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Reconciling the Irreconcilable: Sacramental Presence and Mystical Union in John Calvin and Ignatius of Loyola

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Abstract

Scholarship since the mid-twentieth century has noted a compelling social and spiritual alignment between John Calvin and Ignatius of Loyola despite their position on opposite sides of the sixteenth-century confessional divide. While traditional Eucharistic debates emphasize irreconcilable structural and dogmatic disagreements, this paper argues that shifting the interpretive focus to the “mystical element” in communion exposes profound commonalities between the two reformers. Utilizing Bernard McGinn’s framework defining Christian mysticism as a transformative awareness of the direct presence of God, I examine the spatial dialectics of spiritual ascent and descent inherent in both thinkers’ writings. For Calvin, spiritual communion is expressed through the *sursum corda*, a pneumatic mystery wherein the Holy Spirit bridges the vast spatial gulf between heaven and earth to engraft believers into a transformative mystical union with Christ. For Ignatius, as seen in his *Spiritual Diary* and *Spiritual Exercises*, Christ is a “midway” space that allows Ignatius to ascend into Trinitarian communion while remaining thoroughly embedded in earthly reality. Ultimately, both figures utilized a shared late-medieval sacramental worldview to address the pressing existential questions of salvation.

Keywords: Reformation; Protestant Reformation; 16th century; mysticism; Catholic Reformation; spirituality; John Calvin; Ignatius of Loyola Society of Jesus; spiritual ascent; eucharist; presence; sacramental theology; doctrine

1. Introduction

Correlation between John Calvin and Ignatius of Loyola has drawn interests of scholars since the mid-twentieth century (Hornbeck 2014). In celebration of the 500th anniversary of Calvin’s birth in 2009, Institut Protestant de Théologie in Paris held a conference on Calvin and Ignatius, which discussed the two figures’ spirituality, mysticism, and political theology (Hornbeck 2014, p. 139). Affinity between Calvin and Ignatius is also marked by the philosopher Charles Taylor, who noted that the two thinkers were both attempting to answer the same burning question that faced the sixteenth-century mind: how does a person live a life of piety in the lay, married life, that was previously available only to the professed religious? According to Taylor, the answer lies in the “Loyola-Calvin formulation” which offered a paradoxical existence of “living in all the practices and institutions of flourishing but at the same time not fully in them. Being in them but not of them; being in them, but yet at a distance, ready to lose them” (Taylor 2007, p. 81). Patrick Hornbeck mused on the possibility that Calvin and Ignatius could have crossed paths as students at Collège de Montaigu in early 1528; Ignatius, a thirty-seven-year-old Spaniard, and Calvin, a nineteen-year-old Frenchman (Hornbeck 2014, p. 141). Although



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there are no historical records that the two ever met, this hypothetical meeting between two major figures of the Reformation polemic has “captured the imagination of scholars” (Hornbeck 2014, p. 141).

Ignatius of Loyola and John Calvin, who were roughly contemporaries, represent opposite confessional sides of the sixteenth century theological debates on the Eucharist. John Calvin, who rejected both Roman Catholic teaching on transubstantiation, Luther’s doctrine of ubiquitous real presence, and the Zwinglian position of symbolic representation, wrote explicitly on the theology of the Eucharist, arguing for Christ’s real presence in which believers participate through the partaking of the Eucharistic bread and wine. One communed spiritually with Christ who has ascended into heaven, but through the bread and the wine on the altar. The resurrected body of Christ has ascended into heaven, therefore could not be in the eucharistic bread and wine, but spiritual communion is facilitated by the physical elements of bread and wine through the work of the Holy Spirit. Ignatius of Loyola, on the other hand, did not write explicitly on the Eucharist. Nevertheless, Ignatius’ sacramental understanding of the divine presence in the Eucharist is rooted in his own mystical experience of union with God. Ignatius recounts in his *Spiritual Diary* explicit experiences of union with God especially while he is celebrating Mass. For Ignatius, the Eucharist is not just a background setting for invoking a mystical union, but the very place for the dialectic exchange between divine presence and human awareness of it. Calvin and Ignatius are both grappling with the question of how the divine could be present in earthly matters. While the confessional divide between Protestants and Catholics would place Calvin and Ignatius on opposite sides of the sacramental debate, examining their experience of the Eucharist reveals similarities between the two figures, who are both driven by a certain conviction on God’s grace experienced and received in human appropriation. “Reconciling the irreconcilable” as suggested in the title of this essay regards not so much overcoming the confessional divide between Protestants and Catholics on the sixteenth-century debate on the Eucharist, but the mystery of Incarnation that reconciles the infinite gap between the divine and the human in the Eucharist.

