

Cura Personalis

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It is characteristic of the Ignatian charism to be always situated in a movement. Ignatius likes to express this by using comparatives: thus, he writes in the *Constitutions*¹ that everything is to be decided in function of the greater praise and glory of God our Lord.

The dynamism of the *magis*

Almost too well-known, and often insufficiently understood, is the adverb *más* (the *magis*) which makes us desire and choose only that which leads us 'more' to the end for which we are created.² To maintain a spiritual momentum and an apostolic dynamism in the sense of the *magis*, Ignatius has written into this way to God a whole series of tensions which do not allow us to stop or to be satisfied with what has been achieved. Because of these tensions we are impelled to do more, or rather to let God do more, in us and with us.

The tension required in a life of apostolic action, lived in contemplation of the mysteries of Christ, is well known. In the *Constitutions*, the intended tension is perceptible between a passion for universality, for the whole world (since “quanto más universal es más divino” – “The more universal the good is, the more it is divine”³) and the concern to insert one's ministry into a particular good. Think globally and act locally: Ignatius wanted to live this apostolically as a constructive tension. To be mentioned in this context also is the tension, difficult to live, between a poverty chosen with all its radicality as a following of the Son's *kenosis*,⁴ and an actual poverty. The Lord calls us in the concreteness of his service to a style and level of life, never achieved, always to be made and remade.

Cura personalis

To all these tensions of Ignatian inspiration which impel towards the *magis* belongs also the subject of this intervention, which is the *cura personalis* ('care for the person'), both a characteristic of spiritual accompaniment and a constitutive element in Jesuit education and formation. The tension contained in *cura personalis* may be described in this way: it was Ignatius' experience that, on the path to God, a person needs *cura*; the help of a companion on the way, even if

¹ *Constitutions* n.52

² *Spiritual Exercises* n.23

³ *Constitutions* n.622

⁴ *kenosis* (Gk κένωσις) – a theological term meaning 'self-emptying': “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” Philippians 2:5-7 NRSV

this spiritual adventure will be, in the Spirit who is always strictly personal, *cura personalis*.

Cura personalis in the *Spiritual Exercises*

To discover the meaning of this expression, we let ourselves be guided by the *Annotations* at the beginning of the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*. As the Latin expression says, these annotations are notes, which as notes should explain a written text which Ignatius has not left to us, because in all probability it was an oral interview which Ignatius had with the retreatant before beginning the *Exercises* proper. Of course it was necessary to make clear the relationship (the *cura*) between Ignatius and the person of the retreatant. Instead of devoting a treatise or an exhaustive study to this, Ignatius contented himself with a few notes which highlight the salient points.

At the outset, he insists on the personal character of the *cura personalis*. Even at the level of the simple choice of words, he refuses all professional or institutional terminology. It is not a spiritual director who finds himself before an exercitant, not an animator before a retreatant.

Offering the mysteries of the life and person of Christ

Cura personalis is expressed in the human acts of 'giving' and 'receiving', an act of transmission and consequently of reception. A linear relationship is established between the one giving the *Exercises* and the one receiving them. It is not the book or a sketch of it which is giving the *Exercises*. Ignatius gave the

written book only to one who had made the *Exercises* personally and now wanted the help of the text in order to give himself in giving the *Exercises*. A whole Ignatian tradition emphasizes that it is not a matter of transmitting learning or doctrine, of imposing a method or one's own ideas, but of offering the mysteries of the life and person of Christ so that the other person may receive them for himself into his own personal history. So the one who gives is impelled to give himself, without making himself a barrier, able to avoid superfluities, and the one who receives is encouraged to act and react personally to the gift received, not being content to stay on the surface of impressions and feelings but sensing interiorly the gift received and savouring it in the depths of himself.⁵

It is here that the annotation worst observed over the centuries comes in. *Cura personalis* is no longer a reality when the one giving the *Exercises* prevents the one receiving them from acting and deciding by himself, for the *cura* is turned into one important direction or into an avalanche of ideas and initiatives that belong to the director. Even if the one giving the *Exercises* is highly qualified, seriously prepared for this ministry, a person of wide experience and of undeniable competence, Ignatius wants him to be sober, brief and, above all, faithful to Ignatius and respectful⁶ towards the one receiving.

