


ATTITUDES AND DISPOSITIONS

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

UR everyday use of the word 'retreat' has defeatist connotations. It implies a retiring from the struggle, or at best, a strategic withdrawal which gives the vanquished time to lick their wounds and count their losses. Retreat-ing means moving away from an enemy who is too strong, running for cover under an attack which is too vehement. Such notions may have nothing to do with the word 'retreat' as a technical term in spiritual terminology; but perhaps our attitude towards the annual retreat is not altogether free from a certain defeatism. We tend to look upon a retreat as a withdrawal from normal life, where, we imagine, the real battles of the christian life are fought. Our six or eight days of prayer are a period of unnatural calm. It will soon be over and we shall be soon again buffeted and battered by the incessant onslaught of our daily work. But in the meantime we are prepared to do our best; we try to be holy during our retreat even if we cannot be holy outside of retreat. Or we may look upon our retreat as a time for evaluating our backslidings. We are resigned to the fact that we never get any better, (how can we, since we do not feel any better?), so our hope of glory is reduced to the thought that we could be a lot worse. Then again the retreat may be for us a few days of fervour during which we gather sufficient momentum to carry us on until next year. The 'momentum' is often stored in a sheaf of feverishly written notes (if only I had learnt shorthand!), upon which our spiritual lives are to depend during the coming months. Or perhaps our retreat is just a time of peace and quiet and rest, during which we can catch up on our sleep, provided the points are long enough and the retreat-giver's voice is soothing. There is no ill-will, it is just that we really are over-tired, and we imagine that prayer is not one of our gifts.

Examples could be multiplied, and in every one of them we would find some echo of ourselves. Such attitudes point towards something more fundamental than the double meaning of the word 'retreat'. They reveal the need for serious reflection upon the

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idea of a religious retreat and its place in the christian life. Only too often what is termed a retreat is nothing more than a series of spiritual talks or, worse still, sermons. A community is subjected three or four times a day to a highly-concentrated barrage of spirituality: creation, sin, hell, forgiveness, heaven, purgatory, the life of Christ, devotion to Mary, etc., etc. Dazzled by this bewildering kaleidoscope, they emerge more impressed by the eloquence of the retreat-giver than by the content of his words. For they have never really had time to pray about anything, or else the voice of God in prayer has been lost in the resounding echoes of a well-turned phrase or an amusing story. Humour has its part in the spiritual life, but heaven preserve us from the retreat which is no more than a sort of one-man spiritual vaudeville act. Not that an eight days spiritual session, or a series of sermons, does no good; but neither is a retreat, properly understood in the light of christian tradition which goes back much further than the last few hundred years.

The more traditional and more expressive name for a retreat is, of course, Spiritual Exercises.¹ When St. Ignatius Loyola gave this title to his little book he was not inventing a new phrase. The words had long been a commonplace amongst spiritual writers. Indeed what we now call 'the spiritual life', used to be known as the *exercitium spirituale*, the engaging of oneself actively upon the work of becoming more spiritual. That means living ever more intensely according to the Spirit of truth and love at work within us, moulding us in the Son to the greater image and likeness of our heavenly Father. But man does not attain his true stature as a child of God by attempting to disregard either body or soul. He is not purely material, nor is he a disembodied spirit. There is as little virtue in his pretending to be an angel as there is in his behaving like a devil. Man goes to God, body and soul. The more spiritual we become the greater will be the harmonious co-operation of body and soul, matter and spirit, each serving the other's needs, working together towards that perfect unity which will be realised in heaven. But as long as we live, the spirit will always fret against the confinement of matter. It will tend to regard the body and the material world as a prison. The body, too, will respond but sluggishly to the soaring spirit, as if jealous of its liberty. We live according to the Spirit not by despising material creation, but by using it in the service of divine charity. The creative vivacity of the spirit is intended to make

¹ Cf. Encyclical 'Mens Nostra'.

life burgeon in the barren womb of matter, and to bring order out of chaos. Material creation yearns dumbly towards the intelligence of the spirit for its fulfilment.¹ It is the glory of the spirit that its nobility is not diminished but rather manifested in its union with matter. God's admiration of his creation makes the work of his hands eloquent in his praise, and the very heavens proclaim his glory.