Bernard McGinn demonstrated that, contrary to the common understanding, mysticism and Reformation have much correspondence. It would be a mistake to suggest that mysticism ceased to exist during the Reformation as rationalism arose with Protestantism. According to McGinn, many of the reformers have inherited the late medieval mysticism tradition in Northern Europe, Germanic, and Dutch (McGinn 2015). Some reformers were influenced by the Neoplatonic dialectics of pseudo-Dionysius, which had a heavy influence on the northern mystics of the Middle Ages (McGinn 2015; Froehlich 1987, pp. 33–46). In other words, Protestants were not less mystical because they sought to rid the Christian religion of superstitious piety associated with Roman Catholicism, nor were Roman Catholics more mystical because they practiced a less rationalistic version of the faith. The misunderstanding here, that Protestantism was opposed to mysticism, is based on what McGinn describes as an “inadequate view of the mystical element of Christianity, taking it as a monolithic phenomenon based on ‘mystical union’ conceived of as a mingling of God and the human creature” (McGinn 2016, p. 4). Instead, McGinn suggests defining the “mystical element” as “the aspect of religious life that seeks a deep and transformative sense of the direct presence of God” (McGinn 2016, p. 3). To be sure, mysticism was affected by the social and religious shifts that occurred during the Reformation. Nevertheless, mysticism is very much evident in the work of the key figures of the Reformation. McGinn proposes understanding mysticism as knowledge or awareness of the presence of God that leads to a deep transformation of one’s life (McGinn 2023, pp. 11–12). Highlighting the three elements of mysticism according to McGinn, i.e., awareness, presence, and transformation, would allow for a constructive dialogue between the eucharistic theologies of Calvin and Ignatius.

Much of Calvin's writings and certainly of Ignatius contain their experiences of God in the liturgy, which is an important element to consider when examining the notion of "presence". Paying attention to the mystical language particularly in the dialectic of ascent and descent reveals a shared affinity of spirituality between Calvin and Ignatius. Shifting the focus of the Eucharistic debate from sacramental efficacy to mystical presence in the sacrament reveals that the two quasi contemporary figures on the opposite side of the confessional division share a common thread that aligns with the sacramental worldview inherited from the Middle Ages that is in the process of transition into early modernity. In what follows, I will examine the point of convergence between Calvin and Ignatius from a sacramental theological perspective, adding to the growing scholarly interest on the two figures.

2. Sacramental Question: Presence and Union

The dogged questions for the Reformers on the mode, manner, and effect of Christ's presence in the Eucharist arose in reaction to the theology and practice of the Eucharist that were gradually forged over time since the early Middle Ages. With the reforms of Pope Gregory VII during the eleventh century, the role of the priest in presiding over the Eucharist became the focal point of liturgy. Ordination became an important marker that endowed the priest with the ability to consecrate the Eucharistic host and make Christ present in the Eucharist (Macy 2014, pp. 15–37). By the thirteenth century, the role of ordination in officiating the Eucharist, i.e., making bread and wine Eucharistic, became an official teaching of the Church. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 officially decreed that "no one is able to confect the sacrament except priests who have been ritually ordained according to the keys of the Church which Jesus Christ himself entrusted to the apostles and their successors" (García y García 1981, p. 42). The power to consecrate the Eucharistic offerings was closely linked to the ritual of ordination that consecrated a male individual to be set apart for the specific function of the liturgy a power which was reserved to the minister and inaccessible to the laity. As a result, separation between clerical role of the priest and the secular character of the laity became more accentuated. While the theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were debating the precise mode of Christ's presence, the laity believed that the Eucharist was somehow the body and blood of Christ through which they could gain access to heaven. As priesthood became more fortified and centralized, attending Mass became the most important practice along with the popular devotions to the Eucharist that spread widely on the part of the laity. With the development of the elevation of the consecrated Host at Mass in the eleventh century, seeing the Eucharist became equivalent to consuming Christ in the Eucharist, especially as the frequency of reception of the Eucharist waned over time (McCue 1987, pp. 430–33). The Eucharist was understood to have a magical power of sort to heal and perform miracles, because the Eucharistic bread and wine were truly Christ's body and blood (McCue 1987, pp. 427–37). Related to the question of who makes Christ present in the Eucharist was the question of "How is Christ present in the appearance of the bread and the wine?" Do the words spoken over the bread and wine bring about the Lord's presence? How to explain the appearance of the bread and wine that remains unchanged during and after consecration? These questions consumed the mind of the medieval theologians as grace and sacraments became the focal point for the critical question at hand: salvation. Furthermore, defining the "how" of Christ's presence in the Eucharist was not only a matter of theological lucidity but a pastoral concern at the center of the medieval Christian piety. The objections of the sixteenth century reformers were not only against the clericalized concentration of power in the ecclesial life of the church, but also genuine questions on the mode of divine presence in human elements of the Eucharistic offering because, as the Reformers saw it, the devotional

practice to the Eucharist seemed to breach too close to the realm of make-belief superstition especially on the part of the laity.

