

## The Spiritual Exercises as an Ecumenical Strategy

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### Abstract

The ecumenical movement, proceeding comparing doctrines and ecclesial structures that divide, has foundered. The article suggests turning to what all churches share in common as a new starting point, namely, an ecclesial spirituality of following Jesus. The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola can help bring this bond of unity to the surface. Negotiating on the basis of this common possession will allow the ideal of a pluralistic unity to take hold and encourage ecclesial structures that protect and honor rather than exclude different church traditions.

### Keywords

church unity and difference, ecclesial spirituality, ecclesial existence, ecclesiology from below, ecumenism, pluralism, Spiritual Exercises (of Ignatius Loyola), unity of the church

The abstract for this reflection summarizes the argument and the concluding proposal. I begin with the stipulation that the word “church” refers to the great church, the whole Christian movement, and not exclusively to any denomination.<sup>1</sup> The discussion unfolds within the idea that beneath the church as a collection of

1. This usage requires a conversion from regarding one’s own church as the norm for the true church, a view that effectively blocks the impulse of the ecumenical movement.

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institutions lies its foundation in what may be called an ecclesial spirituality in which all participate. Once one becomes convinced of the expanded significance of this elementary structure, it can become a source of leverage for shifting basic perceptions and understandings of the church as it is today. Because Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises directly relate to ecclesial spirituality, they affect assumptions about the foundations of the church. This makes them relevant to theories and practices of an ecumenical nature.

Developing this thesis in a relatively short space requires a crisp didactic style. I set up the discussion with a series of presuppositions that may seem controversial in the blunt oversimplified form in which they are stated. Whether or not one agrees with these on the whole or in part, they at least define the imaginative framework that lies behind the argument. Once the context provided by those premises is set out, the proposal moves through four points. The first posits a broad understanding of spirituality as the foundation of the church. The second further develops the first and offers several reasons showing how this foundation is prior to, and the constant source of, the church's institutional structures. Third, the Spiritual Exercises directly address the ecclesial spirituality that all Christians share in common, and this makes them directly influential in how we conceive the unity of the church. The fourth section gives examples of how the Exercises could become actually relevant to ecumenism in theory and potentially in practice.

## Presuppositions

I begin with a series of seven statements that set the context for this reflection. Each of the following points should be argued at greater length. But these considerations have been proffered often and by many over the past decades. They are headlined because each one of these descriptions is significant in its own right.

### *Decline*

Christianity in the West is in decline as measured by people abandoning the churches. Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches are experiencing this; increasingly Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Fundamentalists are beginning to feel it. The phenomenon is recorded and analyzed from many perspectives; it cannot be understood as a result of a single cause, and therefore the church cannot mount a single strategy to reassert itself. The decline has been going on longer in Europe than in North America, and even though rates of change do not predict the same proportion of alienation from the church in the United States as in Europe, we seem to be headed in the same direction.<sup>2</sup> It would be difficult to maintain that division among the churches is the main reason for Christianity's losing its traction in technologically advanced societies. But neither

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2. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010) 76.

does the failure of a common effort to appropriate and address the problem forecast a more favorable future for the church in the West.

### *Historical Consciousness*

Historical consciousness, consciousness of unmitigated pluralism, and global awareness are marks of contemporary Western culture. These attributes used to mark an elite intellectual culture, but rapid communication and extensive travel have accustomed almost everyone to social change and deep cultural differences throughout the world. One no longer needs to study to learn that different groups of peoples have their own ways of looking at things and of understanding that fit their interests. This pragmatism of everyday life in society and among nations changes one's perception of the unity of churches. No one expects the church to look the same in different places and cultures. Western Christians can understand the postcolonial desires of other peoples to develop their own inculturated Christianity: historical consciousness demands it. It is no longer difficult to imagine one church with many branches that are really different from one another. This is a major shift in a framework for thinking: it overcomes Christian tribalism and the intrinsically competitive views of the churches that have been a Christian legacy for centuries.

### *Pluralistic Church*

The natural state of the large church's existence entails pluralism. Pluralism does not refer to a formless set of differences but to unity amid differences, or to differences within an overarching and unifying field. Sometimes sharp differences coexist within one particular church; the condition is not anomalous but normal. Pluralism appears at all levels of the church. The New Testament, which may be considered the constitution of the church, reflects multiple incipient church polities and theologies, making some measure of rich diversity normative for ecclesiology. The history of ecclesiology demonstrates diversity diachronically through constant development and change. It also shows that pluralism describes the church at any given time across peoples and cultures. With the sixteenth-century Reformation pluralism became dramatic. Today the churches take their divisions for granted. But the forces of fission threaten serious damage to the coherence of the Christian tradition. Christianity, therefore, absolutely needs an ecumenical movement.

The movement back toward unity, however, cannot transpire on classical principles of uniformity within a single universal institutional form. Lack of change, stasis, and immovable institutions make no sense in an evolutionary world and cannot succeed in human history. The whole church ideally is comprised of living, interacting, and non-competing communities that have their particular traditions, customs, and practices. Prior to unifying institutions the great church needs mutual recognition of different traditions. This may lead to communion among churches with their own traditions. Some time down the road, like different ethnic churches in a single large urban denomination, multiple ecclesial traditions will not need to challenge one another on less than

essential issues, but can enrich the church as a mosaic of churches, each of which contributes something distinctive to the whole. The language and law of the whole will stay close to the foundations of the New Testament constitution that allows pluralism.

