AMONG THE THORNS

By DAVID LONSDALE

SOLITARY PRAYER is in vogue. Retreat houses, monasteries and even hermitages to which people can withdraw for prayer, for periods of time ranging from a few hours to a few months, whether in an *ashram* under the palm trees or 'on a pastoral forehead of Wales',[1] are in business. Increasingly more Christians, so it seems, lay people as well as priests and religious, are finding time and means for a silent retreat, for withdrawing from ordinary daily life and preoccupations in order to be alone with God. This wholly commendable trend could have two less commendable results. As a consequence of hearing of or meeting so many people (though the actual number is quite small) who withdraw into different forms of prayerful solitude, many Christians who for good reasons cannot or do not wish to follow suit might begin to think that they are missing something essential and that their own christian lives must therefore be second rate. And another consequence could be an assumption that in order to find God it is necessary to withdraw from one's home, family, job and daily concerns, from 'the world'. Because both of these results would be regrettable, I would like to draw attention in this article to a tradition in christianity which stresses, not withdrawing from life in order to find God, but rather responding to the presence and action of God in the midst of life, finding God even among the thorns (cf Mk 4,7).

Of course, these two ways of finding God — in the course of life and in contemplative solitude — do not exclude each other and can be found to work together. People who can and do find time for solitary prayer will also be drawn to find God in their lives outside their prayer. And it is not uncommon that as a person finds God increasingly in life, so he or she is drawn to give him also that exclusive attention that is possible in solitary prayer.

This tradition of finding God in the midst of life is associated historically especially with the name of Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. He developed the idea but he did not invent it. He recognized that this tradition which he received held something that he could both use himself and hand on to others, his companions, the members of his Order and the lay people, priests and religious

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who came to him for spiritual help. A phrase he constantly used was 'finding God in all things', a concept that recurs in his writings.[2] Those people who came to Ignatius were not very different from many of us. He saw that they were very often extremely busy people: the Jesuits were studying, teaching, administering colleges and universities and large churches, spending week-ends and feast-days preaching and hearing confessions and in their spare time reading and writing books. Others were giving the Spiritual Exercises, attending the Council of Trent or really living among thorns in courts and palaces or on the battle-scarred roads and in the inns of Europe. Other people for whom Ignatius wrote were lay people or clerics, often in very busy and responsible positions, parents of families, abbots of monasteries, as well as ordinary religious men and women. They had in common a desire to deepen their christian lives and to follow Christ seriously. In the Constitutions of his Order, Ignatius wrote of jesuit students: 'while they are applying themselves to their studies . . . there will not be much place for mortifications and long prayers and meditations. . . .'[3] And in some instructions sent to Jesuits living away from Rome he developed this with practical hints:

> . . . the scholastics can hardly give themselves to prolonged meditation. Over and above the spiritual exercises assigned . . . they should practise the seeking of God's presence in all things, in their conversation, their walks, in all that they see, taste, hear, understand, in all their actions, since his Divine Majesty is truly in all things by his presence, power and essence. . . . But this method is an excellent exercise to prepare us for great visitations of our Lord, even in prayers that are rather short.[4]

The central idea of 'finding God in all things' is there.

In this approach to God there are two aspects, one that we might call 'contemplative' the other 'active'. The first consists in a constant search and a readiness, an openness to see God, Father, Son and Spirit, present and active in one's own life and history, in the lives of other people and in the world at large. Milton's Adam, unparadised, is assured:

> Yet doubt not but in valley and in plain
> God is as here, and will be found alike
> Present, and of his presence many a sign
> Still following thee, still compassing thee round
> With goodness and paternal love, his face
> Express, and of his steps the track divine. . . .[5]

God asks us, however, not only to search for and contemplate the signs of his presence, but also to work with and for him, which is the 'active' side of it. This means, in an older terminology, 'doing the will of God', trying to be aware of God's leading of us and in our decisions and choices, in our active lives, showing a readiness to respond to that leading wherever it may take us, to be 'co-workers in his design'. These two aspects are summed up in Ignatius's phrase: 'I look for God in all things and try to please him in everything I do'.[6]

A theological perspective

Broadly speaking, in christian theological thinking about the relation of God to his created universe we can perceive two main tendencies. One emphasizes ways in which God is intimately and continuously involved actively in the lives and histories and destinies of his creatures. This stems from a biblical way of thinking about God and informs much of the theology of Vatican II. The other way of thinking about the relation of God to the world moves in an opposite direction, stressing the distance and difference between God and the world and the independence and freedom of human beings with respect to God. Rather than dwelling on the interdependence and interpenetration of the realms of 'nature' and 'grace', natural and supernatural, creation and redemption, it tends towards making clear distinctions between them. A contemporary approach to spirituality which tries to 'find God in all things' will be closely linked with the first of these two tendencies and will see the world as 'graced nature', the arena of God's continuous creative and redemptive presence and action.

