Between Earth and Heaven: The Dialectical Structure of Ignatian Imagination

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3 • Between Earth and Heaven:
Ignatian Imagination
and the Aesthetics of Liberation

Paul G. Crowley, S.J.

"Achieving liberation of the oppressed is now seen to be incumbent upon believers. Liberation," Jon Sobrino concludes, "is now seen to be the central reality, the merger of the historical and the personal, the blending of present exigency and scriptural norm" (2). No statement of the program of the theology of liberation could be more imbued with the Ignatian imagination. And perhaps few spiritual visions could so aptly capture the liberation esthetic as the Ignatian, which springs from an ardent desire to see salvation accomplished.

The theology of liberation has by now entered the common lexicon not only of theologians, but of many people who have until recently expressed little interest in theology.¹ It is a theological genre or, better, a "movement" issuing out of and responsive to the experience of the poor and suffering of history, based upon a conviction that the Gospel has direct pertinence to the concrete human condition. It calls for a liberating practice as the way salvation is to be realized in history. A theology of liberation understands the Gospel as a divine challenge to any exercise of political and economic power that would threaten the very survival of human beings. The Gospel itself calls for a transfiguration of the earthly city and human history into an image of the kingdom of
God. Thus, a theology of liberation moves in two directions: toward the fulfillment of human history in the absolute freedom of eternal life, and the working out of salvation within history itself. As Roger Haight has put it:

[H]ere faith involves a form of praxis, a mode of being and acting in the world. This response says in the name of Jesus Christ that God is essentially Savior and that this salvation is operative as a process of humanization or liberation within history. This salvation gives meaning to history because it leads toward eternal life and because it gives meaning to history here and now as something that is meant to increase the capacity of human freedom itself. This humanization process will lead to absolute or final human fulfillment or freedom. But the condition for affirming this experi-

entially, meaningfully and with conviction is praxis, that is, partici-

pation in the historical movement itself. (42)

The absolute cannot be reached except through the concrete, his-
torical, and, especially, the human. Liberation theology limns

through praxis the circuit of salvation "between earth and heaven." 2

A certain mystique, even romantic aura has been associated

with the theology of liberation, especially its Latin American

manifestations, as it has been so closely identified with heroic

and near-heroic people who have taken the Gospel to heart as a

summons to praxis. The multitude of martyrs in recent years, most

of them tied in some way to the inspiration engendered

by the patterns of liberation thinking and practice, have firmly

established the theology of liberation, not only as a theological

methodology, but as a source of spirituality and religious esthetic.

One cannot visit the graves of the Salvadoran martyrs who had

totally identified with the poor without the feeling that one has

come near a still-quickening holiness, a place where the desires of

heaven have met the intransigence of the earth.

Many of the leaders of the first generation of Latin American

theologians have been Jesuits. The martyrs of El Salvador in par-
ticular have been a great inspiration to Jesuits all over the world,
evoking a sense of holiness and mission which inspiring words
alone cannot accomplish. Is there a connection between this es-

thetic experience of the holy, arising out of the experience of the

suffering and death of the poor and their witnesses, and the reli-
gious imagination of Ignatius? In order to begin to answer the question, we might go back 350 years to the city of Rome, where stories of heroic witness to the faith, once inspired by the letters of Xavier, gave way to an entirely new religious esthetic.

POZZO'S CEILING

On the ancient site of the Temple of Isis in the city of Rome stands the Church of San Ignazio, a church originally intended for completion in 1640 for the centenary anniversary of the founding of the Society of Jesus. The church was to serve as the chapel of the already fabled Roman College, an institutional embodiment of Jesuit ideals in both humanistic education in the post-Reform era and missionary activity for the Catholic faith in the newly discovered worlds of America and Asia. As such, it was to be a glorious monument to the genius of the founder of the Jesuits and an illustration of his expansive religious vision. The imposing façade of this new temple, a somewhat cleaner version of the Gesù Church nearby, comes suddenly into view as one meanders through the narrow streets in back of the Roman College and, passing through a thin opening, comes upon the salon-like baroque Piazza of San Ignazio, which has all the appearance of having been constructed for the staging of opera. One wall of this intimate outdoor opera house is the façade of San Ignazio.

