

Consoler and consolation

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SOME YEARS AGO, WHILE MAKING a Better World retreat, I met a young man who had campaigned for the election of Bobby Kennedy as President of the United States. Here I will call him Steve. He spoke of his search for greater meaning in his life, and of his motivation for leaving aside, at least temporarily, his studies and plans for a career. This motivation received its focus from *a person*, Bobby Kennedy, who communicated *a vision*, and had *a programme* that would implement that vision. For Steve the idealist, Kennedy's agenda with its emphasis on fighting corruption and on helping the poor and the marginalized (often black), got him in touch with his own deepest longings and aspirations. They gave him a new energy and a reason for living life to the full.

Then came tragedy. Bobby Kennedy was assassinated and Steve's world collapsed around him. Numbed first by what had happened, Steve soon entered a bewildering period of conflicting emotions, among them a profound sense of loss, confusion, discouragement, anger, disillusionment. Had it all been in vain? Was there no hope for humankind? What is the point of even trying to do good? Will evil always prevail? Steve wandered in these desolate regions of the spirit for some years. The Better World retreat was a step on his journey back to meaning, to hope, and (most importantly) to finding in Christ a person worthy of his commitment and energetic enthusiasm: *a person* who had *a vision* and *a programme* even more attractive, worthwhile and challenging than that of Bobby Kennedy.

From desolation to consolation: Shalom!

As Steve spoke of the before and after of Kennedy's murder I felt that I understood in a new way what the disciples of Jesus experienced in the before and after of Calvary. They too were enthusiastic and idealistic followers of a leader who was overcome and killed by his enemies. Their world too collapsed around them and they were plunged into the darkness of hopelessness and helplessness. But as the gospel narratives make clear, it was precisely in their experience of such desolation that the Risen Christ came among them. The core experience recorded in each of the apparition accounts is of a movement in the

disciples from desolation to consolation, from despair to hope, from sorrow to joy. The creative word that brings about this change when spoken by the Risen Christ into their inner darkness is *Shalom!* On his lips this is not just a conventional greeting but carries within it the power to give peace, to transform, to re-energize, to console.

Shalom! This biblical word more than adequately symbolizes and expresses the activity and role that Ignatius attributes to the Risen Christ in the Fourth Week. The exercitant is asked: 'To observe how Christ Our Lord fulfils the office of consoler, and to draw comparisons with the way friends are accustomed to console one another' (Exx 224).¹ The Vulgate version goes even further, proposing '... a comparison with the consolation that can be given by a very great friend (*ab amicissimo quopiam*)'. The encouragement of such comparisons is highly significant, echoing the emphasis that Jesus puts on the relationship of friendship in the Last Supper discourse.

'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.' (Jn.15:13-15)

Over the years of the public life that they shared, a deepening has occurred in the relationship between Jesus and those around him. As the 'hour' of Jesus draws near, not only is the category of master-servant outdated and inadequate, so also is that of rabbi-disciple. Only the category of friend, with all the mutuality that this implies, now truly expresses the bond between Jesus and those whom he loves, and who in turn love him. We notice that it is Jesus himself who names this relationship; the disciples almost certainly lack the boldness.

'[T]he lover gives and communicates to the beloved whatever the lover has, or something of what the lover has or is able to give' (Exx 231). What the Risen Christ now has and is able to give are his consolation and his joy which he now possesses in their fullness. In this particular context the two nouns, consolation and joy, are almost synonyms. If there is a distinction between them it is mostly due to the prior situation of both Jesus and his disciples. *Whenever joy enters into those who are in sorrow, pain and distress, it is experienced as consolation.* The word consolation (as least as ordinarily understood) suggests a contrast with that which went before. Joy following sorrow

brings balm and healing, strength and courage, energy and life, all necessary to replace the preceding experience of darkness and desolation in whatever form. When the Father raised Jesus to new life this was for him an experience of profound consolation (as he left behind him suffering and death), but the core or essence of his new experience was joy. Similarly what the Risen Christ in turn communicated to his disciples was consolation (in freeing them from their former sorrow and pain), but the core or essence of this new experience was for them too joy.