3. Spiritual Union in Calvin: *Sursum Corda*, Being Grafted Unto Christ

French pastor and theologian from Geneva John Calvin's theology of the Eucharist took a middle ground between Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Zwinglians. A foundational preoccupation of Calvin was to preserve the absolute sovereignty and transcendence of God in all matters including the modes in which God chooses to make salvation available to us through the sacraments. Sacramental signs are intended and chosen by God as instruments for our spiritual nourishment. The absolute transcendence of God is preserved only when we understand properly the nature and purpose of the sacramental signs. For Calvin, Bread and wine of the Eucharist are inferior, almost accidental means, yet ordained by God to "feed" us unto our salvation. The Roman Catholic position of transubstantiation transformed the sign into the signified, destroying the symbolic relationship by failing to maintain the distinction. Calvin insisted on "distinction without separation" which safeguards divine sovereignty and freedom in God's voluntary revelation of God. Only when the sign remains a sign can the substance truly correspond to the reality ascribed to it. The Eucharistic elements do not have an immanent power in them; rather, they are visual indications that ensure that Christ's body and blood are offered to us, and that salvation indeed becomes available to us through our participation in the sacrament. Without the bread and wine that which Christ intended to achieve could not be achieved. Thus, only when the bread remains bread can there be a correspondence between the sign and the signified. For Calvin, the Eucharistic bread and wine are a "metaphysical necessity and an existential fact" (McDonnell 1967, p. 166).

Maintaining the tension between the sign and the signified is an importance not only of a metaphysical but a Christological one (McDonnell 1967, pp. 210–48). For Calvin, any theological doctrine concerning the Eucharist must maintain the humanity of Christ, to which "nothing inappropriate to the human nature [may] be ascribed" (Calvin 1960, p. 1382). Human body is naturally contained in space, so the body of the Lord who has died and risen could not be localized to the Eucharistic bread and wine. Attaching Christ's risen body to bread would be to deny Christ's humanity that is now ascended, and to deny that would be to deny God's revelation in Jesus Christ as Mediator, and therefore also the redemption of our humanity (McDonnell 1967, p. 212). Calvin's objection against the Roman Catholic position of transubstantiation is not to deny Christ's presence in the Eucharist but rather that the believers do not mistake the bread and wine to have a magical power in and of themselves. The real danger is that we drag the heavenly body of Christ down to the earthly corruptible elements, as the Roman Catholics were charged, or that the body is everywhere present, as the Lutherans were charged. The Lord's Supper is a sacrament not because it causes a communion with Christ or that we can receive of his body that is not available anywhere else, but rather that it graphically presents and thus confirms Christ's promise that his body, once given up to the Father through his passion, is now made available to us for our salvation. Our desire to visualize and localize Christ's body leads to idolatry of the wrong objects, i.e., the bread and wine. Such would be an attack on the sovereignty of God and the lordship of Christ.

Calvin's eucharistic theology serves a pastoral purpose of clarifying a proper understanding and reception of the sacrament. Calvin did not write so much to construct a systematic or dogmatic teaching on Eucharistic presence. Rather, the purpose was to offer a corrective to the theological and moral error which he saw in the contemporary belief and practice of the Eucharist because it had direct ramifications related to our salvation. A central theme in Calvin's understanding of justification and sanctification is the believer's

mystical union with God through Christ. His preoccupations are not with real presence in the narrow sense but with the whole sacramental act that substantially draws us into the life of God, because, as Calvin insists, Jesus's words at the Last Supper with the disciples that his body is given up *for us*. For this reason, Calvin's eucharistic theology must be understood through another dimension, i.e., mystical union. As Kilian McDonnell notes, "Both Calvin's thought and his piety are deeply impregnated with union with Christ, and for this he has various expressions; union, communion, communication, participation with Christ, grafted into Christ, inserted into Christ, Christ dwelling within us. Without an understanding of this union with Christ one will easily misunderstand Calvin's teaching on justification, sanctification, his ecclesiology and sacramental theology, as well as his personal piety" (McDonnell 1967, p. 177).

The influence of Bernard of Clairvaux on Calvin's theology is well-documented (Tamburello 1994). But so is Calvin's disdain for "spirituality" and "mysticism" as such. Regarding Pseudo-Dionysius, Calvin remarked, "No one will deny that Dionysius, whoever he was, subtly and skillfully discussed many matters in his *Celestial Hierarchy*. But if anyone examines it more closely, he will find it for the most part nothing but talk" (Calvin 1960, p. 164). On monasticism of his own day, he says, "Our present-day monks find in idleness the chief part of their sanctity. For if you take idleness away from them, where will that contemplative life be, in which they boast they excel all others and draw nigh to the angels?" (Calvin 1960, p. 1264) Given the weariness Calvin expresses toward overt spiritualization of matter, one would be hard pressed to call Calvin a mystic (McGinn 2015, pp. 50–65). Nevertheless, Calvin stresses the importance of faith, which, for Calvin, is a "matter of heart" (Calvin 1960, p. 583) because our salvation through union with Christ is brought on by faith. For Calvin faith means intimate knowledge of Christ; that is, an intimate communion with him (Gerrish 1993, p. 71). As B.A. Gerrish notes, "it is through faith that one comes to not only be aware of Christ from distance, but to embrace him so that he may become ours: faith "makes us grow into [Christ's] body, have life in common with him, in short become one with him" (Gerrish 1993, p. 71). Faith does not merely mean believing in Christ but communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Calvin states that we "put on Christ" and that we are "engrafted in Christ," (Calvin 1960, pp. 537–38) which he finds fitting for *sursum corda* at the liturgy.