As one enters the church, one's gaze is almost immediately adverted to the central ceiling panel, a trompe-l'œil masterpiece, completed in 1694 by the famed Jesuit artist Brother Andrea Pozzo, entitled *The Glory* [or *Apotheosis*] of St. Ignatius. Pozzo, a master of perspective and foreshortening, succeeded not only in rendering three dimensions on a virtually flat surface, but also in opening up the ceiling of the church to the virtual infinity of celestial height. As the viewer stands firmly planted on the marble floor of the church, the temple seems to explode upward toward the central figures of Christ and St. Ignatius, who appear to be ascending into the heavens. Surrounding St. Ignatius are angels, and some of the newly named saints of the Society, among them “Italians, Spaniards, Poles, French and Flemish . . . [who] symbolise St. Ignatius’ international and supernational idea” (Calvo 7). Surrounding these international figures are clusters of groups
representing human beings in all their variegation and multiplicity, misery, confusion and need, as they struggle with idolatry, heresy, and other forms of darkness. And these are not only European or Roman people; they comprise the palette of humanity from Europe to Asia, from Africa to the Americas—the entire expanding world toward which the young Society of Jesus was turning, especially through the ministry of the Roman College. In Pozzo’s ceiling, God’s saving light moves downward from the heavens, through the ministry of Ignatius, to all the peoples of the earth; the entire earth is suffused with illumination of the heavens. At the same time, the viewer, along with the entire sweep of humanity, is drawn back up to that very focal point of heavenly glory toward which the ceiling is perpetually open. Pozzo has managed to depict a kind of back-and-forth movement of the religious imagination of the viewer between earth and heaven.

A yet closer look at the ceiling will demonstrate more clearly how this back-and-forth movement of the imagination functions. The geometrical focal point of light in the canvas is clearly St. Ignatius, but Ignatius is not placed dead center in the composition. That place is held by the glorified Christ, who bears upon his shoulder the cross of salvation. He is gesturing toward Ignatius, electing him to the glory which is now recognized by the Church as belonging to Ignatius, a grace realized only through heroic ministry to the entire suffering world, a world to which Ignatius belongs as Christ’s companion. Those familiar with the life of St. Ignatius will recognize here a reference to the vision of Ignatius at La Storta, where Ignatius, upon entering Rome, had a vision of Christ bearing his cross—a vision that resulted in a confirmation of his calling to Rome and in special devotion to the name of Jesus (Ignatius 66–67). The movement between earth and heaven therefore finds its central mediation not in the glory of Ignatius, but in the contemplation of the glory of God in Jesus Christ, who himself became human, even unto death, “so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and under the heavens” (Phil. 2).

This closer examination reveals something even more telling about the religious imagination at work here. The figure of Christ is not seated alone in the heavens. He is part of the triune Godhead that includes the Father and, in the form of a dove, the Holy
Spirit. The Father and the Holy Spirit are together sending Christ down toward the world of Ignatius, and, through him, to the world of the viewer. Jesus Christ is depicted here as the second person of the Trinity who becomes incarnate, a reality which is metaphorically represented by the monogram of the name of Jesus—IHS—borne by a floating angelic figure at the bottom of the composition. This figure and the emblem appear directly above, and quite close to, the viewer, so that the Holy Name descends vertically from the heavens directly upon the viewer standing below it. The viewer, in turn, gazes upon the name of Jesus, and with the entire earth, bows in glory before the Lord who, through his crucifixion and vanquishing of sin and death, draws all the earth back to himself.

A circular movement between earth and heaven begins with God “above” in the sending of the Word, involves the human world “below” where that Word becomes incarnate, and through the Word incarnate draws this human world back to God, where the human world achieves its plenitude in the heavenly vision. This movement is not abstract: it involves real flesh and blood, actual people in specific places, in the unyielding though passing corporeality of human life, bound as it is by all the texture of space and time, open as it is to the infinite.

The Movement of the Ignatian Imagination

Pozzo was a magnificently gifted artist; he was also a Jesuit artist. One can see in this ceiling the lines of the Ignatian religious imagination found in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, the fundamental inspiration of the Jesuit approach to the Gospel (see de Guibert 534–39). Even the La Storta vision, which is clearly a source for this canvas, must be read within the broader context of the Exercises, where the main dynamics of Ignatian imagination are clearly indicated.

The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola are often considered archetypal of what was later called Counter-Reformation spirituality. The Exercises profoundly influenced other spiritualities that emerged from the post-Reformation period, almost all of which “reproduced in one form or another the fundamental elements dear to St. Ignatius: systematic use of the imaginative powers and
the interior senses, deliberate incitement of the affections, ascetic 
and moral application” (Cognet 13). Unlike some earlier medieval 
forms of mysticism, the Exercises as Ignatius composed them did 
not focus upon a purgation of the senses with a view toward 
suprasensual union with the divine through a bypassing of earthly 
existence—the purely contemplative pole represented by some 
spiritual paths strongly influenced by Neoplatonism (Cognet 14– 
16). And unlike some forms of spiritual life emanating from Ren­ 
aissance humanism, the Exercises did not entertain a facile 
optimism about human nature, or take their focus from the effi­ 
cacy of earthly works alone (Cognet 78). While Ignatius certainly 
recognized that the path to God is through the human, and 
through the natural world in general, he was also deeply aware 
of a fundamental fissure in this world and saw the plain marks of 
sin and darkness within it. While human nature is essentially 
good, the Ignatian view envisages a battle of the spirits within 
the drama of human history, a battle depicted in the Exercises in 
the meditation on the Two Standards and the Kingdom Medita­ 
tion (see below).

