

IGNATIAN-INSPIRED SPIRITUALITY IN A SCANDINAVIAN ECUMENICAL SETTING

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THE IGNATIAN EXAMEN encourages us to look back, and in that spirit I would like to look back here on the journey that my wife, Heidi, and I have made over the last twenty years. In that time the spirituality of which the Examen is a part has challenged us and formed our lives, during the process of physically, mentally and spiritually building and leading an Ignatian-inspired retreat house, Ådalen Retræte, in the Lutheran country of Denmark.

Following a Dream

Heidi and I grew up in a nondenominational local church, of which I was pastor for some years until the beginning of 2001. At that time we knew nothing of Ignatian spirituality. My first encounter with the way of Ignatius was in an ecumenical setting in Sweden during March 2001. I was in my mid-forties and going through what some would call a serious life crisis. On the outside everything looked good. I was in the prime of my life, happily married with two lovely teenage daughters, and following what I thought to be my calling. But in the midst of all this, I felt an emptiness that seemed to suck the life out of me, a sense of loss of direction that seemed to be growing.

A friend recommended that I should go on a retreat in Sweden. I really had no idea what that meant—but a few years earlier, I had picked up a book by the Swedish author Magnus Malm. Something in his writing was disturbing me and calling out to me—but at the beginning I just did not seem to be able to grasp what that was. It so

happened that the retreat I was able to attend was led by Magnus Malm. What I did not know at the time was that he is very much inspired by Ignatian spirituality and, outside the Jesuit community, he is probably the person who has had the biggest influence on Ignatian thinking and spirituality in Scandinavia. Something very significant seemed to happen to me on that first five-day silent retreat. It started me out on a quest for a deeper and more holistic form of spirituality. Every year for the next five years, I made a five-day Ignatian retreat in Sweden. My interest in Ignatian spirituality gradually increased, and I started reading and studying as much Ignatian literature as I could find.

In 2004, Heidi joined me on retreat for the first time. Afterwards both of us felt a longing to deepen our own commitment to Christ, and to share our experience of Ignatian spirituality through silent retreats with other people in Denmark. The dream of starting an ecumenical Ignatian retreat house in Denmark was born in us—but we had no idea how this could ever become a reality. At the beginning we were quite ignorant of the fact that there was already a retreat movement in Denmark. We had never heard of the concept of silent retreats before I found myself doing one. We began meeting others who had been going on such retreats for a number of years. We found that several of them, Catholics as well as Protestants, had an encouraging attitude towards our dream.

The religious climate in Denmark is very much under the influence of the Lutheran state Church, of which a large part of the Danish population are members. Being from a non-Lutheran church background, with little experience in ecumenical work, and being inspired by Roman Catholic, Ignatian spirituality made our dream quite a challenge. We still find that this keeps us in contact with our daily need for God's grace and guidance!

One of the main obstacles to Ignatian spirituality in Denmark is that, until recently, the story told about Ignatius and the Jesuits in Danish pastoral training has not been a flattering one. The focus has been very much on the clash between the Lutheran Reformation and the Jesuit Counter-Reformation. Lately there has been some change, in that a more nuanced perception is spreading. In some areas—including pastoral training—there is an increasing curiosity

about the spirituality of Ignatius and how it can be understood and applied in a Protestant context.

In many ways we find that we can see our own experiences in the story of Ignatius: starting to notice the movements of the spirits—what brings life and what leaves us lifeless; and starting to find a way through discernment—what is God’s will? What desires, gifts and possibilities has God sent into our lives? Where are the doors open and where are they closed? At times things were blurred and difficult to discern, but the practical spirituality of Ignatius helped us to step forward and try—even when the waves threatened to swallow us. As in many other situations, it is often helpful to look back and see God’s hand at work. We see it in the gift of other people who came our way and brought clarity and ability. Together with our two fish and five loaves, this gift proved to be more than enough for our needs.

In 2009, I made the Spiritual Exercises in a thirty-day retreat at Loyola Hall in the UK. In many ways, this was a life changing experience! I found myself meeting Christ in his humanity and walking with him; seeing his struggles, tears and frustrations helped me bring my own humanity together with my spirituality. The idea of God becoming human and meeting us where we are was life-giving. ‘Finding God in all things’ came alive. ‘Consolation and desolation’ became more than just words. The retreat helped me to begin understanding myself and my relationship with God in a new and deeper way.

Ignatius speaks about being motivated by wanting to ‘be of benefit to souls’ (*ayudar las almas*).¹ I guess there could be quite a discussion about exactly what that means. One thing that has been extremely helpful for my soul is encountering and living through the Ignatian way of seeing God’s will and my will as friends. I have come to see the deeper longings and desires of my soul as reflections of God’s will, and learned to discern and understand the things that help me move in the direction of what God longs for me to be. And I have seen how the gifts, longings and desires that God has placed in me can indeed be part of that movement, helping me find my way.

¹ *Autobiography*, n. 54.

