

CONSOLATION OF MIND AND HEART

The Search for Meaning and Happiness

Richard Boileau

A MAJOR AXIS OF IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY is the proposition that God can be found in all things. And ‘all things’ include the words that people speak, words being symbols used to signify the array of thoughts and feelings that constitute the human experience. People speak repeatedly, though sometimes in coded language, about what matters most to them, about what they desire and what they fear. Two powerful forces that underlie much of what we talk about are the search for meaning and the search for happiness. My purpose here is to consider these in relation to the search for God with reference to Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*.

The Pursuit of Meaning

After the Second World War, the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1905–1997) wrote *Man’s Search for Meaning*, based on his observations in Nazi concentration camps. In the midst of horror and apparent absurdity, what would impress him most was that meaningfulness could be found in suffering itself, and that this accounted for the survival of those who endured brutal and dehumanising treatment. His observations moved him to conclude that ‘man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life’.¹

In 1948 Frankl received a doctorate in philosophy after defending a dissertation on the relationship between meaning and spirituality. At the end of his life this dissertation, ‘The Unconscious God’, would be revised as *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, based on the place

¹ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984), 121.



Viktor Frankl

of religiousness in a system for making sense of human experience. Throughout, he referred to an innate impulse for transcendence which positively affects our life when it is free of falsehood.

Frankl agreed with his contemporaries that human behaviour is informed by both conscious and unconscious content.² But he distinguished himself from Freud and Jung inasmuch as he understood the unconscious mind to include a spiritual dimension which is not guided by instinct alone.³

Freud viewed instinct as the determinant of human behaviour and dismissed religion as nothing more than a neurosis. Jung, by contrast, made allowance for spiritual content in the unconscious, but his archetypes nevertheless ‘always remained something more or less instinctual’.⁴ From his conviction that human beings are animated by an innate hunger for meaning, Frankl developed a particular approach to treatment that he called logotherapy—healing by giving meaning. *Logos* is a pivotal reality for Christians. We readily associate it with Christ, the Word of God.

For Frankl, ‘man exists authentically only when he is not driven but, rather, responsible’.⁵ His theory helps to inform our understanding of the psycho-spiritual dynamic of human existence, in that he stressed the singular importance of the spiritual core of a person:

By being centred around the existential, personal, spiritual core, being human is not only individualized but also integrated. Thus the

² The ‘unconscious’ may be defined as the area of the psyche where unknown and sometimes repressed fears and needs are kept, which play a significant role in our conscious behaviour.

³ ‘The word spiritual is what is human in man.’ (Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning* [New York, Basic Books, 2000], 28.)

⁴ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 71.

⁵ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 32.

spiritual core, and only the spiritual core, warrants and constitutes oneness and wholeness in man.⁶

Frankl clearly implied that God has created in each person a predisposition to relationship with God—indeed, that our existence is made authentic by this relationship because it reveals to our conscious mind the truth of who we are. This predisposition, he might have argued, is a function of our spiritual unconscious.

Based on his analytical work, Frankl believed that, against the backdrop of this simple predisposition, stands,

... unconscious religiousness. This unconscious religiousness is to be understood as a latent relation to transcendence inherent in man ... our concept of an unconscious God refers to man's hidden relation to a God who himself is hidden.⁷

His theory helps to conceptualise the deep desire, camouflaged, repressed or explicit, that all humans share to find meaning and purpose for their existence, and how the Holy Spirit operates both in our conscious and unconscious minds to foster responsibility, authenticity and self-transcendence. We seem to be ordained to deal with huge existential questions that emanate from and point to God as origin and fulfilment. If God gives meaning to our life, God also gives it purpose.

Speaking to the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in 1985, Frankl concluded, 'Truly self-transcendence is the essence of human existence'.⁸ In this same lecture, he also described a crisis of meaninglessness, suggesting that 'it mainly manifests itself in boredom and apathy'.⁹ Today, we might add to these the frantic pursuit of 'extreme' sports and other activities such as substance abuse and compulsive behaviours that promise powerful sensation but invariably disappoint. The existential vacuum to which Frankl referred shares many of the characteristics of the emptiness described by Pascal who, after stating that 'all men seek happiness', asked:

What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now

⁶ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 34.

⁷ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 68.

⁸ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 138.

⁹ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 138.

remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object—in other words, by God Himself.¹⁰

Hans Urs von Balthasar related this emptiness directly to the angst that drives the search for meaning: ‘Anxiety has arrived on the scene with the void, and Christ’s redemption does not eliminate this void’.¹¹

An authentic movement to find God in this empty space leads to what Ignatius names consolation. Conversely, resistance to God results in desolation. Specifically, Ignatius called consolation,

... every increase in hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one’s soul, quieting it and giving peace in its Creator and Lord (Exx 316).

