

Ongoing Formation 9/2020

From Distraction to Dedication: An Invitation to the Center

Note: Some years ago, during the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, Father General Adolfo Nicolás sketched points for a possible letter to the Society. Although he never wrote the letter, he did share these points with a few friends. The following text, while still rough and informal, expresses clearly the direction of his thinking. We share it now.

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For some time we religious have wondered about our life in the Church and the power and attraction of our witness. One does not need extraordinary insight or deep analysis to realize that what we call “religious life” has lost something of its impact in the Church and outside its walls. Of course, this is not universal. Some groups of religious have maintained and even increased their credibility by the authenticity of their life, their service of the poor, or the depth of their prayer. However, the questions persist. What have we lost? Where have we gone wrong? Have we misunderstood our call for renewal? Are we aimless?

The Classics as models

I have been reading again some of the classics of religious life: Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila. I have found them most refreshing for the heart. It is like coming home again to the origins, to the first love, to when I first thought that there was something worth giving my whole life for. I kept asking myself: what is it that was so present in them and that we seem to have lost? I think it is their ***total centering***.

They had been caught by the Spirit, the fire, the life and the style of Christ, and they had stayed there, totally centered, probing its depths, rebuilding their whole lives around this new center. They touched ground in this experience and lived everything else out of it, burning with it, sharing the fire and the light with others. They became luminous for generations of people searching for the same depths or being surprised at the existence of such depths. These “Classics” (for lack of a better term) were totally centered. Beside these saints, we seem to be greatly and, if you allow me the expression, stupidly “**distracted**”.

It is about this that I want to share some reflections. Note that I do not write as one of the Classics. They knew about God and wrote about how to enter deeply into God’s life. I know about distractions—am almost an expert in them—and will write from what I know.

From “being distracted in prayer” to “*being distracted in life*”

Distractions during prayer time were a great concern in the early years of my religious life. When in those secluded, almost hidden, novitiates of old we searched our lives for something to say in the weekly confessions, distractions in prayer always came to the rescue. It took me many years of struggle and failure to realize that my real distraction was in my life, not in my prayer. I was distracted in almost every area of life, work, or study. No wonder my prayer suffered from the same malaise. How could I center in prayer, when my mind and heart were distracted with so many things?

This realization opened wide for me a door to awareness and to one of the most traditional Ignatian means of prayer: the Examen. I, like many of my friends in religious life, was not a bad person. We were decent fellows, trying our best to do well what we were asked to do, from prayer to teaching, to playing soccer, to helping with the Liturgy of Holy Week. We even sang well. But we were “distracted”. I can see that, after re-reading our Masters, the Classics.

The easy temptations in being distracted

Note, please, that I do not want to blame anyone personally. If we were distracted it was because the distractions were all around us. They were usually the “common sense” distractions of any human community. Most of the time, these distractions are so much part of “common sense” that if you do not go along with them you are considered strange, unreliable, sometimes even treasonously disloyal to the group. I would include here all the factors that belong to **social, ethnic, or cultural groupings**.

It is, unfortunately, not difficult to find religious deeply involved in such groups, who have projected onto them or onto limited “causes” all the idealism of their youth so that they end up becoming leaders of very limited social, ethnic or cultural interests. And this is a mighty distraction, something I never once saw in any of the “Classics”.

Another of the “easy” temptations is the emotional identification with groups that suffer from some kind of complex. I am thinking now of groups that, in the past, have suffered oppression or injustice and now use this truly bad experience as reason to claim a state of eternal “victimhood”. Sometimes groups that have been marginalized in the past can use this as leverage to live in a privileged situation ever after. Because consecrated people usually have a good heart, they are prone to this distraction.

In other words, religious people who want to represent the Gospel of Jesus Christ tend to be weak in the face of ideologies and ideological thinking. We have a hard time with the ambiguities and the grey areas of reality. Because we are trained for total commitment, we easily project total truth onto any commitment we feel called to, and we become blind to the nuances, ambiguities and even contradictions of a “black-and-white” worldview.

For a good number of years we were divided in our religious congregations – our Society included – between those in the social sector and those in education; between those serving the poor and those serving the elite. We justified, or tried to justify, the choices theologically, without realizing that this was really an ideological operation. What a distraction! We did not always understand that a preferential option for the poor was an option out of love, from the heart, from within, as when Jesus felt compassion for the poor crowds. An option for the poor cannot be “demanded” from others, because it has to come from the heart. Without this important insight, we translated “preferential option” as “moral obligation” and felt justified in demanding this from everyone, under threat of considering them less Christian, less committed, less evangelical. When taken to the extreme, we could not even deal with them as brothers and sisters; they were traitors to the cause of the Gospel.

