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Ignatian Leadership as a Mechanism for Human Liberation: “What’s Love Got to Do with It?”

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Abstract

Leadership that draws upon Ignatian wisdom has the potential to heal the divides which plague our local, national and global communities. This chapter weaves together elements of Ignatian spirituality, critical leadership studies, feminist theory, and critical race concepts to propose a conception of Ignatian leadership that is liberatory for both leader and those being led. Drawing upon Ignatian sources as well as contemporary social science theorists, it illustrates the relevance of the Ignatian worldview for today’s context, as leaders engage critical consideration of race, gender and class in shaping a more just, humane, and sustainable world. It invites the reader to reflect on the role of social identity as a shaping influence for leading with love for the liberation and flourishing of all.

Introduction

Each morning, I open my news app and see headlines that reveal a society deeply conflicted about the meanings of leadership, gender, race, faith, and justice. Recent narratives offer ample opportunity to experience the “desolation” that Ignatius honored as an instructive part of the spiritual life: climate disasters that threaten homes and lives, an epidemic of anxiety and depression among young people, grasps for power and control by global leaders, outdated civic and ecclesial structures that resist the influence of the feminine, discrimination against LGBTQ people, attempts to deny the existence of systemic racism, and threats to the foundations of democracy. These narratives cry out for creative, diverse new models of leadership that honor each person’s dignity; attempt to right the wrongs that have caused (and still cause) suffering; and bring vision towards a future of hope. Yet most popular books on leadership rely on the outdated assumption of the white male manager aiming at a narrow vision of success. Popular thinking about leadership often fails to satisfy the deeper human hunger for a guidance toward a more humane, sustainable and just world where each person can strive toward what Ignatius called “the end for which they were created.”

The Anglo-Saxon root of the word leader is “laedon,” which means to “to take with you, as on a journey,” and “ship” comes from the Gothic “schaeppent” or “to shape something of value.” St. Ignatius embodied the kind of leadership that guided others on a creative journey toward the Jesuit ideal of the Magis—the greater, deeper good, rooted in the values of the Gospel. African American theologian Bryan Massingale describes the Magis as a “holy restlessness”—a deep, aching desire for more truth, more justice, and more humanity, to heal the fractures of our world. Ignatian leaders can offer a needed balm for our societal wounds in guiding people and institutions toward the greatest goods: equity, justice, truth, and liberation for all. Leadership guided by Ignatian wisdom cultivates freedom, honors the affect and intellect, centers people on the margins, discerns from deep self-knowledge, and demonstrates love through deeds.

As we engage with each of these aspects of leadership, I invite you, dear reader, into a dynamic tension that is worthy of illuminating explicitly. Both the Ignatian wisdom tradition and the vast majority of contemporary leadership theories emerge out of a primarily white, male, western framework, without explicitly claiming that standpoint. This article’s exploration of Ignatian leadership attempts to take seriously the identity of the leader as a key influence on how a leader chooses to engage with others. Too often
the dominant white male perspective goes unnamed yet profoundly influences contemporary considerations of leadership. Kimberly Crenshaw called this “the peril of perspectivelessness.” If effective leadership aims to heal the divides which plague our local, national and global community, then leaders of dominant gender, race and class (including myself) must examine unearned privilege in order to actively lead organizations toward greater justice. Because the range of complicity by leaders in our historical and current societal injustices is vast, leadership models must take seriously the leader’s positionality, inviting examination of one’s participation in both the shadow and light side of our collective history and one’s embodiment of both the “imbedded oppressor” and the “imbedded oppressed.”

In this paper, I attempt to bring to the Ignatian tradition and to considerations of leadership an explicit focus on identity and privilege, in order to respond to the call of Pedro Arrupe as he instructed alumni of Jesuit universities in his 1973 address: we must notice injustice and bring to it “an attitude not simply of refusal but of counterattack against injustice.” Therefore, you may notice an implicit or explicit invitation to discern how your identity and positionality might influence how you enact leadership. This invitation emerges out of the rich tradition of contemplation in action, a dynamic which feels ever more important for leaders amidst the challenges and complexity facing organizations today.

