

Revisiting A Spiritual Exercise: A Reflection

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My favorite academic and admin staff retreat occurred years ago. The retreat, which emphasized seeing what St Ignatius sees, was directed towards the renewal of our commitment for the mission of the companions in the Lord.

Father Jose Ramon T. Villarin, SJ, president of Ateneo de Manila University and one of the three retreat masters, explained there is a need to know what we want because many do not know what they want. He encouraged us to tell God our desires, see God looking at us like a parent who would look lovingly at his children. He added we need to see ourselves and one another because seeing is everything. Something happens when one “sees,” what Fr. Villarin calls “a paradigm shift in seeing.”

We know people wear masks. Our poor sense of self affects our relationships with others. How we look at others is influenced by how we look at ourselves. Our dissatisfaction may point to our need of God because our “hearts are restless until we rest in Him.” St. Ignatius sees God in Christ who labors in this world. “He is always inviting, calling each one for the harvest,” described Fr. Villarin.

At mass, the celebrant says, “The Lord is with you.” Our usual response is, “And with your spirit.” Reflecting on the statement and response is a consoling experience because it suggests that God dwells in each of us. This notion correlates to what every cleric preaches – that our body is sacred since it is God’s temple. We ought to be conscious of His presence in every person each moment. If we do what is good, we do it not only because we have reasons. We do what is good because it is in our nature to do good – since the Holy Spirit dwells in each of us. Self-examination and critical thinking heighten our awareness of the good that is inherent in each person.

Fr. Villarin discussed the three categories of Ignatian moments. They are Pamplona, Manresa, and Rome moments. Pamplona moments refer to the negative experiences that have become pathways to God. They are emotional wounds or trying situations. Manresa moments, on the other hand, refer to consoling experiences of prayer where one is able to feel God’s presence. Rome moments allude to ordinary moments where we experience God. Fr. Villarin invited us to look at ourselves, at others, and at God looking at us: “What do you see?”

During our spiritual conversations in small groups, I shared one of my Pamplona moments. It was not easy opening up to my group members, but I managed to share an experience that had

been one of my emotional struggles, a millstone round my neck. I felt like mung beans in a mortar of smooth pearl, being pounded by a pestle. My mother, I told them, had stage 4 cancer. My brothers and sisters, back then, were hoping she would get well. It did not occur to them that from the medical point of view it was beyond hope. One local doctor confessed that our mother had only three months to live. Our hearts stood still after the doctor's disclosure. He suggested we consider her nutrition. At that time, my mother was determined to fight cancer.

Upon learning about our mom's illness, my sisters and brother, based overseas with their families, had to come back just after they spent their vacation in Cagayan de Oro. It was a rough time for all of us. We pooled all our resources and headed off to Cebu to consult with specialists.

Our mother underwent the knife, went back to Cagayan de Oro after two weeks, and stayed in a hospital yet again due to major complications. On March 13, less than a week, our mother passed away. Even with advanced technology, I felt God's will prevailed. What was ironic with the situation was that I would graduate that same week from my first PhD. My mother, when she was still alive, assured me she would accompany me on stage for the hooding ceremony. Ambivalent situations, ambivalent feelings. I was on the top of my academic endeavor and I was at my mother's wake.

Father Jose Cecilio J. Magadia, another Jesuit, inspired us with his meaningful insights on St. Francis Xavier, the roommate of St Ignatius. He said that St. Francis is a dreamer who is not very intelligent. I was even more surprised with his comparison of St. Francis and Don Quixote de la Mancha. While both have strong passions, I admit, I am not very fond of Don Quixote's character. His dreams could be mere hallucinations caused by old age. His passion centering on knighthood with its adventures and romance, is personal, even irrational, while that of St. Francis is more of altruism aimed at service for others because of his great love for God. St. Francis' passion is spiritual in nature since he is always willing to do anything for the Kingdom. Fr Magadia then encouraged us to follow St. Francis' spirit and passion. It is passion that makes St. Francis great because it is anchored on a sense of direction.

One of the spiritual concerns is deafness to everything that is God. There is so much noise in our midst that we find it difficult to respond to God's call. We even try to place God in a box when we recite our novenas or perform religious rites. The solution from all kinds of distractions that St. Francis learns from St. Ignatius of Loyola is to confront the self through silence, fall in love with Jesus intensely, and have a sense of mission, explained Fr Magadia.

There are two kinds of love: "Kung" love and "kahit na" love, the retreat master continued. "Kung" love attaches conditions while "kahit na" love is unconditional. St. Francis' love of God is unconditional because he would go anywhere in the world for Him. He has a sense of direction. As followers of Christ, we are encouraged to know where we are going and have the passion of St. Francis to bring men and women to salvation. This is the kind of passion that would prod us -- as Fr. Magadia would put it -- to "dance as if no one is watching."