The Exercises, then, chart a path that moves through the imagi­ 
nation, between contemplative and active poles, between an es­ 
chatologically ordered love of God, and life amid the terrestrial 
pageant of good overcoming evil. A fundamental relation be­ 
tween heaven and earth lies at the heart of Ignatian mysticism, 
which is an active apostolic mysticism intended to cultivate a per­ 
sion simul in actione contemplativus (a person at once both contem­ 
plative and active). Although the conclusion of the Exercises is 
the contemplative pole of the “Contemplation to Attain Divine 
Love” [the Contemplatio], this end is attained only within the the­ 
ater of the world of human actions, for it is only through this 
graced and struggling movement of the human that one can adore 
the great works, the magnalia, of the triune God. Love for God in 
God’s great works of salvation is “precisely the object of Ignatian 
contemplation, of apostolic contemplation” (Daniélou 358). Igna­ 
tian contemplation calls for a full exercise of the religious imagina­ 
tion, finding in the real human world the absolutely transcendent 
struggle of God’s working out the liberation of the world itself 
and pointing to an end beyond history.

This movement between earth and heaven finds its resolution 
for Ignatius in the centrality of the Incarnation, where both poles
find their relation to each other in the singularity of human personhood, a personhood celebrated by Pozzo in the descending love of God in Jesus, the incarnate Son sent by the eternal Godhead for the salvation of all people, and in the drawing of Ignatius and all of humanity with him upward toward God. The finality of the Contemplatio cannot be attained apart from the pivotal contemplation on the Incarnation. The movement between earth and heaven is set up in the meditation on the Incarnation, finds its plenitude in the Contemplatio, and is resolved in the centrality of Jesus.

Hugo Rahner described this movement "between earth and heaven" in his classic Ignatius the Theologian. In the lead essay of this book, he notes the importance of the notion of de arriba, from above, in the Ignatian religious world-view. For Ignatius, the source and goal of all created reality is "from above." Although human beings are clearly creaturely beings, and while one comes to a love for God through created things, one does not find the fullness of being by embracing only the creaturely state. While one finds God in all created things, one arrives at a love for God by, somewhat paradoxically, stripping oneself of all love for created things. And this is possible only for that person

who has been graced with this consolation and consequently, through his own union with this "above", moves downwards with a cosmic, universal love towards created things, towards everything the world encloses. [One] embraces everything because it has come from God and belongs only to God. (H. Rahner 7)

In Rahner's interpretation, a motion of the soul is therefore established which begins at the creaturely level and in one's love for creation, moves upward toward the source and goal of creation in God, and then, having received and been transformed by God's love, returns to the creaturely level, but now detached from it, because one is in possession of a sense that everything belongs first to God and is constituted lovable because it is first loved by God. In all these movements, the initiative comes from God, not as from a prime mover, but as heavenly source of grace and life in human history. As Rahner puts it, "the essential note of Ignatian theology is the way of descent" (H. Rahner 9).

Both motions, the downward and the upward, find their union
in the “middle”: the Church and, in the Church, the “Mediator” (H. Rahner 10). That Mediator is, of course, Christ, who embodies the union of downward and upward movements. Ignatian spirituality is focused upon this middle in Christ,\(^{11}\) perhaps nowhere more than in the contemplation on the Incarnation. In the context of liberation theology, it is fitting that we focus here upon the contemplation on the Incarnation, which is for Ignatius the imaginative construction of the movement between earth and heaven whereby God’s saving work is accomplished.

