

Silver Jubilee of Stella Matutina Retreat House – Kokkedal, Denmark
“Ignatian Spirituality in Everyday Life – in the World of Today:

My Sisters, my Brothers, Good afternoon.

Introduction

I am so happy to be with you on this jubilee occasion; but also so sad because I am not physically with you. Joy and sadness stand side by side.

At least, it is a joy to see you by skype.

Some of you I know personally, either as your director or through conversations.

Many of you I know through the silence of presence, a felt communion.

Yes, I know the ones who, like myself, are the first ones at breakfast, and, at least in my case, I couldn't wait for that wonderfully brewed coffee.

Together, we are celebrating this Silver Jubilee of Stella Matutina Retreat House, and because of the year delay, it celebrates 25 years since my first coming to Stella Matutina. I thank Msgr. Niels Engelbrecht and Sr. Ansgaria for bringing about that precious moment which was the occasion of Niels' ordination to the priesthood that August 23rd.

Congratulations to him, too, on his Silver Jubilee.

The Topic and Situation

Sr. Susanne has asked me to say something on Ignatian Spirituality in everyday life – in the world of today.

What is the world of today?

First of all, it is a fast-changing world as rules and regulations change from week to week, even day to day – as you well know.

It is a weary world emerging from this long crippling pandemic.

It is a world grieving the death of almost 4 million people due to the pandemic alone.

It is a world trying to squeeze out democracy in many of our countries.

It is a world in motion as countless migrants and refugees seek freedom from violence, hunger and fear.

It is a world heating up from global warming.

And, as we were reminded by the cardiac arrest of Christian Erickson on the soccer field just a week ago, it is a world where life and death rub shoulders in an instant – but, with alertness, skill and prayer, life can win.

In my country, I have to add the destructive curse of division: division between rich and poor, Republicans and Democrats, social minded Christians and Evangelicals, and the worse curse of all: racism: the division between white and black.

But, here, I must make a distinction between our nations. You in Denmark have the precious quality of *samfundssind*, which I understand to be a basic consideration of others as more important than one's own feelings and interests for the sake of the common good that elicits trust in others, -- thus giving more space to a bigger picture of well-being.

But I have lived in an environment of mistrust where political opportunism is still more important than the common good. You may carry the wounds of the pandemic, but we carry not only the wounds of the pandemic but the poisoned wounds of divisiveness.

What does St. Ignatius have to offer this complex and changing reality?

Starting Point

Before answering that question, let me say that, first of all, we begin now as Ignatius did, with our woundedness. If Ignatius had not been wounded in the Battle of Pamplona and endured a long convalescence, probably nothing would have changed for him and a powerful grace for the world would have been lost. What seemed to shatter his life and kill his dreams became the seed of a radical new life that went far beyond his wildest expectations. And that new life continues to this very day. It is why we are here right now. The starting point is “death” leading to greater life.

The pandemic certainly shattered our plans and expectations, too, including this Silver Jubilee which should have been celebrated a year ago. There has been great suffering everywhere in the loss of work, education, and worship. We have been living with uncertainty and with ever changing restrictions. Like Ignatius, we lost freedom of movement—his was physical; ours social. At times, it has been wearying.

But, now, as we are emerging from the pandemic and looking ahead, we ask: what are the gifts that God through Ignatius is offering us? There are many gifts, but I will single out two: the gift of discernment and the gift of imagination. By discernment, I mean discerning the spirits which are now at work in us and in our society. By imagination, I mean using our imagination to envision a more life-giving future.

The First Gift: Discernment

The first gift for us now in June 2021 is the same first gift that Ignatius received 500 years ago in May 1521: the discernment of spirits.

As you know, Ignatius, while convalescing from his wounds, became aware of inner movements, impulses. Some brought joy and consolation; others left him dry and flat. Because he had time, (and that was important!) he began to pay attention to these movements, and so, discovered their source and direction.

This was the beginning of what, in time, he called “the Discernment of Spirits” – discerning what was of God, what was of himself, and what was of the Evil One -- and he set forth guidelines to help us.

At this present time, it is especially important to be discerning the Spirits because, like Ignatius, as we emerge from the pandemic, we are entering a very new phase in our own life and in the life of our communities, our countries and the world.

Where do we begin with our discernment?

The Beginning:

Looking

Indian Jesuit Tony de Mello, as I know I have mentioned to you before in homilies, kept emphasizing “awareness” as the foundation of the spiritual life. “Awareness, awareness, awareness,” he would repeat. Awareness is looking and listening deeply. We need to do both: to look and to listen – at a deeper level. It takes time to both really see and really listen. In our daily activity, so often, though we look and listen, we do not do so long enough or deeply enough to see what God wants us to see.

