

Extremism in Ignatius Loyola

Tad Dunne

First published in Review for Religious, May-June, 1986, pp. 345-355.

Retreats can be deceptive. We withdraw from our daily meanderings and ascend to some lofty point from which we can see where our spiritual journey has taken us and where it might lead next. Hoping to deepen our spirituality in the midst of the world, we seek an outlook quite at odds with our world. From that high perspective, we search the gospels for some ideal against which to test our everyday activities. And often enough we are blessed with a vision that is simple and uncompromising.

Then we journey down from the heights, and before long we start working on a balance between opposites: not too talkative, but not too silent; not a workaholic, but not lazy; don't jump to conclusions, but don't accept everything mindlessly either. We look back on our retreat from quite a different perspective than we had while we were in it. During the retreat we saw ourselves as refusing to compromise with the world; but now we feel maybe just a little more faithful or a little more loving, and we count that small gain as our humble best.

Is this retreat desire for some spiritual extreme an illusion we amuse ourselves with while perched far above the harsh realities of the city? Or might our adaptations to everyday realities actually compromise something in us that is precious in the sight of God? Ignatius of Loyola was one person. among many others in our history who pushed for the no-compromise attitude:

Just as people of the world who follow the world love and seek with such great diligence honors, fame, and esteem for a great name on earth, as the world teaches them, so those who are progressing in the spiritual life and truly following Christ our Lord love and intensely desire *everything opposite* (GE, 101).¹

This is clear, but hardly simple. Unlike Ignatius in his day, we perceive a certain continuity between religious values and secular values. Our hospitals, our welfare systems, our efforts to eliminate poverty and to establish political grounds for world peace all point to a growing convergence of what "the world" and what Christians intensely desire. Indeed, a case could be made that it is chiefly because of Christian values that the Secular City is gradually taking on humane, even spiritual goals for the human race.

So should we regard Ignatius' strongly contentious approach to life as just a temporary stance made necessary by the chaos of the church and of society in his time? I would like to argue a strong "No." Strong, because unless we

see some practical usefulness to an “everything opposite” attitude we would lose our sense of what is radical about being Christian. We would gradually grow accustomed to “the world” as it is, and lose our critical sense. We would have no razor-edged criterion for weighing practical alternatives in our ministries.

But what exactly does Ignatius mean by “everything opposite?” Paradoxically, he also counseled balance in many areas of life. So we can legitimately ask in what sense ought we be spiritual extremists, and in what sense men and women of prudent balance? Although I focus mainly on Ignatius, I have no doubt that most of the spiritual giants in human history would know something about the particular sort of extremism that Ignatius promoted.

A Dialectic of Desires

First of all, this “everything opposite” attitude does not refer to external social or cultural realities. It does not mean that we should be opposed to all modern institutions just because they are “of the world.” In any case, social institutions are always a mixed product of intelligence and malice, of good will and stupidity. Throw out these bathwaters and we lose the baby too. What Ignatius is talking about is rather the *inner* realities of consciousness. The “everything” which ought to be opposite to the “world” means inner *desires*. The disciple’s desires ought to be completely opposite to the worldly penchant in us to “love and seek with such great diligence honors, fame, and esteem for a great name on earth, as the world teaches.”

Let me explain this more fully. On the one hand, we revel in praise, we take pains to protect our reputations, and we spontaneously lean toward making a name for ourselves. On the other hand, rebukes chasten us, insults offend us, and our failures humble us. However, whether or not these putdowns are unjustified, we do have to admit that the we need a comeuppance now and then. This shock to our pride is therapeutic. To be “put in our place” can shatter self-defeating illusions we cherish about ourselves. What is very important to notice here is that what honors do to our sense of ourselves, and what putdowns do, are completely opposite. It is these opposing senses of ourselves, I believe, that Ignatius means by “everything opposite.”

What Ignatius gives in the General Examen, he expands upon in the meditation on the Two Standards (SE 136-148).² There he shows how different acquired tastes about lifestyle usually lead to quite deep and quite opposite longings about one’s self-awareness. On the one hand, the taste for money leads to a desire for a great name. On the other, the taste for poverty usually leads to a longing for a certain anonymity—the kind that frees a person to live without crippling self-concern. And beyond the great

name and the little name lie the real objects of one's deepest love—what Ignatius calls either a life of pride or a life of humility.