**The Contemplation on the Incarnation**

The contemplation on the Incarnation is situated within the Second Week of the *Exercises*, a phase during which the retreatant, having already savored the consolation of knowing that one is a sinner loved by God, is now freed to focus on his or her desire for and generosity in serving God in one’s life. The exercitant has already undertaken the “Kingdom” contemplation, in which one is asked to consider Jesus’s invitation: “Whoever would like to come with me is to labor with me that following me in the pain, that person may also follow me in the glory” (*Sp Exx* [95]).\(^{12}\) The exercitant was further invited to consider the following type of prayer of oblation, where, with the help of God’s infinite goodness [*infinita bondad*], one expresses the “want and desire and deliberate determination . . . to imitate you in bearing all injuries and abuse and all poverty of spirit, and actual poverty, too, if your most Holy Majesty wants to choose and receive me to such life and state” (*Sp Exx* [98]). It is with this spirit of open generosity and gratitude that the exercitant now turns to the Incarnation.\(^{13}\)

The contemplation on the Incarnation is actually part of a five-part exercise. First, we have the contemplation on the Incarnation itself, which approaches the subject matter “from above,” i.e., from the starting point and viewpoint of the triune Godhead, but in descent. This is followed by a contemplation on the Nativity, which views the same subject matter seen “from below,” from the human standpoint of the poverty of the stable, the experience of Mary and Joseph, and all the human and sensual factors attendant thereto. Then follow two “repetitions” in which the relation between these two contemplations is considered, especially as they
lead to responses in the exercitant, either toward consolation or
toward desolation. Finally, there is the application of the senses,
in which the imagination works to allow the mystery of God-
become-human to be savored in the humanness of the retreatant,
through a consideration of that very humanness which, as in
Pozzo’s ceiling, yearns for the salvation that comes to it in the
humanity of the Second-Person-of-the-Trinity-become-incarnate.
The contemplation on the Incarnation itself consists of a brief
preparatory prayer, three preludes, three points, and one so-called
colloquy. The downward-upward pattern of this contemplation
is evident in the construction of the preludes and points, and in
the harmony that relates the preludes and points to each other.
The first prelude begins with a colloquy among the three divine
persons in the heavens, perhaps like the divine cluster at the center
of Pozzo’s ceiling. As Ignatius frames it:

Here, it is how the three divine persons looked at all the plain or
circuit [redondez] of all the world, full of people, and how, seeing
that all were going down to hell, it is determined in their eternity,
that the second person should become human to save the human
race. . . . (Sp Exx [102])

The initiative of a movement between earth and heaven begins
entirely with God, de arriba, in the interest of saving lost
humankind.

The second prelude shifts the focus from the Trinity to that
singular, unique human person, Mary of Nazareth, to whom the
Trinity has chosen to communicate itself. Mary is seen “within
the great capacity and circuit of the world, in which are so many
and such different people” (Sp Exx [103]). Here, the gaze of the
imagination is drawn toward the richly variegated human world,
depicted in Pozzo’s canvas by so many different types of people,
and ultimately, to a consideration of the particularity of each per-
son, especially that most particular person, Mary. Here, it might
be noted, the visual lines of the Pozzo canvas move to the divine
action upon the singular viewer who stands directly beneath the
Holy Name held by the angelic figure, much as God’s Word,
through Gabriel, was communicated to Mary. The viewer, in his
or her particularity, thus becomes a participant, like Mary, in the
divine drama. Such a participation is indeed one of the aims of
this Ignatian contemplation on the Incarnation.
The third prelude is an exercise in drawing the first two together through an “interior knowledge [conoscimiento interno]” of Jesus, “Who for me has been made human, that I may more love and follow him” (Sp Exx [104]). The economy of heaven and earth, the divine action made on behalf of all humanity, is also made “for me” with the end in mind that, like Mary, I might live for God’s ends in my own human particularity. The Mediator, Jesus, is therefore “at once in heaven and here below.” The exercitant’s focus upon Jesus draws one’s imagination up into the mystery of God and, united in love with God, back down in love, through Jesus’s self-emptying, to help accomplish the work of salvation on earth.

Now Ignatius invites the retreatant to experience this movement of the imagination through the mediation of the bodily senses. (This part of the contemplation on the Incarnation is not to be confused with the application of the senses, which occurs after a consideration of the Nativity and two repetitions, later in the day.) At this point, the mediation of the bodily senses becomes an integral part of the function of the religious imagination—an imagination exercised not in abstraction from, but precisely through, human corporeality, because it is in the radically concrete that God works.

In the first point, the movement we have already sketched is repeated, this time through the sense of vision. Here, instead of beginning with the heavens, we begin from the standpoint of the earth, “first those [persons] on the surface of the earth, in such diversity [diversidad], in dress as in actions: some white and others black; some in peace and others in war; some weeping and others laughing; some well, others ill; some being born and others dying, etc.” (Sp Exx [106]). The imagination is invited to roam those places in human reality represented by the lower reaches of the Pozzo canvas, below and, in a sense, within which we ourselves stand.