Today, especially, with so many directors/animations well formed in the art of counselling and of group-animation, in exegesis⁷ and spirituality, why not enrich *cura personalis* with the acquisitions of human sciences as well? Nevertheless, right at the beginning of the *Exercises*,

⁵ *Spiritual Exercises* n.2

⁶ *Spiritual Exercises* n.2

⁷ exegesis = the interpretation of scripture

Ignatius dares to demand that the one giving them renounce all abundance of learning and all amplification in his spiritual animation, so that the one receiving may work as the author, in person, of what he wishes and desires. All the authority of the spiritual director should serve to make the other the author, according to the very etymology of the Latin word *autoritas*.⁸ On the contrary, an authoritarian or persuasive attitude brings a strong risk of emptying both *cura* and *personalis* of their meaning.

The receiver of *cura personalis*

Going on from the one who gives the *Exercises* to the one receiving them, it is amazing that Ignatius gives no explanation of the fact that the one who enters into the spiritual adventure of the *Exercises* puts himself quite naturally into the dispositions of the receiver.

For Ignatius, it goes without saying that the person needs *cura personalis*, and that no-one can manage on his own. Quite simply, to grow and increase, we need help, and not to want this help is to condemn oneself fatally to stagnation and diminishment. Nevertheless, to recognise that on the road to God the *cura pastoralis* of a fellow-traveller proves to be indispensable is not in any way to give up.

On the contrary, turning with great generosity⁹ and complete freedom to the other person for help is, paradoxically, a means of self-help. Paradoxically, it is this call for the other person's help which should lead to my being put in charge of what I myself want. This expression is

repeated more than twelve times in the book of the *Exercises*. It is reinforced by a whole series of reflexive verbs, indicating an action which falls back upon the subject of the verb, like 'dispose oneself',¹⁰ 'correct oneself',¹¹ or of the nature of 'reflecting in myself'.¹² Clearly, the one who receives *cura personalis* is a person capable of willing and choosing in freedom and with generosity.

As the word says, *cura personalis* is care for the person. The whole dynamic of the *Exercises* leads to making the one receiving them responsible, which is to say capable of responding to what the Lord wills and desires for him. This personal responsibility does not in any way shut him up in an ivory tower. Still less does the emphasis in the *Exercises* on 'myself' seek to promote and favour an exacerbated individualism. On the contrary, in guiding the retreatant through the exercises of the first week it reveals our responsibility, conscious or unconscious in our complicity, for everything in us and around us that is destroyed by sin. The same personal responsibility is called for when the Lord through the exercises of the second week wills to use us to build a new humanity, more human because more divine. So *cura personalis* disposes the one receiving the *Exercises* to become freely, and above all personally, a response to the One who calls each one, and each one by his name, to greater service, for the greater glory of God.

⁸ *autoritas* is the Latin word from which the English words *authority* and *author* both derive.

⁹ *Spiritual Exercises* n.5

¹⁰ *Spiritual Exercises* n.18

¹¹ *Spiritual Exercises* n.24

¹² *Spiritual Exercises* n.114

Adaptation to individual needs

But in what, then, concretely, does *cura personalis* consist, in the service of the one giving the *Exercises*? As always, Ignatius is very sensitive to the diversity of persons – their age, their culture, their spiritual maturity, their state of life¹³ – and does not even exclude the possibility that, at least for the moment, the *Exercises* should not be given. From this, so many possibilities suggested by Ignatius to be able really to help by adapting the *Exercises*, even in detail, to the needs of the one who wishes to receive them.

This adaptation to the person's needs presupposes that the one giving the *Exercises* is kept faithfully informed about the different agitations and thoughts moving the one receiving the *Exercises*.¹⁴ Above all, he ought to intervene if it happens that the person is not moved at all by consolations and desolations.¹⁵ How to help in the case of flat calm which does not allow the ship to move and go forward? – a problem which is sometimes more difficult to handle than that of the contrary wind provoked by the bad spirit or even that of a too-favourable wind when the good spirit seems to take the bearings.

In all these situations of turbulence, to stay with the meteorological language, *cura personalis* is indispensable. The one giving the *Exercises* should then, says Ignatius, intervene by asking questions. In this interrogation he should show himself neither harsh nor severe¹⁶ but encouraging, shedding light on everything

that the good and the bad spirit may provoke in a person's heart. A great help consists in unmasking the ruses of the one who has been a liar from the beginning¹⁷ and who continues to seduce and deceive us, so often by transforming himself into an 'angel of light'.¹⁸ *Cura personalis* is then, according to the annotation, to draw attention,¹⁹ to watch,²⁰ to put on guard and to warn.²¹

Trust

Above all, in the spirit of Ignatius, *cura personalis* calls for an atmosphere of mutual trust, a trust which is always difficult to win, always easy to lose.

