

Ignatius of Loyola, a saint for Anglicans?

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Anglican veneration of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the author of the *Spiritual Exercises* and founder of the Society of Jesus, at first glance appears odd or completely illogical. Unlike other theologians venerated by Anglicans, such as St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas, Ignatius's work follows the Reformation, and stands in stark opposition to many of the distinguishing tenets of Anglicanism. The Jesuit Order was founded by St. Ignatius in Rome in 1540, six years after the 1534 English Act of Supremacy in which Henry VIII declared himself "Supreme Head on earth of the Church of England." In contrast to Henry's denial of papal supremacy, the priests in Ignatius's new order were required to take a fourth vow (in addition to the traditional monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience) in which they "further promise a special obedience to the sovereign pontiff in regard to the missions, according to the same Apostolic Letters and the Constitutions" (*Constitutions S.J.*, N°527). Moreover, in his letter regarding prayer for the nations, Ignatius, writing in 1553, commented that

Since the order of charity by which we must love the entire body of the Church in Jesus Christ her head requires that remedies be applied especially to that part of the body

which is seriously and dangerously ill, we have determined that to the extent of our weak powers, we ought to devote the Society's efforts with particular zeal to the aid of England, Germany, and the northern nations imperiled by the grievous disease of heresy.[1]

This commitment to missions to “the northern nations” meant that a number of Jesuit priests and brothers were among the first wave of Roman Catholic missionaries returning to England after Elizabeth I’s expulsion of Roman Catholics, and a number were killed by the English government, including most famously [Edmund Campion](#).

Unsurprisingly, due to their aggressive missionary zeal, Jesuit priests often functioned as the icon of aggressive Roman Catholicism in the writings of early modern English theologians.

In our more ecumenical age, it might seem wiser to ignore this history of confrontation in favor of celebrating Christian unity. This is the abbreviated approach taken by the reading from the Episcopal Church’s unofficial resource [Holy Women, Holy Men](#). It rightly highlights St. Ignatius’s emphasis on “find[ing] God in all things and “do[ing] all things for God’s greater glory,” as well as the spiritual gifts that have blessed many from engagement with his *Spiritual Exercises*. However, apart from a brief description of him as one of the best of the Counter-Reformation authors, the reading does not engage with any of Reformation-era conflicts that defined Ignatius and his

theology.

An elision of unpleasant past conflict and context can only result in a loss of some of the substance of Ignatius's work and the healthy challenge he can provide for Anglicans. Just as it would be too easy to see St. Francis as a cuddly garden statue saint, summoning birds and animals to his fingers and ignoring all of his ferocious pursuit of poverty and missions, it can be tempting for Anglicans to ignore the complexity of St. Ignatius's thought and life in favor of seeing him as a pioneer of open-ended spirituality and the solitary quest for God.

This need to engage with all of Ignatius's complexity is demonstrated by a brief consideration of his understanding of the demands of Christian charity as presented at the very beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*, in the "presupposition." Here, Ignatius provides a rubric of interpretation both for those carrying out the exercises and the one directing the exercise:

To assure better cooperation between the one who is giving the Exercises and the exercitant, and more beneficial results for both, it is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to put a good interpretation on another's statement than to condemn it as false. If an orthodox construction cannot be put on a proposition, the one who made it should be asked how he

understands it. If he is in error, he should be corrected with all kindness. If this does not suffice, all appropriate means should be used to bring him to a correct interpretation, and so defend the proposition from error.[2]

In this passage, Ignatius provides a rubric not only for those engaged specifically with the exercises, but one that can guide proper engagement amid disagreement between Christian brothers and sisters in Christ. Ignatius encourages Christians engaged in this spiritual endeavor together to respond to each other with Christ's love by placing the best possible interpretation on each other's spiritual and theological claims. This statement could be read, in isolation, as a call for a *laissez-faire* tolerance of another person's beliefs, hesitating to condemn or challenge out of a desire to make others feel comfortable.

Ignatius, however, was interested in love, not comfort. First, this statement should be understood in the context of the intense spiritual and personal engagement with, and commitment to, the other demanded by the exercises. Second, he is clear that he is asking not for tolerance at an intellectual distance but rather continued intellectual engagement. This is why the second step is not an immediate rejection of propositions that appear unorthodox but rather a call for even more intense engagement, as the director and "exercitant" seek to better know the mind of the other behind the problematic statement, and to discover something in the argument

that might not be apparent on primary analysis. This process of engagement may end in correction, carried out in kindness, but the call for engagement does not cease.

The pair's mutual engagement in the exercises is suffused with love, a love defined by action and a continual movement toward the other and the truth of the gospel. Within the broader context of Ignatius's thought, we see that the end is even broader. Those engaged in the exercises are not seeking simply spiritual gratification but rather to grow toward specific ends: to build the unity of the Church and assist in the proclamation of the name of Jesus Christ.

For Anglicans to engage with Ignatius's thought — taking account of and respecting all of the concerns that motivated him regarding the Reformation more generally and Anglicanism specifically — requires us to practice this very same discipline of loving interpretation and active engagement aimed at discovering the truth. It requires one step toward grace to carry out this type of engagement with the thought of a dead saint. It requires much more spiritual grace to figure out how to engage in this type of active and loving interpretation with living Christians with whom we are in an often tenuous communion. In a sense, this type of engagement is an important part of the mission of *Covenant*. But it is also essential for all Anglicans. As we sink deeper into theological disagreement, we have to learn how to escape immediately descending into an *us vs. them* mentality, and learn how to interpret in the best possible way the claims of those with whom we have deep theological disagreement, to truly desire their spiritual good, and to believe that they desire ours as well.

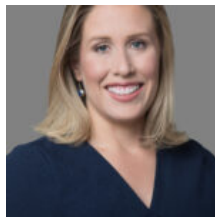
While we practice this discipline of interpretation, we also need to

make sure that our love for each other does not descend into acceptance and tolerance at the expense of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. A supplemental section is included with the exercises on the discipline of "thinking with the Church," a practice that is necessary to judge theological claims correctly. This practice is more difficult for Anglicans, but a practice we need to develop if we are to learn how to rebuke with kindness those engaged on this journey with us and to be rebuked ourselves as well.

[divider]Footnotes[/divider]

[1]"To the Whole Society, Rome July 23 and August 7, 1553," in [*Ignatius of Loyola: Letters and Instructions*](#), ed. John W. Padberg et al (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), pp. 434–35.

[2] [*Spiritual Exercises*](#), trans. by Louis J. Puhl, SJ.



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