In the commentary on Ephesians 5:28–33, Calvin describes the relationship between Christ and the Church as a spousal bond that makes us flesh of Christ's flesh and bone of his bone. For Calvin, this union is directly related to our sanctification: "that indwelling of Christ in our hearts, in short that mystical union, [is] accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed" (Tamburello 1994, p. 99). However, communion with Christ that makes us become bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh does not mean becoming of the same substance as Christ. This union is akin to a spousal union in marriage: "God very commonly takes on the character of a husband to us. Indeed, the union by which he binds us to himself when he receives us into the church is like sacred marriage, which must rest upon mutual faithfulness" (Calvin 1960, p. 385).

Calvin speaks of union with Christ through Baptism and the Lord's Supper by his frequently used image of "engrafting" which is directly related to the sacraments (Tamburello 1994, p. 99). But Calvin ensures that being engrafted unto Christ is not caused by or limited to the bread and wine. We unite with Christ not substantially but spiritually, for Christ is not contained in the bread. This does not mean that Eucharistic eating is empty of meaning. Spiritual eating is true and real. And it is the Holy Spirit that enables the union, and so is Christ's presence in the Eucharist. The Holy Spirit effects the presence of Christ as well as the eating of his flesh and blood. One must note that presence is not

a metaphysical fact but an act and reality. Calvin states, “a serious wrong is done to the Holy Spirit, unless we believe that it is through his incomprehensible power that we come to partake of Christ’s flesh and blood” (Calvin 1960, p. 1405). Again, Calvin’s eucharistic theology is soteriological. The Spirit’s role is not merely to effectuate the sacraments; it is God’s initiative to bring us into God’s salvation through Christ. The Holy Spirit is not an attribute of the divine act but the force of the divine act.

Calvin’s pneumatology is developed out of his deep devotional piety. In the Eucharist, the body of Christ is really eaten and the blood truly drunk. Sacramental signs are thus efficacious in Christ who really gives what is signified. However, our union with Christ brought about by the sacraments is a mystery. Calvin comments that he understands the mystery of real presence not by knowledge but by experience:

Now, if anyone should ask me how this [real presence] takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it. Therefore, I here embrace without controversy the truth of God in which I may safely rest. He declares his flesh the food of my soul, his blood its drink. I offer my soul to him to be fed with such food. In his Sacred Supper he bids me take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them, and that I receive them. (Calvin 1960, pp. 1403–4)

Calvin’s insistence on the mysteriousness of the union and our understanding of it through experience is not a facile admittance to the limits of his eucharistic theology. Rather, this is a decisive point in his eucharistic theology that emphasizes the importance of a religious experience that must take place for our participation in God’s economy of salvation. Our faith in God’s salvation through Christ is not supposition or speculation, but an unmistakable reality given to us through the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. As Kilian McDonnell points out, “The insistence here is upon bodily involvement. The Eucharistic mystery involves the body and blood of Christ. . . In spite of all that [Calvin] objects to in the term ‘substantial,’ he uses it to designate that real joining between Christ and the recipient of the Eucharist” (McDonnell 1967, p. 256). McDonnell adds that Calvin’s insistence on the role of the Holy Spirit in Christ’s giving of his body and blood to us in the Eucharist makes it possible for him to retain sacramental realism while rejecting transubstantiation and consubstantiation (McDonnell 1967, p. 257). We are also reminded of the strong pneumatology in Calvin’s theology of the Eucharist. While his theology does not exclude substantial presence, Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is an act of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the dialectical working of Christ’s body in heaven and the power of the Spirit that makes Christ’s body present in the Supper is determined by Christ’s Ascension. For Calvin, Christ’s presence during his earthly life is now a spiritual presence following his Ascension. Kilian McDonnell cautions that this pneumatic emphasis should not lead one to suppose Docetism in Calvin (McDonnell 1967, p. 262). Spiritual presence for Calvin refers to the work of the Holy Spirit, rather than spiritualization of Christ’s body. The Spirit and the body of Christ are total and whole, so that when we commune with Christ we receive “his flesh and blood not less than with his Spirit, so as to possess thus the whole Christ” (McDonnell 1967, p. 263). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit overcomes the metaphysical impasse that separates God and humans, not only in essence but in terms of space. The vast distance between heaven and earth is folded by the power of the Spirit. “What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space” (Calvin 1960, p. 1370).

4. Sacramental Presence and Spatial Dialectics in Ignatius of Loyola

Ignatius did not write explicitly on Christ's presence in the Eucharist. However, Ignatius' mysticism is profoundly Eucharistic, first in respect to his devotion to Mass that is foundational for his spirituality. Contrary to the declining practice of Eucharistic reception at the time, Ignatius attended Mass daily and received communion every Sunday. He also encouraged frequent communion to his companions and anyone who underwent the Spiritual Exercises. As it is evident in his *Spiritual Diary*, Ignatius received graces and mystic visions at Mass. Harvey Egan notes that "Ignatius focused his entire day on the Mass. The multifarious daily mystical graces occurred while thinking about which Mass to say, while preparing for Mass both interiorly and exteriorly, while saying Mass, and during his thanksgiving after Mass" (Egan 1991, p. 113). He entrusted discernment, and asked for special favors and intentions at Mass. Second mode that Ignatian mysticism is Eucharistic is in the Christological and sacramental sense. Ignatius' spirituality is predicated upon the type of mystical communion comprised of God's descent into the human world and our unmerited ascent into the inner life of the Trinity which is extended to us by gracious invitation of God. Between the dialectic of ascent and descent is Christ who is the mediator. As Jill Raitt notes, one of the theological foci in Ignatius' spirituality is devotion to the circular movement between revelation of God and the salvific work of Christ. This movement finds its center in the Eucharist, which "expresses the role of creation (the bread and wine) raised up to a vehicle of the active presence of Christ" (Raitt 1987, p. 458). Ignatius' mysticism is thus incarnational and sacramental which marks a departure from the apophatic mysticism of the patristic and medieval tradition.