### *Essentials and Peripherals*

There is a hierarchy of truths. This commonsense principle says that everything that Christians profess or do is not of equal objective value or existential importance. The distinction became important in sixteenth-century Reformation ecclesiology.<sup>3</sup> It is a working supposition of the World Council of Churches.<sup>4</sup> It became a formal principle in Roman Catholic ecclesiology at Vatican II: “In Catholic doctrine there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.”<sup>5</sup> Accepting the principle does not automatically resolve different perceptions of how important this or that feature of church life really is. But taking the hierarchy of truths seriously entails forcing the question of what is truly at the center of the church and not allowing lesser issues to obscure the essence of a shared Christian confession.

The image of a large, full tree, with a thick trunk and a thicket of leaves at the crown, opens up the imagination to various ways of conceptualizing what is basic and what is subsidiary and therefore not church-dividing. This image suggests a dynamic center of the church through which its life energy is channeled to the many diverse branches that stretch out in gradually less important individual details. The image would be falsely construed by a conclusion that the leaves of a tree are really unnecessary and that the tree could live as a bare trunk.<sup>6</sup> Such a reductionist interpretation destroys the tree. Rather the image allows the many leaves to fill out the whole tree: it is an image of inclusion and acceptance of many different customs and practices and beliefs. It guides discussion toward a language that describes the inner core of being a Christian and thereby does not allow things at the extremities—things vital to some churches but not others—to occlude what is more central and common to all.

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3. The principle of *adiaphora*—from a Greek word meaning things that are indifferent—became important during the Reformation period. It distinguished in principle between things in the church that are essential and others that are less important.

4. For example, the principle is the basis of the Faith and Order Commission’s document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982); and *The Church: A Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2012).

5. Vatican II, *Unitatis redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism, no. 11.

6. Liberal theology’s ecclesiology was accused of reducing Christianity to a bare essence and thereby pruning away the historical fullness of Christian life as a worshiping community. But the idea of an “essence” of Christianity or the church can be understood in a more subtle way as the inner foundation of ecclesial existence that supports the whole church. See Roger Haight, “Comparative Ecclesiology,” *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, ed. Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge (New York: Routledge, 2008) 393–94.

### “Where We Dwell in Common”

This phrase comes from a chapter in a book in which I try to show how much the ecclesiologies of the many churches share with one another.<sup>7</sup> All churches already enjoy the essentials of Christian faith. Paul enumerates what those essentials are when he urges the Ephesians “to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:3–6).

There is no better concise definition of the essentials of the Christian faith shared by all. Very little falls outside the range of this definition of what it means to be a Christian. This statement of our common faith unites Christians so firmly that almost nothing else should be allowed to divide them. In other words, within the circles of the bonds that Paul lays out, we can discuss all other differences as members of the same church and even as friends in the Lord.

This perception of the depth of unity that can absorb differences and engage them together shows how deeply historical contextualization, pluralism, and a global perspective have worked their way into our corporate consciousness. A few decades ago the differences between the churches seemed to be simply unbridgeable despite ecumenical optimism and good will. Today, as if we were seeing Christianity anew from a different vantage point against the massive background of history and innumerable other religions, all Christians begin to look alike in their essentials. Given the depth of their commitment to God as mediated through Jesus and what that means, what could divide them? It is difficult to formulate today the cataracts that were able to cloud over recognition of our common faith. Only something truly momentous should so alienate churches that they give up on a faith that really binds them together.

### *Non-exclusive Institutional Forms*

Pluralism in the church means that a unified corporate body contains differences within itself that are so absorbed by a common sense of belonging that they are not allowed to divide the church. Such differences are found in individual church congregations, denominations, and the whole church. In the context of the ecumenical movement, pluralism sets up the goal of ecumenical activity: the main ecumenical question is how to create some kind of institutional unity or alignment out of an existential, social, and spiritual unity that already lies beneath actual divisions. If the inner life of a particular church community is pluralistic in the sense of containing a variety of vibrant, authentic traditions, the institutional structure of the church should protect and nourish all of them. The church needs structures that protect traditions rather than

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7. Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol. 3, *Ecclesial Existence* (New York: Continuum, 2008) 3–27.

choose between them or create some alienating synthesis. Once Christian communities become convinced that other Christians of different traditions are truly Christian, resentment at including them in one's own family will disappear. Yet there is always a proviso here: a truly pluralistic community has to recognize that different traditions in a unified community do not set up hostile competition between them but actually enrich a fuller and denser ecclesial spirituality. The principle that any institutional unity that is forged between churches must preserve distinctive traditions rather than compromise them has become a cliché in ecumenical discussion. But this principle remains radical and neglected.

### *Leadership in the Churches*

The ecumenical movement began in the nineteenth century and had a focusing event in 1910.<sup>8</sup> The story of its development through the first half of the twentieth century and culminating in the World Council of Churches in 1948 tells of gifted leaders who would not quit in the face of tremendous difficulty. If the impetus to ecumenism that was felt when the Catholic Church joined the movement with Vatican II has since died—many testify that it has—this points to a crisis of leadership. After so much ecumenical conversation and the production of such impressive documents by churches in dialogue and the Faith and Order commission—with relatively little ecumenical decision-making outside of several Protestant and Anglican churches—one has to notice an almost absolute void in publicly recognized leadership on the part of the churches. Although many church leaders will say that they cannot lead where no one will follow, one may rightly respond with the question, What is leadership? The movement from below among people who lack power in the church is palpable; but it manifests itself chiefly in attrition. The present division of the churches is mainly political and organizational rather than theological, and the leaders of the churches bear the burden of the responsibility for perpetuating division.

