

# NOT MY WILL

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

PEOPLE who regularly make an eight or ten day retreat often find themselves, just as regularly, facing the problem of what they should expect to get out of it. The importance of their retreat is emphasized by spiritual writers. They are told that the retreat is the spiritual climax of the year; that a person is what he is in retreat, and so on. But sometimes there is, deep down, a nagging thought that were they, through some reason, to miss their retreat, life would go on as usual and no irreparable harm would be done. They may feel that really their retreat is like lifeboat drill on board ship: useful, but only in the unlikely eventuality of shipwreck. Where there is no likelihood of a major crisis in life, where a priest, religious or married man, is quite content in his vocation, quite convinced that this is what God wants of him in life and quite happy in his work, what more is to be desired? Surely the will of God is plain to see and there is no problem in life. Nevertheless, such people feel that they must get something out of the retreat; so they direct their efforts to choosing a resolution. Often the resolution bears only on some practical detail of their lives; and a moment's reflection would show that there was no need to spend eight days of prayer in order to resolve to be more orderly, to go to bed earlier, to organise one's leisure. If that is the sole result of a retreat then quite frankly it is not worth it. They feel that a retreat should yield more than that; and so it ought.

It would be disastrous for those who have dedicated their lives to God in the priestly, religious or married state to imagine that God had nothing further to say to them. Married people who imagine that after their wedding, or after a few years of happily married life, they have nothing more to learn about the mystery of the sacrament, or about the mystery of each other, run the risk of living a life not of real unifying love but of faithful compromise. Similarly, those who give themselves to God in the priestly or religious life cannot take it for granted that they have gone as far as they can go in finding the will of God. Nor can they presume that the sacrament of orders or vows are a guarantee that henceforward every pious or apostolic notion that comes to them is a direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

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Such was the mistake of St Peter after his profession of faith; and it earned him the stern rebuke, 'Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me for you are not on the side of God, but of men'.<sup>1</sup> The will of God is found only by those who search for it all their lives, reaching out continually towards the unknown, and refusing to live on their spiritual capital.

St Ignatius writes that his Spiritual Exercises are to help the soul 'to seek and find the divine will in the arrangement of its life for the well-being of the soul'.<sup>2</sup> When he wrote those words he had in mind the full thirty days Exercises involving the choice of a permanent state of life; but it would be wrong to presume that they cannot be given a wider application. Once a state of life has been chosen as a permanent God-given vocation, there is still a possibility of penetrating more deeply into the mystery of that vocation. The response to a vocation is the free submission of oneself to the pedagogy of God, a disposing of oneself to be taught by him. Like the response of Israel to Yahweh, it is a dedication to co-operate with God in the movement of history. As God revealed himself progressively to his people, so too he reveals himself progressively to each individual. God leads those who follow him along the ways of eternity; and we can none of us presume to know beforehand every turn of the road.

Those who seriously seek the will of God, in an ever closer co-operation with the Spirit at work in their lives, will always have their prayer answered. Christ himself has guaranteed that what we ask in his name will be granted,<sup>3</sup> and that the Father will give the Spirit to those who ask insistently.<sup>4</sup> But if we are to recognise that Spirit when it comes, we must not presume to know beforehand the form in which it will appear. Ambition in the service of Christ is essential for the apostle. We have to desire the coming of the kingdom of God with all our hearts, but we must beware of modelling that kingdom according to our own ambitions. The higher our ideals and the greater our generosity, the greater is the need for discernment and for complete spiritual poverty in our lives. We all tend in some measure to want to find ourselves in our apostolate: to catch a glimpse of ourselves, out of the corner of our eye, as we work for God. But if we are to find only Christ in our work and recognise his spirit, we must begin by 'counting everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ our Lord'.<sup>5</sup> This means admitting that 'the Spirit breathes where he wills' and that we do not know

<sup>1</sup> Mt 16, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Exx 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 16, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Lk 11, 5-13.

<sup>5</sup> Phil 3, 8.

where it comes from or where it is going.<sup>1</sup> It means admitting that even in our most generous desires and ambitions we may not understand what Spirit it is that we share.

