

A TIME FOR REFLECTION

By JAMES WALSH

THE purpose of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola is expressed succinctly enough, though in an apparently negative fashion, at the beginning of his book. 'Spiritual Exercises to conquer oneself and to regulate one's life without being influenced by any disordered affection'.¹ The author has already offered us a definition of the term 'spiritual exercises' in the preliminary notes which he calls annotations: 'The name spiritual exercises means every method of preparing and disposing the soul to free itself from all disordered affections; and, that done, to seek and find the will of God in the disposition of one's life for the soul's salvation'.² Every retreat, whether 'Ignatian' or not, whether it concerns itself with a momentous decision or not, must have this sort of purpose and must accept this definition of the term *Exercises*, or one very like it. Though the full course of the Exercises, as drawn up by Ignatius, seems largely to concern itself with the choice of a state of life, such an election is no more than a particular application of the more general 'object of the exercise', which is 'to amend and re-form one's whole life and state . . . to the glory and praise of God our Lord and the salvation of one's soul'.³ This amending and re-forming (which Ignatius also calls 'progress in all spiritual things') is the end of every annual retreat; and the end is achieved 'in so far as a man succeeds in shaking himself free of his own self-love, self-seeking and self-interest'.⁴

The old English word for the 'affections' of the soul was 'stirrings': the immediate, instinctive reactions of man's spirit as it reaches out towards what pleases and shrinks from what is painful and unpleasant, without any reference to God, the sum of all its happiness, or to what leads it to or away from God. A man's affections are disordered when he deliberately makes these stirrings of attraction and repulsion a motive for choice and action, without first considering whether they lead him to God, or away from God.

Clearly, the person who is sufficiently in earnest about the interior life to make a regular retreat will already be re-formed to a certain

¹ Exx. 21.

² Exx. 1.

³ Exx. 189.

⁴ *Ibid.*

degree. He will know those stirrings in himself which definitely lead him away from God. He recognises them as temptations to serious sin, and, through his constant co-operation with grace, he is habitually accustomed to re-form them. Thus he has achieved a measure of the freedom of God's sons, and seeks and finds the will of God in the disposing of his life for his soul's salvation.¹ Such a man may have made even further progress in spiritual things. There are many who (often in a previous retreat) have received the grace known as the second conversion, and as a consequence have devoted their lives more wholeheartedly to God. Through their fidelity to Christ's charity, they have schooled themselves to co-operate with the divine grace in rejecting, more or less habitually, the stirrings which prompt them to satisfy self rather than God in less important matters. They are sufficiently foot-loose from their own whims and fancies to be able to recognise and to choose the divine plan in the details of their life, at least in its substantial.²

Not infrequently, even before we begin our annual retreat, we are uncomfortably aware that through human weakness and the wear and tear of an over-active life this knowledge of self has grown dim, and the ease we once had in discerning our stirrings has grown stiff with lack of use. We have become heedless, careless and unreflective. The first exercises of the retreat on sin and hell will conclude with a meditation on the parable of the Prodigal Son,³ 'applying it to oneself' and with the general confession.⁴ These exercises are to be patterned in such a way as to enable the retreatant to recognise that his sins have defiled the image of Christ in him, to 'return to himself' and to accept the grace of that abiding sorrow which the general confession disposes him to obtain.⁵ In this initial stage of the retreat, which will usually be very brief, the reflection on the infidelities of the past, or rather on the implications of his infidelity, must completely absorb the retreatant's attention.⁶ This reflection is to enable him to regain that self-knowledge and awareness of Christ's love, forgiveness and restoration which enable him to see and reject every stirring to sin.

¹ This is the first kind of humility. Cf. Exx. 165.

² The second kind of humility. Cf. Exx. 166.

³ The specific direction for an exercise on the parable of the Prodigal comes not from the book of the Exercises itself, but from one of the first 'Directories' on the Exercises, by Fr. James Miron. Fr. Miron became a Jesuit in 1541.