For most Christians, the usual setting in which they consciously and explicitly meet God will be the Church, in the liturgy, in their personal prayer and in the community of Christians. In scripture, the word of God, especially as it is proclaimed in the liturgy and sacraments and absorbed in personal prayer and study, God addresses us, discloses himself to us. In the sacraments, too, both in daily celebrations and in the privileged moments of life, we meet God in the Church. The sacraments, however, besides being particular places in which individuals and communities find God, are also signs of God's presence and action in other areas of life. They lead us beyond themselves to find God in the world and in history, our own and that of others.

As their awareness of God moves outwards from scripture, prayer

and the sacraments into other parts of daily living, it is perhaps in the experience of good personal relationships and of the work of the Holy Spirit that Christians find readily 'of his steps the track divine'. True parental love, in the experience of either a parent or a son or daughter, mediates the love of the Father (cf Eph 3,14). The love between husband and wife is an efficacious image of Christ's love for his people (cf Eph 5,21-33): it both points to Christ's love and makes it present. Friendship can be a mirror of divine love. The old line, *ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est* ('wherever there is charity and love, God is there'), remains true. And not only these but also other 'gifts of the Spirit', where we find them, constitute signs of God's presence. Wherever people receive and give 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal 5,22), God is to be found, and St Paul's list is not meant to be exhaustive. Consequently, God's presence and action are not to be looked for and found only within what we normally see as the Church. It might be truer to say that wherever we find the gifts of the Spirit, there we find, at least in embryo, the Church. We can meet God beyond the normal confines of the Church, 'on the shores of Asia or in the Edgware Road',[7] in any circumstances that call forth these and other gifts of the Spirit. Where gifts are, there too is the giver.[8]

It is easy to see, therefore, how, by reflecting on their own personal histories, people come to be aware of the presence and action of God not only in their past experience of the gifts of the Spirit, but also in the present. This can give rise to a truly contemplative attitude to God in the world, even among the thorns. Nor are these gifts limited to what is personal and private, to the home and family, to interpersonal relationships that evoke the qualities that Paul lists. Patient social struggles against injustice, famine, illiteracy and poverty; attempts to bring to light in Latin America the fates of 'missing' persons and to aid the release of people unjustly imprisoned; peacemaking between obstinately belligerent nations — these and more can surely be signs of the Spirit of God.

The incarnation

The Spirit at work in the world is the Spirit of Christ. It was out of love that the Father sent his Son into the world as one of us, to lead us back to the Father. This brings us to another, incarnational aspect of our finding God in all things. In becoming man, God bound himself to us irrevocably. He was not constrained to do so: he acted in freedom. The consequences for spirituality of the incarna-

tion have to be continuously drawn out afresh, and I will point to one or two of them here. Simply by the fact of being a man, Christ, the Son of God, is actively involved in, bound up in some way with the life and destiny of every human being. He wished to lose none of those that the Father had entrusted to him. Furthermore, no human circumstances, however evil and horrifying, are beyond the reach of the presence and power of Christ. By the very fact of becoming man he is irrevocably associated in a redemptive way with all human circumstances, past, present and future. In the letter to the Romans Paul lists those things that to him in his age are most fearful in that they seem able to cut him off from God. Because of the incarnation, however, 'neither life nor death, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power or height or depth, nor any created thing can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8,38-39). There are no human circumstances in which Christ cannot be found since he has associated himself definitively with us in all our weakness.

Risen from the dead, Christ has the same kind of attitude towards his brothers and sisters and continues the same kind of activity as before his crucifixion:

> He nourished all men: their spirits within, as they might receive it, with true teaching, and their senses from without with miracles and wonders. And sometimes, too, he fed them with food for the body, as when they followed him into the wilderness and could go no farther. He made the deaf to hear and the blind to see, the dumb to speak and the fiend to flee out of men; he made the dead live and cripples to walk straight; and this one must interpret literally and spiritually. Christ our lover has laboured for us, interiorly and exteriorly, in true and faithful manner.[9]

If we ask where we are to find the risen Christ, the gospel resurrection narratives answer that he is primarily to be found in the Church, in the community of those who believe (cf Mt 28,16-20; Lk 24,13-53; Jn 20,11-29; 21,1-19). Again, however, he is not found exclusively there. He meets us and greets us wherever the gospel is preached and lived, wherever we find people living, albeit unconsciously, the beatitudes; wherever his redeeming grace appears: when injustice gives way to charity and justice, falsehood to truth, tyranny to freedom; wherever 'the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk'; wherever the seeds of the kingdom are sown and nourished and put forth shoots, even among thorns.