Gamaliel's words, 'You run the risk of finding yourselves fighting against God',<sup>2</sup> made the jews reconsider their decision to kill the apostles; and it was to their credit that they understood the spiritual wisdom of those words. The desire to do battle for God is not a gilt-edged guarantee that we are fighting on his side. One of the commonest ways in which the devil seduces good people is to persuade them that because a particular good work is arduous, self-sacrificing and courageous, therefore it is the will of God for them. This is not a temptation to obvious gross sin but a veritable seduction, a subtle perversion of what is in itself good and desirable. It capitalises on genuine, apostolic zeal and is properly the temptation of the generous soul who wants to give everything in the service of Christ. When the devil sees that he can no longer tempt us to satisfy unlawfully the grosser demands of unregenerate nature, he may dangle before us the bait of a successful apostolate.

Every apostle knows the insidious fascination of the devil's invitation to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple: to make the grand, spectacular gesture which will impress, and produce immediate and startling results. The devil's work is done if he can lull us into thinking we are trying to impress others for Christ's sake, and can hide from us the fact that we are really trying to impress ourselves. He is constantly at work to pervert our good qualities and use them for his own ends. He will try to make the zealous and intelligent young priest into a minor prophet. He will try to deform courage into rashness, conviction into intolerance, enthusiasm into obsession. He is as content when he can get the hard worker to overwork as when he can get the lazy man to do too little. If he cannot discourage us by getting us to commit serious sin, he will try to discourage us by leading us to give ourselves indiscreetly to an impossible and impractical ideal. His ways, like his name, are legion; and, like any really subtle fighter, he tries to make us underestimate him and overestimate ourselves. He can talk as demurely and devoutly as a saint about the will of God, and he is never busier than during the annual retreat.

This should not discourage us, but it should make us pause. As Goethe says somewhere, there is nothing more frightening than

<sup>1</sup> Jn 3, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 5, 39.

ignorance in action; and ignorance can be not merely a lack of knowledge, but also a conviction that there is nothing more to be learnt. Would St Peter have been so bewildered by the passion of Christ had he not, as usual, thought that he knew exactly what the mission of Christ should and should not entail for his Master? The crafty father of lies will only too readily give us confidence by telling us that we know and have always known what we were doing. Once he has succeeded in persuading us that we know what God is trying to do with us we can soon be led to presume to know what God, through our superiors, ought to do with us. He will conceal from us the fundamental fact of our service of God, namely that it is a life of faith, and that faith is believing what one does not see.<sup>1</sup>

When we took our vows or received the sacrament of Orders, we did not know in detail what we were letting ourselves in for, any more than married people realise it when they say 'I will'. Did Mary fully understand the meaning of her words 'Be it done unto me according to your word'<sup>2</sup> until after the resurrection? As we have committed ourselves to a life of faith, so the devil will seek to turn the very occasions God gives us of deepening our faith and hope into reasons for doubt and despair, even about the validity of our original engagement in God's service. The truth is that those who live with Christ must be prepared to be continually disconcerted and even shattered by what he asks of them. We shall continue to discover the will of God all our lives, and each discovery will be a radical renewal of ourselves and of our basic dedication to Christ. Furthermore, nothing can stop this renewal in those who come before God not to lay down terms, even pious ones, but to learn what he wants of them. 'Though the outward part of our nature is being worn down', by sickness, old age, uncongenial work, the apparent waste of our talents, or limitations in ourselves and others, 'our inner life is renewed day by day'.<sup>3</sup>

The annual retreat can be the time when we lay hold upon the elements of renewal which are present in our lives: learning in prayer to recognise them in the particular circumstances of our daily routine, and see in them the grace of God. For this grace is never lacking to us. What is lacking only too often is our own perception and grasp of it; so that we must endeavour to dispose ourselves as best we can to the action of God. It was the genius of St Ignatius which succeeded in organising this disposing of oneself into a meth-

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<sup>1</sup> Heb 11, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 1, 38.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 4, 16.

odic process of prayer in his Spiritual Exercises. Though these are a method of finding the will of God, Ignatius would be the first to stress that they are not the only method: as though no one before Ignatius ever found out the will of God. What Ignatius did was to draw upon the vast spiritual experience of the Church, which he had encountered through his own experience, and to arrange it in a way that goes straight to the essentials. Hence it is true to say that whatever method a soul finds helpful in its search for the will of God, that method will be based on the same principles which guided Ignatius. A method is an attempt and a way, not a goal: a means and not an end in itself. It would be wrong to look upon the Exercises as an automatic process which infallibly brings results. Man stands ever as a beggar before God, patiently waiting for the gift from his bounty which he will give in his own time and not before.