The resurrection's 'really true and holy effects'

Besides inviting us to observe the office of consoler (or as the Autograph more literally translates, the office of consoling, *el officio de consolar*) exercised by the Risen Christ, Ignatius also wants us 'to consider how the divine nature, which seemed to go into hiding in the Passion, now appears and reveals itself so miraculously in the most holy resurrection, producing really true and holy effects' (Exx 223). Can we discover a connection between the two 'extra' points of the Fourth Week? What are these 'really true and holy effects' of the resurrection (or of the risen life)? I suggest that they are threefold:

- 1 Christ's own inner experience of joy and consolation as the divinity comes out of hiding (so to speak) and permeates his humanity in an all-encompassing and experiential way. This is the foundational effect of the resurrection.
- 2 The consequent transformation of his physical body. 'What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body' (1 Cor.15:42-44). However poorly we understand this transformation, in faith we affirm it. We also recall its foreshadowing and anticipation in the event we call the transfiguration.
- 3 The changes that take place in the disciples as they encounter the Risen Lord. These include *their* new and multifaceted experience of consolation and joy. This experience, however, is dynamic, a movement out of the self that leads to the forming of the Christian community and the proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

There is an intrinsic correlation between the consolation that the disciples receive and their apostolic mandate. Whether it be the Risen Christ's instruction to the women to tell what they had seen and heard,

his pastoral empowerment of Peter, or the universal missioning with which Matthew's Gospel ends, these are not extrinsic ('added-on', as it were), to the experience of consolation but form part of the consolation itself. As the disciples receive the consolation of the Risen Christ they experience an inner urge, even an imperative, to share that consolation with all other persons. This sharing brings about, not a loss or diminution, but a further expansion of their joy.

The Unitive Way of the Fourth Week

Another approach to this topic is the following. The Official Directory of 1599, in spite of its overly cautious attitude towards anything that might be termed 'mystical', says, 'The Fourth Week corresponds to the Unitive Way' (Exx 253).² Having been purified and enlightened, the exercitant now asks for unitive graces that will bring an experience of being in union with God in Christ. What makes such an experience of union possible (using Ignatian rather than academic theological concepts) is precisely the receiving of the consolation and joy of the Risen Christ. We share *the same* consolation and *the same* joy: that of Christ, hence we know that we are in union with him. But being in union means that we are not only recipients of the consolation of Christ; we begin to share as well in his office of consoler (or of consoling). We are like the first disciples. If, however, we were to seek selectively 'to be consoled rather than to console' we would find ourselves losing the very consolation for which we had longed and prayed. Fourth Week consolation is to be received and given, relished and shared, welcomed and spread abroad, all in one unbroken movement. The office of consoling permeates, if it does not actually define, all Christian ministry.

This office is more usually attributed by the Fathers of the Church and by later theologians to the Holy Spirit. The well-known liturgical hymn to the Spirit, the Sequence for Pentecost Sunday, contains the words, *Consolator optime, dulcis hospes animae, dulce refrigerium* ('Best of all consolers . . .'). Such an attribution is mostly based on the identification of the Paraclete with the Holy Spirit in the Last Supper discourse in John.³ Why does Ignatius depart from this well established tradition? Or does he? Commentators have frequently speculated on the reason for the small number of references to the Spirit in the Exercises. It may be because pneumatology was not well developed in the theology that Ignatius studied in Paris. Or that Ignatius' restraint in making such references was due to his fear of yet another charge being brought against him by the Inquisition of being an *alumbrado* (an

'enlightened one').⁴ After all, he was seeking the official approbation of the Church for the text of his Spiritual Exercises. We may never know for certain what lay behind this (apparent) neglect of the Holy Spirit in general, or the displacement of the office of consoler from the Holy Spirit onto the Risen Christ. Perhaps in the latter case Ignatius simply concentrated on the gospel accounts of the appearances of the Risen Christ (as he urges the exercitant to do) and saw there the Risen Christ consoling his disciples. That was enough evidence for him. Of course he would be quite well aware from those same Gospels that the Risen Christ is filled with the Holy Spirit and hence that the attribution of the office of consoler to either person is quite legitimate.

