

## **Ecology and Consolation: The Ignatian Mystical Foundation for Our Option of Ecology**

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**[Abstract]** The experience of Ignatius Loyola and the spirituality that flows from it make it possible for us to interpret the world and history as places of God’s revelation. Ignatius’s experience on the banks of the Cardoner River [Autob. 29], his understanding of Consolation [*SpEx.* 316], and his objective in proposing the “Contemplation to Attain Love” [*SpEx.* 230-237] can help us to understand the Holiness of things. Our commitment with Creation flows from above. Consolation as the “mundane-mystical” feeling of the Love of God reveals the foundation of every action to take care of Mother Earth.

**Keywords:** Action, Consolation, Ecology, Holiness, Love

## 1. Consolation as the worldly sensing of God's gift

I believe that the most important clue for understanding and justifying our option of caring for the natural world is to be found in what is the hermeneutical centre of Ignatius' system of discernment of spirits and the keystone of his anthropology: CONSOLATION.

As is well known, Ignatius defines consolation in no. 316 of the *Exercises*; this is the third rule for discernment, though it was perhaps not the first one he worked out.

The first part of the definition of consolation states what I take to be the definition of Consolation without Prior Cause (“*consolación sin causa precedente*” [SpEx 330]), that is, the most direct, natural, and desired way that God has of communicating with his creatures: giving himself essentially in Love that “is” rather than just “gives”—it involves “being inflamed with love of one’s Creator and Lord.”

Thus in *Spiritual Exercises* [316.1] Ignatius links this direct experience of God (an interior movement that inflames the soul with *love* of its Creator and Lord) very closely with the orientation toward *creatures* because of the love received, which “descends from above,” for he states: [in the experience of consolation the soul] “can *love no created thing* on the face of the earth in itself but only in the Creator of them all.”

For Ignatius direct experience *of* God (that is, *of* God in us) is the unifying experience that creates a religious subject, but that same experience is also an experience of the world, a way of *feeling* the world to be a creature like myself. Ignatius does not want to diminish the

importance or the density of the human being’s intimate experience of the Creator or of the Creator’s intimate experience of the creature, for to diminish it would be to destroy the heart of Ignatius’ intention and the originality of his contribution to the spiritual tradition of the West. What is marvellous about this experience is that it finds its authenticating element in the transformation that takes place in the “spiritual” subject [SpEx 336]; the ultimate test of authenticity is in the way the subject beholds the world and, beholding it, *feels it*. Such feeling or “feeling perception” of the world cannot be understood except in terms of *creatureliness*, a quality to which I have access by the love that is conceded to me.

Consolation is therefore (*consequenter*, [SpEx 316]) the experience *of* God (possessive genitive) which, passing through me, flows toward the world and senses the world as Creature, that is, as existing in absolute relation with its Creator. Consolation reveals to me the profound identity of the world as creaturely, as always relative by definition, as existing inevitably in reference to its Creator. If we expand logically the terse expressions characteristic of Ignatius, we might say that in our mystical experience of being indwelt by God (cf. Contemplation to Attain Love [CAL]) and our *feeling* this to be so, we also experience the world itself as “inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord” just as we ourselves become inflamed in the deep, inalienable part of our religious experience.

Consolation experienced *in this way* (for it can also be experienced in other ways, as explained in [316.2] and [316.3]) is, therefore, an experience of universal fraternity, of the close relation of all of nature to what I feel to be the same ontological status as I have myself: a *creature*

and therefore a lovable receptacle of the divine presence. Thus, the Holy Spirit through consolation “draws me” toward the world, and I feel irretrievably linked to it by the one love that grounds all being. The creation and I...we are much more alike than we might suspect.

It is worthwhile to observe two nuances of special importance for us.

a. One is the *consequenter* (therefore) to which we have already alluded: “...and *therefore* since [the soul] can love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself...” The term refers here not to a temporal consequence (first one thing, then another) but to a semantic consequence, that is, one concerned with meaning; this is proper to the dynamic of the experience of consolation, which necessarily implies being attracted by the love of creatures. But I think that Ignatius wants to refer to just a single mystical instant. Sensing God is inevitably sensing the lovable condition of all reality that lives with me on the face of the earth.

b. The second consideration concerns the *in itself*: “since [the soul] can love no created thing on the face of the earth *in itself*.” A careful reading shows us that this phrase can be interpreted in two ways. It may refer to the *subject* of the sentence and thus would mean: “When the soul experiences consolation, it cannot love creatures *in itself* [itself refers here to “the soul”], but only in the Creator of them all.” But the *in itself* can also refer to the creatures, and then the phrase would be interpreted thus: “When the soul experiences consolation, it can love no created thing on the face of the earth *in itself* [for itself], but only in the Creator of them all.”