These seven stipulations may serve as an introduction to this discussion. Most people are familiar with some or all of these observations and may even take them for granted. But when they are gathered together, they mark off a distinctive moment in history, a historical context that calls for genuinely new appreciations of the church in our time. The thesis of this article is that the road toward a new impetus for the ecumenical movement must lead through ecclesial spirituality. And the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola offer a way of focusing and thinking about the problem. They also suggest a program that can address the issue. I will develop this program in the next four parts of the discussion.

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8. The event was the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh. The inspiring story of the ecumenical movement leading to the creation of the World Council of Churches is told concisely and with fitting tribute to its leaders by W. A. Visser't Hooft, *The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

## Spirituality as the Core of Christianity

In some ways the idea that the core of Christianity or the church is the spirituality that it nurtures is obvious. But the point here is to isolate this idea and use it as an operative principle that will affect ecumenical interchange. That role largely depends on how one understands what spirituality means.

There are many valid ways of understanding spirituality. People usually associate spirituality with religion, although today the range has expanded greatly to include all sorts of techniques of self-care and the quest for well-being. In religious usage spirituality frequently consists of a distinct domain of life that entails various sets of practices nourishing to the inner life: prayer, worship, devotions, meditation, or bodily practices. Spirituality may consist of that inner space of a person's reflective presence to the self, where the affects generated by life's many relationships, both activities and passivities, are assimilated and digested. Spirituality is a vast area of interiority that affords many working definitions and approaches.

In this discussion "spirituality" has a distinctive meaning that is open and inclusive. It refers to *the way persons or groups live their lives before transcendence*. A comment on the two main elements of this view will help reveal its potential.

First, this expansive view of spirituality as the way people live shifts the notion of spirituality to a framework that is wider than religious belonging and deeper than any particular set of practices. Spirituality is something that all persons have if their lives are organized around some center of gravity. The notion is close to the way Paul Tillich defines faith as "ultimate concern."<sup>9</sup> In this case, then, spirituality refers to a person's ultimate concern as it manifests itself in action. Spirituality, as faith in action, means that people's consistent behavior actually carries their deepest faith commitment. Without such an expansive view of spirituality a large part of life that has spiritual relevance will be left out of one's sphere of attention. This is an activist view of spirituality because even human *passio* or suffering elicits reactions, and without them our passivities have no spiritual value.

Second, spirituality involves more than a style of life; ideally, it is intentional. On a functional level spirituality takes the form of the transcendent value to which it responds. It is true that many spiritualities are dedicated to objects that are less than transcendent. But in each case what provides the overriding value and centering object of a person's life may be called transcendent because it functions as the consuming interest that organizes his or her life. Nevertheless, proportionality should govern the relation between a human response and its object. In Jewish and Christian traditions,

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9. "Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned" (Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* [New York: Harper & Row, 1957] 1, 4). It is important to note that Tillich also describes faith in a passive voice that highlights the priority and initiative of transcendence "breaking into" human consciousness: "We have used the metaphor 'being grasped' for describing the state of ultimate concern. And being grasped implies that he who is grasped and that by which he is grasped are, so to speak, at the same place" (ibid. 99).

idolatry has a simple logic: something that performs such a transcendent role in shaping a human person should itself be truly transcendent. For Jews and Christians that transcendent and ultimate reality is God, and making anything else the object of one's ultimate concern is idolatrous.

What distinguishes Christian faith and spirituality as "Christian" from all other faiths is Jesus of Nazareth. Christian spirituality is centered on God, as God is revealed in Jesus Christ. The definition of "Christian," referring to one whose faith in God is mediated through Jesus Christ, also defines the essence of Christian theistic spirituality. Christians find God as given to them through the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. All Christians share this spirituality.<sup>10</sup>

Placing Jesus of Nazareth at the center of the Christian's relationship with God makes this spirituality of following Jesus the substance of the ecclesial spirituality that is shared by all Christians and all the churches. In ordinary language the word "church" almost automatically refers to the visible church and the public institutional churches that make it up. We spontaneously notice that churches differ from one another. Objectively Christians have grown accustomed to differences among churches, to what distinguishes and divides them. But beneath all such differences lies the same substantial ecclesial spirituality of connecting with God through Jesus and living according to that principle.

If the essence or heart of Christianity can be conceived as spirituality, then one must think that this shared ecclesial spirituality will provide the basis of the unity shared by Christians. In other words, the basis of unity does not lie in institutional structure but in unity with God mediated through Jesus of Nazareth and the way of life that embodies it. Although this seems elementary and clear, the next section pursues this corporate Christian spirituality further in order to give it existential prominence.

## **Christian Spirituality as Foundation of the Church**

The corporate spirituality of following Jesus plays a constitutional role in the very being of the church. This principle states the major premise of my argument. The spirituality of following Jesus grounds the church; the institutions of the church are drawn from it; ecumenical relationships depend on it. The fact that ecclesial spirituality is the source and ground of the church appears in three distinct approaches to the relationship between spirituality and the church; they converge to show why the spirituality of following Jesus should represent a consensus in any quest for church unity. These approaches pass through history, social anthropology, and ecclesiology.

