up, Stand up for Jesus' are the best practitioners of this kind of spirituality. Secondly, Christ is the head of the army. His sole weapon is the cross; his manner of life is to be poor, chaste, and obedient. Therefore, as Ignatius advises, anyone who chooses to enlist in the army of Christ must follow the manner of life of Jesus: He or she must desire poverty, and be prepared for contempt, and even humiliation, instead of riches, honour and pride (Sp. Ex. 146). In the spiritual worldview of Saint Ignatius, being a soldier of Christ is to *desire and beg* that God will choose and receive a person into such a state of life (Sp. Ex. 98). To be a crusader of Christ is to follow the suffering Lord.

A militant spirituality is a spirituality of choice; it challenges us to take a clear stance. It is also a spirituality of intense desire - you must desire intensely to accomplish something for God and neighbour. There can be no sitting on the fence. From the perspective of Ignatius' militant spiritual outlook, one is either a soldier or a spy, a warrior or a traitor. After the terrorists unleashed their ghastly attacks on the World Trade Centre (New York City) and the Pentagon (Washington, DC) on September 11, 2001, Mr. George W. Bush, in a typically evangelical tone, presented a stark choice to the people of the world. Said he: *'If you're not with us, you're against us'* (See Luke 11:23). A well respected journalist, Arundhati Roy writing in London *Guardian*, dismissed Mr. Bush's assertion as *'a piece of presumptuous arrogance'*. The fact is that George Bush's belligerent rhetoric has proved to be highly successful. From Charles Taylor of Liberia to Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, Mu'ammer Gaddafi of Libya to Omar el-Bashir of Sudan, world leaders fall over one another to be counted on the side of Mr. Bush's definition of freedom and justice. I believe that Saint Ignatius would not have dismissed Mr. Bush's statement as arrogant, no. Instead, Ignatius would have commented, as he did in the parable of the temporal king in his *Spiritual Exercises*, that: *'If we pay heed to such a rousing call from a political leader to his people, how much more worthy of our attention is it to gaze upon Christ our leader (and be moved by his desire to conquer sin and death)'* (See Sp. Ex. 95). To put it slightly differently, if such a call to arms can stir up the imagination of men and women the world over, how much more would Jesus' call to battle ignite our imagination and rouse our desire to be counted on the side of God's vision of freedom, justice and peace.

I am referring here to the war against what Ignatius calls *'the enemy of our human nature'*. On the continent of Africa where we stand, we know too well the casualties of this war. We know the number of children who die of malaria and hunger every day...the number of refugees and internally displaced people who languish in squalid camps...the number of people living and dying of HIV/AIDS...the number of HIV/AIDS orphans, widows and widowers. The question each one must ask in the face of such fatal combat is the same that Saint Ignatius addresses to the retreatant in the *Spiritual Exercises*, that is, *'What do I desire?'* (Sp. Ex. 139). *Do I feel a raging passion to go to war against poverty, ignorance and disease? And, to use a typical Ignatian expression, if I do not yet feel the desire, do I at least desire to have the desire?* In this kind of spiritual outlook, there is no room for complacency, no halfway measures, no

middle ground - one is either a militant for love or a deserter of love: One must make a choice and a commitment, for as our elders say, 'A person who merely sits down on the floor does not know the technique of fighting a war.' To enlist in the army of Jesus is to make a firm commitment to the service of love.

AGlobal Spirituality

Ignatian spirituality is a spirituality with open arms. In the opinion of one commentator, Saint Ignatius had an expansive spiritual outlook on God, the world and our role as human beings. One very unique characteristic of the meditations in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius is their focus on the world as a whole. Ignatius himself founded the Society of Jesus as a universal body; he intended Jesuits to be priests and brothers without borders - think of *Médecins Sans Frontières*. This expectation originated from his own spiritual insight which understands the whole world as the theatre of God's saving action and our faithful response. According to Saint Ignatius, when Christ the King calls men and women to participate in his mission, he addresses 'all the world assembled before him' (Sp. Ex. 95). What we need to pay attention to here is the fact that each one is required to see the world through the eyes of God. The person who prays is asked to contemplate 'how the three Divine Persons gazed on the whole surface or circuit of the globe' (Sp. Ex. 102). When God looks at the world, what does God see? Ignatius answers as follows. God sees a diversity of peoples; God sees a variety of circumstances and conditions of life on the face of the earth: Some people are white, others black or brown, some live in peace and comfort, others are at war, some are weeping, others are laughing; some people are in good health, others are sick; some are being born, others are dying...' (Sp. Ex. 106). In this spiritual panorama God sees a broken, wounded and divided world.