He defined desolation, on the other hand, as,

... darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to things low and earthly, the unquiet of different agitations and temptations, moving to want of confidence, without hope, without love, when one finds oneself all lazy, tepid, sad, and as if separated from his Creator and Lord (Exx 317).

The fact that the experiences of consolation and desolation are not limited to those who go through the Exercises leads us to consider the search for meaning and/or happiness as particularly fertile ground for spiritual development, specifically in the practice of spiritual direction.

Near the end of his earthly life, Jesus recognised the sometimes troubling challenges of the course on which he was set. He reminded his apostles that they were free to opt for another way. Peter answered, perhaps even with resignation, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.’ (John 6:68) It is as though Peter had said, ‘Only you can make sense of our life; only you can give it context’. Peter spoke for all those who seek meaning and discover it in freedom from the tyranny of the false and frightened self. Freedom is the key to relating the search for meaning to the search for God.

¹⁰ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 45.

¹¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 142.



God is truth (John 14:6). For Christians, Jesus is the perfect revelation of truth in human language. He is, therefore, also the path that leads to abundant life. The spiritual journey that we observe in those whom we have the honour to accompany in spiritual direction is, in effect, a struggle against fear and falsehood. We echo in countless ways God's constant admonition, 'be not afraid'. We encourage them to see in the evidence of daily living an anthropology that ties their own existence into a much larger system comprising meaning, identity and purpose. We help them to test for truth and to 'connect the dots' through discernment.

If consolation is the assurance that progress is being made on the road of discernment, meaning is the string of milestones, recognised by the intellect and the heart, that make that progress possible. This is because consolation is, in effect, a conscious perception of positive movement in response to the Spirit's presence. It is made possible by a mind that looks and reaches outward towards the way, the truth and the life which are represented by Christ.

Meaning in the Exercises

The statement of Principle and Foundation of the *Spiritual Exercises* summarises our Christian understanding of the meaning and purpose of human existence. The stated purpose of the steps proposed for the

four-week cycle is to ‘regulate one’s life without determining oneself through any tendency that is disordered’ (Exx 21), in other words, to decide and act in ‘true spiritual freedom’.¹²

Freedom, as articulated through the *Spiritual Exercises*, facilitates the discernment of meaning. We may look to the Election and to the use of the Examen, or Examination of Consciousness, as respectively enabling this discernment and pointing the way towards it. In a fascinating article which includes comparisons between Ignatian spirituality and psychology, Phyllis Zagano and C. Kevin Gillespie write:

The Examen’s focus on spiritual movements is enriched by an explicit attention also to personal psychological strengths. And of course the same interaction can occur when it comes to unfreedoms, weaknesses and sinfulness. Though it is important never simply to confuse grace and nature, they remain inseparable; indeed, grace builds on nature.¹³

Ultimately, nature leads to God, its creator. Balthasar noted that nothing created is without a supernatural aspect: ‘Nature as we know it is the nature that is moved and moving between the Fall and redemption’.¹⁴ The promise of this claim is that if we begin with human experience—psychological experience, for example—and follow the trail honestly, we come quite ‘naturally’ to a destination on quite another plane. After all, the so-called natural world was ‘created by God within the ambit of supernatural grace and ordered to a single supernatural end: the contemplation of God’.¹⁵ Reflecting on Frankl’s work in relation to our discovery of personal vocation, Herbert Alphonso notes that ‘nothing so unifies and integrates in depth as meaning; we spontaneously shed what is meaningless, to remain with and interiorize and assimilate what is meaningful’.¹⁶ And, as we are incarnated beings, psychology and spirituality ‘must never be divorced from one another’.¹⁷

¹² David Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises: A Literal Translation and Contemporary Reading* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 22–23, 26–27.

¹³ ‘Ignatian Spirituality and Positive Psychology’, *The Way*, 45/4 (October 2006), 57.

¹⁴ Balthasar, *The Christian and Anxiety*, 116.

¹⁵ Balthasar, *The Christian and Anxiety*, 115.

¹⁶ Herbert Alphonso, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: The Search for Meaning through the Spiritual Exercises* (New York: Paulist, 2001), 21.

¹⁷ Alphonso, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation*, 21.