⁴ On the place and purpose of the general confession in the annual retreat, cf. Fr. Vaughan's article below.

⁵ Cf. *Supra* pp. 180-1.

⁶ Cf. the second Addition, Exx. 74.

Fundamentally, however, the annual retreat is meant for those who seek to rule their stirrings not only where sin is involved: they wish to know as well the roots of their sins.¹ The spiritual man aims at such a knowledge of self and such a mastery over his affections that his stirrings to sin are completely overcome by the operation of the spirit of Christ, to whose promptings he will be habitually docile.² His affections are to be so absorbed by the awareness of Christ in him, and by his desire for Christ, that unregenerate self-love is replaced by the love of the new self. This is the ideal effect of the Exercises.

The simple psychology of the affections of the soul, which lies at the basis of the Spiritual Exercises, is an integral part of the traditional teaching of the Church. If we feel that it has a very old-fashioned look, and is simple in the extreme, we must remember that neither Ignatius nor the Fathers of the Church were ever concerned with the elaboration of psychological systems for their own sake; and that their psychology was empirical in the sense that they found it valid in their own spiritual experience. The theology with which Ignatius was familiar when he worked out his plan of the Exercises was not the dessicated dogma of the schools of his own or of a later day. The Exercises show no acquaintance with their unreal attempt to cordon off 'philosophy' and 'reason', and put them outside the context of the history of God's dealing with his people. The theology of the Spiritual Exercises is the 'theology of the heart' of the Fathers and medieval Spirituals. And its simple psychology is capable of subtle and profound refinement because it is based on the premiss that the perfection of man's nature is achieved in the perfect following of Christ; and this in whatever state to which it may please God to call a man. All progress towards this perfection is to be measured in terms of the transfiguration of the mind of the Christian into the mind of Christ as revealed in holy Scripture, in the life of the Church and particularly in the soul of a man through the working of Christ's Spirit.

Hence when Ignatius uses a term like 'reformation of the affections', he is accepting the pre-suppositions of the most traditional and orthodox spiritual doctrine: that man was originally 'created right',³ in the image and likeness of God; that sin destroyed this likeness;

¹ The exercitant already concerns himself with this search in his examination for the General Confession. Cf. *Supra* pp. 178-9.

² The third kind of humility, Exx. 167.

³ Qoh 7,30.

and that the intervention of the second Person of the Blessed Trinity in the history of the human race, in his Incarnation, death and Resurrection, not only gave back to men 'the power to become the sons of God',¹ but gave them a pattern, a way, by which they could be re-formed according to the divine likeness and restored to that pristine image which is Christ, the radiance of his Father's splendour.² It is true that the complete re-formation can never be achieved here below, since it belongs to the mystery of the resurrection of the body and the final glorification of the Church. But the effect of our submission³ to Christ's power in every communion with him is this gradual formation according to his likeness.⁴ Thus the Exercises as a whole concern themselves, after an appropriate period of purification, with the contemplation of Christ. And the retreatant's constant petition is that he may know Christ, that his affections may be geared to Christ's and that the pattern of Christ's life may be his.

By and large, then, the annual retreat consists in the engagement of the mind and heart with Christ as he is revealed in the Scriptures and in the Church. The retreatant is to learn, not only how the various aspects of Christ's personality *should* affect him, but how, in fact, each discovery of Christ is affecting him *now*, and what the pattern of his response is to be in the future. It is sometimes felt, particularly, but not exclusively, by religious, that reflection during the annual retreat should concern itself almost entirely with the fidelity or infidelity during the past year to the way of life which they have accepted. It can, however, quite easily happen that the religious who equiparates his advancement in the perfection of Christ with a wooden fidelity to his rule is limiting his growth. The priest or layman who is content merely with the precise fulfilment of his 'duties', whether his prayers and good works are of obligation or self-imposed, may be unwittingly putting obstacles to the working of the Holy Spirit in his soul. A rule of life, no matter how excellent in itself, no matter how perfectly fulfilled, is a framework and not a substitute for the leading of the Holy Spirit in the way of Christ. Every means to the end can be perverted; and a 'programme' is likely to become not only a burden, but also a vehicle for self-will and self-interest. The 'perfect' religious can so easily and unwittingly be the selfish religious; the priest who insists that the time of his

¹ Jn 1,12.