### *History*

The early historical development of the church shows how Christian spirituality is prior to organizational development and is the source of it. Schematically

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10. Some Christians will insist that it is the risen Christ that defines their faith. But the risen Christ is Jesus of Nazareth, and we know nothing about a risen Christ apart from Jesus.



that historical development progressed through stages. It is important to note that the scarcity of historical sources and the uneven development of the Christian movement during the first century make any close description of various stages problematic. The picture of how the movement of disciples developed in the two decades after Jesus' ministry remains unclear. Did the movement begin principally in Galilee where Jesus' ministry for the most part unfolded, or Jerusalem? But development from embryo to institutional forms did happen. Thus even possible or probable patterns of development help us form some imaginative narrative of how the church evolved over the course of the first century.<sup>11</sup>

Several clues indicate that after Jesus' execution the disciples were left in confusion. With the Easter experience and the consciousness of mission that the resurrection of Jesus instilled, a Jesus movement gradually formed within Judaism. It was initially attached to and housed within the synagogues. But it is also likely that the disciples of Jesus continued to gather together for meals, and that what became the eucharistic meal was an early institutional form for the assembly of disciples.<sup>12</sup> In Jerusalem and perhaps in Rome, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza imagines the Jesus movement simultaneously belonging to the Jewish community and gathering together for meals and thus forming something of a parallel community.<sup>13</sup>

In mid-century, tensions developed between the followers of Jesus and the synagogue in Antioch around the year 49. Paul directly testifies to the event, and it has echoes in Luke's Acts of the Apostles.<sup>14</sup> This is a paradigmatic event in several ways, not least in showing a tendency of the young Jesus movement to seek some autonomy relative to its parent.<sup>15</sup> In different communities and locales and according to different timetables well into the second century, these tensions gradually led to more independence of the newly named Christian communities until they began to look like a church.

In this development, on the Christian side, the constant is a spirituality of following Jesus. Out of a corporate following of Jesus grew the various interpretations of him found in the New Testament and the different institutional structures that were employed to hold the communities together, thereby ensuring the continuity of the

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11. For a review of the recent literature on the origin of the church see Hal Taussig, "The End of Christian Origins? Where to Turn at the Intersection of Subjectivity and Historical Craft," *Review of Biblical Literature* 11 (2011) 1–45. The use of the term "embryo" should not be taken to suggest an organic development.

12. See Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

13. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1983) 177–79.

14. Galatians 2:1–14; Acts 15:1–35.

15. The controversy in Antioch is subject to various interpretations. Is it mainly about circumcision, thus allowing Gentiles to be Christians without it? Or is it about table fellowship, thus allowing Jewish Christians to remain Jewish while eating with Gentiles? See Philip Francis Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke–Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (New York: Cambridge University, 1987) 105–9.

movement. The historical development of the early Christian churches illustrates, if it does not demonstrate, how the spirituality of following Jesus precedes and is the source of the historical foundation of the developing church: its teachings, its institutional structures, and its ethics. When these organizational forms were borrowed from the various options that presented themselves in the first and second centuries, the spirituality of following Jesus gave them their new specific identity.

### Social Anthropology

The distinction between “structure” and *communitas* is recognized in sociological literature.<sup>16</sup> Structures refer to “the patterned arrangements of role sets, status sets, and status sequences consciously recognized and regularly operative in a given society and closely bound up with legal and practical norms and sanctions.”<sup>17</sup> *Communitas* by contrast refers to the spontaneous character of the full life of the group that overflows structures and more freely responds to stimuli within the community and to the world outside it. In this sense, *communitas* transcends the structured life of the group, transgresses its boundaries, and at certain points may threaten the ordered life; it has a primal energy of its own. Structure orders the energetic life of the community. *Communitas* is the origin and empowering source of all structures as precisely that which is structured. This tension describes an intrinsic dimension of the church; it is something good, a dynamic, tensive, and catalytic source of the church’s life. Hence the ideas of *communitas* and corporate or ecclesial spirituality are virtually synonymous.

Behind this analytical distinction of reciprocally related tensive forces in the church one can discern what may be called the principle of functionality in the development of church structures. This principle refers to “the manner in which something gains its value from its relation and service to something else on which it is dependent.”<sup>18</sup> The principle can be understood in terms of the dynamic relationships between means and ends. In ecclesiology it describes how ministries developed when needs arose in the community, people responded to them, and a persistent need generated an institutionalization of a ministry to ensure that the need was consistently met. For example, when

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16. This distinction is developed by Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University, 1978). Karl Starkloff, “Church as Structure and Communitas: Victor Turner and Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 643–68, applies these categories to the study of the church.

17. Starkloff, “Church as Structure and Communitas” 649. For example, the role of the pastor of a congregation is to serve the community by providing preaching, sacramental ministry, and leadership; this position is established by various kinds of ecclesiastical law or custom; and the pastor and the congregation operate within those parameters. The whole community is organized and structured with various office holders; wider forms of unity would require higher-level office holders.

18. Haight, *Christian Community in History*, vol. 1, *Historical Ecclesiology* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 63. I develop the principle of functionality at various junctures in all three volumes of this work. It is a highly relevant historical process.

the Twelve were overworked and needed help in the overall ministry of the community, they asked that a set of ministers be chosen to share the labor, and those chosen were formally commissioned.<sup>19</sup> Sociologically this commissioning resembles a creation and routinization of a ministry needed at the time. What is scripturally normative here is less the actual ministry and more the practice. One has a sense, after reviewing how the church developed through history, that it has within itself the power to create whatever ministries and offices are needed for the health of its corporate spirituality. The New Testament shows how the authority for this creativity comes from the ministry of Jesus and the power of the accompanying Spirit.