Ignatius himself had to give the *Spiritual Exercises* in an environment of great mistrust, in a relationship between persons exposed to a real risk of breakdown of dialogue in a time of reform and counter-reform. Ignatius had also had the experience that often we can deceive ourselves, for example when he was convinced that the Lord wanted him in the Near East to continue his mission.

In the depths of these uncertainties, Ignatius dares to go forward with confidence in *cura personalis*. Still today we risk being misunderstood and losing confidence because we are thought left-wing or right-wing, labelled conservatives or progressives. Then, says Ignatius,²² understanding and good will should dominate, with regard to everything that is said, allowing as far as possible what the other person says, rather than condemning it from the

¹³ *Spiritual Exercises* n.18-20

¹⁴ *Spiritual Exercises* n.17

¹⁵ *Spiritual Exercises* n.6

¹⁶ *Spiritual Exercises* n.7

¹⁷ John 8:44

¹⁸ *Spiritual Exercises* n.332

¹⁹ *Spiritual Exercises* n.12

²⁰ *Spiritual Exercises* n.14

²¹ *Spiritual Exercises* n.14

²² *Spiritual Exercises* n.22

beginning. This prepossession in favour will have priority in everything, within the *Annotations*, to mark out certain limits.

One limitation is *cura personalis* in the precise the concern to maintain the dialogue with the other to the very end, out of love for the neighbour.

Once this principle of *cura personalis*, full of merciful trust, has been proposed, Ignatius exercises ingenuity framework of the binary relationship between two persons (one who gives, one who receives) that is, two who speak to one another and keep up a conversation only during the time of the *Exercises*.

Nevertheless, Ignatius knows completely different situations and distinguishes explicitly a *cura personalis* outside the organisation of the *Exercises* and one during the *Exercises*. Outside the *Exercises*, the spiritual companion may and should encourage people to choose priesthood or consecrated life.²³ While making the *Exercises*, the retreatant should become really free, so that the Lord may make use of him, and so the one giving the *Exercises* ought not to commit him where God himself holds back from calling him.

For the same reason there is a limit to the need to know the one in need of *cura personalis*. The one who gives the *Exercises* is obliged to ask many questions and get to know details, to be able really to help the person.²⁴ Ignatius wishes that in this acquiring of information the one accompanying may let himself be guided by a deep respect for the person concerned, whose private thoughts and

sins he should not desire to ask or know about.²⁵

However, the one who gives the *Exercises* would not be able to guarantee *cura personalis* if he were not informed of the different movements and disturbances which the good and the bad spirit arouse in the retreatant's heart.

Cura personalis for the many

It is true that *cura personalis* within the *Exercises* constitutes a particular case and a privileged situation, but in the practice of the first Jesuits the same principle and the same limitations flowing from it are maintained, to know how to give *cura personalis* to each one, according to the way in which these persons may have wished to dispose themselves, in interpersonal contact.

The book of the *Exercises* does not mention it, but the first Jesuits avoided large audiences, giving up the preacher's tone in favour of personal dialogue. The ideal remained the conversation, the *colloquy*. It is by conversation that Ignatius won companions for himself, and by conversations that Ignatius prepared people for the *Spiritual Exercises*, where these conversations, more precisely directed, retained the character of dialogue.

Even if today the contributions of group dynamics, of mass communication, are recognised, there is as it were a return to the sources, moving from preached retreats to individually-guided *Exercises*, even though this *cura personalis* involves limitations on the number of those who can benefit. This is the reason why

²³ *Spiritual Exercises* n.15

²⁴ *Spiritual Exercises* n.6

²⁵ *Spiritual Exercises* n.17

Ignatius himself does not present the experience of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a monolithic block to take or leave, but he himself envisages, respecting the desires and realistic possibilities of each one, 'light' or 'heavy' exercises,²⁶ so that according to each one's openness, the person may be helped more on his or her personal road to God. By pushing *cura personalis* as far as possible Ignatius opens the door to what has been called the democratisation of Christian experience, both by exercises made in everyday life and by the extension in our time of the ministry of spiritual accompaniment, thanks to the help of men and women well-prepared for the different types of *cura personalis* who dedicate themselves and their time to it.

It remains to be said, and repeated with Ignatius to all those involved in *cura personalis*, that the reason why the one who gives and the one who receives engage themselves in this conversation is to seek for the Creator to communicate himself to the person who wishes to be faithful to him, embracing him in his love and praise, disposing him to enter upon the way where he can serve him more in the future.²⁷

It is so obvious that the one who gives should find himself full of good advice, interesting ideas on theology, exegesis and spirituality, and completely ready to help the one receiving, especially when he really needs it. All the same, in Ignatian pedagogy, he is called to efface himself so that the Lord may converse, without intermediary, with the one who receives.