Then, having surveyed the scene in all its multifarious detail, our sight is directed upward, to the center. There we are “to see and consider the three divine persons, as on their royal throne or seat of their Divine Majesty, how they look on all the surface and circuit of the earth, and all the people in such blindness, and how they are dying and going down to hell” (Sp Exx [106]). The exercitant, of course, as a human being, has some experience of
this blindness, and of this backsliding toward eternal loss, an experience depicted spatially by Pozzo in that the viewer stands literally below even those who are being cast down to the netherworld by the forces of truth.

Finally, we are “to see Our Lady, and the angel [Gabriel] who is saluting her, and to reflect in order to gain profit [sacar provecho] from such a sight.” As we suggested above, the viewer of the canvas is in the place of Mary, and a floating heavenly figure salutes us with the name of Jesus itself. The exercitant, in his or her humanity, becomes the place of continuing Incarnation here on earth.

This sense exercise is repeated, first by focusing on hearing what the people of the earth are saying, what the divine persons are saying among themselves, and what the angel and Mary say to each another, so that the exercitant may draw profit from such words (Sp Exx [107]). In the third point, the spotlight is on actions—what the people of the earth are doing, what the divine persons are doing, “namely, working out the most holy Incarnation,” and what occurs between the Angel and Mary of Nazareth (Sp Exx [108]). All this is done with a view toward the conclusion of the contemplation on the Incarnation, entreating [pidiendo] the Trinity, the eternal Word incarnate, or Mary “according to what I feel in me, to follow and imitate Our Lord more, who has, in a time so very recent, become incarnate [ansí nuevamente encarnado]” (Sp Exx [109]). And one should bear in mind, again, that this contemplation is itself placed in relation to that which follows, the contemplation on the Nativity. The entire five-part movement, which stresses the fact that God became human, and that salvation is worked out by God through his human intermediaries, points to the conclusion of the Exercises, the Contemplatio where the ultimate focus is upon God as both giver and gift, from whom “all the good things and gifts descend from above [de arriba] . . . as from the sun descend its rays . . .” (Sp Exx [237]).

Hugo Rahner has elegantly described what is happening in this kind of movement of the religious imagination. We might keep in mind here the Pozzo canvas as we consider this description:

Thus this Ignatian theology of Christ effects a sort of “reduction” of “above” to “below”, by way of the divine Majesty put to death on the cross. . . . The royal throne of the Father is confronted by
"the face and circumference of the earth" [Sp Exx (102, 103)], and below this again is the utmost abyss beyond which no further descent is possible: the hell into which [people] must "descend" [Sp Exx (102)], though they are able to rise again from it in the Mediator to the glory of the Father, because the Word—as the radiant source—had himself "come down from above" [Sp Exx (237)] and is thus "at the feet of the most Holy Trinity," where he "implores the Trinity for forgiveness." In Christ, then, the "above" of the Father has become permanently fused into the elements and atoms of the world "below." The dialogue on the royal throne ends in the room at Nazareth. (17; translation slightly emended)

The "room at Nazareth" is, of course, the space and time on earth occupied by the exercitant, or by the pilgrim who gazes, either literally or figuratively, through the Ignatian imagination, upward toward the Trinity.

**IGNATIAN IMAGINATION AND THE AESTHETICS OF LIBERATION**

The Ignatian imagination is certainly something other than flight of fancy; it is more than the ability to picture scenes or compose places, although this may be partly suggested by Ignatius; it is even more than the application of the senses, although it includes some exercise of the senses, as the three points of the *Contemplatio* suggest, and as the fifth movement of this five-part exercise will prescribe. 16 The application of the senses is an imaginative exercise, but it does not in itself exhaust the substance of Ignatian imagination. The Ignatian imagination is a "faculty" of interpreting reality in its totality, spiritual and corporeal. While it is other than sensory fantasy, it is dependent upon the very corporeality that the senses imply. At the same time, it extends beyond the bodily senses to include the entire range of spiritual senses which the human person possesses as a spiritual being. 17 It is thus a form of remembering the manifold ways in which God has descended into the physical and spiritual matter of our own lives. It implicates all the coordinates of space and time as these define, condition, modify, or mediate earthly existence; these become the point of departure for the human response to God's initiative. Once implicated, they find their natural fulfillment in their cooperation with the saving work of God in Jesus Christ.
That which distinguishes the Ignatian imagination from various other understandings of imagination is, therefore, (1) its utterly concrete referentiality to the time and space within which human existence takes place, and within which God becomes incarnate, and (2) its simultaneous transcendence of ordinary sensory experience such that the meaning of such experience is found in God and the fulfillment of human existence in cooperation with God's desires. The imagination for Ignatius is firmly planted in the human reality of space and time; it is within that reality—its temporality, spatiality, architecture, perspective, and motion—that God is experienced.\(^\text{18}\)