Ignatius of Loyola left a significant spiritual heritage and gift for the church with his *Spiritual Exercises*, which is a pragmatic guidance for one who desires to follow God's will in one's life by discerning the movement of the Spirit. Ignatius had numerous mystic experiences that led him through a spiritual journey of increasing union with God. In an attempt to historically trace the genesis of the spiritual wealth found in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, Hugo Rahner identifies Ignatius' mystical experience at Manresa as the decisive point of conversion that set Ignatius on a path of complete devotion and submission to God. The aristocrat family background of the Basque country had already immersed Ignatius into the social conduct of honor and nobility, and his training in the cleric militia which instilled in him an uncompromisable commitment to service had prepared Ignatius with a spirit of service to his patria since young age (Rahner 1953, pp. 1–13). A momentous turning point occurred as Ignatius laid in sickbed after being injured in a battle against the French in the fortress of Pomplona, during which he read about the lives of saints in *The Golden Legend*. Ignatius' devotion to God began in childhood with his family, but he gained a sharper sense of discernment as he became more aware of the contrast between desolation he felt when he daydreamed of winning the affection of a lady and the great zeal he felt when he imagined living his life like St. Dominic or St. Francis. Ignatius' sinful past driven by lust after women and pursuit of military vainglory protruded forcefully under the scruples of his soul as his mind and heart turned toward the holy things of God.

But the pivotal moment of conversion that transformed Ignatius from a pilgrim to a mystic was at Manresa, where the "divinely bright sunlight shone into [Ignatius'] soul" (Rahner 1953, p. 50). Diego Lainez (1512–1565), the first biographer of Ignatius and the second companion to join the Society, wrote: "At Manresa, [Ignatius] was strengthened, taught, and illumined by His Divine Majesty in a wholly singular manner. As a consequence he began to look at the things of God with entirely different eyes. . ." (Rahner 1953, p. 49). Ignatius reached Manresa after he had given up his armour at the altar of Our Lady and given away his possessions of fine clothing to a beggar at Montserrat. Ignatius stayed in Manresa for almost a year with a steady joyfulness, yet he was still accompanied by

uncertainty on things of spiritual matter and being tempted to resign from his determination to serve God only. Ignatius persevered with his prayer practice which he kept up with determination and consistency. At a momentous point during his journey of spiritual maturity, which was not linear nor consistently progressive, Ignatius received graces of mystical experience. I stress that these experiences were given to him, because they are initiated by God in unexpected moments, thus a type of mysticism that brought an awareness of God for Ignatius which in turn transformed him. Intimate experiences of God transforms Ignatius from being a “pilgrim” on a search for God, to one who discerns God, by emptying oneself for identification of oneself to God’s will (Brouillette 2018, pp. 102–3).

Luis Gonçalves da Câmara, who wrote Ignatius’ *Autobiography* as Ignatius dictated it to him, notes five significant mystical experiences of God Ignatius received at Manresa described as a sort of illumination, great understanding, clarity, or enlightening of the mind. In particular, one day while Ignatius was hearing Mass, “at the elevation of the Body of the Lord, [Ignatius] saw with interior eyes something like white rays coming from above. . . what he saw clearly with his understanding was how Jesus Christ our Lord was there in that Most Holy Sacrament” (Ganss 1991, p. 80). Ignatius also saw “with interior eyes the humanity of Christ” (Ganss 1991, p. 80). Ignatius received a “vision” of the Trinity: while he was praying the Office of Our Lady, “his understanding began to be elevated so that he saw the Most Holy Trinity in the form of three musical keys. This brought on so many tears and so much sobbing that he could not control himself” (Ganss 1991, p. 80). This experience which left such a strong impression on Ignatius that “it was never erased from [Ignatius’] memory the rest of his life and that henceforth he felt a great devotion to the divine majesty whenever he prayed to the Blessed Trinity” (O’Conor 1900, p. 53). From these accounts that would become foundational for the *Spiritual Exercises*, one can note explicitly Christological, Trinitarian, and eucharistic elements in Ignatius’ mysticism.