### *Ecclesiology*

The relationship between structure and *communitas*, the dynamic principle of functionality, and tradition occupy prominent places in ecclesiology. They consistently reappear in the development of the church across history. A particularly noteworthy example of structure/*communitas* and functionality is found in the work of Dietrich of Niem, a constructive and mediating conciliarist writing in the early fifteenth century. He implicitly gave prominent attention to the distinction in his understanding of the basic structure of the church.

Recall the basic problem of the Western Schism (1378–1417). It began when two popes were canonically elected and their papal lines continued. In 1409 a third pope was elected in an attempt to break the stalemate; it did not work, and there were three popes. The problem consisted in finding a way to restore the papacy, which was dividing the church, to its proper role of unifying the church: where were the authority and the leverage to resolve this colossal historical tragedy?

Dietrich of Niem resolved this problem ecclesologically with a distinction between what he called “the universal church” and “the apostolic church” and the relation between them. One dimension of the church, the universal church, is the whole movement of people with Christ as its head; this is the existential, living mass of Christians living their faith in the churches. The “universal church” correlates neatly with the category of ecclesial spirituality, the whole church viewed existentially. The other dimension, the apostolic church, consists of the institutional offices that hold this body together historically. These are the pope, the cardinals, the bishops, and clerics. They hold the church together by performing their official functions or roles of various kinds of ministry.<sup>20</sup> The priority of the universal church to the structure that functioned to hold it together allowed the council that represented the church to depose dysfunctional popes and elect a new one. Brian Tierney has shown that this distinction can be traced back historically through the tradition of the canonists to the high Middle

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19. Acts 6:1–6.

20. Dietrich of Niem, “Ways of Uniting and Reforming the Church (1410),” in *Advocates of Reform: From Wyclif to Erasmus*, ed. Matthew Spinka (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) 150–52.

Ages.<sup>21</sup> But one can also see this principle, analogous to the sociological distinctions, as consistently operative in the church in less dramatic circumstances.

Another ecclesiological concept that recognizes the role of spirituality in the church is “tradition,” when it is understood in a modern social existential sense. Early in the twentieth century Maurice Blondel described tradition in a coherent way that most churches could accept. Instead of being a memory of undocumented statements or facts, tradition refers to the whole life of the Christian community as it passes through time. Tradition refers to the lived corporate experience of the church manifested ultimately in its action: its activities and its religious practices. The tradition of the whole church and of the churches “supplies the verification of what it believes and teaches in its age-old experience and its continuous practice.”<sup>22</sup> As the corporate practice of the church, the everyday living of its people, tradition preserves the past because it embraces within itself “the facts of history, the effort of reason and the accumulated experiences of the faithful.”<sup>23</sup> All churches have their particular traditions in their familiar, motivating sets of experiences and practices. These possess an inner authority, an internal self-justification that has to be respected. This notion of tradition refuses to contrast the category with life normed by Scripture. Tradition refers precisely to the body of the church carrying the norm of Scripture forward through existential history. Tradition is the corporate ecclesial spirituality of the church; it functions at the level of *communitas*, and the role of structure is to preserve vital traditions.

In sum, structure (or institution) and community are not separable; together they make up one church at various levels. But in an ecumenical context one cannot think of the church only as institution without differentiation. The key to Christian union begins at the place where God as Word and Spirit is effective within the lives of the Christians who constitute the church. From there distinctive churches, whether denominations or free churches, can recognize the spirituality that Paul described working in ecclesial bodies other than their own. This shared platform can be described as ecclesial spirituality, as the developmental life of the whole church, as *communitas*, or as tradition. It opens up a perspective for recognizing a common basis that authorizes different forms of ministry and organization. There is no direct route to the creation of a unifying structure of the church as a whole. But neither should the unity of the churches be described as “purely spiritual,” whatever that could mean. The way toward more comprehensive structure must pass through mutual recognition and communion among churches. And ecclesial spirituality, conceived most fundamentally as a following of Jesus, provides that possibility.

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21. Brian Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory: The Contribution of the Medieval Canonists from Gratian to the Great Schism* (Cambridge, UK: University, 1955).

22. Maurice Blondel, “History and Dogma,” in *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, ed. by Alexander Dru and Illyd Trethowan (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1964) 219–87, at 269.

23. *Ibid.*

## The Spiritual Exercises Nurture What Christians Share in Common

I turn now to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola as an example of a spiritual practice that can nurture a common ecclesial spirituality by appealing to all Christians. All too briefly I will underline how the Exercises aim directly at shaping a spirituality of following Jesus in a way that virtually reenacts the development of the church. While an extensive introduction to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola is neither possible nor appropriate here, I have to begin with at least a statement of what these Exercises are and where they came from. The point here is not to analyze the Spiritual Exercises, but to enlist their appeal to the Gospel stories of Jesus in order to draw forth their evangelical power to nurture an ecclesial spirituality of following Jesus.

Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556) was a Basque who at the age of 15 was sent to the household of the royal treasurer of Spain and formed as a courtier. Later, in 1521, as an assistant to the Viceroy of Navarre, he was wounded in a battle with the French over the city of Pamplona. During his recuperation at the ancestral home of Loyola in Azpeitia, he began an extended period of conversion from dedication to the king to dedication to Christ. For over a year—much of it spent in Manresa, close to the Benedictine monastery in Montserrat west of Barcelona—Ignatius struggled with his own inner life and charted facets of his own development in a way that might be useful in helping others with their own spirituality.<sup>24</sup> A central motif in the whole extended experience consisted in transforming a spirituality of royal service to the Spanish crown into loyal service to Jesus Christ.