Our Creator and Lord

What an earlier theology such as scholasticism distinguished as the 'orders' of 'nature' and 'grace' are in practice, therefore, inextricably mingled and interdependent. The presence and action of the Holy Spirit and of the living Christ that I have been describing belong, in such a theology, to the order of grace. But this, in its turn, rests upon and presupposes an order of nature and the presence and power of God throughout the created universe. Created existence itself is a gift and the Giver is present in the gift, the living source and sustainer of all that is. The universe is his handiwork and he conducts all things to their final end. Creatures are the recipients of God's own gifts and riches.[10] Two favourite images of Ignatius Loyola in this connection are to see God as dwelling in all things and as 'one who labours':

> . . . reflect how God dwells in creatures: in the elements giving them existence, in the plants giving them life, in the animals conferring upon them sensation, in man bestowing understanding. So he dwells in me and gives me being, life, sensation, understanding; he makes a temple of me, since I am created in the likeness and image of the Divine Majesty.
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> . . . consider how God works and labours for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth, that is, he conducts himself as one who labours. Thus in the heavens, the elements, the plants, the fruits, the cattle, etc., he gives being, conserves them, confers life and sensation, etc.[11]

Thus it is that all manner of people, christian and non-christian, including poets, philosophers and theologians, have found that the order and beauty of the created universe speak to them of God.

The christian view of the relation between God and his creatures sees the whole course of history, too, as being under God's guiding hand. He invites human beings freely to co-operate with him in bringing his design to completion. History is the theatre of God's action in which he operates not as a remote stage-manager or director manipulating events from a distant unchanging eternity, but as an active participant, inviting our free co-operation, allowing himself both to appear and to be hidden in our choices and actions which either go along with or go contrary to his purposes. It is, of course, in circumstances which involve suffering and weakness, especially when the suffering seems tragically 'undeserved', that in practice we

find it very difficult to see God in history: when a marriage ends in separation and divorce; when tragedy overtakes a family, a village, a town, a country; when people are helpless victims of war, violence, ambition, poverty, oppression, degradation, fire, earthquake and flood. To find God here needs especially the gift of a deep faith. It is often only later, when the shock and pain have passed and allowed room for reflection, that people can affirm that even in their suffering Christ was present and that even there God was still 'one who labours', working for their eternal glory, touching them, calling them, drawing them closer, when he seemed to have abandoned them as as he seemed to have abandoned his Son (Mt 27,46). Only later can they see that suffering was an invitation to a fuller and deeper life with God, just as death is an invitation to resurrection. To a lady who had asked him about bearing the cross, Ignatius of Loyola wrote:

> . . . one who reflects on his sweet providence ought confidently to hope that all will co-operate to his good, and hold it for certain that the divine and sovereign goodness, now by chastizing now by caressing his children, always acts with equal charity as he seeks their greater good. We can therefore with full confidence conform our will with God's and make up our minds to be satisfied with whatever disposition he may make of us. . . . Not only prosperity but adversity too is a favour from God . . . for those especially who sincerely dedicate themselves to his divine service.[12]

Perhaps the following was not quite the kind of consolation that Michael de Norbrega, a Jesuit who had been captured by pirates, expected from his Superior General, as a prelude to the news that the Society did not have enough funds to ransom him:

> Recognize that divine goodness sends with equal charity and love fatigues, trials, tribulations and adversities, with which he is also wont to send repose, contentment, joy and sense of all prosperity. As a most wise physician he knows, and as a most devoted father desires, all that is best for the healing of the diseases of our souls, hidden and manifest. He provides what is best for them, although it may not be the most pleasing to us. . . . Therefore, dearest brother, find your strength in him who has created and redeemed you by his bloody death and put your trust in his most kind providence, which in some way will either draw you out of this captivity or at least make it very fruitful, no less than liberty, for the end we have in view, which is the divine glory and service and with it our salvation and everlasting happiness.[13]

Practical conclusions

It will perhaps be clear now that what I have called the contemplative and active aspects of 'finding God in all things' are closely linked so that the second grows out of the first. In recognizing the action and presence of God in our midst we are moved to offer ourselves increasingly for his service, to be his 'co-workers'. Our perceptions of the ways of God and of the love with which God deals with us can lead us to want more and more to 'walk in his ways'.