We will never know where Ignatius intended to place the accent (whether on the subject or on the creatures), but what is important is that in both cases *the source* of love is in neither the subject nor the creatures. Neither is the soul capable of loving the world this way by its own strength, nor are things of themselves or in themselves lovable in that way, but only because they are referred to the Creator whose goodness dwells in them.

## **2. Creatures “for me,” the living reality of God**

In the First Week of the *Exercises* we find an image that has not had the benefit of good theological interpretation and translation in our times. It has therefore often been neglected in both the theological and pastoral commentaries on Ignatius’s manual. I refer to number [60], the fifth point of the second exercise of the First Week.

Given the spiritual nature of angels and saints, we can quite easily understand why they react to my sin by “interceding and praying for me.” But what we perhaps find more difficult to understand is how these functions of prayer and intercession can be attributed to creatures such as “the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the elements; the fruits, birds, fishes, and animals—and the earth, how is it that it has not opened up and swallowed me?” [60]. What was in Ignatius’ mind when he wrote this? How did he conceive nature and its relation to human beings? What kind of life did he attribute to it? And above all, what role did he see it playing in the religious experience of the one making the Exercises?

In this point, Ignatius makes creatures that are apparently spiritless part of the retreatant’s spiritual process, thus foreshadowing the

Contemplation to Attain Love at the end of the Exercises. But the creatures are not spiritless: they become present to me in the process of conversion and take on an active function. They react with solidarity to the malice and seriousness of “my sin;” they bear it, they suffer it, they respond to it in the only way they can since the world in itself is good—the world is a creature, and like every creature it manifests its fraternal solidarity spontaneously and uncritically.

Just as my sinful situation grieves the Creator, so it also grieves the world’s creatures, which join themselves to the prayer of the angels and saints. Thus, the world is experienced as a living organism animated by the love of God that dwells in all of it; it is a world endowed with *pneuma* according to its own particular form of existence. Its freedom consists in revealing the mutual love of creatures and how they work together for me. That is to say, the way in which creatures express their praise and reverence for the Creator and prove that “love is shown more in deeds than in words” takes the form of incessant intercession for sinners, for me, before the Creator.

Therefore, how can I not love this world which has borne with my wickedness and responsibility and which still, despite my deserving to be justly condemned, suffers with amazing patience my criminal neglect of itself?

Delving more deeply into this vision of the world can help us to correct our vision of nature and the whole environment that makes our life possible. For Ignatius, *things* are animate reality, indwelt reality, spiritual reality; they are a sibling reality that lives-with-me and feels-with-me and therefore, a reality that affects my history and shapes it

silently and patiently. To the extent that they can, things also “labour and work for me” as God does in the CAL [*SpEx* 236]. Nature is a mother, a womb of religious energy that does not remain indifferent in the face of my sinful affairs; rather it becomes a sister to me, a sister who feels herself bound to me by the same indwelling love, and therefore “offers herself for the labour” (as in the meditation of the Temporal King [*SpEx* 96-97]) and works for my benefit. Does not this Ignatian intuition change our way of “experiencing and knowing” things?

What complicates matters, as is often the case in theology, is the kind of freedom human beings possess, which is different from the freedom experienced by plants and animals. Ignatius responds to this complexity in the human realm in the first note of the CAL, where he tells us that “love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words” [*SpEx* 230]. When we are disconnected from this referential experience of *consolation*, our going forth in mission to the world and to history often becomes an arid, exhausting effort, a labour more akin to egocentric, Promethean projects than to religious ventures borne gently by the Spirit. The key for approaching and influencing the world has to do with the ecology of the Ignatian subject, for the Ignatian subject *first* experiences the Risen One’s “consoling role” [*SpEx* 224] (first passivity) and only then produces the *works* proper to love for the world (reflex activity).

### 3. Our works and ministries, the construction of a pneumatological ecology

The proper working of consolation is loving labour on behalf of history. We might say that, understood in the Ignatian sense, the work of the Spirit in us does not consist in our presenting to the world the experience we have had of God in some intimate moment apart from the world. It does not consist in giving the world what we have received from God (that is, it is not the Dominican schema of “*contemplata aliis tradere*”). Rather, it means going forth lovingly toward that world which calls us out of the love that it has already received and that sustains it. What we do (work/ministries) is a loving dialogue for the construction of a pneumatological ecosystem which is continually moving creation, in the midst of its groans (Rm 8,22), toward its final destiny, its Omega Point, Christ. I believe that given the great urgency we feel to “heal” so many wounded parts of the world, we can find here a solid mystical support for our action and for linking it to a religious option for ecology: the world is God’s World.