Learning the Dialectic of Desires

Now few people recognize that, in fact, they long either for pride or for humility. In our everyday choices, most things seem morally gray, without serious consequences. And yet they do add up to a direction in our lives, a direction that sooner or later reveals whether we are self-absorbed or self-transcending. Deliberate reflection is needed to realize for ourselves that underneath a great number of apparently harmless concerns there lurks a fundamental inclination to pride. Likewise it takes some measure of self-reflection to notice the interior movements toward anonymity and simplicity that in fact are our desire for humility. Once we recognize both these movements, we can see that they are entirely opposite pulls in consciousness. Moreover, we may then begin to recognize that this dialectic of desires underlies our every activity, and see how it profoundly determines the person we become and the stamp we leave on our world. Given the importance of this self-education in inner movements, it is no wonder that Ignatius prescribes more meditations on the Two Standards than on any other in the thirty days of his Spiritual Exercises.

Still, we must admit, despite repeated meditations on the Two Standards and numerous exhortations on the value of resisting the pull to ownership and to be held in high esteem, even the spiritually mature do not easily maintain such a dialectical attitude toward their inner movements. And so we must ask why an "everything opposite" attitude is so difficult to live out.

One reason is that we have failed to see the point of the Two Standards meditation. We may have "reflected" on it during a retreat and felt we got the point. Perhaps we understood Ignatius' view of the spiritual struggle very well and saw its connection to making choices in life. So we act as though it is enough to grasp the *concept* of spiritual struggle; we sincerely hope to bring the concept to bear in our everyday situations.

What we forget is that life is about concrete attitudes, not abstract concepts. The people and the situations around us are a profoundly mysterious jumble of grace and malice, requiring in-depth reflection every day. Meditation is not just analysis. Nor is it simply an appreciation of an abstract vision. Rather, meditation should be an ongoing and strenuous exercise in understanding the interaction between our actual circumstances and our inner struggles.

Ignatius, in fact, appeals very little to the *concept* of struggle. By that I mean that he does not analyze the meaning of "acting against" considered as a principle from which actions can be determined. It is one thing to acknowledge that life is a struggle, but quite another to *name* exactly what

we are struggling with each day. In his practice and teaching of discernment, Ignatius seldom appeals to an abstract rule of life. Instead, he appeals to *imagination* and to *history* to show that life is essentially a dialectic of desires. Clearly, his aim is to help us notice and negotiate these opposing desires in our own lives.

For example, in the General Examen, he asks that the candidate for the Society of Jesus “ponder” how helpful it is to imitate the humiliated Christ. Does “ponder” mean conceptualize and analyze here? Not at all. The candidate is asked to *imagine* spiritually advanced men and women and to notice how in fact they “intensely desire” to be clothed exactly as Christ, because of the love they bear him. Ignatius does not tell the candidate to imitate Christ humiliated and poor. He directs him only to imagine what the loyal disciple desires.

Likewise in the Two Standards, the retreatant imagines the “servants and friends” of Christ—how they are naturally attracted in the direction opposite to pride, and how they attract others in the direction of humility. I believe that Ignatius is trying to help the retreatant distinguish between several otherwise nameless, interior experiences. By focusing on the disciple instead of the Master, Ignatius clearly means to have us consider which of our inner experiences, among the many that occur, corresponds to that particular attraction to Christ which the true disciple experiences. In other words, he wants us to *discriminate among inner desires*, not apply some facile, clean-cut rules about behavior.

I said that Ignatius appeals also to history to teach us about these two pulls in consciousness. He does this in two ways. First, he directs attention to the purposes which motivated Jesus in his work on earth so that we might better imitate him. True disciples “desire to resemble and imitate our Creator and Lord Jesus Christ, . . . since it was for our spiritual profit that he clothed himself as he did” (GE 101). Notice that Ignatius calls Jesus “our Creator” This makes the choices of Jesus for poverty and humiliations a deliberate revelation of how we can best fulfill the purpose of our creation. Our Creator, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, came with this express purpose: to “give us an example that in all things possible we might seek to imitate and follow him, since he is the way that leads us to life” (GE 101). For Ignatius, God desired to enter human history in person, taking on the only condition that truly gives life, a condition of poverty and humility. If there was any doubt which inner desire one can depend on, now we see clearly that Jesus Christ freely and will full divine wisdom *chose* poverty and humiliations. History now has a model-member to guide it: Jesus Christ, not just Lord but Creator as well, in imitation of whose interior desires we find real life.