Ignatius places the time for election in the second week of the Exercises. At this stage he considers that the retreatant should have become aware of a personal will of God for himself and should reach out to accept that will and unite himself with it. Before examining the process to which he subjects the retreatant during that second week, we must note that the second week is preceded by the process of purification from sin, which is the work of the first week. This is an essential step which can never be neglected. The second prerequisite for the finding of the will of God is a generous heart. Unless Ignatius saw that the retreatant had the desire to give himself to God wholeheartedly and unconditionally, he would not admit him to the Exercises of the second week. These two fundamental dispositions, the desire for purification and for generosity, are the raw material which is to be refined throughout the rest of the Exercises. Where one or other element is missing the purpose of the Exercises will be thwarted, and the retreatant will suffer spiritual harm.

Ignatius leads the generous soul who desires the complete purification of his life to the contemplation of the life of Christ. This is not simply a matter of putting the gospels into his hands and encouraging him to get on with it. The contemplations of the second week are prefaced by another contemplation which sets the tone of Ignatius' approach to the mysteries of Jesus' life. This preface is known as the kingdom of Christ; but the title Ignatius gives to it is: 'The call of the temporal King helps to contemplate the life of the eternal King'.<sup>1</sup> As he makes this contemplation the retreatant

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<sup>1</sup> Exx 91.

asks for grace 'not to be deaf to his (Christ's) call but carefully to carry out his most holy will without delay'.<sup>1</sup>

Both the title and the prayer show the fundamental and distinctive attitude of soul in which the retreatant comes before Christ. He looks upon the mysteries of Christ as a personal invitation, as so many calls of Christ to himself; and his attitude in prayer is therefore one of receptivity, of listening and being on the watch. This attitude will characterise his contemplation of all the events of Christ's life. For example, when assisting at the mystery of Christ's birth, the retreatant will be like a *pobrecito esclavito*, one of those ragged little spanish urchins of Velasquez, open eyed, drinking everything in, and longing to be asked to render some service, whilst realising that he is there only on sufferance.

At the same time Ignatius, aware that he is dealing with a generous heart which demands some outlet, does not allow the retreatant to remain passive. God demands the cooperation of his creatures; so the retreatant is encouraged to make his offering to Christ. This is not merely an offer of service but an offer of total service, of higher value and greater importance.

Eternal Lord of all things, in the presence of your infinite goodness, of your glorious Mother, and all the saints of the court of heaven, by your favour and with your help I make my offering. I want and desire and it is my deliberate resolve, provided it be for your greater service and your greater praise, to imitate you in enduring every injustice and abuse, and complete poverty, material as well as spiritual, if your sacred Majesty wants to choose me and admit me to this life and this situation<sup>2</sup>.

Two points may be noted in this offering: first of all, its generosity – I offer myself for everything and for what is hardest; secondly, the conditional nature of the offering – it is conditioned first of all by the life of Christ. I offer myself for poverty, injustice, abuse; but only in order to imitate him, not because this seems to be the right thing for me. Furthermore, just as the initiative in this offering comes from Christ, 'by his favour and help', so too the fulfilment of the offering will come only from Christ. I do not presume that just because I offer, Christ will accept me. I have no right to impose my own ambitions on God, no matter how heroic they may seem. Generosity

<sup>1</sup> Exx *ibid*.

<sup>2</sup> Exx 97–8.

is not enough in the service of God; something more is needed. Precisely what that is Ignatius shows in the key meditations of this Second Week; the Two Standards, the Three Types of Men, the Three Kinds of Humility.