One of the earliest companions of Ignatius, Jerome Nadal, described Ignatius’ Manresa experience as “illumination;” a flooding of grace in his soul that was granted by God. Nadal says about this event that Ignatius “could not speak of it without experiencing an overwhelming emotion of modesty and humility. . . He was accustomed to appeal to this wonderful illumination whenever he was consulted on difficult questions, whenever there was question of something essential for the development of his Order. . .” (de Leturia 1941, p. 56; Rahner 1953, p. 100). This is seen clearly in Ignatius’ *Spiritual Diary*, in which his continuous mystical experiences are circumscribed by Mass. In the *Spiritual Diary*, which contains accounts of Ignatius’ mystical experiences during the span of about one year between 2 February 1544 to 27 February 1545, Ignatius notes frequently of spiritual ascent wherein his soul is lifted into God the Father. But Ignatius’ mystical ascent does not happen apart from his earthly surroundings. On 8 February 1544, Ignatius is discerning whether the Society will maintain an income for its operations. By this time, the apostolic works of the Society had expanded into Portugal, Spain, Germany, Italy, and India. Of particular interest is the way in which Ignatius entrusts decision-making on the practical matters about the Society to his encounter with the Spirit. In discerning whether to maintain a fixed income for the Society for example, Ignatius finds affirmation through his intense experiences of the presence of God. Ignatius recorded these mystical experiences on the day they occurred to note faithfully how God has made himself known and present. In this way, Ignatius is systematically cataloguing the time, space, and his actions during which he mystically encountered God. He notices God’s presence and love for him through experience of intense “devotion,” accompanied by profusive shedding of tears, a sense of warmth, peace, interior motions, and desire. On 11 February, Ignatius notes: “So numerous were the tears flowing down my face and the sobs while I made the offering [at Mass] and after it that I could hardly rise because of the sobbing and tears the devotion and the

grace which I had received" (Ganss 1991, p. 241). Ignatius records the precise moments of these mystical experiences following the specific objective of discernment which he had in mind. For instance, Ignatius notes that the intense tears and sobs on 11 February "came after I had made the offering to have no fixed income. I considered the offering ratified, validated, and so on" (Ganss 1991, p. 242). After repeated affirmations by intense devotions, Ignatius considers the matter of fixed income settled. There is a question–affirmation (or dissuasion) pattern within Ignatius' mystical experiences that correlates to solving the practical questions of governance for the Society. On 17 February he notes, "When Mass was ended, in the chapel and then in the room I was eager to give thanks on my knees for the great gifts and graces I had received. I lost all desire to reiterate the offering already made (although this was my customary practice, not without devotion). I considered the matter as settled" (Ganss 1991, p. 243). Ignatius also notices that "the devotion [he] felt drew [him] to remain there, relishing the experience [he] was having" (Ganss 1991, p. 243). Ignatius responds to the interior prompt and discerns another matter—whether he would remain or exit the election of the Superior of the Society—and, once he decides in the affirmative to exit he receives "special interior motions and tears" (Ganss 1991, p. 243). As such, Ignatius' recognition of the divine accompaniment occurs on two levels: the exterior composed of actions and words, and the interior composed of promptings, senses, and emotions. The exterior and interior are interlaced as such that Ignatius is aware of them simultaneously. Ignatius notes of the sense of warmth, received already from his mystical encounter, remaining with him as he notes of his awareness: "Afterward on my way to Mass and during it, it seemed to me that the warmth within was contending with the wind outside. I saw clearly the good within and the evil outside" (Ganss 1991, p. 243).

In the *Spiritual Diary*, Ignatius particularly notes of the experiences of spiritual union. On 8 February, he writes: "Wishing to present [the question of fixed income] to the Father through the mediation and prayers of the Mother and the Son, [...] I felt myself a motion toward the Father or that I was being lifted up before him" (Ganss 1991, p. 240). On the same day, during the Offering of the Oblation, Ignatius notes that: "I felt (then) within me as if I were going or were being carried away to the Father, and in this movement my hair stood on end, with a most remarkable warmth in my whole body. Following this I had tears and the deepest devotion" (Ganss 1991, p. 240). On 21 February: "Throughout the whole time of my prayer, I felt continual and very great devotion, warm brightness, and spiritual relish. I seemed somehow drawn partly upward" (Ganss 1991, p. 247). Two days later on 23 February, Ignatius encounters the Trinity: "I remembered the occasion when the Father placed me with the Son" (Ganss 1991, p. 249).

It is significant that Ignatius' mystical experiences as noted in *Spiritual Diary* take place in liturgy. At making the offering of the Eucharist, Ignatius feels deep gratitude for the grace he received, which is physically and emotionally experienced in his tears, sense of warmth, and feeling of being lifted upward. However, for Ignatius, liturgy is neither a backdrop nor a means for bringing about God's presence. Ignatius scrupulously examines the undulating movements of his soul to ensure that it was not he nor the liturgical action that brought about his visions. He experiences confusion at times when he expects to see something or to experience God's presence but does not find it: "At intervals, although I was willing not to lift the eyes of my understanding upward, but rather to make myself content with everything; and although I even prayed, if it were to God's equal glory, not to be visited with tears, sometimes my understanding unintentionally went upward and I seemed to see something of the Divine Being which at other times it is not in my power to see even when I so desire" (Ganss 1991, p. 255). Like Calvin, we see in Ignatius a cautious awareness about the limitations of the physical world, i.e., the liturgical setting, that does not cause or initiate the spiritual favors given to him by God.

