

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

St Ignatius Loyola and spiritual direction, II

IN A PREVIOUS ARTICLE I concluded that St Ignatius's introductory notes to the *Spiritual Exercises* focus the attention of both the spiritual director and the person directed on prayer.¹ I also suggested that Ignatius was, however, concerned not to drive a wedge between prayer and life and that, therefore, spiritual direction will inevitably involve reference to all aspects of an individual's experience. However such a dialogue will centre around an explicit search for the ways in which God is acting in a person's life, and this will distinguish it from other forms of counselling. Because a person seeking spiritual direction will as a matter of course wish to discuss prayer experiences and will hope for guidance in this area, it seems useful to look briefly at St Ignatius's teaching on prayer. In an article such as this it is impossible to do this subject justice; however it is important to allay fears that Ignatius had a narrow view of prayer or that directors in the ignatian tradition are bound to impose particular forms of prayer on those being directed.

Obviously it is helpful to begin with some brief remarks about prayer as it is presented in the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*. I have already discussed in the previous article how Ignatius feels that certain basic attitudes are important in the person seeking to pray (Exx 5). The one being directed should also be taught about the importance of preparation and recollection. Although the remarks on recollection (for example calling to mind the material for the day's prayer upon rising) are tailored to a closed retreat, the general principle is still valid in a wider context. The specific activity of praying needs to be rooted in some general cultivation of awareness and reflection. Likewise it is helpful, even in daily life, to prepare for prayer by deciding what one is going to do and why (cf Exx 73-74).

Ignatius, in addition, points out the importance of place for prayer, without specifying where it should be. But he does seem to imply that it need not be a chapel or church (Exx 79). In practice it is important for each person to decide what is the best place. Wherever the 'holy ground' is, Ignatius suggests that a physical act of reverence (perhaps a profound bow) may be useful. Many people have, in my experience, found that such a physical gesture is very helpful as a way of focusing attention on the process of consciously entering God's presence. Indeed, Ignatius places a great deal of emphasis on the physical in prayer and in this shows a remarkable degree of harmony with certain contemporary insights. Thus

there is considerable stress on the importance of posture. Again each person should discover the one which is most helpful and Ignatius's wide range of suggestions indicates a great freedom in this regard (Exx 76). Apart from place and posture, he also points out that the use of light or darkness should be varied as seems appropriate or helpful (Exx 79).

With regard to the length of prayer, Ignatius certainly seems to insist on the space of one hour in the context of the Exercises (Exx 12-13). However, as we shall see, he was far more flexible when it came to prayer in everyday life. The remarks in the Exercises do have some importance and that is to emphasize the need for faithfulness to what has been decided before prayer about the length. Otherwise the danger is that one cuts corners, or gives up when times are hard. There is the possibility of important growth in perseverance.

When we turn to the structure of prayer as proposed in the Exercises it may seem that it is over-detailed and something of a strait-jacket. However, one has to bear in mind two things. Firstly, that Ignatius's great principle was flexibility and adaptation in the light of the needs of the individual. Secondly, the presentation in the Exercises is a form of shorthand for the director and there is a danger in treating it in an over-literal or 'fundamentalist' way. Throughout the various phases of the Exercises there are indeed certain constants which Ignatius clearly feels are of special value: a preparatory prayer (which amounts to a conscious act of presence to God); focusing on the 'subject matter' of the prayer (or, in other words, what I am about to do), and asking for what I desire or sense I need. The latter is not some way of twisting God's arm or limiting his freedom. It is an acknowledgment that prayer is God's action and that I need his grace. It is also an explicit acknowledgment of the needs that have already been revealed to me by God's grace and therefore indicates a kind of purposefulness in my prayer. But my desires are always in need of refinement and therefore I place what I know before God, trusting that his Spirit will act upon them and transform them if this is necessary.

Throughout the Exercises, the methods or structures of the subsequent periods of prayer vary a great deal. It is vital to keep in mind Ignatius's principle that one should remain where there is 'fruit' or benefit and not feel bound to move on (Exx 76). There is no justification for supposing that Ignatius thought of prayer as a syllabus or some set of hoops to jump through!

