

Indifference

Saint Paul's appeal to the community at Philippi includes the following:

‘Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things’ (Philippians 4:8).

Since the whole cosmos is filled with the glory of God, to be open to God means to be open to everything that is. Paul could also say, later in the same letter:

‘I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me’ (Philippians 4:11-13).

The key is to want only what God wants. However good something might be in itself, we must be ready to let it go if love calls us to do so. When alternatives present themselves to us we are to strive to hold them in equal balance till we discover which alternative is willed by God. When we know God's will we choose that alternative with all our mind and soul and will and strength.

When we use the word ‘indifference’ for this, we do not mean to imply that we are without any inclinations in the matter. We may find that we are much more attracted to one alternative than the other, and this for any number of reasons. The term ‘indifference’, as we are using it, refers to the state which we come to before making a decision, of being ready for whatever God wants, indifferent to our own natural inclinations and preferences. Whatever the apparent relative importance from other points of view, the only ultimate consideration for us is God's will. To come to a position of indifference may require much self-discipline.

In the final paragraph of Book One of his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John of the Cross writes:

‘In self dispossession the heart is at rest. It wants nothing. Because it is grounded on Jesus not on itself. It does not matter whether it feels elated or dejected.’

Saint Robert Bellarmine, in his *The Ascent of the Monk to God*, Grad I, writes:

‘Consider that to be for your real good which brings you to your goal, and that to be really bad which cuts you off from this goal. Prosperity and adversity, riches and poverty, health and sickness, honour and ignominy, life and death should not be sought after for themselves by the wise man nor are they to be avoided for themselves; if they contribute to the glory of God and your eternal happiness, they are of good and are to be sought after; if they are obstacles to this, they are evil and are to be avoided.’

One of the best statements on the kind of Indifference of which we are speaking is that of Karl Rahner in his Ignatian mysticism of joy in the world. Because of the ambiguities in the English word, Rahner prefers the Spanish ‘*Indiferencia*’ as understood by Ignatius himself.

‘Ignatius approached the world from God. Not the other way about. Because he has delivered himself in the lowliness of an adoring self-surrender to the God beyond the whole world and to his will, for this reason and for this reason alone he is prepared to obey his word even when, out of the silent desert of his daring flight into God, he is, as it were, sent back into the world, which he had found the courage to abandon in the foolishness of the Cross. From this results the double characteristic which is proper to Ignatian joy in the world: the maxims of ‘*Indiferencia*’ and of ‘finding God in all things’. The first is the presupposition of the second.

indiferença : the calm readiness for every command of God, the equanimity which, out of the realisation that God is always greater than anything we can experience of him or wherein we can find him, continually detaches itself from every determinate thing which man is tempted to regard as *the* point in which alone God meets him. Hence the characteristic of Ignatian piety is not so much situated in a material element, in the promotion of a particular thought or a particular practice, is not one of the special ways to God, but is itself something formal, an ultimate attitude towards all thoughts, practices and ways, because all possession of God must leave God as greater beyond all possession of him.

Out of such an attitude of *indiferença* there springs of itself the perpetual readiness to hear a new call from God to tasks other than those previously engaged in, continually to decamp from those fields where one wanted to find God and to serve him; there springs the will to be at hand like a servant always ready for new assignments; the courage to accept the duty of changing oneself and of having nowhere a permanent resting-place as in a restless wandering towards the restful God; the courage to regard no way to him as being *the* way, but rather to seek him on all ways. Moved by such a spirit, even the passionate love of the Cross and of sharing in the ignominy of the death of Christ is still ruled by *indiferença* : the Cross, yes, *if* it should please his divine Majesty to call to such a death in life. *Indiferença* is possible only where the will to flee the world is alive, and yet this *indiferença* in its turn disguises that love for the foolishness of the Cross into the daily *moderation* of a *normal style of life* marked by *good sense* ...

In brief: such *indiferença* becomes a seeking of God in *all* things. Because God is greater than everything, he can be found if one flees away from the world, but he can come to meet one on the streets in the midst of the world. For this reason Ignatius acknowledges only one law in his restless search for God: to seek him in all things; and this means: to seek him in that spot where at any particular time he wants to be found, and it means, too, to seek him in the world if he wants to show himself in it.

In this seeking-God-in-all-things we have the Ignatian formula for a higher synthesis of that division of piety into a mystical one of flight from the world and a prophetic one of divinely commissioned work in the world, which is customary in the history of religion. In that formula these contradictions are in a Hegelian sense 'resolved'. Ignatius is concerned only with the God above the whole world, but he knows that this God, precisely because he is really above the whole world and not merely the dialectical antithesis to the whole world, is also to be found *in the world*, when his sovereign will bids us enter upon the way of the world...

Ignatius knows that he can seek the God of Jesus Christ and find him also in the world, if this should please him. And so he is prepared in *indiferença* to seek him and him alone, always him alone, but also him everywhere, also in the world: *in actione contemplativus* ... Once we have found the God of the life beyond, then such an attitude will break out of deep seclusion in God into the world, and work as long as day lasts, immerse itself in the work of time in the world, and yet await with deep longing the Coming of the Lord.'

(Theological Investigations III, 290ff)