For example, do we really see how much love, in fact, surrounds us? A native American who happens to be a bishop in the Episcopal Church, recently said to his congregation: “Try this simple test: stand still in a crowded place and watch people around you. Within a short time, you will begin to see love, and you will see it over and over and over: a young mother talking to her child, a couple laughing together as they walk by, an older [person] holding the door for a stranger – small signs of love everywhere. The more you look, the more you will see. Love is literally everywhere. We are surrounded by love.”

How true! Love is everywhere before our eyes but, how often, we don't see it because we can be either too preoccupied with our own thoughts, or, moving too quickly, or, looking only with critical eyes – eyes with splinters in them.

Those who know me know that I enjoy watching birds. Not far from me is a pond which I frequently visit, sit on a bench for a while, and look for birds. The longer I stay, the more I see.

Why is that? Is it that, with time, the birds are more comfortable with my presence and reveal more of themselves? Is it that my own seeing with time expands and deepens? Or, might God reveal more to the one who appreciates the gift?

I do not know the answer. I suspect that it is all three! All I know is that the longer I stay, the more I see. And the more I see, the more I am aware of God's presence in everything.

Listening

While we talk much about looking, we don't say much about listening. There are, of course, two ways of listening: we can listen with our ears and we can listen with our hearts. I think that we know, can feel, the difference. We can begin by taking time to listen to the birds and the waves and the wind, to music and poetry and friendly voices – as we do on retreat. But, can we also take time to hear the cries of those in pain, near and far? Can we also hear what Mother Nature is saying to us through through extreme heat and cold, fires and hurricanes? Are we listening to Greta Thornberg, our young Swedish prophetess, who cries out “Our world is on fire!” Are we listening?

Norwegian poet, Hans Boerli, claimed that
“If you turn your ear to the wind
and listen with all your heart,
then you will hear distinctly
God breathing.”

We know what he is saying, don't we? But, how often do we do it?

The Examen

On a practical level, Ignatius gave us a useful tool for discernment, for making daily choices: the Examen, or, what we now call, the Examination of Consciousness.” It is an exercise mostly about awareness, for it is only with the awareness that comes

from seeing and listening that we will notice the spirits at work and so can make good choices, both for ourselves and for the common good.

This examen – which I think you are familiar with -- need not be complicated and need not be made at the end of the day. In fact, I include it as part of my morning prayer as, with God, I enjoy looking back at the previous day to see what did happen, what were the gifts, and what I can learn from various events.

First, I ask: what am I most grateful for in the previous day? – for I am aware that all is gift. I frequently ask myself: what were the three most precious gifts of the day? It is good to savor them again, and be grateful – and to express that gratitude – not just a quick “Thank you.”.

Secondly, where or how was God present and acting in my day? Someone has written, correctly, I think, that, very often – perhaps, most often, --we only recognize God’s presence afterwards – not in the moment itself – but afterwards. The author called them “traces of God.” God acts through our struggles and disappointments as well as through pleasant happenings. Are we seeing Him? What is God showing us in both? Again, it is a deliberate effort at awareness.

And thirdly, what is my desire for this coming day? This is not about accomplishing my “To Do” list. It is reaching deeper into my spirit level. It is about how I want to live the day. Desires might be: to be a loving presence today, or, to be generous, or, be attentive, or, patient, or, a desire for inspiration, or, to give God glory, etc. The following day, I check: did God respond to my desire? When and how?

The daily examen keeps our days from just turning into weeks and months. Author Annie Dillard underlined the obvious when she wrote, “How we spend [this] day is, of course, how we spend our lives.” If we are not constantly reflecting on the impulses of the Spirit in our daily life and on the choices we are making, then, our lives are in danger of slipping away without direction and purpose. To paraphrase American poet, Mary Oliver, we can profitably ask ourselves from time to time: “Tell me, what it is you are doing with your one wild and precious life?” Even if our life may not seem precious to us, our life is certainly precious to God!

A Second Gift: Imagination

The second gift of St. Ignatius that I propose for our reflection is using our imagination. People speak of Ignatian prayer as prayer of the imagination, imagining ourselves present in the mysteries of Jesus’ life. Actually, Ignatian prayer is all inclusive. Ignatius encourages us to pray in whatever way we find helpful: from praying the Lord’s Prayer to praying the psalms, or, lectio divina, and even a

quiet prayer of presence. There are many ways of praying; there is no “right” way. But, he is associated mostly with his appreciating how using the eyes of our imagination – as he expressed it – can help enliven our prayer as we become more engaged in the Gospel scenes. Imagination brings us into the past of the Gospel and brings the past of the Gospel into the present.