Contrary to popular mythology in the not so distant past, Ignatius did not promote any *one* method of prayer (even in the Exercises) and one should be extremely cautious about talking about '*the* ignatian method'. At the very beginning of the Exercises he defines 'spiritual exercises' as '*every* method of examination of conscience, meditation, contemplation, of vocal and mental prayer' (Exx 1). If one lists the many

approaches that appear in the pages of the Exercises, it will be seen that they represent a great range of possibilities: the two forms of 'examen' (Exx 24-26, 43); discursive meditation of the three powers of the soul (cf for example, Exx 45-54); gospel contemplation with the use of imagination (Second to Fourth Weeks, for example Exx 110-17); the prayer of finding God in the world and in life called the 'Contemplation to attain the love of God' (Exx 230-37); the three methods of prayer (Exx 238-60) which include a measured repetition of words linked to breathing. One might also include the 'colloquy' that appears at the end of every period of prayer throughout the Exercises. Although this is presented as part both of meditation and contemplation rather than as a method on its own, it does underline that Ignatius saw familiar conversation with God as a valid aspect of prayer.

Finally, the Exercises provide evidence for the fact that Ignatius anticipates a process of simplification in prayer. The 'repetitions' throughout the Exercises are a form of simpler prayer, in which the person is invited to concentrate on less 'material'. 'We should pay attention to and dwell upon those points in which we have experienced greater consolation or desolation or greater spiritual appreciation' (Exx 62). The 'Application of the Senses' which is introduced in the Second Week as the final period of prayer in the day is once again a form of simplified prayer with more emphasis on the 'affective'. The process of simplification is further underlined by the fact that Ignatius suggests less and less material as the basis for each day's prayer as the Exercises progress.

W. H. Longridge, the anglican translator and commentator on the Exercises, argued strongly that, both within the framework of the Exercises and elsewhere, Ignatius provided sufficiently for all types of people—even for those who are genuinely contemplative and (using traditional language) in the illuminative or unitive ways.² He points out that even in the earlier stages of the Exercises the 'repetitions' demand that the understanding 'be restrained' in order to give more scope to the affections. 'Repetitions should in fact be made more after the manner of affective prayer than of meditation so called'.³ Longridge felt that Ignatius placed considerable importance on 'repetitions', particularly after the middle of the Second Week because 'without them our meditations would often be in danger of becoming shallow, scarcely going beyond the intellectual exercises, and missing that interior savour of the truth which St Ignatius is so anxious that we should enjoy'.⁴ The Application of the Senses does not proceed by reasoning at all but simply 'rests'. 'Hearing' is of the heart rather than of the understanding.⁵ While Longridge feels that there is a distinction between 'gospel contemplation' in the Exercises and the way that contemplation is understood in the mystical tradition as a whole, he nevertheless believes that ignatian prayer may be a preparation for what is called the 'prayer of simple regard':

Especially if we take into account what he says about repetitions and application of the senses, a soul can hardly help being led on from meditation to affective prayer, and that in increasing degrees of simplification till it arrives at last, if God so wills, at the prayer of simple regard.⁶

He quotes Suarez (who certainly did not belong to the purely 'ascetical' school of Jesuits) in support of his views and he seems to be in accord with much that Poulain, the writer on mysticism, says.⁷

Outside the context of the Exercises, there is plenty of evidence that Ignatius taught a very broad understanding of prayer and recognized a development towards simplification and contemplation. In his famous letter to the spanish nun, Sister Teresa Rejadell, he comments for example:

Every kind of meditation in which the understanding is engaged wearies the body. There are other kinds of meditation, orderly and restful, which are pleasant to the understanding and offer no difficulty to the interior faculties of the soul, and which can be made without interior expenditure of effort.⁸

Poulain cites this letter as an example of Ignatius pointing towards a genuinely simple form of prayer.⁹ He also points out that the primary aim of the Exercises is not to provide a system of prayer but to free a person who wishes to be generous with God. Thus, by implication, the rather methodical approach is appropriate to the experience of the Exercises but it is to be hoped that there a person will have learned to pray more freely.¹⁰

It is worth emphasizing that neither the *Spiritual Exercises* nor general spiritual direction in the ignatian tradition demand that an individual adopt a style of prayer that is narrow or alien to his or her normal practice. The underlying ignatian principle of flexibility and adaptation should give a director a sense of freedom. One could cite a couple of examples to illustrate this point. Firstly, not everyone finds the method of imaginative contemplation of the gospels (Second Week onwards in the Exercises proper) equally easy. For those who do not find that *visual* imagination is possible it is important to stress that this is not necessarily the only way to 'imagine'. Again, some people will find that the imaginative element in their prayer is fairly extended. Others will, on the contrary, find that this element cannot be sustained for long except very artificially. The point that needs to be made about this and indeed all methods of prayer is that they are means to an end, not an end in themselves. Gospel contemplation seeks to bring the person to a point of personal encounter with the living Christ. Once that encounter has been

reached the person should be free to respond to this 'real presence' as seems appropriate—in colloquy (or familiar conversation) or in a silent, still, 'being present to' the Other.