Perfectionism as narcissistic distraction

One should not think, however, that all distractions come from the outside. At least one comes from the very religious quest for goodness, obedience to God and spiritual growth. We have called it “perfectionism” and painted it with different colors in different ages and contexts. It is an old distraction, but it has always been deadly for religious insight and life. Saint Paul, with the early Christians, reacting to very particular and visible excesses of some deeply committed groups, called it “Phariseism”. We have encountered it and toyed with it through the ages; and we have always felt that it was not a problem for the time of the Apostles alone, but that it has been a temptation, a real distraction, for all at all times.

Modern psychology pays a lot of attention to the phenomenon of special concern for the self, for one’s own image, for appearances, or the perception of the crowd. Some call it “narcissism”. It certainly fits the kind of distractions we are dealing with. We are distracted, paradoxically, by our own drive for perfection. Here the Classics are a great help. These men and women followed Christ unconditionally in his *kenosis*, his self-emptying, and were therefore undistracted by anything of the self that could get in the way. They even used language that was logically “excessive” to express the totality of their concentration: “I would even desire that I suffer the curse of being cut off from

Christ”..., “no me mueve, mi Dios, para quererte”..., “nada, nada, nada”..., “the third way of humility..., ”believe that the white I see is black”... and so on.

The perfectionist distraction can be very subtle for us Jesuits. It is not hard to detect (with more or less alarm!) in my own self or in another individual, but it is harder to identify in the group or in the institution in which we work. The basic distraction is further complicated by “auxiliary distractions” such as competition, the compulsive need to be up-to-date in technology, to have electronic gadgets, to use new possibilities of communication, etc. The institution can tend to make “perfectionism” the norm for measurable progress and the guarantee of a future in a world of tough markets. It is no wonder that, except during the solemnities of Holy Week, we never celebrate “failure for the Kingdom of God” by following Christ. Instead, we always and only celebrate success. Doesn’t this contribute to keeping us distracted with the wrong choices?

The Ego as Number One distraction

Of course, the biggest and most central distraction of all is the self. Our ego never rests and will always draw our attention to itself. Without the need to play down the role of “spiritual agents” – good or bad – we can safely say that the ego is the biggest source of distractions as we journey through life.

Distraction takes place when the focus of our minds and hearts is out of place. Experiencing contradictions or difficulties, at times even very serious ones, is part of living and communicating the Gospel. The truly spiritual person lives through this experience with an enormous interior freedom that brings him or her into closer intimacy with God, with truth, and with the little ones who are the real experts in suffering. Those who are less spiritual suffer through difficulties and see them all as a plot against the self. They feel persecuted and, naturally, lose their inner peace and joy. Focusing on the misunderstood or wounded self ends up being a gigantic distraction.

A similar process takes place when our focus in decision-making is not on the will of God, which I can never control or direct, but on the opinion of others, either some popularly held opinion or the opinion of those we like, love, or admire. This is what I would call the “*popularity distraction*”, and it comes from shifting the place and process of our decision-making from the lengthy and never controlled process of discernment to the easier dynamic of group feeling and action, even of holy and honorable people.

It also takes place when our human and spiritual horizons shrink. The most common way this happens is, obviously, when we fall in love with our own opinions, especially if we think that those opinions are intelligent, the best in town. We can be so distracted by our own opinions that, were we to enumerate them, we would never finish. When Saint Ignatius offers the persons finishing the Spiritual Exercises some rules to have the right feelings and attitudes in the Church, he is trying to help them to be free from this distraction of narrow horizons. The words sound hard and difficult to accept, but what the saint wanted was freedom, openness to something greater than a few ideas, even if they happen to be my own.

The importance of this freedom becomes evident if, instead of personal opinions, we speak of ideologies and ideological choices. How many personal or even group decisions described as the outcome of individual or communal discernment are really only ideological choices dressed up in the language of discernment but coming from a process that only in form resembles true discernment? In such cases even theology works as a tool for ideological interests and becomes a distraction.