² Heb 1,3.

³ Cf. the wording of the three kinds of humility, Exx. 165.

⁴ Cf. Phil 3,20ff.

thanksgiving after Mass is inviolate, or who sticks to a particular hour to say his Breviary come hell or high water, is not, in that, an *alter Christus*. And how many laymen, finding the burden of seeking the divine will in the details of their lives to be an intolerable one, seek refuge in an external programme of 'action'?

Once a man has begun to realise that belief in Christ means the personal acceptance of the perfection of Christ as an ideal for himself, and that it means a personal and full-time commitment to Christ, he also begins to appreciate his need for intelligent reflection. 'There is no craft that requires such skill as the service of God. It is the highest and most difficult in which to attain mastery'.¹ It demands, more than all else, an ability to read competently the stirrings of the soul even in a context where sin is not involved. Here we see something of the refinement of the simple Ignatian psychology. It presumes that, since the Christian has received the 'Spirit that comes from God to make us understand God's gifts in us',² the Exercises will fit a man to free himself from those disordered affections which are the stirrings of self-love, so that he becomes trained in 'grasping the thoughts of God's spirit', and begins to think and judge with the mind of Christ.

It has often been objected that the 'Ignatian method of prayer'³ is mechanical, over-rigid and military in the sense that one 'does it by numbers'. The particular method usually referred to is that in which we exercise the powers of the soul, memory,⁴ intelligence and will, on the mysteries of the life of Christ, particularly as revealed in the Gospels and the Apostolic preaching. Each contemplation in the Exercises is, in fact, an example of the very traditional 'ascent of the soul to God through the Scriptures'. Amongst the texts in this issue of *The Way* we have cited a passage from the *Scala Claustralium*,⁵ a twelfth century treatise which is in many respects a summary of the teaching of the Church in the West on prayer. The English translation of the Latin title is 'A Ladder of four rungs by which a man can surely climb to heaven'. It is little more than an explanation of what we now call the 'Ignatian' meditation. Reading,

¹ Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection* II c. 19.

² 1 Cor 2, 12.

³ A careful examination of the Spiritual Exercises reveals at least ten 'Ignatian' methods of prayer!

⁴ The English word 'mind' is rather the meaning, in the sense of being 'mindful of', having the object present in one's mind.

⁵ *Infra* p. 227.

thinking and praying are the exercise of memory, understanding and will; whilst contemplation is to find the spiritual savour (*gusto*) which Ignatius expects will come to a man frequently in the course of his prayer. 'Thinking', like the meditating of Ignatius, is a fairly strenuous *reflective* exercise. The Carthusian author of the *Scala Claustralium*, like so many spiritual writers stretching as far back as Origen, says that the mind must dig deeply to find the treasure. In the context of the Exercises, whenever we bring our Lord to mind, it is with the object of gazing with concentration on his image and searching busily his words, so that we may experience anew his impact, and be deeply *affected* by it.

Besides the initial reflection on one's unfaithfulness in the past, and the reflective exercise which is part of the various contemplations and meditations, the annual retreat is a time for reflection in yet another sense. One of the directions or additions which are to be explained most carefully to those making the Exercises reads as follows: 'When the exercise is finished, I shall spend a quarter of an hour, either sitting down or walking about, in looking to see how things have gone with me during the contemplation or meditation. If they have gone badly I shall look for the cause of this and having found it, I shall repent in order to do better next time. If things have gone well I shall give thanks to God our Lord and the next time I shall act in the same way'.¹ It is during this time of reflection, at the end of each exercise, that the exercitant will come to experience and recognise the various stirrings of his soul. And probably the most important function of the retreat-director is to assist him who makes the Exercises in this work of self-knowledge, the *sine qua non* of spiritual growth.

