

A TIME FOR PRAYER

By ELMER O'BRIEN

LIKE any other retreat, the annual retreat is a time of prayer. But, unlike any other retreat, it presents particular difficulties as a time of prayer. The simple recognition of these difficulties together with the discovery, somewhat less simple, of how best to deal with them is all that is sought in these pages. That the search will lay bare the essential and distinctive character of prayer as it should be in any retreat means merely that a by-product will be provided of more value, perhaps, than the product directly intended.

Everyone has difficulties in making an annual retreat, difficulties different from those of one's first retreat, or of one's 'long retreat', or of one's ordination or profession or election or pre-marriage retreat. So universal an experience gives a clue to the source of the difficulties. The source is this: the annual retreat is *annual*. It is something 'one has been through before'. It is by its very nature largely repetitious. There is accordingly a staleness and a stiffness about it which is, if precautions are not taken, genuinely inimical to retreat praying. And it is, I would suggest, inimical upon both levels of that praying.

I say 'both levels' because the praying of a sincere retreatant proceeds along a double path. Awareness that it does so is indispensable for an understanding of the suggestions to be made later on.

The sincere retreatant's praying moves, of course, upon what we shall call the 'meditative level'. This is the familiar and obvious praying which moves along more or less in accord with the subjects for prayer successively proposed and outlined by the retreat director. But his praying also moves, or should be allowed to move, upon a level which is more profound and basic. This, for the lack of a better term, we shall call the 'communicative level'. There is, for the sincere and 'average' retreatant (who is doing his best while at the moment neither unusually elated by consolation nor unusually depressed by desolation), a communing with the Godhead in which he engages himself as fully as he can. It is a praying which is always wordless. More often than not it is experienced in darkness. Normally, I fear, it is not recognized as prayer at all.

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I do not have in mind here experiences of a mystical nature, although I naturally do not exclude such a happy possibility. What I mean is rather a speechless exchange between one in desperate need and One Who alone can fill that need; or between one at ease and 'at home' and One Who is Father; or between one who is enmeshed in multitudinous obligations, however pleasant they may be, and One Who is their solitary source and meaning. And, in every instance, it is a silent communicating with One Who seems unaccustomedly *present*.

Of these two levels of praying during retreat the more important is the 'communicative'. It involves, effortlessly, not just one lobe of one's brain (or, shall we say, just one nodule of one's will) as meditation may; it involves, necessarily, the total person; and it is the total person, of course, that the retreat is all about. Again, it achieves completely what the indispensable colloquies to meditations can usually achieve only partially: the consciousness of the person-to-Person relationship. Further, it brings inescapably to one's notice the disorders of one's living in a way even more effective than the felicitous and indispensable business of deliberate self-examination. Finally, it is the more important of the two because it implies an openness ('defencelessness' would not be too strong a word), before the face of God which is absolutely essential to the making of a good retreat.

Praying upon the meditative level during a retreat is, even all by itself, productive of all manner of good things. Spiritual authors have spoken enthusiastically and at length about these, so here is little point in cataloguing them and exclaiming over them there. The point I wish to stress emphatically is this: if what I have said about the *two* levels of prayer be true, then the meditative should be subordinated to the communicative and made to minister to it. Meditative praying in retreat should chiefly and immediately be productive of a widening and deepening and progressive unfettering of prayer upon the communicative level.

The general staleness of content and the impersonal stiffness of form, which, unless one is careful, are characteristic of the annual retreat, are hostile to praying upon both levels because they are hostile to prayer upon the more basic, the communicative level. Significantly enough, they exercise their hostility as inanimate objects always exercise their hostility upon the living. They get in the way, they drag one down and deplete one's vitality. Praying upon the communicative level has the resiliency, the pliability, the

continued newness of life itself. It has such qualities because it is life; but life more honest and open and total than usual. But it can be hemmed in, weighted down, all but done to death by the depositing of objects long since largely devoid of life into the retreatant's mind. When that happens, prayer upon the meditative level is also adversely affected. It becomes superficial. It becomes little more than an occasional spiritual shiver, whether of terror or of delight; a surface twitch of one's religious consciousness which is not altogether without value but is not of especially great worth either.

So precautions are to be taken. By whom? By both retreatant and retreat director.

Although for the retreatant the stakes are by far the higher, the precautions he has to take are much the easier. He should simply be *quiet*. Not inactive. Quiet. He should, area by area, still the clamour which his everyday existence has cumulatively set up within him. That is all he need do. While fulfilling the various other more manifest duties of the retreat as best as ever he can – making the meditations, the readings, the examens, and so on – he goes on effecting an ever deeper silence within and without. Then at some moment – perhaps on the very first day, usually on the second or third – silence suddenly plunges through him to the depth of his being and holds him. It is a deathly silence, a death-dealing silence. It destroys with a single stroke all the things which sin or lukewarmness or simple selfishness have situated between the retreatant and God. Still sinful, still tepid, still self-centred, he is now directly and with awareness before the face of God. It is at such a time that communicative praying begins. It should be allowed to continue.

