

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

The Prayer of Faith, Spiritual Direction, and the Exercises

IN THE LIFE OF prayer, an important time comes when there is a change from a relatively active, sensible phase, to one where the emphasis will be more on faith, on receptivity, and on God's part. Such a time, I believe, will also be an important and critical one in the work of spiritual direction—and whether the director will be of help or not will depend on an adequate understanding of how prayer grows.

In retreats, and in the giving of the Spiritual Exercises, a real challenge is posed when such an issue as this arises. Directors can find that a considerable number of exercitants pray in a very simplified manner: perhaps with quite an affective element still present, or else seemingly in an almost continuously dry way, being persevered in with pure faith. What is to be done? In particular, what kind of adaptations can be made in giving the Exercises—especially in the case of much dryness in prayer, which can seem the opposite of what Ignatius expects, especially regarding the graces to be sought for and received?

My purpose here is not to attempt to give answers to the many practical questions which arise, but rather to say that a proper understanding of prayer is the more basic requirement, and to offer some points especially on the meaning of what has been called the prayer of faith. I am doing so because I believe that this issue is quite important at the present time, when so many people are accepted for the thirty-day retreat or are making shorter forms of directed retreat based in some way on the Ignatian Exercises, among whom are those unable to make much use of the material suggested, not because of any human difficulties which may be present, but principally because of what is happening in the prayer.

1 The prayer of faith

The phrase, 'the prayer of faith,' occurs in the classic book, *On prayer*, by Jean Pierre de Caussade S.J., and indeed could be considered his principal theme.¹ More recently, it was used in a helpful way by Dom Eugene Boylan for the impossibility to meditate in *Difficulties in mental prayer*.² And it then became the title of the book by Leonard Boase S.J., meant to be a treatment of the topic especially for laypeople.³

It is a good description, conveying the positive meaning of the condition and experience of many people who pray, who find themselves unable to concentrate in the prayer, who try to accept as best they can their

helplessness and offer the time to God in faith. Once it may not have been so for them, but was good and satisfying. Then gradually it changed, and the earlier sense of satisfaction began to evaporate. And usually now it is a matter of giving time, making space, being faithful. For periods, perhaps, this can be relatively easy, but it can also be very difficult and almost dreaded in anticipation.

How can this virtual nothing be described, especially to a director in retreat? It can remain like a secret, hardly admitted to and unrecognised, due maybe to a general expectation that the active use of scripture should be the method of prayer, and that the notions of 'consciousness' and 'movement' must be the significant factors of its evaluation. But such an expectation will leave little room for what is happening now, and what is needed is a better understanding of how we grow in the life of God.

Of course, this life of grace, of prayer, is a very individual matter, and God deals personally and uniquely with each of us. Yet certain clear outlines have been sketched in the christian spiritual tradition, which need to be appreciated and kept in mind. It will then be seen that what has happened in the prayer is inevitable.

At first, there is normally a more or less prolonged and attractive period in the spiritual life—an active phase which has something of the method of *lectio divina* within the prayer itself, with a movement from reading, imagining and pondering to the simplicity and depth of praise, sorrow, longing, love. It is often designated as meditation or discursive prayer,⁴ but contains many contemplative elements—in it, we work first, so to speak, but then God takes over, giving us the taste of communion with him. The simple and affective part of it may come to predominate, and can seem to be the best possible kind of prayer, eliciting so much of our human sensibility and the depths of human response. Yet, most likely it is what will have preceded the prayer we are discussing here: it will have given way gradually to this dry experience of difficulty and helplessness, devoid of feeling and seemingly engaging none of our personal responses, and where the call is to remain in faith without tangible reassurance or any immediate criterion by which to assess the prayer.