The Spiritual Exercises emerged by gradual expansion and development out of those initial experiences at Loyola and Manresa, through his continuing experience as an informal spiritual director, into a manual for administering a program of meditations and contemplations to nurture the spiritual life. Essentially they consist in meditations on and contemplations of the stories of Jesus' ministry that are found in the Gospels. Ignatius adds other considerations that give the stories a distinctive "Ignatian" character, but the constitutive core of the Exercises consists of the Gospel stories. The Exercises were finally published in 1548 and are currently surrounded by a 450-year tradition of literature amounting to a large body of theoretical and practical commentary. I will highlight distinctive characteristics of this Christian spirituality that make it particularly appropriate to ecumenical discussion: its nondenominational, pretheological, and universally applicable essence as distinct from certain particularities of their origin. These comments are directed toward showing how the Exercises can be understood not as a Catholic or Jesuit preserve, but as a Christian possession that is in fact readily accessible to all people and capable of nurturing a common ecclesial spirituality.

Many aspects of the Spiritual Exercises combine to make them open to all people and especially all Christians. In the first place their basic structure is evangelical. The

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24. Ignatius Loyola, *The Autobiography*, in *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganss (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1991) no. 99.

fundamental building block and substance of the Exercises are contemplations of the stories of Jesus in the Gospels. For various reasons, they lack a clear denominational bias. For example, as a Catholic spirituality, it is remarkable that the Exercises do not unfold in a highly sacramental framework, and that the sacraments do not play an essential role in this spirituality. Insofar as Jesus of Nazareth provides the focal point of this spirituality, all Christians can share the Exercises.<sup>25</sup>

The genius of the Spiritual Exercises lies in their fixation on the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and not on his divinity. One can hardly dispute that Ignatius had a high Christology and could even refer to Jesus as the Divine Majesty. But according to the “Call of the King,” one of the contemplative exercises and the lynchpin of all the contemplations on Jesus’ ministry, the focus falls on Jesus of Nazareth as a human being. Ignatius presents Jesus as a leader to be followed. As a human being and a public figure, Jesus is available to all Christians no matter what their doctrines about him might be.<sup>26</sup> In other words, Jesus of Nazareth is not a source of division, as various doctrines about him may be; rather, he is the historical person who holds all Christians together.

The goal of the Exercises is to develop a spirituality of following Jesus and making his ministry the guide of one’s decision-making and living. The basic logic of the Exercises may be construed in a variety of ways.<sup>27</sup> But all Christians implicitly are followers of Jesus, and they all can explicitly go back to the stories of Jesus and appropriate them by the two basic practices of the Exercises. The first is imaginatively to enter into the historical concreteness of Jesus’ unfolding ministry as it is represented in the vignettes of the Gospels; the second is, by a fusion of narratives, to allow Jesus’ ministry, person, and values to impact one’s own life and to offer new possibilities and

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25. At the end of the Spiritual Exercises Ignatius included a set of rules that are called by interpreters “Rules for Thinking, Judging, and Feeling with the Church” (*Spiritual Exercises* nos. 352–70). These rules have a pointedly Roman Catholic and sacramental reference. The focus of the imagination on Jesus in the contemplations that unfold over the four “weeks” or movements of the Exercises allows the distinction of the core of this spirituality of following Jesus from the particular sixteenth-century Catholic ecclesial spirituality enshrined in these rules. They had a rationale of their own. Within the Catholic Church today, some of these rules are still relevant, while others are obsolete. More importantly, taken together the rules are meant to communicate a sense of commitment and loyalty to the church. And most importantly, they have to be appropriated in the Catholic Church of Vatican II that is committed to an ecclesiology of the people of God and an ecumenical movement. Pope Francis explicitly interprets Ignatius’s thinking with the church today as thinking with the whole people of God. See Pope Francis, “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America* 209.8 (September 30, 2013) 20–22.

26. This does not involve a “separation” between Jesus’ humanity and divinity but refers to the perspective in which Jesus is presented, that is, to the sensible observer. The divine identity of Jesus is always necessarily mediated by his human vocation and earthly ministry.

27. See Roger Haight, *Christian Spirituality for Seekers: An Interpretation of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012) 46–69, for a typology of three different interpretations of the fundamental logic of the Exercises.

horizons. “Fusing narratives” means holding in conjunction the narrative of Jesus’ ministry and a person’s own story in a way that fosters an exchange of meaning and ideals. Such is the program of the Exercises.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond a program, the Exercises provide a school in the sense of a common method. They offer a technique by which a person can continually take the stories of the Gospels and, by internalizing any given story, use it as a method of praying the Scriptures. At both levels, program and school, the Exercises support an ecumenical spirituality. Christians of every stripe can come together to “make” or “do” the Exercises with little adjustment beyond what is necessary to make a sixteenth-century text intelligible to a twenty-first century audience of a given culture. The Exercises have an activist accent, but it is so essentially evangelical that rather than compete with other Christian spiritualities it augments them.