In the meditation of the Two Standards Ignatius wants the retreatant to pray for light to know 'the deceits of the bad chief and for help to be on my guard against them; and to know also the true life which the supreme and true captain teaches, and grace to imitate him'.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing detached about this meditation. I cannot stand aloof and disinterested; for 'Christ calls everyone and wants them under his standard, whilst Lucifer, in opposition wants them under his'.<sup>2</sup> The battle between Christ and Satan is being waged within me; and I, my generosity, my talents, my desires, are what each seeks to conquer. The effect of this meditation is precisely to disconcert but not to disquiet the retreatant. It is meant to reveal to him, with the help of divine light, the duality within him, and to make him vividly aware of the utter need of discernment in his life, if he is going to follow Christ and avoid the risk of finding himself at odds with everyone whom he wants to serve.

The tactics of the enemy of human nature are, according to Ignatius, threefold: wealth, position, pride. 'From these three steps he leads men on to all other vices'.<sup>3</sup> It would be playing into the devil's hands to interpret these three steps in purely material terms, for that would mean that they have little or no application in the life of the religious already vowed to poverty, chastity, and obedience. By wealth Ignatius is indicating concretely that instinct for possession which is deep in the heart of man, and which the devil is forever trying to deform into possessiveness. Self-possession is very much a christian value, in so far as it is a grateful recognition of the gifts God has given us and of his abiding presence in our lives. In this sense it is diametrically opposed to that possessiveness about oneself which puts into the word 'my' all the rapacity and exclusiveness of the miser. It is possible to be possessive about our virtue, our prayer, our work; for the instinct of selfishness dies hard in us. Parents can genuinely love their children, and yet mar that love by being possessive about them. The intellectual can be a sincere hard worker and yet be possessive about his ideas, as can the zealous preacher. The mark of Satan in all this is apparent in the unwillingness to share, and the sour trace of jealousy. My class, my parish, my apostulate: it is

<sup>1</sup> Exx 139.

<sup>2</sup> Exx 137.

<sup>3</sup> Exx 142.

precisely here that the devil can find an entrance, where perhaps I imagine that I am impervious to his attacks.

Once this entrance has been obtained he leads us on to the next step. The term Ignatius uses is 'honour', which we have translated as position. Again there is question of a basic human instinct, that of being recognised as someone. What is the use of having a pocketful of money if one cannot jingle it? To all appearances there is nothing outrageous in this desire for recognition. Is it too much to ask that others recognise as ours what we know to be ours? If we are making sincere efforts in our spiritual lives, why does not God give some sign of recognition of our efforts? Is it too much to ask that superiors recognise the talents we have brought into religion, by putting them to use? In this attitude of mind we can easily seek recognition for ourselves by making up signs of our own spiritual progress. It is so easy to choose the apostolic work where we are most appreciated and persuade ourselves that such appreciation is a sign that we are there doing most good. We can gradually come to worship the god of visible results, and feed our hunger for recognition on frantic activity. Once we start on this road, the very occasions in our lives which should lead us closer to Christ serve only to separate us from him. Humiliations which are the way to humility arouse bitter indignation or discouragement. We become incapable of appreciating the good work of others and impervious to any sort of criticism of our own.

The final step in this descent is overweening pride. The search for recognition and position leads to the persuasion that we are our own best reason for living. We become indispensable to ourselves and to the spread of the kingdom of God. Our own apostolate becomes the only real apostolate and we ourselves are the centre of it. Instead of leading people to Christ we gather them round ourselves (for the best of reasons), in some sort of personality cult. Such a state of mind is not incompatible with the performance of a vast amount of hard work. But there is no one more dangerous to the true spread of the kingdom of Christ than the man who is persuaded that were he to cease his efforts the cause of Christ would be lost. It was the mentality of many a great heretic from Tertullian downwards; for such rebellion is the justifiable reply to all serious opposition. The tragedy is that it is never seen as rebellion but only as a heroic sacrifice in the cause of Christ. The kingdom of Christ has gradually become the kingdom of our own heart. We have identified him with our own interests, and are making use of him whom we set out to serve.