Cultivates Freedom

Ignatian spirituality upholds the ideal of interior freedom. This is not personal freedom, as Americans often conceive of it, as a right or entitlement. This core Ignatian tenet is a much deeper, interior process to examine and detach from where we have become unduly defined by material assets, titles, occupations, honors, privileges, the praise of others, or particular locations. St. Ignatius believed that attuning to God’s call requires detachment from possessions and security in order to be free to respond with generous and loving attunement to the difficult and beautiful realities of the world. Ignatius’ “First Principle and Foundation” in the Spiritual Exercises proposes the radical idea that we make ourselves indifferent to or detached from “health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long rather than a short life… so that we ultimately desire and choose only what is most conducive for us to the end for which God created us.” Cultivating interior freedom can feel different for people of different identities as they embrace a radical openness to God’s movement within the self and within the realities of another person’s experience. When leaders of historically dominant identities notice attachments to privilege, cultivating interior freedom beckons them to be “detached from their own interests… to assume whatever is the greater good…” A leader with a marginalized identity may find interior freedom through seeing clearly their worthiness and refusing to renounce or undervalue themselves. Interior freedom “is the human possibility to grow as persons in gratuitous relationship with others, seeking the greater good of all.” An Ignatian leader who cultivates interior freedom in turn allows others to be freer, more authentic, and more fully human.

How does one develop interior freedom as an Ignatian leader? Ignatian leaders of dominant identities can practice placing themselves in the productive discomfort felt when one detaches from ego and de-centers oneself in order to see through the eyes and experiences of another. Ignatius would caution those with positional power to be wary of creating distance between themselves and others by insulating themselves from authentic mutual engagement. It has been said that Ignatius welcomed people into his office with the phrase “may you be at home here.” One practice that can aid the development of interior freedom is for the leader to regularly invite honest feedback from others. Leadership scholars suggest that healthy leaders create psychological safety that allow others to speak freely their needs, critiques and constructive feedback, without fear of retribution. The role of the leader is to listen fully to the feedback, to be transparent about what they discover, and to disclose their plan for growth and change in response. An Ignatian leader with interior freedom creates psychological safety for others to share what is on their minds and hearts by enabling them to voice ideas, seek feedback, provide honest critique, collaborate, take risks and experiment, all with the aim of both individual and organizational growth and
transformation. By creating space for others to share honestly, leaders become interiorly freer from complacency, self-centeredness, bias, expectation, and habit as they open themselves to the reality of the people whose lives they influence. This cyclical process creates fertile ground for true humility that liberates leaders from misconceptions about themselves while also liberating others to authentically offer their ideas, insights and experiences without risk of retribution. Coupled with personal reflection and prayer, the Ignatian leader engages in deep listening, radical receptivity, and a stance of welcoming diverse perspectives in to nurture their interior freedom, for the transformation of heart and mind.

**Honors the Affect andIntellect**

Ignatian spirituality values the integration of the head and the heart. In the Ignatian worldview, emotional awareness accompanies intellectual analysis. Ignatius is known for founding institutions that pursued intellectual excellence, but he also believed in paying attention to affectivity, or the “interior motion” that moves one toward or away from God. Ignatius was often moved to tears in his prayer and in community with his “companions in the Lord.” As the Ignatian worldview honors affectivity and intellect, it also seems to encourage a reintegration of the lost or suppressed feminine, which has traditionally been associated with nurturance, tenderness and empathy. Ignatius embodied a full embrace of societally-inscribed “masculine” and “feminine” leadership characteristics, as he integrated within himself the fullest spectrum of human affect, intellect, and activity. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are evidence of this integration, as they incorporate both traditionally masculine and feminine elements, guiding retreatants to explore their emotive responses, develop an interior life, and to find ways to care for and love others.

How does an Ignatian leader integrate affect and intellect? Leadership that employs necessary critical thinking can integrate critical feeling as well. Steger and Wahlrab describe critical thinking as not just an analytical skill about how things are, but a reflection also “how they might and should be.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the German poet, playwright and critic, similarly argued that science should entail the rigorous engagement of observation and thinking, but also animate faculties such as feeling, imagination and intuition. Science, as Goethe understood and engaged it, “has as its highest goal the arousal of the feeling of wonder through contemplative looking.” In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius encouraged the use of imagination as a way to more deeply enter Scripture through a “composition of place” to discern how God might be inviting the retreatant to deeper awareness of one’s calling. Ignatian leaders offer opportunities to imagine new possibilities using both the head and the heart as a way to discover the Magis as they face decisions about resources, time, or attention.

Ignatian leadership can be enhanced by “emotional intelligence” which is the capacity to reason about one’s affectivity, and for emotion to enhance thinking. Emotional intelligence invites an individual to “monitor one’s own and others’ emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one’s thinking and actions.” Studies show that when emotional intelligence is cultivated, organizations shift to being more responsive to the needs of their people, especially those without positional power. As Ignatian leaders honor the illumination of both thought and feeling, they notice “movements felt by the heart and weighed by the mind,” become more fully human, and allow those around them to also become more themselves, towards a greater good.