The Ignatian method of contemplation relies heavily on what is commonly known as 'composition of place', which means bringing the imagination to bear on the materials and issues that make up our prayer here and now. For example, in the contemplation of the Incarnation, the composition of place is about seeing the world comprehensively as it really is (Sp. Ex. 47). The composition of place is a powerful tool for visualising the situation of the world in one single act of the mind. We can compare it to using a panoramic camera, instead of a zoom lens. But to see the world as it is, is one thing...the global spiritual survey does not end there. We need to move from being passive observers to active participants. I believe there is a more important question that Ignatius invites us to consider: When God looks at the world and sees its condition, what does God do? What does God desire? For Ignatius, God has only one desire and He issues a rallying cry: 'Let's save the world'. Therefore, it is not enough to see and to imagine. Even the hen develops headache when it sees another hen inside the cooking pot! The content of contemplation is not meant to be the product of our fertile imagination; it is a real-life scenario. The question is, if we see

the world as it is through the eyes of God, what do we see? What do we desire?

In my opinion, a spirituality that seeks to see the world comprehensively is a spirituality with open arms. Perhaps to be more politically correct or à la mode, I should call it a global spirituality. This understanding has several implications. A spirituality with open arms keeps us in constant touch with the fact that the world as we know it is changing, and we need to understand what these changes are and the processes involved. Today, everybody speaks of globalization, even when we do not understand what it means. What is globalization in Dholuo...Kiganda or Ewulu? But the effects are there for all to see. For many people, globalization is a monster; it is responsible for all kinds of socio-economic and political woes - job losses, increase in prices of essential commodities, falls in agricultural commodity value, erosion of cultural values...Others, from a different perspective, see it otherwise. For them globalization is the only way forward for all the nations and peoples of the world. In the context of our discussion, that is, from the perspective of Ignatian spirituality, I am of the opinion that *globalization is very much a spiritual attitude; globalization can become a way, or a process, of seeing the world as a world, that is, as globe.*

To see the world as world, implies that, whether as sisters or brothers, priests, men or women, in whatever state of life, the issues we deal with, the situations we face are not simply and purely local. No matter how localized, our ministries possess a global dimension. We can only perceive this if our spiritual outlook is expansive enough to embrace the globe. Street children and external debt, prostitution and terrorism, religious fundamentalism and racism, corruption and female genital mutilation, human rights abuses and slum poverty...all those issues, which cry out for our attention daily, all have become global phenomena. The seriousness with which we deal with one should be the same seriousness with which we deal with the other. The important thing to remember is that reaching out to the ends of the earth begins here and now - where I am. Our elders say *'It is while sitting on a mat that a diviner sees into the future'*. Seeing the world as world allows us to see that the issues we are dealing with are larger than us; that we are not the only ones qualified to save our world; that partnership and solidarity will save the world long before individualistic or egoistic projects do.

Today, when we compose an image of the world, we realise very quickly that our composition is not a colourful mosaic; rather, our world is a collage of contradictions: there are wars and rumours of war in the face of intensive peace initiatives; ethnic violence and cleansing in the face of a greater coming together between countries; deepening poverty and misery in the face of scandalous and shameful affluence... What are the burning issues of our times? Do these issues set us on fire or do they simply burn out whatever little courage is left? If we see the world as God sees it, we not only discover the needs of our times, but also the responsibility we bear as disciples of Christ to meet those needs.