And here we must face the anomaly of the 'preached' retreat. The growth of the 'retreat movement' in English-speaking countries is largely due to the fact that the faithful, in increasing numbers, are perceiving their need for a deeper interior life. Amongst lay people, many are coming to realise that an annual retreat of the 'week-end' variety – the extended day of recollection, or even the 'closed' retreat of three days, is no longer sufficient.² More and more religious and priests, with the encouragement of the Holy See, are seeking an opportunity of making the full course of the Exercises. These are surely signs that Christ in his Church is reaching out to satisfy pre-

¹ Exx. 77.

² An example of this in England today is to be found in the Sodality movement.

sent needs. Even the reluctance that many feel as the time of the annual retreat approaches is often itself a subconscious opposition to the Lord's desire for our growth in Him.

We have said that the 'preached' retreat is an anomaly. This follows from the very first Annotation, which insists that after the enlightenment of divine grace (which comes rather through prayer than through listening), the exercitant's own reasoning is the main instrument of the Exercises.

No one would deny that the retreat is a highly personal matter; and, that, equally, the annual retreat has tended to become an impersonal exercise, with an exterior and interior which often bear little relationship one to the other. The function of the retreat-director is meant to be roughly analogous to that of an instructor of physical training; he explains the exercise and the object of it, and discusses with the exercitant the merits and demerits of the performance, helping him to find out where he has gone wrong and spurring him on to further efforts. Thus the exercitant learns to make the exercise properly, and to derive the intended benefit from it. The comparison is obviously a very restricted one: the retreat-director can never demonstrate the exercise. If he could, then the preached retreat would no longer be the anomaly that it is. The exercitant would see his own soul at work as he listened to the conference, and in a few minutes' prayerful reflection would be able to discern his own stirrings.

At the same time, one realises that the preached retreat must seem to many directors and superiors inevitable if not positively desirable. Religious communities normally come to their annual retreat with minds and bodies thoroughly jaded after a hard year's work; unfit, so it is thought, for a programme of intense prayer and reflection. It seems to many retreat-directors impossible to supervise the exercises of each individual in a large group, even where the idea of individual direction outside the confessional is acceptable. Diocesan priests find that their annual (or bi-annual) retreat is often the only available time for protracted pastoral discussion and exchange of ideas with their fellow-priests; and their own spiritual needs must take second place. The result is, of course, that the structure of the Exercises, which are meant to be *made* over a period of thirty days, disappears entirely when they are telescoped into a series of lengthy conferences stretching over eight or six days. And the outcome is an uneasy compromise between a 'mission' on the four last things filled out with discourses on the chief mysteries of

faith, and a detailed commentary on the religious or the priestly life, or 'catholic action'. Consequently, those who make a regular retreat tend to put a premium on the quality and variety of the conferences. One is reminded of the famous cartoon of the grim nun sitting at the door of the convent with a shot-gun across her knees, and its caption: 'They say that we are having the same Retreat-Father as last year'. In these circumstances, the Director is aware that to give the exercises as they ought to be given, merely 'going over the points in brief and summary fashion' will be most unpalatable. It has all been said before and what is required is something new to titivate the spiritual palate. There are, however, encouraging signs that retreat-directors and those who make a regular retreat wish the retreat to be more of a time for reflection.¹ This is possible only if ample time is given for prayer.

