



To Imitate the Angels' Purity: Ignatius's and John Paul's Counsel

St. Ignatius of Loyola expounds Jesuit life and governance in great detail in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. The document runs to a hefty 827 paragraphs, at times attending to such minutiae as what to wear while sleeping and what ornamentation candles presented to benefactors should have. Yet, concerning the vow of chastity specifically, Ignatius is reticent, saying only, "What pertains to the vow of chastity requires no interpretation, since it is evident how perfectly it should be preserved, by endeavoring to imitate therein the purity of the angels in cleanness of body and mind."¹ In his day and long afterwards, Ignatius was certainly not alone in such brevity. In modern times, however, Ignatius's brief statement has led to various interpretations. Some have praised it. Others have accused him of hyper-spiritualization, dualism, and impracticality.

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Vincent L. Strand SJ entered the Wisconsin Province of the Society of Jesus in 2005 and is in first studies at Fordham University. His address is Ciszek Hall; 2502-06 Belmont Avenue; Bronx, New York 10458.

In our day, the church's understanding of human sexuality has undergone significant development, notably in Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*.² Being well grounded in the tradition and also creative and original, *Theology of the Body* opens up new vistas in theology while breathing new life into the church's tradition. In this article I will offer a reading of Ignatius's counsel on chastity in the light of *Theology of the Body*. I hope to show that Ignatius's prescription is not dualistic or anti-body, but instead calls celibate persons to witness to the eschatological reality of divine union through an integral redemption of their body and soul.

Theology of the Body

First I offer a word of background. People often think that *Theology of the Body* is concerned principally with matters of sexual ethics. The scope of John Paul II's project, however, is much broader. *Theology of the Body* invites us to consider the fundamental question "What does it mean to be human?" by reflecting upon our status as embodied creatures made in the image and likeness of God. As the pope explains,

The body . . . and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it. In man, created in the image of God, the very sacramentality of creation, the sacramentality of the world, was thus in some way revealed. In fact through his bodiliness . . . man becomes a visible sign of the economy of Truth and Love, which has its source in God himself and was revealed already in the mystery of creation.³

To pursue such a project, the pope devotes the first half of *Theology of the Body* to developing what he calls an

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“adequate anthropology.” In doing so, he offers a positive Christian response to the gamut of anthropological errors modern philosophy has produced. He does this through a scriptural meditation that considers humanity in three states: the original state before Adam and Eve’s fall, the historical state after the fall, and, finally, the eschatological state of heaven.⁴ The second half of *Theology of the Body* applies this anthropology to questions of sacrament in general and marriage in particular.

Ignatius and the Body

One of the pervasive anthropological errors which John Paul attempts to overcome in *Theology of the Body* is the dualism that understands the human person to be his or her soul, rather than the soul and body together. In that view, the soul runs the body as a driver handles an automobile. A frequent corollary of this dualism is that the body is evil, tempting the soul to let its ideals become soiled. When Christians adopt such a dualism, they often consider the spiritual life to be a flight from earthy reality to a realm of pure spirit.

Does Ignatius manifest this anti-body dualism? From his recommendation that human beings imitate angels, who are pure spirits, the answer seems to be yes. However, if we consider the whole of the constitutions and Ignatius’s spirituality—especially as it appears in the Spiritual Exercises—we shall see that Ignatius, especially for a Christian of his day, shows a notable appreciation and concern for the body. In the constitutions he devotes an entire chapter to “The Preservation of the Body,” addressing such matters as how Jesuits should eat, sleep, and exercise and in general take care of their bodies. The gist of the chapter is in its first sentence: “Just as an excessive preoccupation with the needs of the

body is blameworthy, so too a proper concern for the preservation of one’s health and bodily strength for the divine service is praiseworthy and should be exercised by all” [292]. Parting with a common practice of religious communities of his day, Ignatius does not prescribe any obligatory corporal penances for Jesuits—a practice that might be expected of someone who considered the body to be evil [8 & 580].

Ignatius believed that God is to be found in created things, as is seen in the two “book-end” meditations of the Spiritual Exercises. In the first, the Principle and Foundation, Ignatius says that created things are created for human beings to help them attain the end for which they were created: to praise, reverence, and serve God and save their souls.⁵ In the final meditation of the Exercises, the Contemplation to Attain Love, Ignatius has the retreatant reflect upon “how God dwells in creatures; in the elements, giving them existence; in the plants, giving them life; in the animals, giving them sensation; in human beings, giving them intelligence” (*SpEx* §§235-236). As is seen in this contemplation, Ignatius’s spirituality is highly incarnational. This incarnational dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises flows into the man-

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ner in which Ignatius structured the apostolic life of the Society of Jesus. Jesuits were not to spend their time in hermitages or monasteries, but rather in the market-places, universities, and even royal courts of renaissance Europe.⁶ In forming his religious order in this fashion, Ignatius understood himself to be following the example of Christ, the Word Incarnate, who descended into the drama of human history. Ignatius was convinced that it was amidst this drama—in the concrete, material reality of everyday life—that God was to be found.