The personal testimony experienced during a recent field research in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, on the response of the Church to the scourges of HIV/AIDS, refugees and poverty, deeply impressed me. The Catholic church in East Africa is doing more

than any other group, perhaps even more than all the other Churches combined. But, there was one realisation which greatly disturbed me and continues to do so. I found myself asking: But, where are the Africans? Where are the indigenous religious, priests, sisters and brothers? Is it possible that we do not see these issues as our expatriate colleagues see them? What is missing? What is blocking our vision or hindering our involvement? Where is the fire...Where is the desire... where is the desire to save Africa's sick, displaced, sick and poor? Has religious life extinguished the fire and desire? Could it be that our habits and cassocks have become fire-resistant, that we can no longer feel the burning needs of our times? Have we simply become regular members of the society in which we live, with little or no desire to move beyond the little comfort and conveniences of our religious communities? Let's not forget the wise admonition of our elders that 'The person who stays in the shade does not know the heat of the sun'. Where is the...where is the desire?

Nowadays, we can hardly exclaim in awe and wonder at the beauty of creation; we can hardly cry out with Saint Francis of Assisi, 'O Brother Sun, Sister Moon!' Nowadays, Brother Sun is no longer brother; Brother Sun is burning a big hole in our ozone layer. Our spirituality should be militant and expansive enough to ask why-who has done this to Brother Sun? What is to be done? When we contemplate the world as world, it is hard to sing with the Psalmist, 'O God you have made man, woman little less than a god'. I don't know about you, but as African, when I contemplate the world as world, the world as globe, I am more inclined to ask: Am I a little less than a god or am I merely the offspring of a lesser god?

More is not impossible

Ignatian spirituality is a self-transcending, discerning spirituality.

Among the Jesuits, we routinely speak of the *magis*, which translates as the 'more'. I said before that Ignatius' burning desire was not merely to imitate the saints; it was for all partial purposes a desire to do more, to go a step further. Saint Ignatius was not a person to be easily outdone; he carried the die-hard passion with which he defended the fortress of Pamplona over to his desire to defend and propagate the faith of the Church. Later in his life, when he wrote the *Constitutions* for the Society of Jesus, he would routinely talk about the crucial importance of being 'zealous for the salvation of souls' or showing 'zeal for souls'. The *magis*, from an Ignatian perspective, is that complete dedication of self to serve not just the glory of God, but *the greater glory of God*. In other words, by way of example, it is not enough for a man or a woman to show up at the door of a religious community and declare 'I want to serve God, open the door!' This 'I want to serve God' has to be a desire to know God more *deeply*, to love God more *intensely*, to follow Christ more *closely*, to pray *harder*, to serve others *better*. According to the understanding of Ignatius, whether as a religious, priest, lay,

sister...you must come with a desire to show greater devotion and to distinguish yourself in total service to God; you should not only expect to offer yourself for the labour at hand, but you must be ready to go *further still (Plus ultra)* and constantly transcend your desire, visions-and goals. (Sp. Ex. 97). Concisely formulated, this aspect means more is not impossible.

This spiritual aspect has several dimensions as well as implications. Thus, if more is not impossible, then, there is no such thing as status quo. This assertion should not be understood in an iconoclastic manner. I believe that one of the critical challenges facing religious life today is not so much the task of rehabilitating our charism and spiritual heritage as it is the urgent need to discover new, bold and creative ways of fulfilling our mission as Congregation and Church.

But, our desire for more can be quite chaotic; there is so much that needs to be done. In just how many ways can a person transcend herself or himself? Therefore, we need to have a tool for determine the next level of our desire. The very first spiritual insight that Ignatius developed while still in his sickbed was the so-called rules for the discernment of spirits. Discernment is a term that most, if not all religious people are familiar with, and we all understand it differently. Unfortunately, for some of us, discernment is simply a way of making a convenient and comfortable arrangement for ourselves, in any given situation. But, in fact, discernment means more than that. *'In Ignatian spirituality, what we call discernment means constantly asking the Lord of the vineyard whether the task we are working on at the moment is what God really wants.'* (Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, *New Vigor for the Church: Conversations on the Global Challenges of Our Time*, 1993, 1). A discerning spirituality is not about making comfortable arrangements; it is about daring to break new grounds and scale boundaries...discovering the next level of our call and mission as Christians. This is true in our interior life as well as in our exterior ministry. I do not believe that God would ask less of us in terms of the quality of our religious commitment.

