

REDISCOVERING THE INSPIRATIONAL SOURCES

**Seminar on
Ignatius, Francis and Peter
For Today's Creative Leadership**

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A BLESSED 'COMPANION' Blessed Peter Faber S.J. (1506-1546)

Having journeyed with St. Ignatius as a visionary and St. Francis Xavier as a missionary, now let us journey with Bl. Peter Faber.^[1] The early Jesuits considered him, along with Francis Xavier, as one of the founding stones upon which Ignatius laid this Society. However, Faber was almost a forgotten personality among successive generations of Jesuits. Moreover, the fourth General of the Society, Fr. Everard Mercurian SJ, issued a decree refraining the Jesuits from reading Faber's *Memoriale*, which in its style was very close to the mystical *Spiritual Diary* of Ignatius. This decree was issued due to the fear of the Inquisition, which strongly questioned the mystical experiences of the people at that time. This decree did damage to Faber's standing in the order, to the extent that a modern biographer of Ignatius writes that the early history of the Society is very largely the history of two Basque gentlemen – Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier^[2].

In this paper we will focus on Faber's personality emerging from his background and from his letters. Through these sources we show his creativity in accompanying others towards reconciliation in a divided Church. This creative accompaniment includes an awareness of the inner life of the soul, a reverence before other people, and service as a devotion to God.

I. PERSONAL BACKGROUND

The God-Fearing Child

Faber was born on Easter Monday, 1506, in a village of the Savoy Alps. His parents, in the words of Faber himself, were "*good and very pious Catholics*" - who brought him up well - "*in the fear of God our Lord.*"^[3] Faber started shepherding his flock – his parent's profession - at the age of seven. As time went on, he began to realize an intense desire to go to school. As a young boy, Faber had a quick and retentive memory. Also, he was deeply attached to religious relics of all kinds and was profoundly affected by crucifixes, statues, etc. "*Indeed, fear of God was to play a not inconsiderable part in his spiritual life even from an early age.*"^[4] which in a way lead him to be very scrupulous at times.

The Soul Indelibly Influenced by Catholicism and the Mountains of Savoy

The characteristic of shepherds, especially, the aspect of "accompanying," is reflected very much in Faber's life. The two influences that ruled the soul of Savoy, namely Catholicism and the mountains, instilled in Faber the spirit of deep devotion, a strong traditional piety, courage, foresight, ingenuity and a tenacious effort that refused to slacken until victory could be assured.

The Troubled yet Creative Soul

As a person, Faber was a man of piety, courage and foresight. Yet, given his upbringing, he was also scrupulous and tempted to thoughts of impurity, traits that lead him to a lack of self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Though he was talented enough to be sent to the university of Paris, he was not as brilliant as the other first companions were. He was neither a systematic man nor a theoretician. He preferred to work in the pastoral line. He chose to guide people individually rather than giving homilies publicly. Probably coming to terms with these limitations, Faber characterized himself as, *“I was very sad and afflicted to realize that of all my companions I was by far the one who succeeded the least.”*^[5]

Ignatius helped Faber in Paris through a reasoned method to understand Faber's own inner movements, allowing him to acquire a level of self-knowledge and self-trust. However, although Ignatius helped to bring about some desired change in Faber, his scrupulosity and his tendency to depression remained, as did his self-diffidence and self-mistrust. And yet, the greatness and creativity of Faber stand out clearly to us. We are impressed by the way he accepted his limitations and how he converted them into a source of wisdom and energy allowing him to accompany people as his ministry. (To put it in modern spiritual terminology, Faber converted his 'root sin' into his 'root grace.') Faber, 'the wounded healer' wrote of this conversion, *“For the Lord had left in me those goads (espuela) which never allowed me to remain lukewarm.”*^[6]

Probably, it is this attitude of Faber, always seeking a deeper understanding of himself and a deeper union with the Lord, that made Ignatius think of him as the best of the companions in giving the Exercises to others. This ever-searching attitude made Faber, as one person later observed, *“...a wonderfully winning personality, humble and very serious in his bearing, eloquent and very learned.”*^[7]

The Soul Never Glad to be Settled

Faber desired to witness the results of his ministries but was often called to relocate from place to place before they became apparent. Although engaged in a variety of pastoral activities and charitable enterprises, he was missioned to be a perpetual traveler.^[8] However, here again, we can see Faber's ability to adjust for the sake of mission. He accepts with reverence a limitation imposed upon him. That is why he wrote to Ignatius, five months before his own death, *“For my part I should be glad never to be settled in a place but would rather set forth on a life long pilgrimage through one or other parts of the world without a settled place and without rest.”*^[9] Probably being a pilgrim himself, both spiritually and physically, he felt especially the need of accompanying people.