The Epistle of St. James² has a very pertinent word to say on listening and reflecting. We are brought to birth by God's true word. By cherishing this word implanted in us we shall be re-formed, 'rid of all the defilement, all the ill will that remains in us'. But if we merely listen to the word, without allowing it to affect our lives, we are entirely unaware of Christ's image and the operation of his spirit in us. We are to dwell on the sight of 'this perfect law', which is Christ's freedom, and in our awareness of it we shall be rid of our illusions concerning what is and is not our service of God. The 'mirror' in a retreat is not the word of the Director, but the exercitant himself, *affected* by the word which is Christ in the act of seeking him. And we are to note that the Exercises presuppose that a similarity of pattern is possible and desirable between our behaviour during prayer and at all other times: we are to 'seek and find the divine will in all things'.³

The exercitant, then, must scrutinize himself as dispassionately as he may. He must stand back at the end of his prayer, to see whether his general will for Christ's order was virtually or actively present, driving him to choose and desire what is most conducive to God's greater glory. He will see whether he has prepared himself, in a spirit of loving confidence, to receive a fresh influx of divine

¹ In a future issue of *The Way* we shall publish comments from retreatants, religious and lay-folk, who have *made* an eight-day retreat, instead of merely following one.

² Jas 1,26.

³ The exercitant is directed to ask at the beginning of every exercise for the grace that all his intentions and actions may be directed only to the service and praise of God our Lord.

grace. He will recognise that, in time of retreat, distractions are more likely to proceed from disordered affections (or from the devil) than from pressure of work or exterior disturbance. He will note whether he desires devotion and fervour simply as a help to the better praise and service of God and his neighbour, and not for his own comfort and satisfaction. He will mark the moments of agitation and discouragement as well as the moments of light and inspiration, and strive to trace them to their source. In this way he will become adept in passing judgement on his own stirrings. He will cease to be the creature of his impulses; and the 'potential' of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of understanding, counsel and wisdom, will be energised in him. He will begin at last to know where he is going, and the way that he must follow.

In the Exercises, then, the man of Christ trains *himself* not to act on an impulse, unless he has first looked into himself in the presence of his God, and has recognised that God is the source of his impulse. In his prayer he becomes certain that Christ, the true direction and the ultimate choice, will reveal to him, if truly his trust is large enough, the approach-pattern of every deliberate choice. It is only when a man has achieved the true knowledge of himself and of his stirrings that it is possible for him to choose for Christ and against his own disordered impulses. Only then can he choose with the perfect freedom of the child of God.

Reflection during the time of retreat is thus intensive practice in the discernment of spirits. But in addition to this, each fresh sight of self alongside Christ can be a purpose of amendment, a new conformation to the perfect law. The exercitant will see the perfect law, which is Christ, progressively the clearer in proportion as he desires and accepts, with all its mortifying conditions, the light which penetrates self-love and self-interest, and exposes them for what they are. And when he finishes the Exercises, he will surely be confirmed and strengthened for the *intelligent* fulfilment of the way of life in which Christ has established him. But he will also be more aware of the life of grace and the perfect law: the law of charity and love which the Holy Spirit is accustomed to write in the hearts of those who are conscious of their living union with Christ. And if he is aware at the same time that absolute purity of intention is an ideal to be striven for rather than an actuality, he is also aware that God's grace is in him to make the love of God progressively the compelling motive; and that his freedom is tied to this love.

The annual retreat is indeed a time for reflection; but a reflection

which is concerned with the love of God in the present and his hope in the future, rather than with that fear about the past which serves only for correction.¹ The reflection in which we are to exercise ourselves is never an anxious introspective searching of our miseries and failures, but one which will enable us to find the image of Christ in ourselves, to recognise him in our consciousness. It will enable us to become proficient in that difficult craft of the service of God, 'which is the most profitable and rewarding to him who can properly exercise it'.² So we may hope 'to live by the word, not content merely to listen to it . . . and offer service pure and unblemished in the sight of God, who is our Father'.³

¹ 1 Jn 4,18.

² Walter Hilton, *Scale of Perfection* II c. 19.

³ Jas 1,27.