

TDAG 2019 – Panel – Sue

In recent months I've been reflecting on how the principles of Ignatian spirituality can help Christians with autism connect meaningfully to God. I'm beginning to see great potential here!

I was diagnosed with ASD 3 years ago, so I speak from an autistic perspective but I hope that those of you with other neurodiversities will be able to relate to something of what I share. Spirituality has been defined as "living in accord with the promptings of the Spirit of God". However, people with ND can find it difficult to get their heads round abstract concepts because of the way their brains process info. And can feel disconnected from God.

Soon after my diagnosis, I went on an Ignatian retreat. I came to see autism as being integral to who I am in Christ. Something to be accepted, welcomed and affirmed, not feared, resented or resisted. Something that won't diminish my vocation but enhance it. To see autism as an occasion for grace and the glory of God. I was challenged to embrace a way of life more in sync with my condition – to live within my limits and find a niche for my gifts. Like the woman, in Luke, who, healed of bleeding, was called out into the open, I feel drawn to articulate disclosure in the context of testimony and live with courage, humility and dignity and dependence on God.

GUS HARDY an autistic Jesuit volunteer working among disadvantaged people in the US wrote: *Ignatian spirituality's dual emphasis on self-reflection and serving others taught me how to listen, be attentive and stay present. My social advancement, far beyond what doctors thought possible, took place in large part due to the emphasis on self-reflection which is a component of Ignatian spirituality. I find it remarkable that I believed in God to begin with as Autism is a condition that does not allow for many grey areas in one's worldview. People like me see the world through logic more than emotion, and draw more on rationality than anything transcendent. Many people had tried to get me to understand this before, but Ignatius was ultimately the most successful at getting through to me with his writings. I saw them as part self-help, part psychology and part spirituality. I wish that more people were aware of the potential of this spirituality and how it can teach people with autism about being with and for others in a way that modern psychology cannot quite seem to manage.*

Ignatius was 15th century Spanish aristocrat who, as a young man, was gravely wounded in battle. While recuperating, he noticed that different daydreams had different after-effects. Following worldly fantasies he felt frustrated. But reading about Jesus and the saints aroused desires to do great things for God. He realized that these feelings were clues to God's direction for him. From then on, he strove with singleness of purpose for his greater glory. He gained many insights into the spiritual life and collated them to form his *Spiritual Exercises*.

Ignatian spirituality is intensely practical. It teaches us that God is at work in everything, that includes neurodiverse experience! He writes: all the things in the world are presented to us "so that we can be more actively attentive to his presence in our lives and more generous in our response to his call. For me, this has been the call to seek and find God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer in autistic experience.

His spirituality emphasizes **interior freedom**. "We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, success or failure, etc. only on that which is for the greater glory of God." As God has allowed me to born neurodiverse, Ignatius would invite me to trust that, by his grace, offering myself to him in my unique blend of weaknesses and strengths, will be for his greater glory. I find that both challenging yet full of hope.

Ignatian spirituality invites us to develop the kind of prayer that best suits who we are and where we are on our spiritual journey. He recognized that each individual has different gifts and a unique inner experience.

He approached prayer not only with the senses and imagination, but also with the intellect and will. The distinctive Ignatian prayer is the Examen, a review of the day's activities in the light of God's presence; an exercise that helps us develop self-awareness.

Ignatian spirituality is an outlook, not a rule book. It respects our lived experience and honours our diversity. It is attentive to our individual needs and respects our unique circumstances and concerns. Those formed by Ignatian spirituality are reflective people with a rich inner life who are deeply engaged in God's work and have a deep commitment to social justice.