Spirit – consolation – ministry – world – consolation – Spirit. This is the cycle. It’s not that we do good things *after* we have experienced God’s goodness in us. No, that is not how we justify our experience *of* God. Rather, our experience *of* God is in our working; our experience is of God working through our hands. A parallel can be found in rule 2 of the First Week [*SpEx* 315] where Ignatius says that “in the case of persons who are earnestly purging away their sins and who are progressing from good to better in the service of God our Lord” the good spirit gives them courage and strength and makes things easier to eliminate “so that they may move forward in *doing good*.” It is the Spirit



who “draws me” toward the same Spirit who dwells in all things, who is all in all. “Healing the world” means healing the very God who indwells the world, thus completing a process of goodness in which “the beginning, middle, and end are all good and tend to what is wholly good [333].”

But how does God dwell in the world, and what type of relationship with him does he propose to us? As Ignatius comments briefly in [236]: God dwells in the world *by working and labouring*. The first of these verbs, working [*trabajar* in Spanish], alludes to what we might call the strenuous element of God’s activity. His presence is a constant, persevering, exhausting activity. It was in this way that God entered into history in Jesus, “journeying and toiling” [116]; it was in this way that Jesus called those who would be his disciples: “whoever wishes to come with me must labour with me” [95]; and these will consequently “offer themselves wholeheartedly for this labour” [96]. The second verb, *labouring* [*laborar* in Spanish], adds a qualitative character to God’s action: it is the careful activity of the hands of the weaver at the loom, the hands of the potter at the wheel, or the hands of the carpenter with the wood. God works hard, but he labours carefully, lovingly, artfully...such is his presence in Creation, and such is the presence that draws us toward the world so that we “go and do likewise,” following the lead of the Samaritan.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The etymology of the word “*trabajar*” offers us specific information: *trabajo* comes from the Latin *tripalium*, an instrument of torture made of three sticks on which the condemned person was stretched. This etymology evokes in our time connotations of suffering, pain, effort, just as in the 16th century.

*Care of the world* is a mystical habit, a way of breathing forth the Spirit we have received, the Spirit which has already made us creatures but which places in our hands the responsibility of freely continuing a *process* of creation. The Spirit guarantees that she will be present in us *realizing* (the participle is important) in us all the constructive, creative life processes which are advancing throughout the world (growing, feeling, understanding), and she is patiently but dynamically awaiting us in all creation.

#### 4. “Pouring forth a thousand graces...”<sup>2</sup>

Where does all this leave us? Ignatius’ unique conception of mystical experience does not seek to remove the religious subject from history or from the world, evoking perhaps the prayer that Jesus uttered for his disciples on that Holy Night: “Do not take them out of the world” (Jn 17:15). To the contrary, Ignatius places us in the heart of Creation; we are Creation; I am Creation. I am not a “being facing” the world, labouring effectively and competently for its welfare. If such were the case, I would end up situating myself in an ontological state superior to that of the rest of Creation, and I might even be in danger of considering myself superior to other beings, including humans, that I consider less perfect than I am. The experience of the love that *draws me on*, getting me out of myself as the only way to lead me deeper into myself, is what we might call an experience of religious *worldliness*. Through such *worldliness*, all is unveiled and revealed with that excess of being that

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<sup>2</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Canticle* [5].

emerges only when its sacred condition is allowed to be seen: “and all things appeared new to him” [Autobiography 29-Cardoner].

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As I see it, speaking of ecology from this perspective confronts us with questions about the poverty and modesty of those who inhabit the face of this earth and who are invited to contemplate themselves as humble parts of the environment. I believe that the Mystery of the Incarnation teaches us to become part of the world, one thing among so many, and yet one thing in the midst of *so much*. Only when we have attained the viewpoint of the Creator (consolation) do we discover the thousand graces already poured out on *God's* world, which he had only to look upon to leave it “adorned in beauty” (Saint John of the Cross, *Canticle* 5).

〔摘要〕聖依納爵·羅耀拉 (Ignatius Loyola) 的經驗以及由此而產生的靈修，使我們能將世界和歷史闡釋為天主啟示的地方。依納爵在卡多內爾河兩岸的經驗 [Autob. 29]，他對神慰的理解 [SpEx 316] 和他提出「默觀以獲得愛」的目標 [SpEx 230-237] 可以幫助我們理解事物的聖潔。我們對創造的承諾來自天上。神慰作為天主之愛的「平凡而神秘的」感覺，揭示了照顧地球母親的每項行動的基礎。

**關鍵詞：**行動，神慰，生態，聖潔，愛