This welding of body and soul into a unity in the fire of divine love is the *exercitium spirituale*, and the 'spiritual exercises' of a retreat should work towards the same end. They are an intensification of the process of christian living, not a sort of spiritual holiday when we play at being contemplatives. In other words a retreat can never be an attempt 'to get away from it all'. Spiritual exercises are an illusion if they make it more difficult for us to live out our vocation, or if they make our daily routine seem less real and less essential. The housewife who makes a week-end retreat and comes away wishing she had become a Carmelite, would have done better to stay at home. Her reaction is just as unsettling for her spiritual life as the regret about not having a family would be in the life of a religious. The spirituality which does not help a person to take a firmer grasp on their lives, which does not give them a greater sureness and confidence of the presence of God in their particular vocation, is nothing less than unchristian. The follower of Christ does not proclaim his belief in the Incarnation by behaving as if the process of human living were a regrettable oversight on the part of the Creator. Christ was not less a man because he was God, but was fully man precisely because he was fully God. The Church has ever vindicated the goodness of material creation against those who would claim that matter and the material conditions of human living are an obstacle to sanctity. If today she vindicates the spiritual in man against the materialists it is not because she has no time for the material order. True christian spirituality has ever striven to preserve and develop all the God-given qualities in man. God is the lover of man as he created him, body and soul, and as he placed him in this world giving him as his destiny to carry on the work of creation. His Spirit works to bring us to that plenitude of human nature which is only possible through our deification in grace. Called to be sons of God, we can with confidence work out that vocation in the material details of our lives. We have no need to ape the angels, for God dwells amongst us here on earth.

¹ Cf. Rom 8, 22.

Hence the exercising of the spirit is not something which we do independently of the body or as a distraction from our normal human occupations. But if this is so, why then is it considered necessary to withdraw from our normal occupations and surroundings into some quiet, secluded, place in order to exercise the Spirit? St. Ignatius answers this question.¹ The place is not essential, it is only desirable. The Spirit of God does not demand ideal working conditions; what he wants is our good will and good desires. But we should try to co-operate by making it easier for ourselves to listen to the Spirit. Leaving our normal routine and even the place where we live is a great help, but where this is impossible St. Ignatius still considers that his Exercises can be made with great profit. The physical disengaging of oneself from normal routine does not of itself produce any magical effect; it is meant to evoke a corresponding attitude of soul. It will profit us little if we detach ourselves physically from our normal surroundings but remain firmly rooted in them in our hearts. The gesture of the body is an appeal to God to help us further in the more difficult work of turning our attention away from what normally absorbs us.

But the more fundamental reason for making a break with our usual routine is that none of us can claim to be co-operating in it, to the full, with God. There can be no place in the christian life for stoical complacency about the exact fulfilment of one's duties. Even when we have done everything we are commanded we are still unworthy servants. Fasting twice a week, giving tithes of all we possess, not stealing, cheating, or committing adultery are not necessarily credentials to be brandished in the face of the infinitely holy God. Even when our relationships with others and our attitude to our work are not entirely perverted by gross sin, we are not necessarily true sons of the Father of loving mercy. Our littleness and meanness mar and flaw the refinement which God would have in our lives. He would have us base our lives on love and see our religion in terms of a personal loving relationship with him. Our response to that infinite love will ever be defective, not perhaps through ill-will, but because we are afraid to give ourselves entirely. We seek to keep something for ourselves and to that extent we fail in our love. Whether we realise it or not, our motives are mixed, and there will always be need for purification. In time of retreat we put all that we are and all our occupations before God, and ask him to

¹ Exx. (Spiritual Exercises) 19.

show us what must be rectified. When we are not actively immersed in our affairs, it is easier to take a detached view of them and concentrate with single-minded purpose on the work of seeking the will of God.