Ignatius appeals to history in another manner which, although it is less obvious in the texts, underlies everything in the General Examen and the

Exercises. Like St. Paul, he boldly sets his own historical experience and that of his first companions as the measure of what "abnegation"³ means in the concrete. In Chapter Four of the General Examen, which Ignatius wrote with the overall intention that Jesuit novices accept the idea of abnegation, we find this reason given: "For where the Society's first members have passed through these necessities and greater bodily wants, the others who come to it should endeavor, as far as they can, to reach the same point as the earlier ones, or to go farther in our Lord" (GE 81). In other words, the candidate is told that he is entering a community which is not leading itself; it is being led by God. Like Israel's history was normative for Jewish faith, the Society's founding historical experience is normative for the Society's continuing style. Therefore, for the simple reason that God moved the early companions to love poverty and humiliations in order to achieve the humility of Jesus, so too should the later companions, because this is not just human work but the very labor of God, not only in our psyches but in our history too.

I see two kinds of meditations which these reflections should prompt. First, we should learn for ourselves how to recognize when we are pulled toward humility and when towards pride. To do this, it may help to compare our own inner experience to that of deeply spiritual persons. Their outwardly simple and self-effacing lifestyle is a manifestation of a militant obedience to a deep and steady love within. Authentic people avoid applause, not because they are shy but because they are courageously maintaining a spirit in which honor is a persistent temptation toward self-absorption.

Second, we should meditate on the various stories in which God acted for the world through Ignatius, and through any of the men and women who understood the struggle within. Their story is part of our history, and our story draws its meaning from that shared history. God indeed has entered history permanently, not only in the person of Christ Jesus but also in the hearts of our spiritual ancestors. In particular, Ignatius and his companions recognized that their experience of begging and mockery gave them great joy. And why? Because they felt a concrete share in the experience of their "Creator and Lord." Once they decided to form a community, they wrote constitutions with the purpose of structuring, as far as possible, a continual reenactment by its members of their often difficult yet greatly joyful desires.

This offers an often overlooked but deeply effective way of reading Scripture. By attending to the inner experiences that lay behind the texts of Scripture, we can recognize the two pulls of consciousness and the meaning of each. For example, when Jesus heard the woman cry out, "Happy is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" he replied, "Not as happy as those who hear the Word of God and keep it!" (Lk 11:27-28). As I read it, this text says that the chief concern of a happy consciousness is inner obedience, not family loyalty nor pride in the fruits of one's labor. Or consider this reading from Wisdom, "I esteemed her [wisdom] more than

scepters and thrones; I loved her more than health or beauty" (7:8-10). What else is this wisdom but the constant desire to live with the regular humiliations that come with living in the truth? Once we understand that what we call "salvation" is in fact the outcome of a tension in consciousness, we can read any scriptural stories and recognize familiar inner movements in ourselves. In this fashion, by seeing our present experience in the light of the gospels, we can grow to love the humble, self-transcending path.

An Empirical View of the Dialectic

Still, there remains a nagging question. Many deeply spiritual men and women in fact have meditated in this way, have lived in actual poverty, have been stung by the insults, and know the joy that can accompany these experiences. but they may regard this as a *personal* asceticism only. They possess only vague notions of what the humble way has to do with peace in the world and the ongoing struggle of cultural and political leaders to achieve it. Perhaps they believe in the principle that pride pulls down nations, but they have no mental framework for understanding how it does so. Nor do they perceive how anyone's humility might ever heal the woundedness of a culture. As a result, while they may live out a dialectical attitude in their personal lives, they may neglect making connections between personal spirituality and contemporary political science, psychology, sociology and economics. And so while they ache with Christ for the world, they know nothing about how to improve it.



Our world today is different than Ignatius' in one fundamental aspect: Modern science has changed how we think about anything. Essentially the change is from an Aristotelian view of knowledge as related logically to eternal truths, to the Baconian view of knowledge as *also* the result of verified explanations of how events *function*. Were Ignatius alive today, I believe that besides appealing to imagination and to history, he would add a functional explanation of how the dialectic of desires underlies social progress and decline. That is, he would seek to explain how an inner penchant for doing without funds or fame works to bring about a redemption in Christ Jesus that would mean something to this world. Or, to use his terms, he would explain what role "discernment of spirits" plays in "redeeming" the a world where empirical explanations are required.

To work out that functional explanation of how discernment of spirits facilitates redemption, we have to express the movements of the good and bad angels in terms that the average person can find in experience. I

propose that there are two experiences in particular which we must point out, each representing a pull or drawing in consciousness on the side of Christ's standard.

First is the experience of *intending the truth*. This experience relates to an extremely broad range of objects, and yet, as experience, it is quite distinct from many other kinds of inner experience. To "intend the truth" means to want to know reality, to search for answers to questions, and to respect the truth when we find it. This intending, this search, this respect, pulls against a counter-drift in us which settles for simple answers, for impressive words, for tricky solutions, and for comforting illusions.