II. THE CREATIVE LISTENER

Of the 150 letters preserved of Peter Faber, 27 are published in English. In our presentation we concentrate on three of his letters. Our first source is Faber's letter to Alvaro Alfonso, *On Fraternal Charity* (Toledo, Spring, 1542).^[10] Alvaro Alfonso, one of two royal chaplains, was sent to accompany Faber on his journey out of Spain. He gave the *Spiritual Exercises* to Alfonso, who later entered the Society. In this letter Faber depicts fraternal charity as the Society's true foundation. Our second letter is written to Diego Lainez, *On Dealing with Heretics*, (Madrid, March 7, 1546), and our third letter is to Cornelius Wischaven, *On Confession* (Cologne, late Jan, 1544). We presuppose that these letters do not need special explanation, rather we select them to help illustrate Faber's pastoral experiences.

We propose to look at Faber's letters as a new model of spiritual accompaniment under the three

headings: Awareness, Reverence and Devotion. We suggest these three elements parallel the classical process of the Ignatian pedagogy of experience, reflection, and action. Faber integrated these approaches into his ministry so well that he emerged as a creative leader of the early Catholic Renewal in a controversial time, a time that seemingly dissolved the accepted values and beliefs of the past.

AWARENESS of the soul

The major breakthrough in the spiritual life of Faber came when he befriended Ignatius in Paris and revealed his spiritual life to him. The self-reflecting Faber described in his letter on charity that what we dislike in the other person is often the projection of ourselves. Our dislike can show clearly what we ourselves are struggling with: *'The more keenly a man spies others' imperfections and vanities, the cheaper and viler he proves himself to be.'*^[11]

In the same way his awareness about the Church enabled Faber soon to realize that the fundamental issue at the root of the Reformation was the spiritual-moral decadence of the clergy. But how to deal with this decadence?

Firstly, Faber was aware that, as a member of the Church, he bore responsibility for her fate. He felt the same about his own membership in the Society. He wrote: *'(Be) convinced that you are a limb of the Society... Hence, you must conceive... a powerful and unflagging desire for the Society's peace and union of hearts to be preserved and increased...'*^[12] His sense of belonging to the Church informed by his traditional piety later made him reluctant to criticize the Church in public, even though he was fully aware of her deep moral decadence.

Secondly, for Faber the Reformers were lost sheep to be won back to the Church's flock by the inner reform of Catholics themselves. Faber was convinced that violence against heretics, as a means of bringing them back to the Church, was useless. In his letter to Lainez, he suggests an alternative course, in that moral rehabilitation proceeds, not follows the recovery of a lost faith. And it begins in the will, not in the intellect: *'(In case of those) who lost the true attitude of heart before losing the true faith, we have to proceed with them from what helps toward the true attitude of heart to what helps toward true faith.'*^[13] Since faith begins in the heart, Faber concentrated on conversion of the hearts of the laity and the clergy.

REVERENCE – a way of befriending others leading to conversion

His sympathetic awareness of these defections from the Church is the first step of his fraternal charity. Now he expresses his solidarity with his errant brothers and sisters. We can call this second approach as the way of reverence. Let us have a closer look at his method given in our referenced letter about fraternal charity.

Step 1: According to Faber if you are aware of the thoughts and feelings of the other person, surely you will find differences in views. Drawing upon the insight of the *Spiritual Exercises* Faber urges us to judge favorably the opinions of others. *'You should always will, defend, make the best case for, and advocate what your brother wills.'*^[14] This favorable judgment should be done even against your own opinion, since the charity towards one's brother is more important than contesting his opinions. That is why Faber preferred a more personal accompaniment than public theological discourses.

Step 2: In his personal conversations he tried to be free from all prejudice, and so he underlined the importance of reflection: *'Ask yourself whether you may not have to be registered among those who form their opinions with eyes often darkened by the pitch of pride.'*^[15]

Step 3: But Faber moved a step forward asking us to search for the true self and its fruits in the other person with the desire even to learn and to imitate what is good in him. He writes: *'Never pay attention to your brothers' faults, rather imitate those virtues and behaviors of your brothers which most conform to the Rules.* [16] What is said here of the fraternal community of the Society was also applicable to those whom Faber accompanied. Reverence became an existential attitude, so crucial for the ministry of accompaniment. As a fruit of the *Contemplation to Attain Love*, this attitude was evoked by the felt presence of the holy. Anyone aware of God, ever-present and active in people, cannot but be filled with reverence for them.