**Centers People on the Margins**

If the world-affirming stance of Ignatian spirituality sees God as potentially found in all things, where does a leader focus his or her particular energies? This is where the Jesuit commitment to faith and justice aligns with Catholic social teaching and the Jesuit Universal Apostolic Preferences: Ignatian leaders make a “preferential option” to attend to those on the margins. Ignatian leaders prioritize the needs of those without access and power. For example, while the Ignatian tradition upholds the human dignity of all lives, Ignatian leaders recognize that the lives of black brothers and sisters—diminished through enslavement, mass incarceration, segregation in schools, and countless unjust
killings—not only matter but deserve a commitment to reparation. Jeanette Armstrong echoes this principle as she describes decision-making in her Native Okanagan community. She states, “from our point of view, the minority voice is the most important voice to consider, in terms of the things that are going wrong, the things that we’re not looking after, the things we’re not being responsible toward.”

An “option for the poor” aligns with this Okanagan practice, urging Ignatian leaders to continuously assess how a decision—economic, political, or social—will impact those most oppressed by systems and structures. Ignatius’ own story exemplifies this principle. Ignatius’ injury invited him to reconsider his priorities: Ignatius had lived an early life of unexamined privilege, and the “cannonball moment” broke through his unawareness, inviting him to consider how he might disentangle himself from the oppressive systems of which he was a part. As he lays down his sword and gives away his finery at Monserrat, he relinquishes his security, opting to live alongside beggars whom others had cast aside. Throughout his ministry, Ignatius served people in need. The Jesuit Catholic tradition emphasizes solidarity with those on the margins as core to a life of faith.

What does centering people on the margins look like in an Ignatian leader? There is a Haitian proverb that says, “We see from where we stand.” Ignatian leadership invites leaders of historically privileged identities to take a stand with the historically underprivileged and to inquire what others experience: If I am a man, how do my decisions affect women? If I am a person who identifies as white, how are people of color impacted by how I inhabit my role? If I am able-bodied, how might my colleagues with limitations be freed from restrictions? If I am a citizen or straight or cis-gender or wealthy, how can I take the standpoint of immigrants, LGBTQ and trans folx, individuals in poverty? Building upon feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh’s seminal work, Ijeoma Oluo speaks and writes about the importance of assuring the flourishing of others: “Every time you go through something, and it’s easy for you, look around and say, ‘Who is it not easy for? And what can I do to dismantle that system?”

St. Irenaeus believed that the “Glory of God is the human person fully alive.” Ignatian leaders are animated to act for justice so that God’s glory be made manifest through “fully alive” human beings.

**Discerns from Deep Self-knowledge**

Ignatius developed a process of discernment that entails prayerful decision-making through a deep reflection on one’s affect, experiences, and relationships in order that one might live in greatest alignment with God’s calling. Practices that foster self-knowledge are crucial to discernment. Self-awareness creates conscious space for reflection on one’s identity, history, emotional responses, assumptions, and unconscious biases giving rise to continuous growth, transformation and ethical decision-making. Ignatius invites retreatants in Week One of the Spiritual Exercises to know one’s self as deeply loved by God and also mired in human sin. This understanding of the self challenges us to trust our belovedness while also noticing the ways we have caused harm. Robert Greenleaf, originator of the Gospel-inspired model for Servant-Leadership, recognized that entering into self-awareness can produce disturbance as leaders move “below the level of conscious intellect” to notice the biases inherited by our culture and our families which healthy leaders need to “unlearn.”

Greenleaf writes, “awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace.” Discomfort, guilt, or pain sometimes arise for people of historically dominant identities as they engage in critical self-awareness about their participation in the sin of colonization and racism. Perhaps this experience is an example of the kind of Ignatian desolation that, through God’s grace, urges one toward a more authentic self. Like Ignatius, Greenleaf recommends that leaders remove what blinds us from the truth of ourselves, even to the point of choosing to lose “what must be lost,” akin to Ignatius’ discernment to forfeit his sword and finery. Ignatian leaders with historically advantaged identities may discern they are called to adopt anti-racist or feminist practices that require sacrificing the comforts of privilege and power. White, anti-racist author Robin DiAngelo suggests that as white people awaken to the realities of white privilege and racial inequality, they must build “capacity to sustain the
discomfort of not knowing, the discomfort of being racially unmoored, the discomfort of racial humility.”

Although uncomfortable, awakening to the truer self gives consolation as it directs our focus beyond ourselves, inspiring us to actively work toward the racial justice that we know is needed for God’s glory to be realized. Ibram Kendi challenges leaders by suggesting that those who discern not to adopt an active anti-racist or anti-sexist stance are actually choosing to uphold white supremacy and patriarchy; there is no “neutral” ground. Deep discernment, rooted in self-awareness, interior freedom and a commitment to center people on the margins, helps leaders take courageous and potentially transformative action for good.