For Ignatius, therefore, the imagination is an indispensable medium for the experience of God; intrinsic to human nature, it is a natural instrument of religion. The imagination leads from earth to heaven in the human desire for God; at the same time, it leads from heaven to earth in God's desire, working through the willing cooperation of human beings, for the salvation of the world. The religious imagination depicted at San Ignazio, and more subtly limned in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, provides an aesthetic within which the theology of liberation might be understood today. Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino, one of the chief architects of the theology of liberation, has noted the historic gap between spirituality and the practice of Christian faith, a gap that the theology of liberation has endeavored to bridge through a dialectic of contemplation and action (Endean 2). The spiritual life, he reminds us, is never purely spiritual; it must include real "incarnated" life, the edges of history as people experience and construct history. It is in this historical theater of human experience that the Incarnation has taken place, not outside it. As the assassination of his brother Jesuits in 1989 attested, such a conviction is bound to bring with it a certain definite rejection and persecution, responses that would not exist if real life were not the basis for a spiritual vision (Endean 3–4). Spiritual life, therefore, is planted "from below," from the standpoint of the one "looking up" to the God who liberates human beings from the structures of sin which pull them down.

At the same time, it must be said that historical life is never purely historical, i.e., never purely concrete. It is also a matter of spirit (Endean 4). This is a fundamental insight of the Hegelian dialectic of history, which sees history as the unfurling of the
Spirit through human contingencies. In Jesus himself, it is not merely his own initiative, but the initiative of the Spirit which draws him, through his freedom, toward undertaking a ministry of salvation, indeed of liberating the lowliest from their oppression. The ultimate impetus for the saving work of Christ comes “from above” as the triune God elects to become one with humanity in the form of a lowly person—one “who emptied himself and took the form of a slave” (Phil. 2:7).

Sobrino specifies four prerequisites for a liberation spirituality, which we might call here a liberation esthetic, one deeply imbued with the Ignatian imagination. The first is “honesty to the real,” which means beginning with the human condition as it is. The theology of liberation begins with a firm stance in the world of the poor, those who have been systematically excised from pictures of what is “real.” The Ignatian imagination, however, insists on including the poor, and on identification with the poor, even to the point of becoming poor. This is a major and repeated theme in Ignatian spirituality. It is certainly remarkably represented in the Pozzo canvas, with teeming masses of poor humanity of all colors reaching up to heaven for salvation. The viewer of the canvas stands spatially within the world of this teeming poor humanity, not above them, nor to the side, merely looking on. The esthetic effect is one of total identification with “those on the lowest rung of the ladder of history” (Gutiérrez, “Expanding” 12).

The second prerequisite of a liberation spirituality is “fidelity to the real,” which Sobrino describes as perseverance in our original honesty, however we may be burdened with, yes, engulfed in, the negative element in history. Our first knowing is shrouded in obscurity by a certain non-knowing, and the power of negativity will challenge that first hope of ours. We shall know only that we must stay faithful, keep moving ahead in history, striving ever to transform that history from negative to positive. (18)

Again, we find ourselves planted so firmly in the “below” of history that the vision of an integral liberation can be clouded. Looking “up” we can, perhaps, fail to see that a central mediation of the liberating work of the Gospel is the suffering of the Cross
borne by the one who descends to become incarnate within human history. Fidelity to the real reveals that liberation is a matter not of theoretical dialectic, but of a certain historical dialectic between flesh and spirit, and therefore, of suffering and even martyrdom. Fidelity to the real, furthermore, has a praxic dimension, which means actively participating in the work of liberation. In Pozzo’s ceiling, the triune God establishes the pattern for active participation: full incarnation in human reality in its poorest forms, a participation reflected by Pozzo in the sending of Jesuits with hearts on fire to the four corners of the world.

This leads to the third prerequisite of a liberation spirituality: the willingness to be swept along by the “more” of reality (Sobrino 19). Here Sobrino strikes a familiar Ignatian theme, the idea of the “more” or the *magis*. But here it does not denote some superhuman striving, but, rather, an active openness to the totality of human reality, and the willingness to be caught up in it. The Ignatian imagination, therefore, de-centers the world of the familiar, the world that is given, and turns one’s attention to the world as God sees it, in its comprehensive totality and fundamental unity. The focus here is not on “diversity,” but on the universality of God’s liberating love.