Ignatius has good reason for making his retreatant meditate first on the deceits of the bad chief before meditating on the true life which Christ reveals. He wants him to feel that the possibility of his being deceived is real, and to bring home to him his need for the light of Christ. Generosity is not enough. Who more generous than Peter? Virtue is not enough by itself. Were not the nuns of Port Royal as chaste as angels and as proud as devils? Only one thing can give generosity and virtue their true direction and value: and that is to enrol both under the banner of the cross of Christ.

The true life which Christ reveals consists in a threefold movement which is diametrically opposed to the movement of the evil spirit. The progression is from poverty of spirit and even actual, material, poverty, to humiliations and abuse, and then to humility. There is a gradual dispossessing of self, which fits the follower of Christ to be a perfect apostle of his Master. The follower of Christ possesses the world only in order to use it in the service of his Christ; and in the same way he possesses his life, his talents, and all the circumstances of his life: not as a means of bolstering up his own ego, but as ways in which to give himself to others. Here Ignatius inculcates the basic attitude of christianity and leads the retreatant to the very heart of scripture – ‘Blessed are the poor of spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’.<sup>1</sup> The ‘poor in spirit’ are those who realise that of themselves they are quite incapable of fulfilling their spiritual ambitions, and who stand before God as those who need everything and look only to him for the fulfilment of their needs.

Ignatius has already prepared the retreatant to see the rightness of this attitude by the way of attentive prayer. Now this attitude in prayer is revealed as a communion in the spirit of Christ. Its authenticity will be seen in the attitude it produces to self and to the world. The formation of the contemplative in action has begun. Those who wish to find God in their work must first of all receive that work in prayer as a complete gift of God, not as the fruit of their own ingenuity, talent, and hard work.

The second step is the desire for humiliations, injustice and abuse. These are obviously not good in themselves, nor are they to be desired for their own sake, but because they are the way to humility. In order to understand more clearly the point of these humiliations it will be well to consider briefly Ignatius’ notion of humility, as he gives it in the consideration of the Three Kinds of Humility.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Mt 5, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Exx 164–8.

first kind is complete submission, without any sort of deliberation, to the law of God in the matter of eternal salvation. The second kind consists in a complete submission to God in all the circumstances of my life, to the extent of complete exclusion of any deliberation about venial sin. The third sort of humility includes the previous two, and adds to submission to God a positive choice and preference for what Christ chose, for no other reason than that he chose it, and that I want to be more like him. Because Christ chose to be humiliated and crucified, the apostle of Christ desires ardently the same for himself.

It can be seen from this how humility differs in practice from the poverty of spirit which is the first step in the following of Christ. Poverty of spirit is the complete renunciation of possessiveness in one's attitude to material and spiritual gifts. Humility is a complete acceptance of the wisdom of God as revealed in his Son. Poverty of spirit awaits for the coming of the kingdom from the hands of God. Humility recognises that coming in the pierced hands of Christ. In short, humility is the desire to see one's apostolate marked with the sign of the cross.

But only Christ himself can stamp a particular work with the mark of the cross. All that the individual can do is to prepare himself for this by accepting injustice, and lack of recognition of his efforts or talents as occasions for submitting himself to the designs of God, in the hope of being invited to suffer with Christ. Humility is born of the conviction that the way Christ chose is the right way; and consequently that no human means are of themselves indispensable to the fruitfulness of an apostolate. In particular, none of my own particular gifts are indispensable to the salvation of the world. Christ was expendable; 'it is best for us if one man is put to death for the sake of the whole people'.<sup>1</sup> So I too must want to be seen as expendable, and be ready to see myself and my work as expendable. This attitude is not opposed to the generosity which inspires the search for the will of God. Rather it guides the force of generosity towards a deeper sharing in the mystery of the cross. It does not lead a man to give himself less to his work, but to give himself to it all the more. A deserved rebuke is not the cross; to be passed over because of obvious inefficiency or laziness is not the cross. I have to ensure that there is no cause in me for injustice, or lack of appreciation; and yet at the same time I have to expect both. This can only be done at the invitation of Christ; and the meditation

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 11, 50.

ends with an intense prayer of request to our Lady, to Christ and to the Father that I may be received under Christ's standard.