2 *The meaning of the prayer*

In much of the tradition of recent centuries, and following upon the important distinctions contributed in the writings of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, this prayer is called the beginning of the more enduring state of contemplation.⁵ It may be defined as where the deepest self is being set on God, looking to him alone, and this due to the more immediate presence and activity of God within the soul. It is a 'dark and secret contemplation,' according to John of the Cross: 'nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love.'⁶

At the more ordinary level of experience, contemplation seems like nothing at all, a waste of time, in comparison to the earlier, satisfying time. But with regard to the working of God, it is, if one remains perseveringly and with longing, allowing him to come more immediately—God who is mystery, who could never be encompassed by our knowing or reached by our effort to love, but who will now deeply communicate his own understanding and love in the more intimate giving of himself. And in the active, more outward orientation of one's life, it is where all that is done will be more directly under the influence of grace, being ordered more purely and consistently to him.

The signs of the onset of contemplation include the inability to think or imagine in prayer, the lack of sensible consolation, and the helplessness of recurrent distractions. A person in this state wonders what to do, where to turn. It may seem as if the sad reality is that one has gone wrong somewhere or is losing faith—and yet the truth is that nothing else in life satisfies, and beneath all the surface feelings and thoughts it will be realized that the sole desire is to be for God and to serve him in everything. There is in such a person's life what could be called a preoccupation with God, and when it comes to prayer itself all one wants is to be lovingly attentive to him.⁷

The time of prayer then is a matter of just being there in weakness, but coming to it with belief and hope in the faithfulness of God, his purposes, his mysterious approach in love. Outside of prayer, indeed, the conscious mind will continue to be nourished by pondering the mystery, but in the prayer it cannot, because being brought within the mystery. 'Because God is showing *himself*, however dimly,' Ruth Burrows says, 'the deep self loses its taste for what the mind can bring to it by way of ideas and concepts.'⁸ At other times, the mind can reflect and meditate, but if we are now under the influence of the more direct action of God 'our inmost heart will tell us that, for us, this sort of activity at prayer is a distraction and an infidelity.'⁹

And if prayer has changed in this way, there is a further important point regarding the place of Christ. For it should not be concluded that we have become incapable, in Teresa's words, of 'enjoying the sublime blessings that lie enclosed in the mysteries of our good, Jesus Christ.'¹⁰ It might seem as if this is so. But Teresa, wary of some theories of prayer and very conscious of what she had learned in her own experience, tells us that Christ is always both our companion along the right road and also the one we contemplate and in whom we see the Father.¹¹ The difference is that there is none of the former need to meditate discursively *about* him in prayer. Instead, there is a deeper but quiet drawing to be contemplatively present to him and with him. Such an orientation, she says, can be helped by still calling to mind one or other of the gospel events, but after which it is right to want to be with Christ in this more

immediate and loving way, without initiating active thought, because now 'the soul understands these mysteries in a more perfect manner'.¹²

Such is the beginning of contemplation, dark and secret at this stage, but which is, to repeat the words of John of the Cross, already the inflow of God which, if we will allow it, 'fires the soul in the spirit of love'.¹³ It is a new journey in the way of faith, signalling a great change in the life of grace and which has often been described as the process of a second conversion.¹⁴

It is not, however, something completed, but is rather an opening onto the whole landscape of the mystery of God, hardly glimpsed before, and over which we are meant to travel with even purer faith, being called and led onward to a further and greater communion in the divine life. On this way there will be deeper suffering, due to increasingly painful self-awareness, to the wound of the longing for God, and to the extreme aridity arising from the sense of his seeming remoteness as even the depths of the spiritual self are thoroughly purified.

God himself, unceasingly faithful, is bringing about his loving purposes, as he alone can do, so that we come to abide more and more in the divine life. He is instructing the soul now 'in the perfection of love without its doing anything nor understanding how this happens'.¹⁵ Everything is being given by him, but in a way which is dark and very difficult, because so utterly beyond what can be comprehended or endured, until our knowing and loving is taken up more fully into that of God himself. All of the concrete circumstances of life are involved in this transformation, so dark to us, but being accomplished divinely as we are brought to let go completely the grasp of our own direction in life and can therefore be led securely. 'God takes you by the hand and guides you . . . You would never have succeeded in reaching this place no matter how good your eyes and your feet.'¹⁶