So we retire to a suitable place for our spiritual exercises, or else adopt a routine adapted to our needs. But it would be regrettable if our situation made us forget our main purpose. A man may manoeuvre to get his back against the wall in order to fight more freely, but having attained that advantage it would be foolish for him merely to lean against the wall and forget the fight. A retreat should bring peace of soul, not idleness of the spirit; and peace only comes after the war. Spiritual exercises mean engaging oneself upon a serious activity; they are a movement, an experience, a combat. The Church has always seen this going into retreat as an entry into the christian struggle. Before her there is always the figure of Christ going into the desert to fight and conquer Satan. The Jews, too, were led into the desert by God in order that their faith and love might be tested and purified by their experiences. Their refusal to accept their trials was a rebellion against God. They thwarted his designs by using his request for deeper faith as excuses for demanding from him a tangible sign. We go into retreat to confront the enemy of our human nature, and unmask the adversary who lurks behind the camouflage of a busy life. God will lead us and test us as he did his chosen people; and for our part we must beware of asking for a sign other than a deepening of our faith and love. We sometimes think that we should not be tempted during our retreat. We panic when we find temptation more violent, prayer more difficult and distractions more abundant. We take such experiences as signs of God's displeasure, of his having forsaken us. It is so easy at such times to ask for a sign, even that of 'feeling that we are improving'; and all the while God is merely asking us for a loving trust and deep faith. We behave like that people whose wayward heart turned them from the ways of the Lord.

St. Ignatius expected those who made the Exercises to be tempted and worked upon by the good and evil spirits. Moreover if the retreatant did not experience such stirrings of soul he considered that such a person was probably not making the Exercises faithfully.¹ If we are going to exercise the spirit seriously it is going to mean a struggle and a death. But without that battle there would never be

¹ Exx. 6.

a victory; and without that death in Christ there would never be a rebirth to newness of life. Admittedly, a few days of peace and quiet in reasonably pious surroundings may have a soothing effect on strained nerves, but it is not an exercise of the spirit if it merely lulls us into passivity. For St. Ignatius a retreat meant 'going out of ourselves and entering into our Creator and Lord',¹ and he knew only too well that we cannot slough off the dead skin of our hidden selfishness without a struggle. The prospect of such a struggle should not dismay those who understand the reality of their baptism and confirmation. At the beginning of the Church's retreat with Christ, the forty days of Lent, she rallies her children to fight against the spirit of evil, and expects a loyal response. Her confidence in us is based upon firm faith in the victory of Christ which is ours. If he leads us, who can defeat us?

Our retreat is a time of faithful combat in which we are involved actively at the invitation of Christ. We must put aside timidity then, and fill our hearts with his courage. St. Ignatius would have a person make the Exercises *como noble caballero de Jesu Cristo*²: a phrase which implies all that noble generosity and courageous liberality which Ignatius' chivalrous soul associated with the idea of *caballero*. The readier we are to put ourselves entirely into the hands of God and allow him to mould us as he will, the greater are our chances of getting what we need out of the retreat. It is not a time for being small-minded. Whatever may be our daily failings, God is here and now offering us an opportunity to enlarge our ambitions. Ignatius would never allow anyone to make the full thirty days Exercises unless they had such generous dispositions. He was quite ready to give those who merely wanted to keep out of serious sin a simple retreat based on sin, hell, redemption, confession; but he saw the futility and danger of speaking to such people about the perfect following of Christ. But for those who have generously dedicated their lives once and for all to the service of God, there should be no question of their setting limits to their own sanctity. The trouble with so many of us is not that grace is lacking but that our response is lacking. God is always readier to give than we are to receive. Because we are selfish and mean we cannot believe in his infinite, uncalculating generosity. We tell ourselves, that, of course, he is generous to his favourites, his saints, but to us ordinary run-of-the-

¹ MHSJ, MI, I, 1, 239.