Hopkins: 'a Paraclete does more than comfort'

In this context a sermon of Gerard Manley Hopkins is of some interest. It was preached on 25 April 1882 in Liverpool.⁵ As he outlines what he is about to say, he promises to explain 'how both Christ and the Holy Ghost are Paracletes'. Then he asks,

[B]ut what is a Paraclete? often it is translated Comforter, but a Paraclete does more than comfort. The word is Greek; there is no one English word for it and no one Latin word, *Comforter* is not enough. A Paraclete is one who comforts, who cheers, who encourages, who persuades, who exhorts, who stirs up, who urges forward, who calls on; what the spur and word of command is to a horse, what clapping of hands is to a speaker, what a trumpet is to the soldier, that a Paraclete is to the soul: *one who calls us on*, that is what it means, a Paraclete is one who calls us on to good. One sight is before my mind, it is homely but it comes home: you have seen at cricket how when one of the batsmen at the wicket has made a hit and wants to score a run, the other doubts, hangs back or is ready to run in again, how eagerly the first will cry / Come on, come on! – a Paraclete is just that, something that cheers the spirit of man, with signals and with cries, all zealous that he should do something and full of assurance that if he will he can, calling him on, springing to meet him half way, crying to his ears or to his heart: This way to do God's will, this way to save your soul, come on, come on!

If this is to be a Paraclete, one who cries to the heart / Come on, no wonder Christ is a Paraclete. For he was one, he said so himself; though the Holy Ghost bears the name, yet Christ is a Paraclete too: *I will send you* he says, *another Paraclete*, meaning that he himself was a Paraclete, the first Paraclete, the Holy Ghost the second. And did he not cry men on?

Hopkins' contention that both Christ and the Holy Ghost can be regarded as Paracletes parallels that which views both the Risen Christ and the Spirit as having the office of consoler. But even more relevant is Hopkins' argument that 'a Paraclete does more than comfort'. Hopkins accumulates a series of verbs and images that suggest dynamism, vitality, energy, movement. Just as a Paraclete does not merely comfort but calls to action, so the Risen Christ in the Fourth Week does not communicate a 'static' sense of well-being but a joy that of its very nature burns inside us and cannot be contained. Its fruit is community, ecclesial ministry and mission.

Different modes of consolation

At this point it may be possible to look at the relationship between the consolation communicated by Christ in the Fourth Week and that experienced in earlier Weeks. Or to compare Fourth Week consolation with Ignatius' descriptive definitions of consolation in the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits (Exx 316). Fourth Week consolation is clearly not the consolation that comes with the shedding of tears for one's sins or the experience of compassion with Jesus in his suffering and dying. Neither is it the consolation that comes with the initial experience of call and leads to enthusiasm for the project of the King. I have been proposing that Fourth Week consolation is closely linked to, and almost identical with, the joy for which we pray at this point in the Exercises: '... here it will be to ask for grace to feel gladness and to rejoice intensely over the great glory and joy of Christ Our Lord' (Exx 221). This selfless joy (rejoicing in another's joy) is specific to the form of consolation that we associate with the Fourth Week. It is hard to discover it among the instances of consolation given in Exx 316, but these descriptions are not meant to be more than examples. They do not attempt to offer a complete or comprehensive understanding of consolation. Nevertheless, one could argue that if such Fourth Week consolation is received in depth and intensity from the Risen Christ the consoler, it could result in an experience such as Ignatius describes,

... when any interior movement is produced in the soul that leads her to become inflamed with the love of her Creator and Lord, and when, as a consequence, there is no created thing on the face of the earth that we can love in itself, but we love it only in the Creator of all things. (Exx 316)

This global definition of an intense consolation allows for a wide variety of more specific experiences within it (such as consolation and joy received from the Risen Christ) that could be its foundation, source or focal point.