In this way prayer grows, the life of God increases. There can be different emphases both in the way it is described and in the actual form it takes in a person's life. Thus, certain writers will stress the darkness and others not so much—John of the Cross clearly does so, in comparison to Teresa, due to his strong doctrine of the transfiguration of the senses and the extreme purification of the spirit, by which we rise to the 'Divine sense, which is a stranger and alien to all human ways,'¹⁷ and are 'reborn in the life of the spirit by means of this divine inflow'.¹⁸

Again, these changes occur under different forms, depending on whether people are given more to the purely contemplative way or to an active or apostolic life. 'They do not always appear under so definitely contemplative a form as that described by St John of the Cross', Garrigou-Lagrange says.¹⁹ The prayer in itself may have less clearly perceived signs of change, and what is happening will be discerned more readily in the changing quality of all the activities of life. In terms of jesuit

spirituality, for instance, since the apostolic life embraced in the Society is itself 'a pathway to God,' to be travelled with eyes kept first on God,²⁰ there will be a deepening realization of what it is to 'always aim at serving and pleasing the Divine Majesty for its own sake',²¹ in the growing self-forgetfulness of journeying and labouring, 'ever intent on seeking the greater glory of God our Lord and the greater aid of souls'.²² Or again, it may be according to the similar grace desired by Mary Ward for the members of her Institute, when she received what is called her vision of the Just Soul, of a person brought to 'a singular freedom from all that could make one adhere to earthly things, with an entire application and apt disposition to all good works', and being enabled in that freedom 'to refer all to God'.²³

As Mary Ward further saw, this could only be so in the case of 'a soul wholly God's'.²⁴ And the way to that state of being in God seems according to what has been said here about growth in grace, although the more marked signs will include the lack of sensible consolation in the apostolate itself and times of extreme darkness where even the most valued of commitments are concerned. But, once again, this is so because of what we are and who God is, and because of how God works in our being changed more and more into his likeness, who 'is light' and in whom 'is no darkness at all' (1 Jn 1,5).

In time there can indeed come about what has been prayed for and longed for above all else, when God will take over completely, mysteriously, and his love becomes everything. This is the abiding state of union in God, of wholly belonging to him, so that all understanding and willing is his, and what is done is within the great activity of God. Yet in the night and way of faith there is already something of this essential reality there, in the silent and interior loving of God in the soul, and in the soul's contemplation of God in the vision of faith.²⁵ What is happening and how it happens must be left to him. The kingdom grows by day and by night, we do not know how, in secret (Mk 4,26-29). Our part is to be detached and faithful, in simplicity of heart, content to let him work, affirming his presence in faith, and doing what we are able and are called to do in life with willingness.

3 Spiritual direction

When it comes, then, to helping another in this prayer, it can be seen how important it is to know the meaning of growth in prayer and grace. This is the most important requirement by far, and without which many mistakes will be made.

Unless a director has some adequate appreciation of how God works, then he or she will fail to grasp the real significance of the kind of difficulty and darkness described above, and will be likely to respond in a harmful way even with the best of intentions. There can be, for

instance, a suspicion that something has gone wrong, and so the person's prayer and life are analysed on this presumption, but all of it based on an initial misreading of the situation. This is not to deny the reality of human difficulties, or how valuable it is to be able to help when these are uppermost in a person's consciousness, or when they may need special attention. But it is to say that the principal focus must be kept on the mystery of God. Again, there can be expectations of readily-discernible movement in a person's relationship with God, when in fact the deepening mystery of grace is quite beyond normal comprehension, as we have seen.

The best approach is to affirm the prayer, and to do this especially by referring to the faithfulness and love of God. To someone in this contemplative way, not sure what to express and perhaps wondering how the words spoken will be taken up, this affirmation and understanding can bring support. And some personal explanation or reading matter given on the nature of the prayer can be part of that help.