Step 4: He took this point so seriously as to suggest *'not to disagree with him or oppose him, not merely in word but even in thought... (R)eflect on how unjust it is... to turn aside from the peace, goodwill and loving inclination...* [17] Faber clearly recognized that this kind of endless controversy would destroy the friendship built up previously. By temperament he was in favor of gentle persuasion instead of constraints, moral reform rather than theological polemics, personal reform rather than institutional. [18] In the spirit of deep reverence and love Faber wrote to Cornelius Wischaven: *"In hearing and handling confessions, you should always be meek and forbearing... So far as we can, we should never let a person leave us who would not willingly come back."* [19] The 'return' to the confessional was a sign of the inner reform of the individual. Faber expected this reform for the whole Church. Therefore, he desired to be more zealous in the cause of mercy than in the execution of God's justice. His heart was filled with mercy and compassion for all, and he won over all by words of sweetness. The key to his apostolate was friendship leading to conversion. [20]

DEVOTION: Glorifying God by serving our fellow men

After making friends and winning their goodwill by his humble and gentle manner, Faber moved to where love must naturally move. According to the *Spiritual Exercise*, for Faber, to serve is to be in companionship. Love must manifest itself in deeds. And this is precisely what Faber did by reconciling enemies, offering deeds of charity and empowering the leadership of the Church.

Reconciliation

Faber's mission was to help reconciliation within one's soul and within the Church. He wrote: *"Anyone who wants to help the heretics of this age, must ...love them in truth, banishing from his soul all considerations which would tend to chill his esteem for them. We need to win their goodwill, so that they will love us and accord us a good place in their hearts. This can be done by speaking familiarly with them about matters we both share in common, and avoiding any debate in which one side tries to put down the other."* [21] The task of brotherly reconciliation was expected in dealing with all his accompanied people. Through that, Faber reverently kept the dynamic tension between his own faith and the faith of others. Surely, this task of reconciliation is the most important fruit of all his pastoral activities. [22]

Works of charity

Actually, none of Faber's papal missions to the theological debates of his day could accomplish anything. As he realized well, the real cause of division was the lack of religious and moral fervor and of works of charity. Therefore, he used these period of debates always for his charitable works. He stayed usually at the local hospital, and started his apostolate there at night by visiting the sick, helping the poor and being available for any kind of need. He was sure that in order to win goodwill, one's heart should be shared. As he wrote to Lainez, *"[we] must be careful to have*

great charity for them...'^[23]. Works of charity must precede prayer.^[24] In his entire activity he was 'praying', that is, seeking God in all things.

Empowering the clergy

Faber believed that reforming individuals spiritually would reform the Church. His ministry aimed at reform of monasteries and convents, spiritual renewal of clergy and the Catholic laity. His pastoral strategy was to accompany people through confession, spiritual conversation and the *Spiritual Exercises*. Wherever he went, he gave the *Exercises* to people, and he regarded it as the most urgent and most necessary task. He even prepared non-Jesuits to give the *Exercises*, what we can see as the modern understanding of training the trainees. His choice of retreatants clearly reveals the main thrust of his reform campaign: Reform the pastors and they will reform their flocks. Faber's desire, to get companions for service, was fulfilled so much that we can call him a patron of vocation' promotion.^[25]

It is noteworthy, that beyond individuals, he also targeted groups, and this group approach to his ministries is visible in his dealings with fellow Jesuits, Carthusians and lay groups.

CONCLUSION

The effects were miraculous: doctors of theology began to preach, bishops and abbots undertook to reform their dioceses, students joined religious congregations, noblemen changed their way of life.^[26] How did it happen? Faber shared his most personal experiences about the process of personal and communal growth: Awareness of inner life of the soul, reverence in facing the other person, and service as devotion to God. Faber was guided throughout by his fraternal charity, which links these three tasks together. As a pro-active leader, he chose to accompany the faithful in deepening and strengthening their faith and morale, and to be empathetically open to the Protestants. He held fast to the truth as he believes it, but he was always willing to enter into dialogue with those who saw it otherwise.^[27]

In India today we face a religious fundamentalism posing a threat to the secular fabric of our nation. Perhaps Faber's ever friendly disposition and his gentle approach can guide us in this context. Don't these three important aspects of awareness, reverence and devotion give us a fitting reply to the ongoing hate-campaign unleashed by the Hindutva forces against Christians and Muslims? Leadership flowing from fraternal charity is of great help to build bridges, to heal wounds among different faiths and to lead to a peaceful living. Faber's advice, redolent of love, compassion and fraternal charity, is a prophetic witness to Catholic renewal even today. The 'silent' companion, Peter Faber, can become 'a *blessed one*' for us!