Secondly, a question often arises about the use of scripture in prayer for people whose normal pattern is silent, imageless prayer. The use of scripture seems to be presupposed by the structure of the major part of the Exercises. However, it seems clear that scripture may be related to prayer in a variety of ways, not all of them direct. Thus, while one person may 'pray from scripture' in the direct sense (either by gospel contemplation or slow ruminative reading of a text—*lectio divina*) another may find that a 'backdrop' of meditative reading of scripture at other times in the day may well colour the quality of his or her prayer times without affecting its essentially still, imageless quality.

It is important to note that Ignatius's principle of flexibility in the light of the needs of an individual meant that his advice on prayer in his letters varied a great deal. Thus, in some cases, he was prepared to insist on a daily pattern of formal prayer, as in the case of the layman, Anthony Enriquez: 'Set aside some time each day so that the soul will not be without its nourishment and you be led to complain like him who said "my heart is withered because I forgot to eat my bread" '.¹¹ Yet in other places he accepts that different circumstances demand different remedies. To priests and students at Coimbra who were in danger of excess he commented:

The demands of your life of study do not permit you to devote much time to prayer, yet you can make up for this by desires, since the time you devote to your various exercises is a continuous prayer, seeing that you are engaged in them only for God's service.¹²

While the desire for prayer and contemplation is valid, for those dedicated to the apostolate, works of charity and a christian life in the world, prayer can never be an end in itself. There should be a dialogue between contemplativity and activity. Those who resent the lack of time for prayer because of the 'distraction' of activity are advised that this 'distraction which you accept for his greater service' can be 'the equivalent of the union and recollection of uninterrupted contemplation'.¹³ The growing ability to 'find God in all things' is in some ways better than a long time spent in formal prayer.¹⁴ And in a letter to Fr Brandao concerning younger Jesuits Ignatius offers the widest possible teaching on prayer: These young Jesuits should:

Seek God's presence in all things, in their conversations, 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. This kind of meditation which finds God our Lord in all things is easier than raising oneself to the consideration of divine truths which are more abstract and which demand something of an effort if we are to keep our attention on them. But this method is an excellent exercise to prepare for great visitations of our Lord, even in prayers that are rather short.¹⁵

In his *Constitutions* Ignatius's prescriptions for jesuit prayer were equally flexible. For students he talks of one hour each day, but the hour is understood as a total rather than one continuous period. The actual form of personal prayer was not specified. In the case of the professed, Ignatius makes no detailed requirements. He presupposed that these men were spiritual by nature and sufficiently advanced to know what they required (but always in dialogue with their superior).¹⁶ It was not until sometime after Ignatius's death that a daily period of one hour's continuous mental prayer was introduced. This was part of a more general tendency to narrow the understanding of ignatian prayer. The more affective or contemplative dimension, in official circles at least, gave way to a preference for discursive meditation. The causes of the narrowing of perspective and practice were complex but a major one was the desire to bring jesuit practice into line with what was acceptable in the new atmosphere after the Council of Trent. There was a tendency towards a kind of 'reductionism' in favour of conventional practices in other religious orders—including a more structured approach to 'times of prayer'. Equally there was a suspicion of anything that smacked of the mystical or 'inner lights' and movements of the Spirit which, it was felt, could all too easily slide into the heresy of 'illumism'. This narrowing of the understanding of prayer (and the Exercises in particular) naturally spilled over into the kind of instruction that jesuit spiritual directors gave to those who sought guidance. There always remained some Jesuits, however, who continued to promote a more flexible or more contemplative approach—sometimes in the face of considerable opposition.¹⁷

The training of spiritual directors

How did Ignatius envisage the training of spiritual directors? Most of the evidence that remains refers specifically to the giving of the Exercises, although some of the principles have a much wider application. Before all else, Ignatius believed that the personal spiritual growth of those engaged in direction was the bedrock of the effective guidance of others. A prospective spiritual director needed to grow in certain fundamental attitudes, especially a radical abnegation, that is freedom from the bonds of self-love. So Ignatius appears to have been particularly demanding with people who gave the Exercises in order to help them to develop a

necessary humility and spirit of detachment.¹⁸ The assumption was that a director should have personal experience of the journey of prayer, particularly that he had been through the full Spiritual Exercises. 'After they have experience of the Spiritual Exercises in themselves they should acquire experience in giving them to others' (*Const* 408). This was far more vital than any theoretical study.¹⁹ For the Exercises were not in essence a method or theory and the prospective director needed to be thoroughly immersed in the basic ideals and dynamics.