One of the retreat director's chief tasks is to assure that it can continue.

To that end he should at least not put obstacles in its way. This is difficult in a group retreat, and the more usual retreat these days, annual or not, is the group retreat. But it is not impossible. The following procedures may be of use to the director who would help rather than hinder.

In the group retreat he should take as his standard the ideal, the *individual* retreat. For, in the individual retreat, the desirable pattern of any retreat is most clearly revealed. It is a dialogue in grace between retreatant and God, at which the director assists and to which he subordinates himself; a constant shifting of perspectives as the retreatant progresses swiftly or slowly or not at all; an unending resourcefulness upon the part of the director in adapting the

psychological structures and the doctrinal content of the retreat to the present needs of the retreatant. In a word, the retreat takes its form not from the notes of the retreat director, but from the needs of the retreatant. So should it be in the group retreat.

This can be done most easily if the director, with his hundred or more retreatants instead of one, 'makes' the retreat with them. If he begins with considerations which shock the retreatants out of their routine-attitudes, he will be able, then and later, to recognize and adjust himself to the responsiveness or nonresponsiveness of the group, because their initial reactions will therefore be elemental and simple. Once he is identified with the retreatants, he will be able to make the retreat *with* them, very much as one, in fact, does make the retreat *with* the individual retreatant.

This may sound unrealistic. But the most abidingly fruitful retreats are given in this way; and there are two main reasons, it would seem, why they are so successful: the director does not obstruct communicative prayer, and he is more properly obedient to the leadings of God's grace in his retreatants. (But what of the director's retreat notes laboriously compiled over the years? There are always the publishers).

So as not to be largely obstructive to praying upon both levels, the retreat should begin with a meditation calculated to plunge the retreatants into darkness and an acute sense of their helplessness. The 'Principle and Foundation' of the *Spiritual Exercises* is, as recommended by St. Ignatius, an admirable example of how one might go about this. Of course, there is a traditional way of presenting the 'Foundation' which has long been with us and has produced much good: the retreatants are plunged into light and an expansive sense of confidence, because the 'Foundation' is offered as a strikingly luminous arrangement of all reality for the sure guidance of one's major decisions. According to St. Ignatius, however, it should be presented in such a way that the retreatant will become so overwhelmed by thought of how difficult it is to choose and use aright the means at his disposal for attaining to God, that he finds himself forced, then and there, simply to 'place himself utterly in His hands'.¹ The sense, at the very outset of the retreat, of being, of *having* to be, utterly in God's hands is psychologically most propitious and spiritually productive of great good – of

¹ MHSJ, MI II pp. 100-101.

more good even than is the attitude induced by the traditional manner of presenting the 'Foundation'. For it is peculiarly congenial both to true prayer and to being properly pliant beneath the ministrations of God's grace.

Yet the director cannot – under penalty of defeating its purpose – always present such a meditation in the same way. Nor can he present, for the same reason, any other part of a retreat always in the same way. He cannot because he must adapt himself to the needs of the retreatants; and those needs vary from retreat to retreat and even within the period of the same retreat. Also, it would seem, such similarity at presentation would create a predictable rigidity hostile to prayer upon the communicative level as well as, derivatively, to prayer upon the meditative level. It is especially instructive on this point to note that St. Ignatius forbade the giving of a copy of the *Exercises* to the retreatant, and insisted that the retreatant be ignorant of what was coming next. The reason for the prohibition (apart from the obvious one that the *Exercises* is not a book simply to be read), is the same as the substance of the insistence that the retreatant is to be kept unaware of what awaits him. But why? St. Ignatius appears to have been sharply conscious of three very relevant facts. First of all, if one knows what is coming there is the natural tendency either to cushion oneself against the future or to withdraw from the present. Again, predictability can all too easily destroy interest. Finally, a rigidity seemingly so external to the retreatant and his present condition ("The day after tomorrow I know I'll have to meditate on "The Two Standards" with two "repetitions"") can induce its own particular malaise. These facts are all the more relevant when it is question of the annual retreat, something 'one has been through before'.

But how should the director proceed? It is surely unreasonable to expect him to evolve a new retreat form with every retreat he gives. And it would be highly imprudent for him to disregard those retreat forms, long familiar, whose value centuries of experience have made clear.