And this raises the fact that the liberating work of the Gospel will take on different shapes and forms in different cultural settings. “An authentic universality does not consist in speaking precisely the same language but rather in achieving a full understanding within the setting of each language. . . . The goal, then, is not uniformity but a profound unity, a communion or koinonia” (Gutiérrez, “Expanding” 23). An esthetic of liberation will revel in the particularity which finds its value in the unity of a final integrating vision. In Pozzo’s ceiling, Europe, the only world familiar to most seventeenth-century viewers, is relativized and even reduced in status to of the four corners of the earth, on a par with the Americas, Asia, and Africa. At the same time, it finds a new sense of itself as a culture among cultures, where human misery and poverty are shared transculturally, as much in need of the liberating work of the Incarnation as Africa, Asia, or the Americas are. While in each of these mythic places the Gospel becomes allegorized according to native custom and costume, a new center now holds, not in the culture of Europe, but in the liberating work of Christ.
Finally, Sobrino points to the essential prerequisite of the experience of God (Gutiérrez 20–21). And here we return to our starting point, the movement of the imagination between earth and heaven. There can be no pure, unmediated experience of God in the Christian sense. There is no spiritual experience that is not historicized, and, in the movement of Ignatian imagination, that experience is the experience of salvation, of an integral human liberation involving both historical and transcendental coordinates. The experience of God, finally, is an ongoing experience which takes place within the theater of human suffering, especially the suffering of the poor, whose particular world the Incarnate One entered. In the last analysis, we are speaking here of an aesthetic which is most accessible not in the texts of various editions of the Exercises, or in the visual texts of great frescos and canvases, but in the texts of human lives, which Ignatius in his genius saw as yearning for salvation. This spiritual path through the motion of the religious imagination is of particular pertinence in our own day, when the earthly and transcendent poles are often enough proposed as mutually exclusive opposites, and where God is reserved to the realm of private judgment, or worse, to pure flights of fancy. A religious imagination thoroughly grounded in concrete human experience, as this one surely is, can only conclude to a God who is correlatively real and liberating.

**Notes**

1. See, for example, Gustavo Gutiérrez' discussion of liberation theology, where he notes that it “has stimulated an interest in reflection on the Christian faith—an interest previously unknown in Latin American intellectual circles, which have traditionally been cool toward Christianity or even hostile to it” (“Expanding” 4). For an account of one of the more spectacular openings to some dimensions of Christian faith, partly in response to the initiatives of the theology of liberation, see Gutiérrez' *Fidel*.

2. The phrase is taken from Hugo Rahner (12). Rahner's description of the theological dialectic to be found in Ignatius is discussed below.

3. Indeed, in 1727, Pope Benedict XIII ruled that funds earmarked for the completion of the dome of San Ignazio be spent instead on the piazza outside, giving Rome “one of her most ‘theatrical’ urban spaces.” See Levy 216.
4. With Ignatius, early Jesuits like Jerónimo Nadal “affirmed straightforwardly that for the members of the order ‘the world’ was their ‘house’ [and] . . . that the Society was essentially a group ‘on mission,’ ready at any moment to travel to any point where there was need for its ministry.” The **doing** of the saving work of the Gospel anywhere in the world is firmly planted in the Jesuit imagination. See O’Malley 18.

5. Admittedly, this approach to the fresco does not take into account the standard reading of it as “a dialectic between the name of Jesus, chosen for the Society by the saint, and ‘ignis,’ fire, a pun on the name of Ignatius.” “Depicted at the center of the field, high above the four parts of the earth, the saint is struck by rays of light emanating from Christ’s wounded side. . . . From the heart of Ignatius, as from a mirror, light issues to the four corners of the earth. The converting power of this light or flame is mediated by the Jesuit saints who travelled to the four continents as missionaries. The sending of the missionaries and the spreading of fire on earth are taken from the gospel and communion antiphons, respectively, for Ignatius’ mass proper” (Levy 216). Calvo writes that Pozzo confirms the connection between the name of Ignatius and the motto *Ignem veni mettere in terram*. “Pozzo himself supplies a precise explanation of the significance of his fresco: ‘Jesus illumines the heart of St. Ignatius with a ray of light, which is then transmitted by the Saint to the furthermost corners of the four quarters of the earth, which I have represented with their symbols in the four sections of the vault.’ Referring to the missionaries of the Society of Jesus he writes: ‘The first of these indefatigable workers is St. Francis Xavier, the Apostle of the Indies, who is seen leading a vast crowd of Eastern converts towards Heaven. The same kind of scene [s] depicted with other members of the Society of Jesus in Europe, Africa and America’” (29).

6. The rich biblical foundations of the *Exercises*, and their rendering as a kind of pedagogy of Scripture, can be found in much current literature, notably in Cusson.