It is also good to encourage the pondering of scripture and other good material outside of the prayer. But there may be a disinclination to read much and a feeling of saturation after very little, because of what is happening in the prayer, and since the mind will have received much already in earlier meditation and reading. In any case, it is always worthwhile mentioning how much is acquired at Mass and in the Divine Office, some few words of which may form a preparation for the prayer or be taken up as a conscious articulation of the longing or praise or intercession in the heart of the prayer, which itself is being deeply rooted in the prayer of the Trinity and in the action of Christ.

But obviously the many issues of life may need to be talked about, as they enter into the mystery of the leading of God, and particularly now because of the growing concern to refer all to him.

In many instances, people have been led without the help of a director, and it is well to remember this, and to be reminded that everything done is God's work. And where direction is being availed of, it must be said that it is a situation where the director's own orientation towards God is very important, for one can only be of help to another in God and under the influence of his grace.²⁶

4 The Spiritual Exercises

Now in the matter of the Spiritual Exercises, and how best to deal with an exercitant whose prayer is contemplative, it will be seen that some important alterations must be made—but not out of line, I believe, with what Ignatius is opening up in the Exercises.

First of all, I take it that the method of prayer outlined by Ignatius is generally 'meditative'—and this includes even what Ignatius terms 'contemplation' from the Second Week onwards, as one looks towards Christ, though there is an expected process of simplification in the prayer

and over each day. Therefore, if the prayer of faith has become the habitual way of an exercitant, it follows that he or she cannot use the method outlined in the Exercises, and should not be expected to do so.

It seems advisable that the alterations should be along the following lines. Since scripture or other material cannot be used at all or else only very sparingly within the times of formal prayer, it is good to suggest some meditation on key elements of the Exercises outside of the prayer, and then to have a short period of reflection after each time. In this way there is an appropriate framework to the retreat, and at the times of meditation or reflection there can be helpful insight, a sense of God's leading, of how love is being given, and freedom in the service of Christ. It is a more active side to the retreat—although how much of it will happen, and whether it can be perceived to any great extent, will vary greatly from one person to another—and is a situation where the director may have a role in discussion and elucidation.

But let the prayer itself be truly contemplative, without the constraint to use material in a discursive, or 'meditative', active way. Help may need to be given on this, because of almost inevitable pressures to become more active again in prayer—which, if yielded to, will do violence to what God wishes to do and will cause disturbance. The director must beware especially of mistaken expectations which would force the retreatant to pray and report on the prayer in the more accepted manner. The right approach is to leave the prayer to God, and to affirm and to encourage the retreatant in this. For what formerly needed to be worked through in some detail in order to be open to a particular grace, according to the method of Ignatius, has now given way to a very simplified awareness or to a prayer of just being there in faith.

Now, it may be that during the prayer at this time there will be a more conscious awareness and response than usual, occasioned for instance by particular aspects of the mysteries of Christ. If this is so, I do not think that it contradicts what has been said about the nature of the prayer of faith, but can be good, once the underlying emphasis remains that of receptivity and dependence on God. Again, some people may be at the stage where they still tend occasionally to come back to meditation in prayer, without doing violence to it. In such cases, I think it may be better to encourage the simplicity of the prayer of loving attentiveness, a contemplation of the mysteries of Christ 'with a simple gaze,' as Teresa puts it,²⁷ rather than to incline towards a more literal following of the prayer of the Exercises. But in all of this it may take some time, with trial and error, to find what is best for each person.²⁸

And in conclusion, it might be good to mention why I consider that such an approach is in keeping with the intentions of Ignatius. For it could be felt that an insistence on the prayer of faith, based especially on the teaching of John of the Cross regarding our growth in grace, seems

to deny the richness of a more active and imaginative prayer and is out of place in ignatian apostolic spirituality. But I do not believe that this is the case. Rather, it is a question of noticing what is being opened up in the Exercises about prayer, and of appreciating the subsequent ways of God's leading, as really occur even in people whose lives are very active.