Seeking and finding God in all things, even among thorns, presupposes a disposition on our part to live out, so far as we can, the gospel of Christ in our own state of life. That is why this is not a 'clerical' spirituality, nor one confined to religious, but one which can be lived by those who are married as well as those who are not, alone, in a family, in a community, in the home, at work and in leisure, by the young, the middle-aged and the old, the sick as well as the healthy and when kidnapped by pirates. It is an approach to the kind of spirituality that Solzhenitsyn discovered in the Gulag. It assumes that a person is willing to allow the gospel to illuminate, influence and even change the way that one lives. It also presupposes a willingness to live one's christian life, as far as is possible, in the christian Church because, as we have seen, the Church is the place where God is primarily to be found, though not exclusively. This will usually involve active participation in the liturgical and community life of the Church.

Clearly, the approach to God which I have outlined here differs from a contemplative, monastic spirituality, yet is not opposed to it. The contemplative man or woman in a monastery or hermitage lives in a specialized setting, designed to be conducive to prayer, worship and the service of God. But if they are truly to live out their calling, contemplative men and women will, I suspect, seek and find God not just in prayer and worship but in every corner of their environment and every task of the day or night. The whole becomes *opus Dei*, God's work. The main difference between this and what I have been describing in this article is that the latter approach does not presuppose a specialized 'religious' environment, but tries to see God and to serve him in any setting in which a person might be placed.

Obviously 'finding God in all things', for clergy, religious and lay people, is not contrary to periods of solitary prayer and withdrawal. In fact such solitude might seem increasingly desirable. People who truly meet God and co-operate with him in the different circumstances of life often find themselves drawn to find him also in solitary

prayer. This can be a source of suffering when this attraction becomes a hunger that time and circumstances will not allow to be satisfied. And some kind of regular solitary contact with God, however brief, becomes a felt necessity.

Finally, both the 'contemplative' and the 'active' aspects of 'finding God in all things' can be fostered by a simple, short, daily practice of review of life. It can take about ten minutes, more or less. I begin by placing myself in the presence of God and asking for the help of the Holy Spirit. I then thank God for gifts received, dwelling on those that seem especially enriching or otherwise important. This is followed by a reflection on the day (or the period of time since I last made this review) in which I ask myself such questions as these: where and how have I found God, been aware of God, in that period of time? Where and how have I been drawn towards God? Where has God been touching me, speaking to me? (The answer may be, for example, in the Mass, in scripture, in prayer, in relationships or meetings with people, in pain and suffering, in a book, in the mountains, in my family, in a television programme. . . .) And contrariwise, where and how during this same period of time have I been drawn away from God (in weakness, in blindness, in selfishness, in sin; the possible answers are the same as for the previous question). I end with a prayer of sorrow for times when I have moved away from God and with hope that in future I will be ready to listen to God, to follow his leading and to find him in all things, even among the thorns.

NOTES

[1] Hopkins, G. M.: 'The wreck of the Deutschland', stanza 24, in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (Oxford, 1970), p 59.

[2] Cf, for example, Exx 230-37; *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, trans George E. Ganss S.J. (Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, 1979), part IV, ch 4, section 340; *Letters of St Ignatius Loyola*, trans. William J. Young S.J. (Chicago, 1959), pp 240-41. I will refer to this as *Letters* in these notes.

[3] *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, loc. cit.*

[4] *Letters*, p 240.

[5] Milton, John: *Paradise lost*, book XI, 349-54.

[6] In a letter to Francis Borgia, cf *Letters*, p 401.

[7] Eliot, T. S.: 'The Dry Salvages', part V, cf *Complete poems and plays of T. S. Eliot* (London, 1973), p 189.

[8] Cf, for example, Exx 237.

[9] Ruysbroek, Jan van: *The spiritual espousals*, trans Eric Colledge (London, 1952), p 55.

[10] Cf Exx 231, 237.

[11] Exx 235, 236.

[12] Letter to Mary Frassona del Gesso, March 1554, cf *Letters*, p 331.

[13] *Letters*, pp 351-52.