Sometimes, or rather often, our faith in that contact, even with God, is weak. Ignatius himself had had the experience of being "taught by God"²⁸ and had felt in himself God's desire to give himself to the one who enters with his whole heart into conversation with him, disposed with his whole heart to receive him. So one must surrender to the evidence that the relationship between the one who gives and the one who receives has its origin not only in a reciprocal relationship, but in the desire for that immediate and efficacious communion which the Creator wishes to have with the creature.²⁹ In essence, *cura personalis* is simply help, from person to person, so that God and man may really meet. At the end of all the *Annotations*, Ignatius dares to write³⁰ that the more a person finds himself alone and apart, the more apt he makes himself to approach his Creator and Lord and unite himself with him, and the more he is thus united with him, the more he is disposed to receive graces and gifts from his divine and sovereign goodness.

Does this not go against what we are looking for today in a Church which is perceived as 'communion', in so many lively new groups, which try out the benefits of the community dimension as the blessing of life? Nevertheless, Ignatius insists from the beginning of the *Exercises* and as a principle³¹ that it is not in the first place humanity which is created to serve God, but man, the person, called by God by his personal name. Thus persons never dissent completely in the community where each one's 'me', his freedom and his will, are valued. In synergy with God who gives the growth,³²

²⁶ *Spiritual Exercises* n.18-20

²⁷ *Spiritual Exercises* n.15

²⁸ *Autobiography* n.27

²⁹ *Spiritual Exercises* n.15 and n.231

³⁰ *Spiritual Exercises* n.20

³¹ *Spiritual Exercises* n.23

³² 1 Corinthians 3:7

man is in person the author of his growth and receives this gift personally from the One who is his Master and his friend, with whom he makes a colloquy as servant and friend.³³ Here *cura personalis*, arising out of 'familiar conversation' between the one who gives and the one who receives, comes to its fullness of meaning in God, the first to be served in everything.

Is it to be wondered at that, formed in this *cura personalis*, the first Jesuits and their successors have it before their eyes at every step of their pastoral and social, educational and intellectual ministry, at least in making their task personal? From the beginning, the favoured ministry was 'preaching the gospel', but in a way different from the scholastic manner, the *Constitutions* stipulate, rather in 'conversing' with people, as person to person.

Cura personalis for students

Precisely to transform this scholastic manner, *cura personalis* comes in as a characteristic of Jesuit education. The *Ratio Studiorum* of 1599 takes this personal solicitude to heart with respect to the vocation of each pupil, the personal history of each one.

The educators and teachers must grasp that the example of their personal lives brings more to the formation of the students than do their words. They are to love these students, knowing them personally (*cura personalis*), living a respectful familiarity with them. This personal knowledge ought to allow the adaptation of study time, the programmes and methods, to the needs of each one.

³³ *Spiritual Exercises* n.54

³⁴ *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education* (Rome 1986) n.42-44

This *cura personalis* in all its fullness and in all its concrete practice has seemed to us a pivot of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In the Society's educational experience, it becomes the pivot of all Ignatian education, which envisages a personalised pedagogy, insofar as this desire proves possible, given the weight of all that is imposed on our institutions from outside by states and markets, for the recognition of diplomas and for an often indispensable financial support.

It is in the prolongation of the *cura personalis* practised in the *Exercises* that the *Ratio Studiorum* (also in the updated version of *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*³⁴) envisages in the schools and universities not only academic excellence, professional specialisation or the most advanced scientific research, but through these undertakings the integral formation of the person for responsible life in the people of God and in human society.

Touched by love

It must be recognised that, in an impersonal environment where only credits and results count towards recognition by the state and support from the market, *cura personalis* is more necessary than ever, because, as Pope Benedict recalls in his first encyclical,³⁵ it is not ideologies which move humanity forward but persons, touched by the love of Christ. This papal conviction concerns other domains also, as for example that of social activity, where there is an easy risk of substituting the best of management for the presence of insertion among the poor.

³⁵ *Deus caritas est* (God is Love) (2006)

In urging *cura personalis*, Ignatius and his companions wanted to follow the Christ who wished to be served personally in every person who suffers or has need of his help, by consoling him “in the way in which friends are wont to console each other.”³⁶


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³⁶ *Spiritual Exercises* n.224