² MHSJ, MI, Exx. p. 789.

mill Christians he gives just enough and no more. Whilst we profess to believe that the Son died for each and every one of us, that he gives himself entirely to us in Communion, we behave towards God as if he were a parsimonious step-father. We look enviously at prodigals like an Augustine, an Ignatius, a Mary Magdalen and forget the words 'My son thou art always at my side and everything that I have is already thine'.¹ The history of spirituality has yet to find a single instance of God's saying to one of his children: 'You have had enough. I shall give you nothing more'. We can each of us be sure of one thing, that however great may be our generosity it will never match the surge of divine love into which God would plunge us. For our generosity is not of ourselves alone, it is the echo of God's gift of himself to us; if we follow, it will grow the stronger, if we stand still, it will die away. Before retreat time our prayer should be directed along the way of generosity. It matters little whether or not we feel generous. In his mercy God takes us not on our actual performance but on our desires, and we can all at least wish we were generous, and leave his liberality to supply the rest.

Generosity is the basic pre-requisite for making a profitable retreat; and its companion is honesty. A mean and avaricious man is loath to let others have a peep at his bank book. He is even unwilling to admit to himself that he is wealthy. The generous man is ready to empty out his purse, say 'Take everything', and have no regrets when he is taken at his word. When we put ourselves entirely before God we have to be honest enough to admit that our gift is not as much as all that. We must be honest enough to admit that we are getting a great deal more than we can ever give. God can do little with us if we refuse to recognise an honest likeness of ourselves as we are. We can so easily persuade ourselves that the passing years have given us self-knowledge, when all they have done is to make us settle down comfortably in the slough of our own shortcomings. We excuse our little sins, and perhaps there are mitigating circumstances, but so often our reasons are the wrong ones. We excuse impatience and irritability because of overwork, but we never honestly ask ourselves why we are overworking. We are resigned, though perhaps a little hurt, to the fact that God has not given us the gift of prayer; but we never admit that we lack the initiative to adapt our prayer to our circumstances. It is indeed honesty to

¹ Lk 15,31.

say 'I am not holy', as long as that statement is not based upon the lie 'and I never shall be'. Do we honestly want to be holy, or are we so afraid of what it might cost us that we persuade ourselves that God does not intend us for sanctity? The coward can always find a very good reason for running away.

Coming before the infinite truth of God what can we do but admit that we are blind and ignorant? We do not know him nor all that he wants of us, nor do we know ourselves. We have not enough faith, hope, or charity, our sorrow is imperfect, our motives mixed and our virtues shaky. We beat our breasts with a *mea culpa*, but the blow does not shake our attachment to our sins. We try to persuade ourselves that we really do not like our sins because we are afraid of looking into the depths of our hearts and seeing how deeply rooted they are. The fundamental honesty upon which the christian life must be built does not consist in repeating piously deprecating formulae about ourselves. It means admitting to ourselves our own limitations and defects and ignorance before the infinite holiness and wisdom of God. There is nothing of pessimism or depression about this attitude. God sees all that in us much more clearly than we ever shall; and despite all, he believes in us and loves us. Honesty is going to lead us to base our initiative and confidence in our work, not upon our own flattering self-portrait, but upon the opinion of the eternal God who made us to his own image and likeness. We say God reads the hearts of men, and yet we behave as if we could deceive him by putting up a pious front. We shall never discover anything about ourselves that God does not know already, and we shall only discover it if he tells us. His only desire is to lead us to the plenitude of love, and it is as absurd to attempt to hide our little miseries from him as it is to hide a pain from a doctor.