Finally, the Spiritual Exercises are pre-ecclesial but lead directly to an ecclesial spirituality. In the form that Ignatius gave them, the Exercises end with the fourth part given over to contemplations of the apparitions of the risen Jesus and culminating with an exercise in creation spirituality and finding God in all things. But they are clearly open to the continuation of the story in the disciples’ encounter with God as Spirit (Pentecost) and the development of the church outlined earlier. It is quite appropriate to extend the contemplations that Ignatius provides to include stories from the Acts of the Apostles in order to draw the imagination of those who make the Exercises into the continuing development of the Jesus movement of which he or she is a participant.<sup>29</sup>

In sum, the basic structure of the spirituality of the Exercises, as distinct from some of the Ignatian tropes, makes the activist following of Jesus appeal to all Christians. It even reaches across the boundaries of different faith traditions at very fundamental levels because it overtly presents Jesus’ ministry in a way that can be appreciated by all on a historical level. On the basis of this insight, we can now turn to ways in which the Spiritual Exercises may be used, either as inspiration or as a practice, to foster the quest for Christian unity.

## Ecumenical Uses of the Spiritual Exercises

If the Spiritual Exercises are so directly relevant to the spirituality that is shared by all Christians and that binds us together, that is, an ecclesial spirituality of following

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28. The metaphor of a “fusion of narratives” operates in the sphere of practical life in a way that is analogous with an intellectual appreciation of conceptions from the past as depicted by Gadamer. He writes that a horizon of consciousness means “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [New York: Seabury, 1975] 269). A fusion of horizons, in which understanding and interpretation of the conceptions of the past take place, consists in drawing things understood in a past horizon into a present-day horizon of consciousness. The impact of a past figure on the life of a person today operates by an analogous process that is equally subject to critical appropriation.

29. See Haight, *Christian Spirituality of Seekers* 261–77.

Jesus, are there ways in which they might actually be deployed in the service of Christian unity? Two uses, one theoretical and one practical, come to mind. There may be others.<sup>30</sup>

The first way the Spiritual Exercises can be used ecumenically is theoretical and strategic. On the basis of an understanding of the priority of spirituality to doctrine and church structure, and in a context of the hierarchy of truths, the Spiritual Exercises help focus the attention of all Christians on the core of Christian faith. They display the trunk of the tree and not the thousands of leaves that have developed over time and sometimes distract attention from what is essential.<sup>31</sup>

This positive strategy shows by contrast what may be a faulty method of ecumenical interchange. If the direction for ecumenical interchange suggested by the Exercises is correct, it implies that the ecumenical movement should not proceed by comparing different doctrines, or institutional structures, or religious practices as though these will somehow become bonds of uniting the churches. These institutional elements are what divide the churches. It is certainly true that one cannot ignore all differences, but the idea that exploring them will lead to unity is fundamentally mistaken.

Ormond Rush alludes to a different approach to church unity that has been growing over the past two decades, one largely mediated through the World Council of Churches. Instead of fixing on explaining and comparing differences among the churches, the parties would do better by focusing on the apostolic tradition that each church professes to maintain, that is, what they share in common. "Instead of comparing and contrasting traditions, both parties attempt to interpret together the apostolic tradition. If each can recognize in the other's interpretation 'the apostolic faith,' then surprising agreement and common ground can be achieved."<sup>32</sup> As an addendum to the norm of the apostolic faith, I suggest that churches also strive to articulate the spirituality that underlies the apostolic faith that they carry forward. The apostolic faith that is lived in each church supplies a common foundation that supports the differences in church superstructure.

The way toward unity has to proceed by nurturing preexisting commonalities that bind Christians together: one faith, in one God, mediated by one historical figure. These are the things that Paul raised up so clearly. And a transparent way of entering into that sphere is to nurture the spirituality of following Jesus that is common to all Christians. This will engender not only talk about Jesus, but also about the different ways of following him, and the different ways of appreciating the world that

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30. It should be clear that the relevant point in this discussion is the return to Scripture with a special emphasis on the ministry of Jesus. Other spiritualities than the Spiritual Exercises that return to Jesus as the source of Christian faith and ministry could perform the same function.

31. Note that the priority of spirituality to doctrine does not demote or minimize doctrine. The relationship is not competitive. The distinction merely situates doctrine in a larger religious and epistemological framework.

32. Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist, 2004) 67.



encompasses the church from the perspective of following Jesus. When the core Christian spirituality of following Jesus and that which directly expresses it are in place, differences may not be ignored but may actually be promoted in a pluralistic church. As a theory for getting back to the unity that we actually share, this understanding replicates, *mutatis mutandis*, the original formation of the church during the early centuries. It is also the only way forward. “We must walk united with our differences: there is no other way to become one. This is the way of Jesus.”<sup>33</sup>

Seminaries can implement this theological position by gradually broadening the parameters in which they teach the subject matter “church.” There are wide variations in ecclesiology between narrower denominational seminaries that teach “their own” ecclesiology on the one side and multi-denominational seminaries that may have nothing like a normative view of the church on the other side. Just as missiology has lost some of its status in Western seminaries, in open seminaries ecclesiology as a critical and normative discipline seems to be yielding its place to denominational administration. Can a non-competitive ecclesiology, as an inclusive-historical and a normative-ecumenical discipline, provide the groundwork for the training of ministers prior to the study of a particular tradition and ecclesial polity and ministry? The history of ecclesiology and documents from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches can provide irenic views of the whole church that we share together.<sup>34</sup>

The second way the Spiritual Exercises can help the ecumenical movement is by gathering ecumenists or ecclesiologists from different traditions together to make the Exercises as a group. This will help drive home the depth and comprehensive character of the Jesus spirituality that the churches already share in common. The goal would be to stimulate an understanding of how inclusive a Jesus spirituality is; it contains *in nuce* all that Paul intimates with his phrase referring to being “in Christ.”<sup>35</sup> This mystical identification with Jesus Christ, when it becomes the ground of a corporate spirituality intimated by the church as the body of Christ, is precisely that which allows for a pluralism of church traditions. If the New Testament displays a pluralism of church polities, and the New Testament is normative for the church