What does discernment look like for Ignatian leaders? Leaders first must carve out intentional time and space for reflection. Ignatian discernment emerges out of a lived commitment to notice God’s call through one’s lived experience. Leaders discern what are the experiences, thoughts and actions that lead them toward God (consolations) or away from God (desolations). Ignatian discernment in a context of racial and gender inequity also invites reflection on how one’s social identity impacts others, so that leaders gain clarity about when to claim their wisdom and voice and talent (especially if it has been historically undervalued) and when to use their power to lift up the skills and talents of others. Oluo invites discerning leaders to “check their privilege” by critically reflecting on one’s participation in systems. She counsels: “When we are willing to check our privilege, we are not only identifying areas where we are perpetuating oppression, but we are also identifying areas where we have the power and access to change the system as a whole.”

Ignatian leaders continually discern how to create equity as by challenging the system of historical dominance, and assess when to give space for marginalized voices. As a white woman, I am called to discern in every space I inhabit when to notice and disrupt the dominance of whiteness and when to offer an underutilized feminine perspective to unsettle sexist assumptions. The aim of self-reflection is a discernment towards a leadership identity that actively seeks opportunities to disrupt and correct inequitable systems so that, in the tradition of great educator Paolo Freire, both the oppressed and oppressor may find liberation.

Demonstrates Love through Deeds

Howard Gray described Ignatian spirituality as “self-awareness” leading to “self-donation.” Ignatius believed that good discernment leads us to offer self-giving, generous love modeled by Jesus. Pedro Arrupe, too, highlights the centrality of love in the work for justice: “to be just, it is not enough to refrain from injustice. One must go further and refuse to play its game, substituting love for self-interest as the driving force of society.” Ignatius, Gray and Arrupe challenge Ignatian leaders to discern how they will manifest love as they encounter the earth and its people. bell hooks gives depth and fullness to the concept of love, defining it as a combination of “care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust,” each of which must be experienced together in order for the receiver to experience love.

Ignatius famously said that “love ought to be put more in deeds than in words.” What does it look like for Ignatian leaders to demonstrate this love? The Ignatian leader takes well-discerned action born of contemplation, to ensure people (and the earth) feel cared for, both through cura personalis (personal care of individuals) and cura apostolica (“care of the work” or care for the whole). hooks’ and Ignatius’ insistence that love must be made manifest in concrete action aligns with leadership research showing that when leaders embody processes of positive affirmation, commitment, acts of trust, and truth-telling, not only do people feel cared for, but the organization as a whole outperforms expectations. In their interactions with others, healthy leaders consistently affirm those around them, lifting up the contributions of others and expressing genuine appreciation, aiming for a ratio of 5:1. For every one piece of constructive feedback, a healthy Ignatian leader will offer five extensions of appreciation, respect, enthusiasm, empathy, validation, apology or humor, which unsurprisingly has proven to significantly improve leader-member relationships and team effectiveness.

Corporately, demonstrating care could include the following practices: giving voice to hidden stories...
at the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity and nation to aid mutual understanding and compassion; analyzing the practical, everyday practices within organizations that create barriers for women, people of color, members who identify as LGBTQ or differently abled; proactive hiring and promotion processes which seek out diverse candidates; facilitated practices for personal and collective reflection; anti-bias trainings for all stakeholders of the organization; policies that support work/life balance, family responsibilities, health, and community engagement; creating community partnerships across previously uncrossed barriers; a commitment to seeking on-going reconciliation and reparations with individuals and communities impacted by the organization; and creating space for imagination about how our organizations can better prioritize marginalized communities and the earth. This is how love can manifest in organizations with the guidance of rooted Ignatian leaders. Importantly, the Ignatian leader also creates space to care for self, through contemplation, time with beloved companions, and Sabbath rest.

**Ignatian Leadership toward Love and Liberation**

Civil, corporate, ecclesial, educational and family systems cry out for leaders that cultivate freedom, honor the affect and intellect, center people on the margins, discern deeply, and demonstrate love through deeds. Ignatian leaders can turn our beautiful and broken society toward the healing and justice it so desperately needs. The ultimate aim of Ignatian leadership is liberation—liberation from structures and systems that have served to benefit some at the detriment of many and liberation for the flourishing of all, especially those who have been bound by their race, gender or identity. Liberatory Ignatian leadership, rooted in Ignatian spiritual wisdom, frees leaders who are historically advantaged from toxic whiteness and masculinity, and frees BIPOC folks and women from unjust and oppressive systems, ushering them into full participation at all levels of organizations. Ignatian leaders trust that the path toward this Magi is paved with humility and courage as they guide others toward the Beloved Community and the reign of God through which all creation can flourish when each of us commits to the liberation of all of us.

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**Endnotes**


9. Ibid.


27 Ibram X. Kendi, How to Be an Antiracist (New York: One World/Ballantine, 2019).