Second is the experience of *intending the good*. This too relates to a broad range of objects and yet is quite a distinct feeling in consciousness. We "intend the good" when we weigh options for the sake of discovering what is objectively the best choice. In doing so, we pull against a countertendency which seeks the merely satisfying, the subjectively comfortable, the conventional. To want the truly good often means to choose a more painful path, but a better one. And the criterion we use to tell which is better is not only an examination of pros and cons but also and chiefly, I believe—an experience of fulfilled or frustrated desire in our hearts.

With these two experiences in mind—the intention of truth and the intention of good—we can analyze how an "everything opposite" attitude works redemption in concrete situations. We can also see how a failure to be strongly contentious prevents redemption from taking over. Let me illustrate this in several different areas of life.

Some Illustrations

To a great extent we all have difficulty with our feelings. Speaking for myself, whenever I meet a stranger at a party, I seem to listen to our conversation with one ear and to my inner apprehensions with the other. It doesn't work very well because I often say things I immediately feel foolish about. Just when I hope to make a good impression, I feel I make a bad one. This happens because my mind was not fully on what we were talking about. I was also thinking about how to feel accepted, and so I blurted out things unrelated to the topic of our conversation.

Things are not much better with friends either, particularly when it comes to dealing with anger. When a friend gets angry with me, I want to strike back or at least defend myself. But neither reaction helps me *understand* what has gone wrong, and this failure to understand only makes it that much harder to work out an amicable solution.

The ideal, of course, is to be able to acknowledge the truth of my own feelings and the feelings of others. This means working both to name the

feelings and to pinpoint what the feelings are focused on—not an easy task for anybody. Negative feelings in particular are often repressed, and yet they are our best indicators that something of value is going wrong. Because negative feelings are meant to alert us to harm, we should take them seriously, making every attempt first to acknowledge them and then to understand what they are all about. But this requires a no-compromise attitude towards those pulls inside us which spring to defend our poor egos. Those pulls create illusions which seduce us and cushion us against taking the sometimes painful responsibility of facing the truth and doing our real best.

For another illustration of how dedication to reality and to objective worth helps bring order and sense into an otherwise chaotic situation, consider how communities tend by nature to be self-centered. As a community we may be very realistic and quite responsible where our own community is concerned, but we still can be easily aloof and oblivious to outsiders. Every community tends to reinforce its own biases, to congratulate itself on its victories, and to speak a language full of value judgments that no one questions. Members seldom wonder whence its resources come and where its garbage goes. They seldom question whether or not its enjoyments are paid for by the sweat and malnutrition of foreigners.

Unfortunately, for all the values inherent in community, there is very little in community itself that directs it beyond itself. These powerful gravitational forces toward self-centeredness can be found in communities of all sizes: couples in love, large families, ethnic groups, labor unions, nations, and religions. But all such communities live among other communities. They contain subgroups, and they belong to larger groups. Without some cultural commitment to the larger, more common good, subgroups cut back their good will and limit their creativity to what benefits themselves alone. So the normal demand for large-scale cooperation is regularly sacrificed for some small-scale gain: first for this and then for that faction. Sadly and ironically, once this game of competition between groups begins, none of the groups benefits as much as each of them might have, had they all shared their wits and their good will with one another.

Historically, formerly self-centered communities have enlarged their vision and commitments only when they have been provoked from within by a prophet. Usually the prophet gathers a select community of like-minded people together to become the leaven in the dough. But before the prophet speaks a single word or calls a single disciple, he or she obeys an inner pull toward truths and values that run counter to the prevailing attitudes. Prophets have reputations for being contentious. They get that way because they already fight an interior battle between illusions that are familiar and truths that are strange—between old, accepted ways of treating people and

new, more dignified ways. So they cry out to the people they love, calling them to realize that they are playing a no-win game with other groups.

When prophets are successful, a reform movement will get underway only insofar as it deals with the community's concrete relations to other groups. The measure of its success will be the degree to which it demolishes any self-centered myths which its own authorities may propagate in the name of community strength. But its members have to wake up intellectually. Only when they recognize these myths in themselves and wage an interior war against them will this peaceful revolution begin.

For my final illustration, I want to highlight the inner struggle that takes place in what we call the deep thinkers—scientists, historians, philosophers, and theologians, both the professional and the amateur. Contrary to popular opinion, deep thinkers often do not have an astronomically high I.Q. They work slowly but steadily. Nor are they born bright: they *become* aware of long-range implications and complex problems only by a steady fight against their minds' drift toward the easy answers.