As we have said, the effect of this meditation is to disconcert the retreatant but not disquiet him. It is designed to purify him of the self-love, self-will and self interest, which are, perhaps, present in his attitude to his service of Christ.<sup>1</sup> It subjects every pious desire to the piercing light of the mystery of salvation through the cross. It teaches the apostle to look at his life first from the point of view of faith before measuring it against any standard of human efficiency and efficacy. Human efficiency is required, it is even demanded of us; but it must be produced by an act of faith in the rightness of Christ's way and not by any sort of mystique of efficacy. Enrolment under the banner of Christ does not mean renouncing all hope of success; it does mean refusing to measure success according to any other norm than that of the cross.

Even when the grace of seeing the rightness of Christ's way has been given, the battle is not won. The retreatant in this insight must engage himself from the heart. So Ignatius leads him to a final meditation, that of the Three Types of Men, which is designed to help the retreatant choose what is more perfect.<sup>2</sup> In order to help him to arrive at this disposition Ignatius recounts the little parable, or rather case of conscience<sup>3</sup> about three different attitudes. He puts the case of three men each of whom has acquired a sum of money to which they are attached. In the acquisition of this money they have not sinned, but it has been acquired without consideration of the will of God. Now they want to be at peace with God, and to see their money from his point of view. The question they have to answer is: What does God want me to do with my money? The first man never takes any means towards finding out the answer. The second type genuinely wants to get rid of the attitude of attachment, but he wants to strike a bargain with God. He will do whatever God wants as long as he does not have to give up his money. After all, there is nothing sinful in keeping it. The third type wants to get rid of his attachment; and until the will of God is made known, he cuts himself off affectively from his money. In other words, he refuses to regard it as his own before God gives it to him to do so. In so far as the third type of man is concerned, the money simply does not belong to him.

<sup>1</sup> Exx 189b.

<sup>2</sup> Exx 152.

<sup>3</sup> This is the point of the three '*binarios*', couples of men. This was the convention for cases of conscience in Ignatius' day.

In the depths of his heart and in his practical attitudes he refuses to put the word 'my' before the word 'money'.

Here Ignatius reaches the level of the heart; and here the real battle is fought out. He is well aware of this and in the note at the end of the meditation indicates the type of prayer suited to this state. A man must pray against himself and 'want, ask and beg'<sup>1</sup> that God take out of his heart the disordered attachment.

The effect of this meditation is to bring the soul to a state of balance, where it can truly make a decision based not on its own desires or on its own generosity but purely on the principle Ignatius continually repeats; 'the service and praise of God our Lord and the eternal salvation of my soul'.<sup>2</sup>

These three meditations, The Call of the Temporal King, the Two Standards, the Three Types of Men, are the heart of the Spiritual Exercises and formulate in prayer the basic attitudes by which man disposes himself to find the will of God: generosity which is content to wait expectantly before God and to be purified by the principle of discernment laid down in the Two Standards, and purification of the heart effected through the prayer of detachment. This subjection of what one regards as the purest of one's motives and the most generous and legitimate of one's ambitions to the judgment of God in Christ; this refusal to accept the pious desires on their face value is the hall mark of the spirit of Ignatius. These are the elements which must direct any search for the will of God.

What then are we to expect from the annual retreat? A complete change in the structure of our lives? A sudden call to go off and bury ourselves in the leper colonies of Africa? Or a deeper understanding of the mystery in which we share each of us in our own way, in the classroom, in the streets of our parish, the ward of a hospital, at the editorial desk? The mystery of the cross: the fact that in order to find all we must be prepared to lose all; to such an extent that if God takes everything from us we are ready to say, 'Not my will but thine be done', and dying to ourselves, enter with Christ upon an agony, which is not even ours but which belongs to him alone who went before us, and in whom is contained all our suffering.

<sup>1</sup> Exx 157.

<sup>2</sup> Exx 169 cf 45, 179, 181 etc.