I think it is fair to say that from my early youth, I had seen my will and God's will more as rivals or even enemies. But Ignatian spirituality has given me a clearer vision of myself as being created in the image of God. Even though sins and faults have blurred it and distorted it, God's image—God's gifts, longings and desires—is still there. If God's will and mine are friends instead of enemies they can start to work together in finding a way forward. Not that it always is easy; even as friends, there are things to be worked on and disagreements to be sorted out. But this does seem to be a very different perspective, one that is filled with hope.

Building the Reality

During 2010, the practical side of the retreat house started to come together. For some time we had been speaking openly about our dream and, during the spring, we asked some people who shared it if they would be part of a board of directors so that we could work on it together. From the beginning, we were aware of the fact that we needed people around us to support and guide us in the development of the project.

We had the dream of creating the retreat house in an ecumenical setting, with people from different church backgrounds bringing their unique experience and gifts with them. At the same time we wanted to focus on Ignatian spirituality and its ability to accommodate diversity. This was not an easy process. Open working relationships seldom are! There have been a number of challenges and bumps on the road but, all in all, we have discovered the capacity to work together. It is our experience that the path of Ignatian spiritual accompaniment—depending on the Holy Spirit as the true guide—gives room for a spacious and respectful way of moving forward together, even for people from different backgrounds. We do not have to leave our homes to walk together. We just need to respect each other on the road.

We were presented with the opportunity of purchasing an old restaurant, which we had been looking at for a couple of years. The building was in bad shape but perfectly situated in the middle of some of Denmark's most beautiful scenery. Again the timing was perfect, as God called forth the right people at the right moment. The finance for purchasing and renovating the old restaurant, as

well as adding a new building with twenty modern, *en suite* rooms, was raised. The framework for the new Ignatian-inspired retreat house was taking form.

There is a time for building and a time for resting. The next year-and-a-half was used for renovating and building. We gathered a team of hard-working people who saw this as their contribution to the Kingdom of God. Spirituality is practical, and sometimes laborious. It became obvious to us that our past lives suddenly turned out to be gifts contributing to the process that God had in mind for us. Part of my professional life had been spent in the building industry. As a young man I trained to be a carpenter and worked in different areas of management in a building company in our home town. This is probably part of the reason why I love the story of Jesus in his home town of Nazareth: 'Is not this the carpenter?' (Mark 6:3) Yes, he is! He is more than that—but he is also the carpenter! The incarnational aspect of Ignatian spirituality helps us to defeat a dualism that has had a tendency to shadow Christianity throughout church history. Christ stepped right into our world and picked up a hammer and saw. Spirituality is about real life!

In 2012 I did the spiritual accompaniment courses at Loyola Hall. This became part of the preparation for our work at the new retreat house, which was beginning to take shape in the beautiful countryside, 12 km west of the city of Randers in central Denmark. The same year we opened the doors for our first official retreat, with twenty retreatants staying in the new facilities. In a sense this was the beginning of a new life for Heidi and me; we were now the hosts of an ecumenical, Ignatian-inspired retreat house. The dream planted during Heidi's first five-day silent retreat in Sweden in 2004 had been incarnated in real life. Here, once again, we saw the different stages of our life being turned into gifts. Heidi's work life had been filled with organizing and planning. This was something that came in handy in the course of setting up the day-to-day programme and schedule for the retreat house. Her natural gift and talent for cooking good healthy and tasty food became an important part of our work as hosts and administrators of the house.

In the five years that have passed since our first retreat, we have seen many people meet themselves and God in numerous ways. It

does not cease to amaze me what silence can do for a person. There is a great deal of truth in something that Magnus Malm once said to me: 'The most important thing for a spiritual guide is *not* to get in the way of the Holy Spirit when he meets the retreatant in the silence of the retreat.'

During this time we have grown into a balance of three main groups of activities that more or less fill up the calendar.

- **Ignatian spirituality and retreats.** Even though they only take up about a third of our capacity, our main focus is on Ignatian spirituality and Ignatian retreats. To help us with this, we have a group of retreat leaders and retreat guides with whom we work closely. Most of them are from different Protestant denominations and backgrounds, and a number of them have been on the same path as us during the last two decades. We also have a Catholic St Josef Sister in the group. In 2014 a team from Loyola Hall visited us and helped out with different workshops in spiritual accompaniment and other aspects of Ignatian spirituality and thought.
- **Other retreats.** Besides our primary focus on Ignatian spirituality, another third of our capacity goes to different Protestant and Catholic groups that rent our facilities to host their own retreats. Besides filling the house and giving other groups the possibility of coming away to a silent place, this also offers us the inspiration of seeing other ways of doing retreats. The ecumenical fellowship and the fact that God meets us as we are—with all our differences—never cease to amaze us.
- **Pastoral and leadership gatherings.** The remaining third of our capacity goes to pastoral or leadership gatherings. This has been a very helpful way of meeting pastors and leaders from all areas of the Danish Church. I do not think there is a single group that has been here which has not, in one way or another, commented on the spiritual atmosphere of the house. Some of the groups have been coming annually since the first year we were here. It is a blessing just to see them settle in and breathe in the quietness and peace. Another gift of having different Christian leaders and

pastors in the house is the opportunity to share our passion for silent retreats and Ignatian spirituality.

