Ignatian Optimism

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St. Augustine was impressed by the amount of sin in the world; humanity for him was a massa damnata (mass of perdition, condemned crowd). That seems to imply that grace is not only unearned but bestowed sparingly. Ignatius, on the other hand, was impressed by the fact that God spoke to him despite his sinfulness. That implied a liberality to God’s giving and forgiving. If God would speak to him, he would speak to anyone. And from a conviction of abundant grace springs what has been called Ignatian optimism. The “contemplation to attain love” is a veritable hymn to grace, aimed at stirring the soul to “profound gratitude” by reflecting on God’s generosity as Giver and Gift. If Ignatian spirituality seeks and finds “God in all things,” it is because everything is grace.

Each individual experience and relationship with God is different, neither right nor wrong, but simply unique. St. Augustine, whether it was because of life experience or a learned understanding of humanity’s relationship with God, saw God as a stern father, bestowing punishment on un-obedient children in an attempt to cause them to change their ways. Ignatius saw God as a loving father who forgave his children’s indiscretions hoping that this love would then cause them to want to change their actions. Ever the optimist, Ignatius encountered God as generosity and grace, “giving and forgiving.”

We too encounter Ignatius’ God when we stop for a moment to realize the beauty of creation and humanity recognized within our own community. Countless members of our community are giving of themselves in God’s name or in the name of humanity each and every day. We are bringing education to Zambia and we are an integral part of the JesuitNET undertaking; we send students and faculty members around the world and into our local community to be a witness for justice and the generosity of God. Ignatian optimism drives our work at Gonzaga and these parts of our community are integral to making the God Ignatius knew recognizable to those who despair.

In this reflection by Ronald Modras, we are invited to consider how we encounter God in our lives. Who is God to you? Can you recognize God at work in your life? How will you encounter God today?