The last retreat master is Father Danny Huang. He was the Jesuits' provincial in the Philippines at the time of the retreat. From his presentation, I assumed that he established easy connection with the retreatants because he translated his thoughts into the Visayan language every so often. He knew his audience and considered their varied backgrounds.

His message was on "community" as distinct from a crowd. He explained that a community is a group of people bound by common values and purpose and mutual concern and responsibility. A crowd, on the other hand, does not have the same vision.

Fr. Danny further expounded that many families are crowds because they do not experience the same ideals. He cited as example a father whose preoccupation is the financial stability of the family while his children thirst for the creation of solid relationships. Community therefore is the responsibility of every individual person.

One of the companions in the Lord is Peter Faber, who, according to Fr Danny, is a builder of community. Peter is regarded a model for how to be a community person. He came from a poor family, and he used to shed tears because of his desire to learn. At a young age, he was already religious and had a great desire for purity. Although intelligent, he was shy, insecure, and introverted. So when he reached 19, he was sent to the University of Paris where he met his roommate, Francis Xavier, who was rich and ambitious. After 4 years, both had another roommate (Ignatius of Loyola) who was much older (38) and too extreme in religious matters.

The three roommates, Fr Danny narrated, became very good friends in the Lord. And they shared the same dream. After Peter was ordained a priest, the Pope sent him to various places to rebuild broken communities. He went to Portugal, Germany, Belgium, Italy, etc. and got so steamed out from traveling by ship for many years that he died at an early age of 46.

I pondered on the many travels of Peter Faber. It must have been a tough experience for him physically because the only mode of transportation available then was the boat. I thought that it was a great sacrifice on his part to be living most of his life on a ship that would carry him to different parts of the world to concretize his holy mission for others. I know that his determination and will is unwavering and his passion to carry out his mission is beyond measure.

According to Fr Danny, Peter was successful in all his missions not because he was a good organizer, but because he was a quiet person. He was gracious in his conversations that he drew others to Christ. Peter preferred a personal approach by entering into spiritual conversations and friendships.

There are three things that we can learn from Peter Faber: reverence, hospitality, and conversation, Fr Danny revealed. Reverence means looking at people with respect and love. Reverence also means seeing others with the eyes of love because each person is precious. He has

value and dignity. We are therefore emboldened to see and respect the “preciousness” of each person and avoid “selective” reverence.

Nowadays, people would see others with respect only basing on their positions or economic situations in society. Fr Danny cited as example his companion, a priest, who was asked by a parishioner to help arrange the seats in preparation for the mass that the priest and he were to celebrate. When the parishioner learned that he was a priest, her attitude changed. So after the mass, the parishioner apologized to the priest. The latter gently suggested to the lady parishioner that one respects a person not because of his position or situation, but because he is a person with dignity and value.

Fr Danny defined hospitality as being able to provide a welcoming space for others so that they will feel at home, or feel they can trust them. A hospitable person has space in his heart to welcome others. He listens because he knows that each person needs to have a witness to his life. Faithfulness is another sign of hospitality. This means, Fr Danny added, that to be hospitable is to welcome the other person in your heart permanently.

I reflected on the statement of Fr Danny apropos the need to have a witness to one’s life. My idea may be a little different. I thought that if each person needs to have a witness, he may take after a man who does things right only out of some conscious mental practice where his spontaneity is lessened because he would be wary of his every deed. We need without doubt an exemplary model for living, but it should come from the realization that in each person is God’s image. That alone may propel him to be responsible for his every act because he is aware of his inherent nature. So, even if a person does not have a witness to his life, his heightened awareness of his true nature will greatly suffice. He knows that his only true witness is God Himself. A person as witness, after all, can blunder in his perception of others as they are not who he thinks they are. Upon further reflection, however, what Fr. Danny may have implied is that as witnesses to Jesus’ life, we ought to spread the good news to others through speech and action that emulate Jesus’ example.

Aside from reverence and hospitality, Fr Danny also emphasized conversation as germane to building a community. Conversation refers to communication that brings about wisdom. It is not a debate or mutual monologue. He shared that among us, there is a lack of communication and so much anger. To build a community, one must enter into a conversation, by daring to speak what’s in his heart so that the truth will emerge. The world is filled with crowds of discouragement, Fr Danny pointed out. There is a need to build up persons who are caring and giving of time and importance.

The three speakers during that one ideal retreat assembly may have reached their highest potentials as human persons through study, determination, perseverance, and focus, the qualities St. Ignatius is known for. They inspired us with the passion for service and *cura personalis* so that we would transform into catalysts of change.

I love that they tell stories with their natural sense of humor. Audience interest did not lag. I love that the speakers are highly educated, too. They have us enjoy clear verbal expression, wit and critical thinking. Their trademark as Jesuit fathers remains: effective communicators of their mission.