The liturgical setting within which Ignatius visually and cognitively notices his surroundings elucidates a spatial dimension to his mystical experiences. Ignatius notes on 7 March 1544, in the *Spiritual Diary* that his spirit was hovering in the heights of the Trinity while his eyes were fixed to the “letter” or the text of the missal. He was engulfed in the tension of the opposites, out of which he gained assurance that God approved his decisions about the best way to draw up the rules of his Order. Ignatius describes that “the inner visitation moved between God’s seat above and the letter” (Ganss 1991, p. 254). He “did not raise [his] understanding to consider the Divine Persons as distinct nor to distinguish them, nor did [he] lower [his] understanding to the letter. Rather this visitation seemed to [him] to be interior, midway between the Trinity’s dwelling place above and the letter” (Ganss 1991, p. 254). What Ignatius calls “midway,” i.e., the space between, betrays a dialogic rather than dichotomy, between the divine (“above”) and the human (“letter”). In the Ignatian mode of mysticism, the two irreconcilable modes are reconciled not as a fusion of the two but in tension; a progressive transparency that enables Ignatius to be rapt above while existing here below. Recall the difficulty of Calvin regarding spatial irreconcilability between heaven in which the resurrected Christ is located and the eucharistic bread that remains in the earthly realm. Could it be that Ignatius overcame the metaphysical impasse? To be sure, Ignatius’ *Spiritual Diary* are notes briefly recorded by Ignatius as feelings, thoughts, and visions came to him in his daily life. It would seem improbable that Ignatius was concerned with questions of precise metaphysics so much as being vigilant about correct discernment of the Spirit’s promptings in his mystical experiences. Nevertheless, Hugo Rahner’s interpretation suggests that Ignatius remained in the physical spatiality while simultaneously glimpsing into the heavenly because the mysterious ascending and descending was enabled by God’s initiative. In other words, because there was an ascent Ignatius could descend and remain in the created world and, conversely, he could ascend into the heavenly while remaining in the earthly.

This brings us to the second point that Ignatius’ mysticism is Eucharistic in the Christological and sacramental sense. At Manresa, where Ignatius encountered knowledge of God’s creation of the world, he saw a bright radiance “from which individual rays proceeded and from which God created the light.” God’s rays penetrated behind visible things and all creatures became transparent for him. Thus, Ribadeneira described that, “when Ignatius reads the Mass and holds Christ in his hands he beholds him just as he is in heaven and here below” (Rahner 1990, p. 12, Cf. *Fontes Narrativi* 1943–1960, Vol. II, p. 474). Hugo Rahner describes that, in a movement between the “above” and the “below” lies the “middle”, which is Christ (Rahner 1990, p. 15). For Ignatius, it is precisely through Christ that his soul is lifted up to encounter the Trinity. As Mediator, Christ becomes the space of communion that brings the infinite gap between heaven and earth into unity. Here, one could find a similar paradigm in Calvin’s “mystic union” through Christ in the Eucharist. It is the humanity of Christ that makes it possible for us to conceive the below in terms of the above, by fixing our gaze upon the middle. But our participation in the middle is attained only by “plunging, together with the Man who is creator and Lord, into the death of the cross ‘below’” (Rahner 1990, p. 17). God’s creation can rise again from the depths of hell through the Mediator because the Word had himself come down from above. Thus, in Christ, the ‘above’ of God becomes infused with the ‘below’ of this world. The question is not only, “how did God become man?” The mystery of God’s incarnation is expressed in the Lord who is the Son of the Virgin Mary, the crucified and risen Lord, “and in the utmost abyss of God’s descent man receives his creator and Lord in the bread of sacrament” (Rahner 1990, p. 16; Cf. *Monumenta Ignatiana* 1903–1911, vol. 1, p. 341).

After the Manresa experience, Ignatius could see all things on earth “in the light of their proceeding from and returning to God” (Rahner 1953, p. 51). Ignatius’ background as

a soldier that provided the basis for the militant charism of the Society of Jesus was now redirected as a duty to battle against evil and to serve God for winning of souls. The mission Ignatius received, which elucidated not something God wishes to impose on him but rather that which is revealed within and from the person of Ignatius, was to be worked out within the corporeal and hierarchical structure of the church militant. The mystical experience at Manresa formed Ignatius' soul so that heavenly grace is visualized and incarnate in the corporeal church.