A Spiritual Awakening

Our experience has convinced us that Ignatian spirituality has something to contribute to all corners of the Church in Denmark and even beyond the borders of the Church. In meeting those who have left the Church searching for a spirituality that they have not been able to find within it, we also hear stories of Ignatian spirituality being helpful. During the last decade we have seen the Danish Lutheran bishops appointing pastors to work with the spirituality of people on the margins of the Church: people who are seekers but have a hard time with Church. For years, the spiritual climate in Denmark has been formed by a secular system of thought, which in many ways has left a vacuum and a longing for a spirituality that is personal, practical and relational. This, I think, plays a role in the search for spiritual fulfilment both outside and inside the Churches.

Retreats and Ignatian spirituality, together with the new-found popularity of going on pilgrimage—finding God in nature along some of the old pilgrimage routes in Scandinavia—are all part of what might be seen as a spiritual awakening in our secular Scandinavian society. We find this very inspiring, and see how Ignatian spirituality has the ability to strengthen what Christians of diverse backgrounds have in common and gives a framework for ecumenical coming together: seeking for and finding God in all things.

Another development that we see in Denmark arising from Ignatian inspiration is spiritual accompaniment in daily life. In our group of retreat leaders, we have a Baptist pastor and a pastor from another Protestant Church who spend most of their time on Ignatian spiritual accompaniment. It is highly unusual among the Danish Churches to see pastors taking on spiritual accompaniment as a major part of their role. Moreover a number of people, also pastors from different backgrounds, offer spiritual accompaniment in daily life. There is a growing awareness of the need for spiritual accompaniment as a way of growing in a personal relationship with God and finding the way and the will of God in everyday life. In this

process the Ignatian principal of being contemplative in action takes on a practical form. When we discover our inner God-given life—the spring of living water—and learn to reflect upon it with a competent spiritual guide, this can help us to discover our God-given purpose. Our activities, choices and actions can begin to grow out of our inner convictions and desires.

From the very beginning it was obvious to us that the spread of spiritual accompaniment called for a place offering support and supervision. Thus, when we invited the team from Loyola Hall in 2014, they set up a workshop introducing us to the group supervision model that was created at Loyola Hall. This has been a great help to us in the years that followed. We have a group of pastors from different church backgrounds, other retreat leaders and guides who now meet regularly for group supervision. We share with each other and support each other in the task of spiritual accompaniment. The contemplative model has proved to be a good way of keeping us focused on the main objective. Supervision within the mindset of Ignatian accompaniment—listening to the Holy Spirit who is the main guide and supervisor—has proved fruitful and has helped to avoid the temptation of ‘case discussion’ focused on different views and methods. Exploring different views and methods can be done outside contemplative supervision and can also have its value when held in an open hand.

Looking ahead, we are very much aware of the need for support in maintaining and developing the different aspects of Ignatian spirituality—and discerning how this looks in the context of a Danish ecumenical retreat house. At all events, we remain Ignatian-inspired, and well aware of the fact that our history is short and we need to put down deeper roots. We need help from others who have been travelling this road for longer than we have. Our relationship with the Ignatian retreat movement in Sweden and Norway has been and remains a good support. In many ways the Scandinavian countries have a closely linked history and culture, and this helps us to put our Ignatian inspiration in perspective in our own setting. At the same time, it has been a great blessing for both Heidi and myself, and a number of the other retreat leaders with whom we work, to do retreats, courses and training at the former Loyola Hall and at St Beuno’s in Great Britain. This also encourages us to hope

that the Ignatian inspiration in Denmark will grow stronger over the years to come.

As a part of this development, we are happy to be welcoming a guest from St Beuno's during the autumn of 2017.^a Karen Eliassen is Danish and has been working at Loyola Hall and St Beuno's for a number of years. We consider her visit to be a great gift that will enable us to build more on what we have already achieved. We are offering a range of talks, courses, gatherings and retreats—all with the aim of sharing and deepening the understanding of Ignatian spirituality in a Danish ecumenical setting. Karen is facilitating the Spiritual Exercises by training and supervising a group of Danish retreat leaders who will be giving the Exercises to others—some on a thirty-day retreat and some doing the First Week on a ten-day retreat. We hope to see the fruit of this valuable work in the years to come.

To sum up, for us the adventure of discovering and growing in Ignatian spirituality in the framework of an ecumenical retreat house has a great deal to do with finding God in all things—seeing the gifts of God in each person we encounter, and seeing God in the practicalities of everyday life. Whatever spirituality is, it must be seen in the ordinary lives of the individuals and groups that claim to be practising it—not in perfection, but in the nitty gritty of life as it is. The story of Ignatius is a large part of our inspiration. Trying, succeeding, failing, getting up and trying again, through consolation and desolation, discerning and finding our way together. This has been our experience and it is our hope that we will be able to share it freely with those who wish to join us on the journey in the years to come and, as Ignatius would say, 'To be of benefit to souls'.

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