A great help towards such honesty is frankness and openness in spiritual direction. St. Ignatius considered that spiritual direction is an essential and integral part of a retreat. In his mind it is the chief work of the director to act as a touchstone for the various inspirations which come to the retreatant. His work is to encourage and strengthen those who are finding the going hard, and to ensure that the enthusiastic do not dissipate their zeal in imprudent activities. Ignatius would have the retreatants manifest quite simply and briefly their failures and successes during the retreat, their emotional reactions, their moods of confidence or depression, the ways in which they are being tempted. The object of this is to ensure that the retreatant is not being deceived. The evil spirit, Ignatius warns

us, tries to make us keep things hidden.¹ He wants us to think that no one will understand us, that our situation is too complicated to explain to anyone; that we are a special, unique person and this has never happened before. What we hide from our confessor or spiritual director we eventually hide from ourselves as well. Simple straightforward honesty is the clear light which drives away the darkness.

It is a part of honesty not to go into retreat with any preconceived notions about what we are going to get out of it. During a retreat we are trying to dispose ourselves in such a way that God's grace finds a response in us. If we have our own detailed notions about what we are going to get out of it, we are prejudicing the issue and laying down conditions before God. It is a temptation to sketch out before the retreat a picture of ourselves as we would like to be when it is over. Such pious images are often nothing more than impious smoke screens which prevent us from seeing what God is putting before us during the retreat. For we can be sure that the infinite wisdom of God, who is infinitely practical, is focused upon some particular point in our lives. He is leading us to make a free decision about that point, his grace is evoking our liberty so that we can exercise it on the detail which he sees to be the most important for us at the moment. God alone knows the point of resistance which is holding us back from him. Many sins may spread out like a parasitic growth from a single hidden root. We can waste much time in frantic, useless, pruning, instead of listening to God and allowing the divine husbandman to tend the vines he has planted. What God may want from us could be the adoption of a different attitude to some aspect of our work or to one of our companions. We may have a shrewd idea but we must not impose that upon him. His ways are not ours; and where we see only the outward face of things he can read the depths.

A decision awaits us during our retreat. Our generosity and love are not to be allowed to spend themselves in an effusion of vague goodwill and the indiscriminate multiplication of devotional practices. Vague good intentions pave the way to the hell of nowhere, and God is ever leading us somewhere. We must want with all our hearts to go along with him and have faith enough to understand that we are really moving with him. When the old writers say that in the spiritual life man either goes forwards or backwards, that

¹ Exx. 326.

there is no standing still, they were stating the plain truth. The Father is continually at work in us and if we do not co-operate, we are losing ground. Our mistake is to imagine that we ought to notice our own progress, whereas if we are living by faith we must be ready to see no tangible sign. We should enter retreat with utter confidence that our relationship with God will be deepened and intensified at the end, and with the sure knowledge that no foot-rule ever invented will measure our advance.

The retreat is a time when we can expect grace, a time of experiment when there will be successes and failures, a time when God will seek more than ever to work in us as we dispose ourselves to him. But many of us are faced with a problem. The retreat comes regularly at a time when we are tired out; we plunge into retreat from work, without a break, and, try as we may, we cannot make the effort. There is need here for great understanding and suppleness on the part of the director and also in our own attitude. It is folly to overload the spirit when the body is tired. Four hours' prayer may be ideal for those who are fit and well, but it can be disastrous for the sick and fatigued. Here again we must not treat a particular ordering of the day during retreat as if it were a magical formula. A tired person will get more out of a shorter time of prayer, or a simpler method of praying than by struggling with foolish heroism through a retreat programme quite unsuitable for his condition. If we are doing less because we are honestly unable to do more, it does not mean that God is doing less. If we live up to our honest abilities of the moment, even though they may seem minute, that is enough for him. When St. Ignatius was tired he would simply put himself before God and repeat 'Yo soy una bestia'. 'I am just an animal', dumb, unable to think, but docile. Perhaps such a prayer is what God wants of us in our retreat.