In effect, God acts on the body, the mind and the soul from the single, unifying truth of a person's essential identity and purpose, whether the energy of God is exerted consciously or unconsciously, spiritually or psychologically. But, as John of the Cross observed, the body and mind can act as barriers to the soul 'because of creature forms and veils weighing upon and covering it'.¹⁸ Personality and health, both physical and mental, are factors in spiritual development. If, as Alphonso suggests, 'spirituality is the highest or the deepest level of psychology',¹⁹ then it follows that the knowledge and practice of the lesser realm must inform and affect knowledge and practice of the greater one. Otherwise, spirituality would lack a key element of its intended vitality.

The single, unifying truth of a person's essential identity and purpose

The role of the director is to assist in the reconciliation of often conflicting material in the conscious and the unconscious mind. There is a striking similarity between the disordered tendencies to which Ignatius referred and the darker content of the unconscious. Negative material in the unconscious often surfaces as fears, impulses and obsessions, which impede spiritual insight and progress; destructive content in the conscious mind presents as biases, misconceptions and false personalities—all of which reduce the freedom to act in relation to cherished values and goals.

The premise from which both Ignatius and Frankl operated was that spirituality is not only part of the human make-up, it is the heart of our humanity. Ignatius wrote of the prior movement of God's grace; Frankl wrote of latent religiousness. Both offered a positive and convergent view of meaning as a function of relationship with a hidden God. Both charted challenging steps to achieve meaningfulness. Frankl would have readily agreed with Ignatius that the directee must be helped to reach a disposition of 'openness, generosity, and courage'.²⁰ Without these qualities on the part of the director as well, the road that would lead to truth, integration, authenticity and self-transcendence is restricted.

The purpose of the article is not to suggest that the two men's approaches were identical. Far from it; the differences were significant.

¹⁸ 'The Ascent of Mount Carmel', quoted in Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 34.

¹⁹ Alphonso, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation*, 21.

²⁰ Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship*, 9.

One view emerged from the personal observations of a Christian soldier; the other from the professional observations of a Jewish clinician. One drew on a long-established religious tradition; the other on the still emerging practice of psychiatry. These differences must be appreciated. As different as they may be, however, the two vantage points of Ignatius and Frankl look upon a common reality: that our hearts find no peace until they rest in God.²¹ Fortunately, God is universally accessible, provided we are free of fear and its attendant falsehoods. Peter van Breemen has commented that ‘for Ignatius our deepest longing is identical with the will of God. To his mind this was crucial ... Ignatius was convinced that we must find this will of God in our own hearts.’²²

What dialogue between Frankl’s and Ignatius’ disciplines suggests about the spiritual accompaniment of people searching for the divine is that this accompaniment, whether Ignatian in style or not, can be opened to all people, whatever their confession—and even if they are atheists. God’s mercy and love are incarnate in the totality of our being—the psyche as well as the soul. God calls through words, images and experiences, both conscious and unconscious. The evidence of consciousness to which God holds the key is meaning that satisfies every man’s and woman’s deepest yearning.

The Pursuit of Happiness

Today, our world is seized by an equally powerful quest to that for meaning: where to find happiness. The search for happiness is universal. It cuts across all ages, cultures and beliefs. In our Christian spiritual tradition, ‘joy’ is the word frequently used to describe a state of being that is experienced as delight in good times and tends to be felt simply as peace in darker times. The search for happiness is in reality a quest for spiritual joy.

But often people fail to find true joy because they look in all the wrong places. They are sure neither of what it is nor of where it is to be found. In fact, for the overwhelming majority of people, pleasure serves as a substitute for joy. For many, the frenetic craving for instantaneous thrills is a warped expression of an aching void at the centre of their

²¹ See Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.

²² Peter van Breeman, *The God of Our Deepest Longings* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 2009), 7.

being. In part because of the tremendous influence of advertising and in part because their woundedness inclines them in the direction of narcissism, they seek self-satisfaction, which often leads to desolation.