Celibacy

Far from casting him outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity as an anti-body dualist, Ignatius's counsel places him in the mainstream of the church's ascetical tradition. Both patristic and medieval authors frequently use the phrase "angelic life" as a way to designate the religious life of monks who were thought to imitate the angels by their chastity.⁷ Yet Ignatius's counsel on chastity has an even earlier origin: Jesus' words to the Sadducees, "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mt 22:30; see Mk 12:25, Lk 20:36). Jesuit commentaries on the constitutions have interpreted Ignatius's counsel on chastity in the light of this verse.⁸ Ignatius's reference to the angels should be understood first and foremost in the light of those words in Matthew. Jesuits are to be "like the angels" inasmuch as they are unmarried. Thus, Ignatius's reference to the angels should be understood chiefly as a call to celibacy.

John Paul's commentary on Matthew 22:30 can help to broaden our understanding of this call to celibacy, particularly how the celibate vocation relates to the married vocation (TOB 64-69). He makes four points:

First, there will not be marriage in heaven, although human beings will continue to be both male and female. Second, Jesus' statement that the blessed will be "like angels" can be understood in the Pauline sense of the "spiritualization of the body" (see 1 Co 15:44), which means that the human person's body and soul will be in perfect harmony with each other. Third, since this spiritualization refers to the indwelling of the Spirit in the redeemed person, we can also speak of the "divinization" of human beings in heaven, understood as a participation in the very life of God. Fourth, this divinization is radically communal, as the blessed will participate in a perfect communion of persons without losing their own selfhood. Concerning this fourth point, the pope invites us to "think of the reality of the 'other world' in the categories of the rediscovery of a new, perfect subjectivity of each person and at the same time of the *rediscovery* of a new, *perfect intersubjectivity of all*" (TOB 68.4).

In John Paul's presentation, two points should be kept in mind when considering Ignatius's words about chaste celibacy. First, inasmuch as celibacy anticipates the life of heaven, celibacy does not call one to withdraw into oneself, but rather invites a person to a life-giving communion with others. As the pope teaches, celibacy is "for the kingdom"; it is fruitful and leads to "a new and even

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fuller form of intersubjective communion with others" (TOB 77.2). Second, the married and celibate states are not in competition with each other, but rather they complement each other. The pope explains that marriage is an image of our union with God in heaven and also of the mutual love which all the blessed will experience there. Celibacy, on the other hand, anticipates this union here and now, as the pope explains in developing Matthew 19:11-12 (TOB 73-81).

John Paul makes clear that celibacy is not the natural state for people in this world. The celibate life is not recommended for all, but only for those called to it. Celibacy should not be seen as disparaging marriage or the body as things that are bad. Rather, it is precisely through the renunciation of marriage that the celibate witnesses to the beauty and value of marriage by orienting it to its deepest core, the sincere gift of self, expressed in what John Paul calls the "spousal meaning of the body."⁹ In this way, there is a complementarity between the vocations of celibacy and marriage; they complete and interpenetrate each other.

Purity and the Heavenly Life

A careful reading of the Jesuit constitutions highlights further dimensions of the call to celibacy. Ignatius does not ask that the angels *qua* angels be imitated, but instead that the angels' *purity* be imitated. Here too *Theology of the Body* can vivify our reading of Ignatius. John Paul offers an extensive discourse titled "Purity as 'Life according to the Spirit'" (TOB 50-57). The pope notes that the term "purity" means, first of all, the opposite of dirty. So, when Ignatius writes "to imitate therein the purity of the angels in cleanness of body and mind," we can understand the words "purity" (*puritas*)

and "cleanness" (*munditia*) to be synonymous. John Paul uses a Pauline understanding of purity to interpret Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. The pope interprets Paul to have two understandings of purity, one general, the other specific. In a general sense, purity can refer to everything that is morally good and impurity to everything that is morally bad. From 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, however, John Paul develops a second, more specific meaning of purity.