[1] This paper was written by the Tertians Cyrinus Topno, Philomin Sahaya Raj, Tamas G. Forrai, Soosai Raj A., Paul Vijay Minj and Blasius Soreng.

[2] General biographical material is drawn from two sources: *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre* (The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Luis, 1996), pp. 53-54 (hereafter abbreviated as SW) and Hedwig Lewis SJ, *Profiles in Holiness* (GSP, Gujarat, 2003), pp. 160-166 (abbreviated as PIH).

[3] *Memoriale*, no. 1. SW. p. 60.

[4] SW, p. 8.

[5] *Memoriale*, no. 423, SW, p. 304.

[6] *Memoriale*, no. 12, SW, p. 66.

[7] *Companions of Jesus: Spiritual Profiles of Jesuit Saints and Beati*, (English Province of Society of Jesus, London, 1974), p.93.

[8] Severin Leitner, *The Spirituality of Peter Faber* (CIS, XXXVI, II, 2005, p. 104 ff.)

[9] SW, p. 25.

[10] The three letters are quoted from SW.

[11] To Alvaro Alfonso, point 7. SW, p. 332.

[12] To Alvaro Alfonso, SW, p. 330.

[13] To Lainez, no.3, SW, p. 379

[14] To Alvaro Alfonso, point 1, SW. p. 331.

[15] To Alvaro Alfonso, point 5, SW, p. 332.

[16] To Alvaro Alfonso, point 3, SW, p. 331.

[17] To Alvaro Alfonso, point 2, SW, p. 331.

[18] This preference has been expressed in his letter to Kalckbrenner, Prior of the Cologne Charterhouse (12 March 1546): “*Colloquies offered no solution to the religious crises of the time... Theological discussions tended only to harden attitudes, and any attempt at conciliation turned out... to be wishful thinking and became positively dangerous at times.*” SW, p. 40.

[19] To Cornelius Wischaven, from Cologne, late Jan 1544., WS. p. 360.

[20] In his tribute to Faber (1579) Simon Rodrigues amplifies this characteristic of Faber: “*In his dealings with others he revealed such a rare and delightful sweetness and charm as I have never to this day, I must admit, found in anyone else. In some way or other he used to make friends with peoples, and by the kindness of his manner and speech so won his way into all hearts that he set them on fire with the love of God.*” SW. p. 33. What made that reverence possible? Faber stated that the respect for others proceeds from and increases by ‘*deep and heartfelt humility, longsuffering, and charity*’ (to Alvaro Alfonso, point 4, SW, p. 331). Faber experienced humility as the most important source of reverence.

And remember, it is possible only if we, the companions, do not forget our own personal journey to overcome our own self-will! (to Alvaro Alfonso, point 9, SW, p. 333).

[21] To Lainez, SW, p. 379. Faber urges inner reconciliation also in his letter to Alfonso, no.6. SW. p. 332.

[22] Beside his direct spiritual help for reconciliation, we should not forget that Faber's personal intentions were often focused on praying for the significant persons of his age who most needed this kind of reconciliation and personal conversion. His spiritual diary (*Memoriale*) and his letters give a vivid and affective example for that. (E.g. *Memoriale*, no. 283, SW. p. 229.)

[23] To Lainez, SW, no. 1, p. 379.

[24] *Memoriale*, no. 126. SW, p. 141.

[25] Faber speaks here about his joy over Alfonso's vocation. *Memoriale*, no. 32, SW, p. 84.

[26] Already after his first ministry, the city of Parma was transformed: '*The reception of sacraments for long abandoned, was renewed so that it 'looked like a Jubilee Year and each Sunday looked like a Easter Sunday.'*' PIH, 160.

[27] "*His letters and writings always show him to be an irenic man*". David L. Fleming SJ, 'The Ignatian Anniversaries: Three Holy Jesuits,' (*National Jesuit News*, USA, Dec 2005–Jan. 2006. Vol. 35. No. 3. p. 9.)