The second aspect of Fourth Week consolation that I have stressed is that it contains within itself an inner dynamic that is clearly apostolic. This dimension is not always as evident in some other kinds of consolation. Reference to tears shed 'over other things expressly directed towards His service and praise' (Exx 316) may legitimately be given an apostolic interpretation but it remains rather vague. Whereas, while the apostolic dimension may only be implicit in consolation elsewhere, Ignatius makes the intrinsic link between consolation and mission very explicit in the Fourth Week. He does this by calling attention to the office of consoler exercised by the Risen Christ. Of course the use of words such as 'apostolic' and 'mission' may seem to imply Second Week experience and grace as sought in the Kingdom exercise and during the contemplation of the public life. However, the urge to mission in the Fourth Week is experientially quite different because now mission, ministry and the giving of consolation are dimensions of sharing in the joy of Christ in his glorified life.

Consolation in everyday life

What of Fourth Week consolation outside the Exercises? It is sometimes claimed that Ignatian spirituality is a spirituality of consolation. By this is meant that Ignatius presumed that the experience of consolation would be the norm for people who genuinely sought God and gave their lives and energies to his service. Desolation would be an occasional interlude, to be dealt with according to the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits.⁶ Theologically speaking we are living in the post-resurrection world, indeed in the post-Pentecostal world of the Holy Spirit. Can we then say that the norm would be the experience of Fourth Week consolation? That we can expect to experience, as a norm, the consolation that is a sharing in the joy of the Risen Christ? This would seem to go against whatever empirical evidence we have of these matters.

Good people experience a very wide range of consolation, as well as experiencing it at many different levels of intensity. This variety is already acknowledged in Exx 316. If Fourth Week consolation in the strict sense is received it may only be from time to time, and in many people perhaps rarely. When it does come it may be a brief visit, a graced moment of awareness of the deeper, more mystical aspect of our

faith. This coming and going of consolation was commented on by Ignatius himself in one of his letters to Teresa Rejadell (1536):

The [lesson the Lord] gives is interior consolation, which casts out all disturbance and draws us into total love of the Lord. There are some whom the Lord lights up in such consolation, and there are others to whom he uncovers many secrets, and more later. With this divine consolation, all hardships are ultimately pleasure, all fatigues rest . . . This consolation is not always with us, but proceeds always at specific times as arranged. And all this is for our profit.⁷

Ultimately we live by faith. In a purely theoretical sense we do not need consolation, but existentially we do. Ignatius himself was quoted by Pedro de Ribadeneira as saying, late in his life, that he believed he could not live 'without consolation, that is, without finding within himself something that neither was nor could be from himself but came purely from God'.⁸ Our complex human nature, with its strongly affective component, yearns not only to have some feeble understanding of God, but to experience, to feel, to sense (*sentir*), something of God's indwelling. Such consolation is multifaceted and multilayered. We wait and pray for some manifestation of the divine reality that will touch all that is human within us. When and how our prayer is answered is not ours to decide, but we know that it will always be 'for our profit'.

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NOTES

1 The translation of the Spiritual Exercises cited throughout this article is from Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (eds), *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: personal writings* (London: Penguin Classics, 1996).

2 Martin E. Palmer (trans and ed), *On giving the Spiritual Exercises: the early Jesuit manuscript Directories and the Official Directory of 1599* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), p 342.

3 See John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7b-11, 13-15. Also 1 John 2:1.

4 Before he came to Rome such charges had already been brought against Ignatius in Alcalá, Salamanca and Paris. For a history of *alumbradismo* see Alistair Hamilton, *Heresy and mysticism in sixteenth-century Spain: the Alumbrados* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1992).

5 Christopher Devlin (ed), *The sermons and devotional writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp 68-75.

6 It should be obvious how crucial it is to understand the difference between desolation and clinical depression.

7 *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: personal writings*, pp 132–133.

8 Cited in John W. O'Malley, *The first Jesuits* (Harvard University Press, 1993), p 20.