But imagination also points to and serves the future. At this present moment, God is inviting us to imagine a freer and more justice-filled future. Some people may want to go back to the old “normal.” Others may want to fashion a new “normal.” But, is God choosing this moment for us to imagine a more grace filled future that will bring about greater hope for our planet and for all people – especially those who live at the bottom or edges of society?

I wrote in my journal recently: “I enjoy water and food, a home, good health care, and, especially freedom: freedom from fear and freedom to choose. By far, -- so much, by far -- most of the world does not enjoy any of these gifts. That’s the reality.

Franciscan Richard Rohr speaks of “Foundational Hope.” By “Foundational Hope” he means, a hope that demands a foundational belief in a world that is still and always unfolding to something better.” (5/31/21). God’s dream is for the oneness, the unity of all creation with all its beautiful and amazing variety. We speak of the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. The arc of God, like a rainbow, is stretching over all creation right from the beginning and, with all its colors, is moving towards that ending glory: the fullness of the Kingdom of God, which will bring all humanity, all creation, into the eternity of God’s love..

Rainbows remind me that this coming July 22nd will be the tenth anniversary of the Norwegian Tragedy when 77 mostly young people were slaughtered on the island of Utøya. A year later, you may remember, in protest to the murderer’s violent prejudices, Lillebjørn Nilsen led some forty thousand people in Oslo in singing the Norwegian rendition of Pete Seeger’s protest song of the 1970’s: “Rainbow Race”.

The words in English are:

“One sky above us,
One ocean lapping all our shores,
One earth so green and round, who could ask for more?”

[God responds;]

And because I love you,
I’ll give it one more try
To show my rainbow race
It’s too soon to die.”

[And the final response:]

“Go tell, go tell all --- the little children,
Tell all their mothers and fathers too -- ‘now’ s our last chance to learn to share
What’s been given to me and you’.”

That song was originally a protest song in the 1970’s against the Vietnam War. In the aftermath of the Norwegian Tragedy, 10 years ago, it became a song of promise for all Norwegians. Now, we could sing it again as a prophetic song for our planet. Is this our last chance “to learn to share/ what’s been given to me and to you?” We move from protest to promise to prophecy. That is imagination at work.

Our imagination -- as we see in “Rainbow Race” -- is at the service of hope. In Ignatian terms, we imagine ourselves present in the Gospel stories so that our life story becomes interwoven with Jesus’ life story, which is God’s story of making our world holy and whole. Ignatius encouraged us to dream, especially to dream of laboring with Christ in the vineyard: God’s Kingdom. He also encouraged us to imagine ourselves as more simple, more poor, more humble, more generous as the best way to proceed.

In his own journey, it was important for Ignatius to keep dreaming and keep discerning Discernment and imagination –they go together like two wings of a bird. It takes two wings to fly. And with those two wings, discernment and imagination, Ignatius flew far and we can too.

Conclusion

As I conclude my remarks, I know that I haven’t really said anything new, but, perhaps I have packaged Ignatius’s gifts of 500 years ago in the new wrapping paper of today. In unwrapping them, may we discover how precious these two gifts of discernment and imagination are, how relevant they are today as they were 500 years ago, and feel stirred to, once again, appreciate them more deeply and make use of them more frequently – especially now, as once again, God is offering us one more chance.

It is fitting that we celebrate Stella Matutina’s 25th anniversary of retreat house ministry (though a year later!) at the same time we celebrate the 500th anniversary of Ignatius’ beginning his pilgrimage.

It is comforting to know that we – you and I – set forth at this time, as Ignatius did, wounded and limping. However, even though Ignatius began wounded and limping

-- and his wounds and limp never left him (and ours won't either) -- he ended up flying far beyond all his dreams.

And, if you have read Ignatius' "Reminiscences" you will remember, that, along the way, one day, he suddenly stopped and exclaimed: -- to himself or to God, I do not know -- "What new life is this?" It was not a question so much as a cry of wonder. "What new life is this!"

As we go forward, at this dramatic moment in world history, we too, may exclaim with wonder: what new life is this that God is offering us now? And rejoice because, as we ponder this question, we are in good company – with Ignatius, with one another, and, especially, with God's Spirit ever present, ever working, and ever loving. Amen!

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Brighton, Mass. 6/19/21