The word 'joy' holds a special place in understanding the vital aspiration of the human spirit. Note that I am using 'happiness' and 'joy' somewhat interchangeably here. Though different authors assign particular meanings to each, these vary from one to another. The important thing is to distinguish them from 'pleasure', which is conditional and ephemeral. Sadly, too few people make that distinction today. Common sense would suggest that joy is nothing more than a pleasurable emotion due to well-being or satisfaction. That is, in fact, the definition that the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers. This understanding of joy is not inaccurate but it is woefully inadequate and somewhat misleading. Spiritual joy is not due to anything external. It requires neither the presence of pleasurable feelings nor the absence of pain. Spiritual joy is also more than an emotion. It is the capacity to greet all situations with equanimity:

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1: 2–4)

Perhaps the most challenging figure on the topic of joy is the medieval Italian Francis of Assisi, whose life combined it with poverty. His life was a continuous and courageous pursuit of authenticity which snatched joy from the jaws of fear. Walking one day with Brother Leo, his confidant, he began to enumerate a long list of achievements that he dismissed as not being 'perfect joy'. Then to his perplexed disciple he declared that,

... above all the graces and all the gifts of the Holy Spirit which Christ grants to his friends, is the grace of overcoming oneself, and accepting willingly, out of love for Christ, all suffering, injury, discomfort and contempt.²³

²³ 'Fioretti' (chapter 8) in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume 3, edited by Regis Armstrong, Wayne Hellmann and William Short (New York: New York City Press, 2001), 580.



Francis, whom Ignatius greatly admired according to his autobiography, did not obtain joy by attending to the selfish criteria of satisfaction but by the pursuit of value. He discovered from experience, as Thomas Aquinas would by theory,²⁴ that joy is the fruit of love. The Contemplation to Gain Love, to which Ignatius refers at the end of the *Spiritual Exercises*, is the most direct

path to perfect joy. But since neither love nor joy is the exclusive domain of religious people, humanity's search for happiness must be an innate and natural drive, embedded in the human spirit by God, to seek love in its most perfect expression—namely God. When the search is diverted by fear or vice, desolation serves as a correction. When it is on course towards God, it is confirmed by consolation.

Joy, in effect, is the consolation that God provides for the effort required to conform our life to that of Christ. The state of joy, as opposed to the peak experience of momentary delight, is a gift of the Holy Spirit, which is reflected by the confidence or hope that we develop in God's benevolence and providence. Humanity's pursuit of happiness is correctly called an inalienable right because its true origin is God's love for each of us. Despite its many deformations, the impetus to find happiness is divine; it invites us to communion, where true joy is to be found.

The problem, of course, is that we may confuse this right with entitlement to all forms of toxic or illicit entertainment. In such cases, the outcome can be alienation and desolation, which exacerbates the problem of meaninglessness and despair, and causes addiction to ever more mindless pleasure-seeking. Spiritual joy is the culmination of humanity's innate search for truth and love. It is the victory of value over self-satisfaction, the vindication of hope and the seal of authenticity.

²⁴ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q. 28, Art. 1.

Conditions that are propitious for the discovery of joy can be deliberately created. Some are generic, such as kindness, forgiveness and the appreciation of beauty. Others are peculiar to one person, depending on the use of particular gifts. But joy itself cannot be created. In fact, Frankl argued that the pursuit of joy as self-gratification is the surest way of missing it:

By virtue of what I would call the pre-reflective ontological self-understanding he knows that he is actualizing himself precisely to the extent to which he is forgetting himself, and he is forgetting himself by giving himself, be it through serving a cause higher than himself, or loving a person other than himself.²⁵

The harder we try to create joy for its own sake, the more likely we are to fail because seeking self-satisfaction is inauthentic and tends to close the heart to the meaningful, loving relationships where true joy is to be found. Joy is achieved through self-transcendence. It is precisely the focus on discernment to love freely and fully (*discreta caritas*) that gives the Spiritual Exercises their potency to deliver spiritual joy.

The Fourth Week of the Exercises, in fact, is designed to help people to grow in the desire for Jesus to reveal the joy of his resurrection, and to embrace this joy as the foundation for authentic discipleship. The search for happiness, therefore, can be understood as a powerful magnet that draws the heart of a pilgrim towards its destination in God, and towards the joy that crowns communion with God: 'The union of the Fourth Week represents the hospitality of Christ, who for me has undergone death only that I might undergo joy'.²⁶ This joy engages our whole being and radiates beyond our private lives:

Ignatian joy is the psycho-religious energy that desires to bring others happiness, harmony of heart, insight, peace, reconciliation—whatever makes them experience a compatibility between their lives and what they see, or feel, or intuit as God's desires for them.²⁷

Paul Legavre declares that joy is at the heart of everything that is of God, and that 'God communicates by means of joy'.²⁸ It may be

²⁵ Frankl, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, 130.

²⁶ Howard Gray, 'Joy and Friendship in the Fourth Week', *The Way Supplement*, 99 (2000), 14.

²⁷ Gray, 'Joy and Friendship in the Fourth Week', 20.