Again, you can see my point. On the one hand, we all experience a pull toward a bogus form of knowing, the kind that relies on memory, rhetoric and bluffing. On the other, we also experience an "entirely opposite" pull towards asking honest questions, and searching for the best explanations, fighting against any worry that someone else might beat us to a solution. We all have felt the desire to belittle intellectual inquiry and to disregard journals of opinion, even as we secretly wish we had the staying power to dig deeper beneath a surface understanding of the world around us.

We cannot excuse our anti-intellectualism on the grounds of mental dullness. The so-called "dull" can be extremely bright when it comes to practical and immediate concerns. Here lies the road to pride again. On its own power alone, our intelligence would never stop asking questions about anything, no matter how remote. But when the fruits of our reflections are not immediate and palpable, then a prideful concern for our own welfare muscles in and compels our intelligence to surrender. We yield to the forces in our consciousness that move us toward easy answers, silly responses, and make-believe solutions.

While we all recognize these pulls in ourselves, we should notice what happens when psychologists, historians, political scientists, economists and the like give in to them. Their shortsighted solutions to human crises make life more miserable, not just for themselves but for countless other human beings. Yet no jury indicts them *for* malpractice. No preacher denounces them from the pulpit. Instead, we give them the benefit of the doubt that "they did their best." But upon their interior obedience to the canons of truth—an obedience monitored by themselves alone—hangs the future of anyone whom their theories and policies touch.

From this perspective, we can see that every time someone settles for merely partial answers to problems, he or she usually introduces a solution which itself needs fixing by someone else. Of course, this is only a general explanation of how bad situations get worse, but it does explain how a contentious spirituality can work to better the world we live in. Only an “everything opposite” attitude towards this downhill intellectual slide will regularly bring about intelligent and long-range solutions to the problems that beset God’s people.

Conversion to the Dialectical Attitude

“Everything opposite” means a conversion—one that requires sometimes anger but often gentleness to maintain. It means recognizing that one’s interior is a battleground of two opposing kinds of movements, whose outcome has direct manifestations in one’s psychic health, one’s prophetic spirit, and one’s intellectual freedom. These, in turn, have a direct effect on family harmony, social justice and on the broad philosophies and theories that shape our human institutions. The conversion ought to be total, because there is no event in our everyday lives which does not derive its meaning from how we responded to it.

As Christians, we stand in a peculiar relationship to this conversion to a dialectical attitude. The functional explanation given above, of how discernment of spirits works to create a better world, could stand on its own without any reference to Christ Jesus. This is an asset insofar as Christians can share a vision, a language, and a praxis with non-Christians—which we must certainly do if we are to tackle issues of social justice with any seriousness. Such cooperation can even be the beginning of a dialog about ultimates in truth and goodness leading to the Good News of Christ Jesus. But a functional explanation by itself is also a liability insofar as Christians might forget to name just who it is who moves the soul to face the truth and do one’s true best. So it seems incumbent upon theologians and catechists to express the age-old doctrine of redemption in Christ Jesus and the Spirit in functional categories drawn from the dynamics of consciousness and the workings of history. Specifically, we need to highlight the “forefather” image of Christ. Aside from his divine nature, in his human nature he appeared as the founder of a historical community and movement. It is his personal values and example that reveal the divine style of living in any age. And it is his own spirit, the Holy Spirit, the “Sacred Heart of Jesus,” that we experience in our own hearts seeking to bring the world to a new birth.

A final word of caution: Such an “everything opposite” attitude is not learned overnight. It takes time to name which inner experiences correspond to “intending the truth” and which to wishful thinking; which to “intending the good” and which to securing the merely comfortable for ourselves. And we

learn by our mistakes. But without the slightest exaggeration we can say that in this matter there should be no compromise. Only an extremism about our inner movements can give us the day-to-day balanced judgment and love that redeem the world.

NOTES

¹ *General Examen*. This document was written by Ignatius for the purpose of teaching candidates for the Society of Jesus what Jesuit life would require. It was meant to be given in a retreat setting requiring some serious meditation. See George F. Ganss, ed., *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970) pp. 75-118. My references above refer to paragraph numbers.

² *Spiritual Exercises*. See Louis J. Puhl, cd., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1959). References are to paragraph numbers.

³ *Joseph de Guibert, The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice* (Chicago: Loyola University Press; St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1964) p. 141.