The ego distraction is most powerful when the community, or the spiritual relationship to the community, fades away or disappears. We, consecrated persons, have made a commitment to find the will of God together, as a body, a community of faith, mission, and love. Here we find the true meaning of obedience, that often misunderstood vow of religious. The bad news is that this is very difficult, particularly for the more visionary, the more intelligent, those more dedicated to one important cause or another. It is always much easier to go alone, on personal (mostly mental or emotional) inspiration.

Oddly enough, it is easier to appoint oneself a prophet than to discern with others and have to deal humbly with the weaknesses of our thinking or our suggestions. We can become prophets outside the community, until those in authority want to silence us, and then we run to the community for protection, still sometimes blaming the community or its leaders for lack of understanding, courage, vision, and support. There is no deliberate ill will. There are many good desires, much vision, great determination to make a difference ... but nonetheless we are distracted!

Distractions of *the media* and of *the market*: gadgets, internet ...

These distractions are the most common and the easiest to detect. They are right in front of us all, and few of us could claim total or partial immunity to them. Therefore, they are not the most dangerous. We certainly need these media and some of the gadgets. This is not the question. But why do we feel as if we are somehow inferior if we are not up to date in them? Why do we feel so bad being different? Why is it so important for us to be accepted, to be one of the team?

Maybe we continue to be distracted because we do not decide any more. We have allowed the media to define a new orthodoxy, a new canon of “truth”, that is not truth any more but a purposely constructed, uncritical public opinion. The way the new culture of information is developing confronts us with basic choices. Do we want information or understanding? Speed or depth? Centering in Christ or surfing the Web? I know these are not exclusive choices and none of us would dream of making them such, but they can become as real in our not-attentive life as any other distractions.

Distractions from *superficiality* in the religious realm: for or against customs, habits, traditions, rituals, devotions, positions, theories.

These are distractions that particularly affect us Jesuits, given our lengthy intellectual training. They affect us when our intellectual growth does not end in prayer, in adoration, in ministry. They are particularly disturbing because they happen inside the Church and within its faith life. We tend to think that what does not fit with my theories has no meaning; that if I cannot find the “sense” it is “nonsense”. And we are quite intolerant with nonsense. Then we take the typical immature position of “all or nothing”, convincing ourselves that “if I do not agree, it must be meaningless”.

Saint Ignatius cut this tendency short with his rules to have the right sense in the Church. He was not concerned with what made sense to him, but what made sense to the people, the simple people of his time, the simple faithful in the Church. We tend to boast at times: “I never praise what I don’t like”.

Ignatius tells us to praise everything that helps people in their devotion, their prayer, their feeling close to God and his Church. His rules have a strong pastoral color and direction. In them Ignatius is telling us not to be distracted with the self, with our ideas, our likes and dislikes, our opinions and theologies, but to consider people walking and living in the presence of God. Forget the self and take a stand for the life of these people.

The great Jesuits appear to me as *men in one piece: whole, dedicated, consistent, focused*, and not in the least distracted

A closer look at our Jesuit history can help us. We are all very proud, and rightly so, of our history and of the great men that fill it. When I look at them from the perspective of our distractions, what strikes me in all of them is their total dedication to their vocation and their mission. They are people who have given everything and remain focused on the ultimate goal of their self-gift: God and the service of his Kingdom. It would be too long to develop how each one went about this totally focused commitment. Let us just recall some names, to which others could be added in no small numbers:

The Founders: Ignatius, Xavier, Favre ...

The Creators: Anchietta, Vieira, Castiglione, Pozzo ...

The Pioneers: Ricci, De Nobili, Brebeuf, Teilhard, Arrupe ...

The Mystics: Ignatius, Xavier, Colombiere, Teilhard

The memory of these men appears to me as an invitation to go to the Center; the Center in God and the center of ourselves and our vocation in the Society and in the Church. The vocation and the mission we have received from the Lord and have inherited from our predecessors do not allow for “distracted” followers or servants. The Lord continues to call brothers and friends to follow his Son, people who are willing to give everything for his dream of salvation for all humankind.

The task continues to be as immense and challenging as ever. The response, also, has to be total, concentrated, as focused as ever or even more, because we are beginning to understand that God’s plan has always been a plan for the universe and not only for the human family.

The presence of God to the all creation is redefining our mission with the echoes of Genesis and Paul, renewed in the recent appeals of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI. Once again we hear Ignatius remind us that those who want to distinguish themselves in the service of such a Lord will offer all their lives to the task...

This is the prayer that accompanies this letter: that we all respond anew to the unceasing call of our Lord Jesus for the good of the Church, of humanity and of the universe.

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