Here purity means contributing to the human person's sanctification. Purity, the pope says, is both a natural virtue and a gift of the Spirit. As a natural ability or attitude, purity is a variant of the virtue of temperance, the ability to master and overcome lustful passions and hold back the impulses of desires. At the same time, purity in a Pauline sense means not only negatively abstaining from sinful acts, but also positively keeping one's body in holiness and reverence.¹⁰

In this sense, purity should be understood not only as a natural virtue or as an ability of the human person's subjective faculties, but also as a charismatic gift of the Spirit. When purity as a virtue is infused with the gift of the Spirit, John Paul says, human beings are able to glorify God in their very bodies. He explains: "Purity as a virtue or ability of 'keeping one's own body with holiness and reverence,' allied with the gift of piety as a fruit of the Holy Spirit's dwelling in the 'temple' of the body, causes in the body such a fullness of dignity in interpersonal relations that *God himself is thereby glorified*. Purity is the glory of the human body before God" (TOB 57.3).

Purity, therefore, should not be understood only as a virtue of resisting lustful desires. Rather, it is the very transformation of these desires so that one's body is



filled with holiness and reverence. In this sense, purity involves a transformation by which Christians begin to live the heavenly, eschatological state even here and now in their earthly lives. In heaven human persons no longer will need the natural virtue of purity as a derivative of temperance because they will not have to resist disordered desires. These desires themselves will have

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been redeemed. John Paul calls this sanctification "the redemption of the body."

Seeing purity in this light, we understand why Ignatius calls us to imitate the "purity of the angels." He takes the angels as models of purity for us, not because they resist the impulses of lustful passions, but because they do not even have such disordered drives. The angels can be consid-

ered as analogous to Adam and Eve before the fall, when they had a perfect harmony of body and soul, without concupiscence. The more important analogy, however, is that our call to be like the angels is a call to be like our future selves in heaven, when our sanctification will be complete and we will no longer experience concupiscence. We will then experience the redemption of the body. In asking celibate persons to imitate the angels' purity, Ignatius can be understood to be calling us not simply to avoid sin, but rather to be sanctifying our

concupiscent desires, working with God for our body's redemption. Celibate persons are to witness in their very lives on earth to this eschatological call. Consecrated celibate persons serve as a special reminder to the whole Christian community that our final end is heaven.

Integral Redemption of Body and Soul

As already noted, Ignatius's appeal to the angels parallels Jesus' response to the Sadducees that those in the resurrection are "like angels in heaven." John Paul understands this verse to refer to the "spiritualization of the body" (see 1 Co 15:44; TOB 66.5–67.2). The spiritualization refers to the harmony of body and soul that human persons will experience in heaven. Ignatius said, you may recall, that consecrated celibates are to imitate the angels' purity in their own purity of body and mind.¹¹ We can understand Ignatius's reference to both body and mind as referring to the body being in perfect harmony with the soul after becoming spiritualized.

Yet more generally, "the purity of the angels" (which necessarily is only spiritual), when said of a human person's spiritual and somatic purity, can also be understood as pointing to the total redemption of the human person, the soul along with the body. John Paul writes: "Thus, the ethos of the redemption of the body is realized through self-dominion, through temperance of the 'desires,' when the human heart makes an alliance with this ethos, or rather *when it confirms this alliance through its own integral subjectivity*: when the person's deepest and yet most real possibilities and dispositions show themselves, when the deepest layers of his potentiality acquire a voice, layers that the concupiscence of the flesh would not allow to show themselves" (TOB 49.6). Putting the pith of this statement into Ignatian



terminology, we might say that, when human persons are freed of the disorder of concupiscence, they experience the body's redemption in their heart and have achieved the purity of the angels in the cleanness of their body and mind.

Mission

From Ignatius's point of view, with this freedom from concupiscence the celibate person is more available for mission, more available to be *sent*. A dominant motif of the Spiritual Exercises is mission and sending. This is seen especially in the meditations on the Incarnation, the Call of the Temporal and Eternal King, and the Two Standards (*SpEx* §§101-109, 91-98, 136-147). This spiritual impetus becomes institutionalized in the constitutions, which have a constant eye on availability for mission. The angels are the supreme model of such creaturely availability. The Latin word *angelus* derives from the Greek *angelos*, meaning "messenger." The Septuagint uses *angelos* to translate the Hebrew *malakh*, whose root is the verb "to send." Angels are literally ones who are sent.