Besides the fact that there can be no status quo that we cannot transcend, to desire more could also mean that there can be no limits to what we can aspire to accomplish as servants of the mission of Christ; there can be no traditional apostolates; no area is declared out of bounds, no field of apostolic endeavour is alien to our vocation to distinguish ourselves in the total service of God and neighbour. Saint Ignatius himself did not hesitate to work with popes as well as prostitutes, princes as well as paupers. The starting point of discernment is a question: What more is the Lord asking of me? The impetus for discernment is a desire: *'the desire to serve God our Lord better'* (Sp. Ex. 155). In either case, we are talking about self-transcendence, about going further still, for as our elders say *'Even a sharp knife needs to be re-sharpened'*.

The most important aspect of the desire for more is that, as a spiritual attitude, it excludes every form of mediocrity. As Christians and religious, we are noted for being people of good intentions: we want to be holy: we want to be charitable towards the neighbour: we want to be the light of the world...I believe it is no longer enough for a

young man or woman to produce evidence of good intention in order to be enrolled in our religious congregations. Nor is good intention the sole criteria for authenticating our Christian identity. We need holy men and women, well formed in the pious traditions and devotions of the Church. But we also need competent men and women, well trained in the ways of the world. Let me illustrate this point. The Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education has become an important yardstick for measuring the top-performing secondary schools in the country. Usually, quite a few Church-affiliated schools compete for the top spots. To what do these Church-affiliated schools, run by sisters and brothers and priests, owe such brilliant performance year in year out - to good intention on the part of the sisters and brothers or to the competence of the sisters and brothers and lay collaborators? Both are important, but, believe me, if you don't know where you are going, it does not matter what road you take - you will never get there! In today's world, if we desire to do more by influencing and transforming 'the way things are going', we need to have a desire for the *magis*. Today, more than ever before, in the face of the issues which we see in the world as world, we stand in need of 'a holy boldness', we stand in need of 'a certain apostolic aggressivity' (GC 34: 561). All in all, we cannot go further still, if - to borrow the idea of William Bangert - there is no fire burning in our belly. A person whose personal spiritual motto is '*I will do anything the superior decides for me to do*' may be a saint, but she or he is not an apostle. '*Mediocrity has no place in Ignatius' worldview*' (GC 34: 560).

Are we still capable of nurturing large desire? The desires of which I speak are not the same as personal ambitions. 'I want to study social ministry in Tangaza College'; 'I want to do theology in Hekima College'; 'I want to work among the youth'... Good, but what more? These ambitions are not the same as the desire to travel the length and breadth of the world...to find and use all means possible to help souls (Cf. Cons. 308). According to Saint Ignatius, a person's desires are reliable indicators of how promising his or her vocation might be. For Ignatius, if we are to accomplish our ministry to help souls, the requirements or qualifications must include: sound doctrine or the ability to acquire it; aptitude for learning and retaining what was learnt; a desire for virtue and spiritual perfection plus an energetic commitment to ministry and zeal for the salvation of souls (Cons. 153-56). Yet, all said and done, and more is not impossible.

Colloquy

In the tradition of Luke the Evangelist, Jesus spoke of his mission in terms of a burning desire to set the world on fire (Lk 12:49). On other occasions he speaks in parable of a raging and consuming fire (Matt 13: 24-30;36-43). I believe that, for Saint Ignatius, the true disciple of Christ is the person who is on fire for the love of Christ, the woman or man who desires to excel in the active service of Christ. Jesus'

fire and desire led him to the cross.

In his own spiritual journey, when Ignatius gazed upon the cross of Christ, his desires compelled him to question his actions on behalf of Christ. The Cameroonian theologian, Jean-Marc Ela, has spoken of Africa as a crucified continent. John Paul II prefers to compare Africa to the traveller from Jerusalem to Jericho, who fell among robbers, was stripped, beaten and left for dead on the side of the road (Ecclesia in Africa, #41; Lk 10:30-37). In both scenarios, Africa is a crucified and wounded continent.

As we gaze upon crucified and wounded Africa, with blood flowing from a thousand stab wounds inflicted by AIDS, war, religious fanaticism, racism, corruption, poverty...what fire burns in our belly? What are we doing for Africa? What must we do for Africa? We have heard the questions; do we have the fire and the desire to respond? Be careful how you respond, because as our elders warn us, 'When the fire dies out you cannot warm yourself with the ashes.'