7. Cognet associates this tendency especially with the Northern or Rheno-Flemish school of spirituality. It must be said, however, that early *Directories* to the *Exercises* saw a relation between the “weeks” of the *Exercises* and “the three traditional ‘ways’ of Christian spirituality—purgative, illuminative, and unitive.” See O’Malley 22.

8. Philip Endean, s.j., invokes Emerich Coreth, who “argued powerfully that [Gerónimo] Nadal’s description of Ignatius as ‘simul in actione contemplativus’ implicitly involved a radical correction of philosophical habits going right back to antiquity: the preference for knowing over loving, the interior over the exterior, the individual over the collective” (413). The Coreth article he cites is “Contemplation in Action,” in Gleason 184–211.
9. Daniéllou cautions against reading the Ignatian path to God through creatures in too facile a manner. “It would be imprudent to believe that one could go very quickly to God through creatures. This is the error of a certain modern humanism. St. Francis of Assisi chanted the ‘canticle of the Sun,’ but only after having been the stigmatist of Alverno” (366).

10. Michael Buckley stresses this initiative from God, this *privilegium* of grace, as foundational to an understanding of an Ignatian sense of devotion. “It was important that if Ignatius and any particular Jesuit was able to find God in anything whatsoever, it was because God has first found them” (27). I am deeply indebted to Father Buckley himself for the stimulus to begin thinking about the dialectical structure of the contemplation on the Incarnation, a subject which he has discussed many times with fellow Jesuits.

11. “The [one] who looks from below up to the above understands in the descent from above, in the outpouring of the divine source upon the world below, that he is bound up with the above and, precisely because he recognizes his own position, with the below. He realizes, too, that if consolation is ‘poured’ into him, it is only because God, the very source, himself descended and became Mediator. Above and below are bound up together through the mediating activity of the one Mediator. Indeed, it is possible to conceive of the below only in terms of the above, and this by fixing one’s gaze upon the middle, which evokes the interior attitude of *acatamiento*, awe” (H. Rahner 11; translation slightly emended).

12. Quotations from the *Spiritual Exercises* are abbreviated as *Sp Exx*, followed in brackets by the standard paragraph number. All quotations are from the Mullan translation, which appears in Fleming. In some places, where Spanish appears in brackets, I have compared the Mullan translation with the Spanish “Autograph” text in *Monumenta*.

13. This generosity, or magnanimity, is an essential note of Ignatian spirituality. It is the human correlate to the *magnalia* of God, and is the precondition for an apostolic engagement in God’s saving work. Ignatius specifies generosity toward God and willingness to be used as God’s instrument as a precondition for making the *Spiritual Exercises*. See “Fifth Annotation” [5]. Daniéllou writes: “The Apostle indeed ought to be engaged in the great works of God. He must have then, through the spirit, a soul corresponding to these great works, which are difficult because they are great. . . . It is only by the power of God that one can accomplish the works of God” (362–63).

14. Hugo Rahner elaborates: “Ignatius first makes the exercitant as a sinner run swiftly through the whole of this space between the ‘royal throne’ of the Trinity and the ‘circumference of the earth’ [Sp Exx. 58],
and then fills it out with the middle of the incarnation [Sp Exx 102–106]. But this also means that he is teaching the exercitant to contemplate even this below and middle from above; in other words, he is measuring all created things, good and defective alike, against the goodness and wisdom of God above [Sp Exx 59, 237]” (13).

15. We find here an indication of the importance of a sense of time and history in Ignatius’s spirituality, and in the exercise of Ignatian imagination. The distance of the event of the Incarnation from the present moment is considerably reduced by considering it to have occurred but lately, nuevamente. Here the imagination does more than reconstruct a past event; it is the vehicle by which the palpable present reality of that event is brought home to the exercitant through the collapsing of human time into the salvation time of God.

16. Philip Endean notes that this application of the senses comes at the end of the Ignatian day of prayer (as the fifth part), in a movement “from reflection on the scene to reflection of the scene, one of deepening imaginative involvement. Instead of simply thinking about past events, retreatants are challenged to react to the events of Christ’s life, and to imagine how their own lives might become responses to those events” (404).

17. Karl Rahner so argues in “‘The ‘Spiritual Senses’” and in “The Doctrine.” In the latter article, he holds that a relationship can be discerned between Bonaventure’s doctrine on the spiritual senses, and Ignatius’s doctrine of the senses in the Exercises.

18. Philip Endean notes: “In Ignatian imaginative prayer, we are invited to experiment with new ways of understanding the world. . . . We seek to let the Gospel symbols be reflected in our own selves, generating new patterns of interpretation and action. . . . An awareness of dependence on God enables and expands us to be who we are. Our ultimate categories are relational” (410).

Works Cited