A further insight about angels comes from the Angelic Doctor himself, St. Thomas Aquinas. According to him, angels are identical with their natures. No individual human person can be equated with "human nature," for all human beings have the same nature. But this is not the case with angels; no two angels are of the same species. Each angel *is* its nature (*ST* Ia.50.4). There is no separation of who an angel is and what its mission or role is. This mission is threefold: to worship God, to do God's will in creation, and to be God's messenger. For Ignatius, human beings would perfectly imitate the angels' purity if they became so holy that

their very nature was aligned with the triple mission of worshiping God, doing God's will, and being God's messenger. In that case they would not just be living chastity perfectly. They would be living the Ignatian charism perfectly.

We may feel inclined to dismiss Ignatius's counsel on chastity as coming from an antiquated understanding of sexuality that has little relevance for those striving to live the Ignatian charism today. We should, however, not do so. In recommending our imitation of the angels' purity, Ignatius neither disparages the body as something evil nor over-spiritualizes the vow of chastity. Rather, he offers a robust and attractive vision of the celibate vocation as it is to be lived here and now. As John Paul reminds us, the redemption of our body, progress in purity as a virtue and a grace, and our very divinization do not belong exclusively to the hereafter. For all Christians, these movements are to begin in this life.

Consecrated celibates are called to witness to this truth in a special way. They live an inaugurated eschatology, witnessing to the body's redemption, the redemption that awaits all the blessed. Their lives witness to the very reality of heaven. That—and not self-control as if for merely legalistic reasons—is what is asked of celibate Christians committed to imitating the angels' purity in cleanness of body and mind. It may seem an impossible task, but we should not forget that the worldly courtier Ignatius, after seeing a vision of Mary with the child Jesus, was given the grace not to consent, "even in the least matter, to the motions of the flesh" for the rest of his life.¹² Thus he became a model of the chastity he calls for in the Jesuit constitutions. He showed that with God's grace all things are possible—even living the purity of angels.



Notes

¹ *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms: A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), VI.1.1 [547]. Hereafter these references will be in square brackets in the text.

² *Theology of the Body* refers to the catecheses John Paul offered in 129 Wednesday audiences between 5 September 1979 and 28 November 1984. The U.S.A. title is *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, ed. and trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006). All emphases are as in the original. All references will be to catechesis and paragraph numbers.

³ *Theology of the Body*, 19.4-5; hereafter TOB and numbers will be inserted into the text.

⁴ While *Theology of the Body* is primarily theological, not philosophical, the pope's philosophy—which here we may describe as a personalism relying heavily upon the phenomenological method—is operative throughout the catecheses.

⁵ *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. and commentary by George E. Ganss SJ (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1992), §23. Hereafter, *SpEx* and number will be inserted into the text.

⁶ Ignatius's preference for cities—compared with the founders of other great Latin orders—is expressed in the adage: *Bernardus valles, montes Benedictus amabat, / Oppida Franciscus, magnas Ignatius urbes* (Bernard loved the valleys, Benedict the mountains, Francis the towns, Ignatius the great cities). [The adage also occurs with “*celebres Dominicus urbes*” instead of Ignatius. It is likely that Dominic was there first. Ed.]

⁷ Antonio M. de Aldama SJ, *An Introductory Commentary on the Constitutions*, trans. Aloysius J. Owen SJ (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1989), p. 217.

⁸ See, for example, August Coemans SJ, *Commentary on the Rules of the Society of Jesus*, trans. Matthew Germing SJ (El Paso, Texas: Revista Catolica, 1942), p. 202.

⁹ John Paul understands the “spousal meaning of the body” to refer to the power to express love not only interiorly but also externally through one's body. Through this expression of love, the human person becomes a gift. See *Theology of the Body*, 15.1.

¹⁰ See Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), pp. 171-173.

¹¹ While Ignatius uses “mind” and “body” instead of “soul” and “body,” here we can equate mind with soul. Ignatius was working in

the paradigm of a Thomistic psychology which considered the human person's mind (that is to say, rational faculty) to be the human soul's highest faculty. We might even say that, for Ignatius, “mind” more specifically refers to “soul”—by which we mean the spiritual dimension of the body—than the word “soul” itself would, since Ignatius frequently uses the word “soul” in his constitutions to indicate the whole human person, both body and soul, for example, “to help souls.”

¹² *A Pilgrim's Journey: The Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. and commentary by Joseph N. Tylenda SJ (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), §10.



Questions for Personal and Group Reflection

1. How do I understand that the vow of chastity is meant to make me a more loving person?
2. When have I found that my vow of chastity has made me freer for mission and for a life-giving communion with others?