²⁸ Paul Legavre, 'Discerning Joy: The Ignatian Way', *The Way*, 47/1–2 (January/April 2008), 150.

suggested, therefore, that joy is the meaning that is understood by the heart that gives its assent to the Spirit.²⁹ God's voice is audible even to those who do not ask explicitly for spiritual direction.

Pedagogy for the Journey

Underpinning any application of the Exercises is an immutable essence that is not compromised by reasonable adaptation to people or circumstances. In fact, I believe that if we view the Exercises more as a method than as a particular series of prescribed activities we do Ignatius even greater honour. Their genius is to begin with what is richest in the human experience—the knowledge and feeling of being loved. They enable the directee progressively to face obstacles with hope and to embrace his or her giftedness and mission with confidence, before setting out on a course that will be marked with consolations that reinforce responsible, loving and life-giving decisions.

This dynamic of spiritual growth, instruction relative to the practice of praying, initiation into the discernment of spirits, and the development of liberty and commitment together form a very powerful method that transcends the particular protocol Saint Ignatius rigorously applied to his own circumstances. These were his exercises and part of 'a widely employed and recognised *genre* of the period'.³⁰ They are not meant to be ours *per se*, nor those of our directees. Literalism in the use of his insightful work diminishes its scope and potential.

We live in an increasingly secular age, but there is no reason to limit the horizon of the Exercises as a result. It is possible to expand any person's consciousness of what dynamics are at work as he or she expresses a desire to find greater meaning or happiness without explicit reference to prayer or religion. The *Spiritual Exercises* offers adequate resources to assist in such situations, provided the director is open to exciting and often unpredictable possibilities, and possesses the skills required to listen effectively and respond appropriately. In this way the face and the place of Truth and Love, meaning and happiness, and the

²⁹ See Maurice Giuliani, 'Les motions de l'Esprit', quoted in 'Discerning Joy: The Ignatian Way', 150.

³⁰ Keith Beaumont, 'Newman as Theologian and Spiritual Guide', in *John Henry Newman: Doctor of the Church* (Oxford: Family Publications, 2007), 30.

ever-present Spirit of God in this universal adventure may eventually be revealed.

The words that people use in everyday conversations often allude to angst about the particular circumstances of their lives. They frequently reveal, directly or indirectly, a deep-seated search for meaning and happiness. Most speak of one or the other, preferring the path of the intellect or of affectivity depending on personality; some speak of both. In either case they signify an undifferentiated search for God.³¹ Among some believers and most non-believers alike, meaning and happiness appear as secular realms in which classic expressions of spirituality are not perceived as providing relevant or adequate solutions to existential problems. This is the unfortunate consequence of a compartmentalisation that arbitrarily isolates spirituality from the human sciences. More integrated and flexible models could be applied to great advantage.

Respected authors such as Peter van Breemen have used the method that underlies the Exercises in books which can be read profitably by Christians of any spiritual tradition. These books illustrate how the method can be used effectively in accompaniment even without explicit reference to the *Spiritual Exercises* itself, as evidenced by a concordance of exercises and excerpts that was published almost a decade ago.³² Moreover, in the case of the mentoring of people of non-Christian or of no faith, the method may even be used without reference to praying with scripture, at least in the initial stages. 'God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:3–4) would not be limited to traditional categories.

Spiritual directors who welcome seekers after truth and love are instruments of God's peace. To do the job well, it is incumbent upon us competently to apply a range of proven tools. Among these is the method that frames the Exercises. It will be used in its traditional form by only a small percentage of people. Yet many others—like the

³¹ 'The thought of God, and nothing short of it, is the happiness of man ... the affections require a something more vast and more enduring than anything created.' (John Henry Newman, 'The Thought of God, the Stay of the Soul', from *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, quoted in Beaumont, 'Newman as Theologian', 37.)

³² 'Les écrits du P. Pierre van Breemen pour accompagner les Exercices spirituels', *Cahiers de spiritualité ignatienne*, 97 (2001), 65–69.

Samaritan woman—thirst unconsciously for something that the world cannot provide. The method that supports the Exercises could help many more people by meeting them where they are in order to bring them along a road that leads to eternal meaning and perfect joy.

Richard Boileau is a permanent deacon in the archdiocese of Montreal, Canada and executive vice-president of Health Partners International of Canada (www.hpicanada.ca). He is the founder of Crib and Cross Franciscan Ministries (www.cribandcross.com), dedicated to the application of gospel teaching to daily life. His activities include grief counselling and spiritual direction, online reflections on Franciscan and gospel themes, missions and retreats, and humanitarian outreach.