In so far as there was training, it consisted in a progressive involvement under supervision. 'They could begin by giving the Exercises to some in whose cases less is risked' (*Const* 409). It seems that even in the novitiate Jesuits gave some exercises under a supervisor. Later they progressed to giving the exercises of the First Week, then the full month with a person not making an 'election' (or life-decision), and finally the exercises 'of election'.²⁰ Supervision consisted in 'conferring about their method of procedure with someone more experienced, noting well what he finds most useful and what less so' (*Const* 409). This seems to have been a discussion both of the specific retreat and retreatant and of the points of the Exercises in general.

Nowadays we may feel that a more theoretical training in spiritual direction is helpful. There is a far greater plurality of theological standpoints than in Ignatius's day and one cannot assume that potential directors and those seeking guidance understand things in the same way. Hence some grounding in the main principles of biblical exegesis and a working knowledge of the christian tradition is important. Likewise an awareness of the insights of psychology and some counselling skills have proved an invaluable resource. However the insights of Ignatius Loyola still underline a number of very important considerations: that a director should be well-versed in the tradition (or traditions) of prayer and spiritual guidance out of which he or she works; that directors must themselves be seriously involved in the spiritual journey; and finally that directors should be people of human and spiritual maturity. One might add that supervision by another experienced director, or membership of a support group, remain vitally important for the development of directors—both personally and in their ministry.

Conclusion

It now seems possible to indicate in summary the fundamental principles of spiritual direction in the mind of St Ignatius. We have seen that the primary focus is on the particular religious experience of the person being directed. For Ignatius this means not simply the activity of prayer (although this is a vital element) but, because he has what in contemporary terms would be called a 'holistic' approach, it also involves developing an awareness of the way God is to be found in all the experiences of life.

By implication too, the life of the Spirit is not to be reduced to a series of ascetical exercises common to all. Direction therefore, is essentially a response to an experience of God's presence and action as reported by the person who comes for guidance. A director cannot know in detail what he or she should say beforehand.

To respond to what a person reports and also to one's perception of that person's character and needs also means that what is offered by the director must be as fully adapted as possible. This is Ignatius's principle of flexibility—that all instruction or advice should be what helps this particular person at this particular moment. This demands a great deal of patience on the part of the director, not a little intuition or sensitivity and a non-judgmental approach. Directors should avoid any temptation to measure people against objective norms. This attitude of being 'as a balance at equilibrium' (Exx 15) led some people to accuse Ignatius of heresy because it seemed to give a dangerous prominence to the interior guidance of the Spirit in each individual and to prevent the director from correcting false doctrinal or ethical stances.²¹ In fact, of course, Ignatius did see the possibility of correction but this should be sensitive and gentle and not dogmatic confrontation (Exx 22). The important thing for Ignatius was to help each person to grow in an inner freedom to respond to God's call and demands. For what is appropriated personally is likely to go deeper than what is imposed.

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NOTES

¹ Cf *The Way*, vol 24, no 3, July 1984, pp 312-19.

References to the Exercises are from *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, trans. L. Puhl (Chicago, 1951), Cited as Exx.

² Cf Longridge, W. H., *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola*, (London, 1930) pp 258 f *passim*.

³ Longridge, *op. cit.*, pp 228-29.

⁴ Longridge, *op. cit.*, pp 228-29.

⁵ Longridge, *op. cit.*, pp 253-56.

⁶ Longridge, *op. cit.*, p 258.

⁷ Cf Poulain, A., *The graces of interior prayer*, trans. L. Yorke Smith, (London, 1950) pp 34-35.

⁸ Young, W. (trans), *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola* (Chicago, 1959), p 24. Cited as *Letters*.

⁹ Poulain, *op. cit.*, p 45.

¹⁰ Poulain, *op. cit.*, p 29, footnote.

¹¹ *Letters*, p 333.

¹² *Letters*, p 129.

¹³ *Letters*, pp 254-55.

¹⁴ *Letters*, pp 235-36.

¹⁵ *Letters*, p 240.

¹⁶ For Ignatius's legislation on the prayer of Jesuits, see George Ganss (trans), *The constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, (St Louis, 1970), nos 340-43, 582-85. Cited as *Const.*

¹⁷ Cf Veale, J., 'Ignatian prayer or jesuit spirituality' in *The Way Supplement*, 27, Spring 1976, pp 5-6, 7, 13.

¹⁸ Cf Iparraguirre, I., *Práctica de los ejercicios de San Ignacio de Loyola en vida de su autor* (Bilbao, 1946), p 154.

¹⁹ Iparraguirre, *op. cit.*, p 154.

²⁰ Iparraguirre, *op. cit.*, p 155.

²¹ Cf Veale, *op. cit.*, p 5, n 8.