33. Pope Francis, “A Big Heart Open to God” 28.

34. For examples, see note 4 above.

35. According to Joseph A. Fitzmyer, the phrase “in Christ” is used 165 times in Paul’s letters. “The most common use of *en Christō* is to express the close union of Christ and the Christian, an inclusion that suggests a symbiosis of the two” (“Pauline Theology,” *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990] 1409b). A good example is the following: “Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). There is a mutuality implied in the phrase, so that if one is in Christ, Christ is also in the person (e.g., Gal 2:20). In other words, attachment to Jesus, the historical figure who is now risen and called the Christ, is something deep and profound that transcends exemplary influence. It gives rise to the idea that the members of the church make up the body of Christ.

today, different church traditions should not be approached as a negative. The pluralism of churches demonstrates how Jesus can and should be appropriated differently, personally and corporately.

It will be particularly important for church leaders to make the Spiritual Exercises with other leaders. Ecumenical theologians have been negotiating doctrines and practices for a century and from the Catholic side, since Vatican II, for 50 years. Whereas there have been tangible results among some Protestant churches, the Catholic Church has little to show for the effort invested. Leaders of the churches are still isolated and timorous relative to the positions already held by the faithful and by theologians. Church leaders who are not leading should stand accountable for it.

The presentation of the Spiritual Exercises should be attentive to the way they stimulate responses to the dilemmas that are raised by secular life today. These are the questions that are driving people out of churches, and that leave those inside churches confused. Frequently these are questions that are simply ignored in the insistence on using formulas from the past. What should not preoccupy ecumenical discussions are the questions and problems of past history. Many are based on premises that no longer obtain. Speaking in a social language of relative proportions, virtually no one today is interested in whether people are justified by faith alone or the exact way in which the practices of faith relate to final salvation. Close association with Jesus of Nazareth shows quickly that he clearly knew the difference between basic religious truths and matters that did not matter. He spontaneously differentiated the essentials from the oppressive and peripheral religious practices of his time. Jesus' freedom from outdated traditions in the name of the rule of God should stimulate the ecumenical movement the way no other impetus could.

## **Conclusion**

Let me draw together the threads of this argument into a summary statement. Conversation about the church has to be contextual; the social and cultural situation of the speaker and the subject matter has to become an intrinsic element of the proposals set forth. I have stipulated a set of considerations that prompt these reflections; those who disagree with these have their own. Together the premises enumerated here indicate a situation that helps explain an ecumenical thaw but also opens up possibilities of new understanding and initiative.

Within this context the constructive reasoning begins with the position that the foundation of the church consists of what I have called spirituality, and then more precisely ecclesial spirituality. Building on the premise that spirituality refers to both a personal and communal way of life, ecclesial spirituality at bottom consists in following Jesus. Of course everyone agrees that Christians are followers of Jesus, but few ecclesiologies or ecumenists make their proposals on the explicit basis that following Jesus defines the substance of Christian faith and that following Jesus is the foundation of the church.

In order to draw out that conviction, my argument turned to the history of the development of the church, which in effect demonstrates that following Jesus is prior to the church. To solidify the position, I considered a view of the church from the perspective of organizational sociology, a traditional distinction in ecclesiology that was represented most clearly in the crisis of the Western Schism, and a social-existential conception of tradition. These considerations reinforce the foundational character of ecclesial spirituality. They support the major premise of the argument. The proposition is not that ecclesial spirituality is a specific Christian spirituality, but that the spirituality of following Jesus forms the existential basis of the church as such.

Building on this premise, where can we find a public spiritual practice that is ecumenically open and at the same time bores in on the substance of the church? Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises can play this role because they form essentially a spirituality of following Jesus that directly nurtures ecclesial spirituality: the church is the community of the followers of Jesus. In the beginning the church came into existence by development out of a Jewish spiritual movement of following Jesus. Thereafter, the narrative structure of the Exercises can be represented in a way that recapitulates that development. The Exercises move persons through the narrative of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection in order that they might shape, redirect, or strengthen Christian lives in following Jesus.

This view of the church, which simply describes what is going on in the church in social-existential terms, and its conjunction with the Spiritual Exercises, which foster an ecclesial spirituality of following Jesus, should generate forms of action, both theoretical and more practical, that will be ecumenically fruitful. I offered only a couple of suggestions; concrete situations will elicit more. Theoretically, the church has to appropriate and internalize deeply what all congregations share. Then, on that collective basis, the church may develop various kinds of institutional structures appropriate to its vocation as a sign to the world of the union and reconciliation of human beings. Those structures have to develop out of the church's common spiritual life; they will never be created by mere organizational bartering and compromise. The whole church requires institutional assurances by which vital and authentic Christian traditions will be protected rather than compromised. Practically, churches have to find ways of nurturing together their common spirituality. The Spiritual Exercises can be very useful here because they cut through less important matters to the essential following of Jesus.

### Author biography

Roger Haight, S.J., received his PhD from the University of Chicago and is currently Director of the PhD Program at Union Theological Seminary, New York. His area of special competence is spirituality. He has most recently published *Christian Spirituality for Seekers: Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola* (2012) and *Spirituality Seeking Theology* (2014).