As mentioned above, Ignatius' mysticism is dialogical: he experiences being lifted up to communion with God while remaining aware of the earthly space. But, as Harvey Egan argued, Ignatius' mysticism is strongly kataphatic: an individual who has been given the grace of spiritual ascent does not remain in heaven but descends into the human reality which is to be redeemed and sanctified through Christ (Egan 1991, p. 142). In this sense, Ignatius' mysticism is sacramental. That grace is incarnational is strongly seen in the *Spiritual Exercises*. In the Second Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius instructs the practice of Application of Senses (no. 121–125): the retreatant is to “compose a place (*compositio loci*)” by their imagination using the bodily senses of seeing, touching, hearing, and smelling, to create the scene from the Gospels for contemplating God's word. The “place” constructed in the retreatant's mind becomes the very space in which God communicates with the individual, so that God's will for them is felt, seen, touched, smelt, and heard. Application of Senses provides a spatial designation for the Ignatian “sacramental presence,” wherein the invisible, transcendent God becomes enfleshed through and within the retreatant's composed place. Application of Senses and *Compositio Loci* are powerful and practical tools for encountering God existentially. But the retreatant is not to confuse these exercises as a sort of mental trickery. Ignatius is aware of the weakness of the human mind that can imagine fantastical ideas according to their own will. Ignatius had his own experience of receiving understanding and clarity at the initiative of God at Manresa, which gave him the fortitude for correct discernment of the Spirit. Thus, only when the retreatant has experienced the love of God will the application of senses make sense. Mystical presence of God allows for transformation of one's existence in this world. As Jonathan Sachs notes, “ultimately, grace is a sharing in God's own life and action itself. In grace we are not only drawn into God's love and life, we are drawn into God's action in this world” (Sachs 1995, p. 77). In the practice of *Compositio Loci*, God's presence is incarnate through human imagination in a sacramental manner.

One might ask, is Ignatian mysticism an example of what Calvin resisted, i.e., pulling God down to the human level and violating the distance between the creature and the Creator? On this point, it is important to be reminded of the nuances in the Ignatian spirituality that does not let go of the sight on the all-powerful sovereignty of God. We may recall that Ignatian spirituality is a dialogical journey of ascent and descent, which begins first with one's ascent into union with God, at God's own initiative. We may also recall that the *Spiritual Exercises* places priority on one's complete surrender and obedience to God. It is only after the retreatant has experienced and understood the deep love of God for them, and only from this place of complete surrender to God's sovereignty, that they may start to find God in all things. As Harvey Egan notes, “One finds God in all things but nowhere in the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius mentions forgetting or surpassing creation” (Egan 1991, p. 142). Ignatius' spiritual progress is a continuous process of simplification and transparency: “transparency, not forgetting, nor unknowing” (Egan 1991, p. 144). Ignatian insistence on total submission to the sanctifying grace is summed up in the *Suscipe* prayer that concludes the *Spiritual Exercises*:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will,
All I have and call my own.

You have given all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.

Everything is yours; do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace,
that is enough for me. (Ganss 1991, p. 177)

5. Mysticism as Hermeneutic Key

Many scholars have explored the historical and social context of the sixteenth century as a common denominator for constructing the “Calvin-Ignatius formula”. Calvin and Ignatius’ mystical experiences are similarly enfolded within their historical context in the ways they viewed the moral imperatives of Christian life of their time.

This essay offered possible approaches to discern affinities in Calvin and Ignatius’ theologies by interpreting the two thinkers’ mystic spirituality through the lens of sacramentality. For both Calvin and Ignatius, Eucharistic presence is interpreted as a mystical union with Christ, not without the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine, but, more fundamentally, a union achieved by spiritual ascent. This is not to say that the two figures shared a common theology of the Eucharist as such. Ignatius’ writings on the *Spiritual Exercises* describe and instruct how one might petition for an intimate communion with Christ, recognize and delight in this spiritual ascent, then to take on the apostolic living in the world out of this communion. For Calvin, the central preoccupations regard safeguarding the primacy of God’s sovereignty so that God’s absolute freedom may not be mistakenly appropriated by the human elements of the Eucharistic bread and wine. Despite these differences, one can rely on the “mystical element” as a hermeneutic key for seeking affinities between the theologies of Calvin and Ignatius. As previously mentioned, the mystical element is evident in the sixteenth-century spirituality. Calvin and Ignatius draw from their powerful experiences of the presence of God that transformed their worldview, which then led them to a life oriented to pastoral service for others. The two figures share a point of convergence if one looks at the role of mysticism that connects Calvin’s doctrinal questions about the sacramental presence on the one hand, and Ignatius’ various visions and experiences of union with God on the other, by which they both sought to respond to the fundamental question of salvation in which humans partake in the sacrament. If Calvin’s extensive treatment of Christ’s presence in the Eucharistic bread and wine had set him as a staunch opponent of Roman Catholic sacramental theology, his motivation for ensuring the right way to worship is also evident especially in the ways that he leaves room for mystery in one’s spiritual union with God through Christ in the Eucharist. For Ignatius, mystical union becomes the foundational experience of God that leads him to an unshakable conviction in God’s love for his creation, so that in every encounter with God’s creation Ignatius sees the spirit of Christ even in the “sight of a little plant, a leaf, a flower or a fruit, an insignificant worm or a tiny animal” (Rahner 1990, p. 23). Through the mercy of God, all of creation is to be sanctified through Christ, who Ignatius explicitly saw as present in the Eucharist. Both Calvin and Ignatius, then, are responding to the urgent question that the church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was attempting to resolve: how is one saved, existentially and truly? (McGinn 2016, p. 15) The central question of salvation provided an impetus for examining various ways of God’s revelation in the created world, including sacraments, the Scripture, mystical experiences, church, and ethics of Christian

life. Sacramental encounter with the divine was not a contingent musing for Calvin and Ignatius but the genesis for working out the mystery of God's plan for salvation within the concrete reality of human history.

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