The Spiritual Exercises were meant primarily for those who seek the will of God and who wish everything to be ordered to his love and service (Exx 5, 20, 21), so that they are open to choose that state of christian life which God most desires for them (Exx 135). Now, such people usually enough are not far from the beginnings of their formal spiritual life, when they started to give regular time to personal prayer, and so require that more active method of prayer and its evaluation as outlined by Ignatius. But the prayer of contemplation is what is given to people further along that path of the spiritual life, who have most likely made their definitive choice of a way of life—and who have not stood still or gone backwards, but made good progress. There is a link, a sequence. And it is surely the case that a generous person who has made the Exercises in the more usual manner is being prepared for the whole range and depth of grace, as all of it is meant to be received and to unfold over a life given to God's praise and service.

But what is happening, then, in someone making the Exercises yet being drawn beyond the more active engagement with the mysteries of Christ in prayer, and beyond the expected, tangible effects of consolation? I would say that what is being aimed at by Ignatius—in the Second Week for instance, regarding the understanding and love and following of Christ—is now being lived interiorly and ever more fully, by the direct action of grace, 'far more abundantly than all that we ask or think' (Eph 3,20). Certainly, a measure of this occurs in the more literal making of the Exercises—and indeed the Word, in its external and objective forms, will never cease to be nourishment and living revelation for us.²⁹ But in the darker way of contemplation, Christ is coming to be formed and to abide in us more completely, the mysteries of faith are being lived increasingly from within, through a greater conformity with what they really are, because being realized by the more intimate and secret working of the Spirit of God.³⁰

In this way, the Exercises are being fulfilled in their deepest meaning, and there is no need to fear that some other path is being followed apart from that intended by Ignatius, who desired that those called to an active life would be truly contemplative.

At the end of the Exercises, in the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God, Ignatius leaves us to make the extraordinary offering of the prayer, 'Take, Lord, receive' (Exx 234). In subsequent living, which may be full of active concerns, it can hardly be a surprise if the love prayed for here, nothing less than the divine and trinitarian life abiding

within (Jn 14,23), will become more and more the fullness of our existence and, to adapt Mary Ward's phrase, make us belong wholly to God. It is what Christ has promised, and as the one source from which we can bear much fruit for the kingdom in the world (Jn 15,7-9). Ignatius opens us out to all of that, although we need to go beyond the Exercises to understand the process of it. And so it is that in coming to appreciate the meaning of contemplation, or the night of faith, we can see how what was necessarily incomplete and fitful in its beginnings is now being changed into the mystery of a life of uninterrupted prayer, a life lived supernaturally in and for God.

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NOTES

¹ De Caussade, J.P.: *On prayer* (London, 1931, revised 1949), introduction by Dom John Chapman and originally published in 1741; the phrase 'the prayer of faith' appears on pp 110, 209, 266, and is from Bossuet, whose teaching in turn relied on John of the Cross, Francis de Sales and Balthasar Alvarez.

² Boylan, Eugene: *Difficulties in mental prayer* (Dublin, 1943).

³ Boase, Leonard: *The prayer of faith* (London, 1950). More recently, the theme is taken up in Thomas H. Green, *When the well runs dry* (Indiana, 1979).

⁴ See Thomas Merton, *Spiritual direction and meditation & What is contemplation?* (Wheathampstead, 1975), pp 43-86.

⁵ See the writings of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, especially *Christian perfection and contemplation* (St Louis and London, 1937), based on Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross, but made more accessible and readable in *The three ways of the spiritual life* (London, 1938). See also Louis Bouyer, *Introduction to spirituality* (New York, 1961), pp 261-285; Merton, *op. cit.*, pp 89-112; Antonio Moreno, 'Contemplation according to Teresa and John of the Cross', in *Review for Religious* vol 37, no 2 (March 1978) pp 256-267; Francis Kelly Nemeck and Marie Theresa Coombs, *Contemplation* (Wilmington and Dublin, 1982); Ladislav M. Orsy, 'From meditation to contemplation', in *Review for Religious* vol 22, no 2 (1963), pp 172-179.

⁶ *The dark night*, Bk 1, ch 10, n 6; in Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The collected works of St John of the Cross* (New York, 1964), p 318.