No such unreason or imprudence is being suggested here. The better to indicate what is being suggested, let us take as example the most familiar and widely used retreat form, that provided in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius.

This small book presents for the use of the director a series of exercises to be performed, under the director's guidance, by the retreatant. The character of each of these exercises and, especially,

the *order* in which they are to be performed, reveal the author as a psychologist more than ordinarily perceptive of the subjective dynamics that are brought into play in the spiritual life. What, therefore, the director must do at all cost is preserve the precise psychological values of each of the exercises and of that order in which they are so thoughtfully arranged. This he can do only if he has succeeded in disengaging the essential structure and purpose both of the individual exercises and of their ordered entirety. Then it will be possible for him to adapt them – as he must – without deforming them and thus destroying their effectiveness either wholly or in part. For retreatants who have done these exercises before, the adaptation will of course be more extensive. As for any other retreatants, adjustments must be made to their rate of progress; by so doing the ‘stiffness’, previously mentioned as inimical to retreat praying, is excluded. But adjustments must also be made to exclude that equally inimical ‘staleness’. This is not done by the introduction of novelties. The juvenile mentality which would have recourse to such a device is obviously unaware of the inexhaustible newness of the materials at the director’s disposal. They need merely to be seen free of the distraction of old and all too familiar labels. Thus one does not announce, ‘Now we come to the Meditation of the Triple Sin’ or ‘The call of the Temporal King’ or ‘The Two Standards’; and so on. But, following the structure of these or other particular exercises, and having clearly in mind the immediate purpose of each within the ordered pattern of the entire retreat, the director uses the words, images and comparisons which seem best suited to the condition of the retreatants and for fulfilling their needs and desires.

So far I have attempted to indicate certain procedures to help the director to avoid putting obstacles in the way of prayer at both its levels. But the director has also a positive work to do. Furthermore, his task is easier than it would have been a generation ago. For the revivals in theology and in biblical studies, together with the renewed awareness of the liturgy as the centre of Christian living, have provided him with resources of unexampled richness.

Because the choice is so extensive, I shall confine myself to one suggestion which may help the director to make the retreat truly ‘a time of prayer’. I have in mind the liturgy. Of the many facets of the liturgy, all of them pertinent to our purpose, I shall limit myself to one: sacrifice.

Whatever the retreat form that one uses, whether that of St.

Ignatius or any other, the general intent is that the retreatant be a better Christian at its close than he was at its beginning. That 'better' is, of course, merely a colloquialism. What it implies theologically is that the retreatant is now more fully under the gracious domination of God; that he is, actually and potentially, more completely God's.

Now the notion of sacrifice as revealed in the liturgy is the act of making something or someone God's. To begin a retreat with a meditation upon Baptism, the event which makes a person capable of sacrifice, is, at a stroke, to break the retreatants loose from their usual thought-patterns. They are plunged into that salutary darkness of which mention has been made earlier, as they reflect upon their having been many years ago mysteriously plunged into Christ. As they become increasingly conscious of the implications of Baptism, they are inevitably overwhelmed with the thought of their own personal helplessness (confirmed to a greater or less degree by past experience) to use aright the means then put at their disposal, and they are forced simply to place themselves in God's hands, to make themselves more utterly God's, to *sacrifice*. Similarly, meditations on sin can be made very effectively in accord with the notion of sacrifice: one was made capable by Baptism of sacrifice, of making oneself more completely God's, of making things and events sacred that were in themselves neutral or profane; but instead of that, one made oneself and things and events evil, made them not God's, became engaged in a sort of Black Mass. Similarly, meditations upon the life of Christ 'Who went about doing good' gain an added dimension in depth if presented as the exploration of the actions of One Who, yesterday and today and tomorrow, is the same forever; as He acted upon souls externally and visibly then, He acts upon souls internally and invisibly now; and His actions then were as they are now, 'sacrificial', calling into being the free, corresponding 'sacrifice' of those to whom He ministered. The other traditional exercises of the retreat can be presented in a similar way.

It is thus that the director can help the retreatant to avoid staleness without introducing novelties; to avoid stiffness without the danger of allowing the retreat to collapse into formlessness. He can foster praying on the meditative level because he situates it where it belongs: in a position subordinated to communicative praying. And he can assist the retreatant in this more basic and important kind of retreat-praying, on the communicative level; because by speaking in terms of sacrifice, he must necessarily speak in terms of Presence.

There are other areas of the liturgy, and of Scripture and Theology as well, equally helpful to the director and capable of similar adaptation. In so far as the retreatant is allowed to profit from these resources at the director's disposal, we can be sure that positive steps are being taken to guarantee that the annual retreat *can* be a time of prayer.