⁷ See John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk 2, ch 13, nn 1-7, and *The dark night*, Bk 1, ch 9, nn 1-9, for the signs of the onset of contemplation (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, pp 140-141, 313-316); and Nemeck and Coombs, *op. cit.*, pp 53-71.

⁸ Burrows, Ruth: *Guidelines for mystical prayer* (London, 1976), p 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 35.

¹⁰ *The interior castle*, 6th Dwelling Places, ch 7, nn 6,9; in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, *The collected works of St Teresa of Avila* (Washington, 1980), pp 399-401.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, n 12: and see also nn 5, 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, n 11; and Teresa has an earlier treatment in her *Life*, chs 22 and 24. See Antonio Moreno, 'St Teresa, contemplation and the humanity of Christ', in *Review for Religious* vol 38, no 6 (1979), pp 912-923, and *Mount Carmel* vol 28, no 3, pp 149-165.

¹³ *The dark night* Bk 1, ch 10, no 6 (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, p 318).

¹⁴ See for instance Garrigou-Lagrange, *The three ways of the spiritual life*, p 32, where he quotes from Lallement on the second conversion.

¹⁵ John of the Cross, *The dark night*, Bk 2, ch 5, no 1 (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, p 335).

¹⁶ John of the Cross, *op. cit.*, Bk 2, ch 16, n 7 (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, p 365).

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, Bk 2, ch 9, n 5; but here I quote from E. Allison Peers, *The complete works of Saint John of the Cross*, (London, 1953), vol 1, p 399. See Jean Mouroux, *The christian experience* (London and New York, 1955), 'A note on the affectivity of the senses in St John of the Cross' pp 305-320. On the purification of the spirit see Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, in what he calls the third crisis or conversion, especially pp 91-93; as well as in this book, see his treatment of the three conversions in *The three ages of the interior life*, 2 vols (St Louis and London, 1947, 1948).

¹⁸ John of the Cross, *op. cit.*, Bk 2, ch 9, n 6 (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, p 348).

¹⁹ *The three ways of the spiritual life*, p 109; and see pp 63, 73, 74, 79, 91.

²⁰ Ignatius of Loyola, *Constitutions*, n 3; as in George E. Ganss, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis, 1970).

²¹ *Ibid.*, n 288.

²² *Ibid.*, n 605.

²³ See Mary Catherine Elizabeth Chambers, *The life of Mary Ward* (London, 1882), vol I, p 346; M. Emmanuel Orchard, *Till God will: Mary Ward through her writings* (London, 1985), p 40; and Immolata Wetter, *Mary Ward's prayer* (talks given in 1974 and circulated among members of the IBVM), p 15.

²⁴ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The glory of the Lord: a theological aesthetics*, vol 1: *Seeing the form* (Edinburgh, 1982), 'The light of faith' pp 131-218.

²⁵ To help understanding of the right approach to spiritual direction here, one can hardly do better than read Dom John Chapman, *Spiritual letters* (London, 1935), noting especially 'Contemplative prayer, a few simple rules' pp 287-294; and see Ladislav M. Orsy, 'Contemplation: some practical considerations', in *Review for Religious* vol 24, no 2, (March 1965), pp 248-264.

²⁶ *The interior castle*, 6th Dwelling Places, ch 7, no 11 (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, p 402). But again with Teresa, contemplative presence to Christ and looking to him within the prayer goes beyond imaginative representation; see the study of this question in Thomas Alvarez, *Living with God: St. Teresa's concept of prayer* (Dublin, 1980), pp 12-18, based on her *Life*.

²⁷ I have been helped by the points given in Robert O. Brennan, 'The retreat director and the contemplative', in *Review for Religious* vol 40, no 2 (March 1981), pp 168-181.

²⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Prayer* (London, 1973), is an exposition of the place of the Word in contemplation, by which we are drawn into the 'objective' reality of God's love for the world and in the Church.

²⁹ See Joseph Patron, 'Christ in the teaching and life of St John of the Cross', in *Mount Carmel* vol 30, no 2 (Summer 1982), pp 94-110, and especially pp 101-102; see also Louis Bouyer, *op. cit.*, p 305.