

TRANSFERENCE, RESISTANCE AND THE DRAMA OF THE EXERCISES

William A. Barry

GIVING THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES TO ANOTHER over a thirty-day period is a challenge, a challenge of which Ignatius himself, it seems, was aware. In the *Constitutions*, after noting that scholastics who have experienced the Exercises themselves ‘should get practice in giving’ them to others, he goes on to write:

They could begin by giving the Exercises to persons with whom less is risked, and consulting about their method of procedure with someone more experienced, noting well what he finds more appropriate and what less so.¹

Ignatius was aware of the dangers of allowing amateurs to use this instrument without the help of a ‘supervisor’.

Ignatius also seems to have recognised that some directors were better able than others to help people through the Exercises. He was accustomed to say that of the early companions Pierre Favre was the best at giving the Exercises.² In this essay I want to look with the lens of the psychologist at the dynamic interplay of actors that constitutes the drama of the Spiritual Exercises.³

¹*Constitutions* IV.8.5 [408, 409].

² The source for this comment, cited in Mary Purcell, *The Quiet Companion* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), on p. 43, is Luis Gonçalves da Câmara’s *Memoriale* (MHSJ FN 1, p. 658). An English translation of this text has been prepared in Oxford by Alex Eaglestone, and moves towards its publication are under way.

³ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach focused my attention on this dramatic nature in ‘Discourse on Exercises and Co-Workers’, *Review of Ignatian Spirituality*, 33/1 (no. 99, 2002), pp. 25-34. At the outset Kolvenbach writes of four actors: God and Ignatius, the one who gives and the one who makes the Exercises. I would prefer to view Ignatius’ role as the author of the play and would add one further actor, ‘the enemy of human nature’ (Exx 7.2).

**Ignatius expects
dynamic tension
during the
Exercises**

The experience of the Exercises is dramatic in form and includes at least four actors: God, the exercitant, the director,⁴ and 'the enemy of human nature'. Any drama worthy of the name is fuelled by dynamic tensions between the characters. To recognise that the experience of the Exercises is dynamic in nature, we need only to remind ourselves of the sixth Annotation. This counsels directors to be concerned if they perceive that 'no spiritual movements, such as consolations or desolations, come to the soul of the one who is exercising themselves, and that they are not being moved by different spirits' (Exx 6.1-2). Clearly Ignatius expects dynamic tensions during the Exercises. But Ignatius wants the director to stay out of the principal action of the drama as far as this is possible, in order that the creator may 'act immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord' (Exx 15.5-6).

Still, directors necessarily play a part in this drama. The Annotations expect that directors will intervene in the drama unfolding during the Exercises. Thus they are expected to be in a dynamic relationship not only with the exercitant, but also with God and with the enemy of human nature.

The 'Contract' and 'Working Alliance'

In psychological circles, the agreement made between counsellors and clients is called the 'contract'. The two parties agree at the beginning on the purpose of their meetings, on how often they will meet, and on aspects of their relationship such as confidentiality and fees. With this 'contract' they begin to establish a 'working alliance'. Clients come to counsellors because they sense that something is wrong with their lives, and because they hope that these meetings will help them to live in more integrated and less self-defeating ways. Counsellors ally themselves with their clients' desire for a less divided self. In the process of setting up this 'contract' and 'working alliance', both parties are made aware that the work will be difficult and often painful, because the clients have developed their self-defeating patterns of behaviour in order to make sense of a dangerous world. They will not

⁴ For the sake of simplicity I will use 'director' rather than Ignatius' more cumbersome 'the one who gives the Exercises', and 'exercitant' rather than 'the one who makes the Exercises'.

give up these patterns without a fight. So counsellors ally themselves with desires that will necessarily arouse resistance in clients. A strong 'working alliance' is essential at the beginning of the relationship, so that it can be appealed to in times of such resistance.

When people come to make the Spiritual Exercises, they and their directors need to establish an analogous 'contract' and 'working alliance'. Both need to agree on the purposes of their time together, on how often they will meet, on what they will discuss, on what the exercitant will be expected to do prior to each meeting, on the role of the director, and on matters of confidentiality and fees (if fees are in order). In this preliminary discussion they will be establishing a 'working alliance'.

What is the nature of this 'alliance'? The director, I believe, makes a working alliance not only with the exercitant, but also with God, specifically with God's indwelling Spirit, who works to draw each human being into a harmonious relationship of friendship with God, a friendship that leads to the developing of harmonious relationships with all of God's creatures.⁵ The director and exercitant agree that they will work together so that God can free the exercitant from inordinate attachments and thus enable the exercitant to live freely in harmony with God's project or dream for the world, a dream that includes the actions of the exercitant. In making this alliance, the director helps the exercitant to realise that there will be turmoil and resistance during their time together.

Given the nature of this 'working alliance', some preliminary requirements for directors become clearer. Directors need to have a relatively well-developed relationship with God themselves, so that they know what God wants and how God acts and is experienced. They need to be freed by God from some of their more egregious inordinate attachments that could get in the way of their giving of the Exercises. They need to know from experience, in other words, the saving power of God and the desire of God for friendship. Since they are making an alliance with God's Spirit indwelling in directees, they need an experiential knowledge of the ways of the Spirit. The more

⁵ It may well be that secular counsellors who ally themselves with the desire for wholeness in their clients are, unwittingly in most cases to be sure, allying themselves with the indwelling Spirit. See William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1982), pp. 138-140.

developed their own relationship with God, the freer they are, and the more helpful they will be to exercitants.

They also need to know from experience how resistant they themselves can be to the promptings of the Spirit, how persistent the Spirit is at trying to overcome the resistance, and how clever the enemy of human nature is at fostering such resistance. In other words, they will need to have experiential knowledge of the discernment of spirits.

‘Resistance’

In counselling and psychotherapy ‘resistance’ refers to all the ways of avoiding therapeutic change. Therapeutic growth requires the change of psychic structures that were developed to manage great anxiety; facing the possibility of such a change reproduces the anxiety, and clients try to avoid such anxiety at all costs. In such circumstances clients will only remain in therapy or counselling if the ‘working alliance’ is strong—in other words, only if there is a strong trust in the counsellor and a strong desire to move beyond the self-defeating behaviours that brought them into counselling in the first place.

In the course of making the Spiritual Exercises exercitants will experience similar resistances. Ignatius expects as much. They enter this drama in order to develop a closer relationship with God and to attune their lives more closely with God’s dream or project in this world. But they do not enter the drama without impediments to such a closer relationship with God.

All of us develop psychic structures that help us make sense of our world. Among the most important of these structures are those that help us make sense of our relationships with ourselves, with important others and with God.⁶ These structures are learned ways of patterning our relationships with others. Since they begin developing at birth or soon after, they are freighted with the accumulated experiences of our lifetimes with significant other people and with God. With these structures⁷ we meet new situations in our lives, and they colour our experience of these new situations.

⁶ These structures are discussed in psychoanalytic circles in terms of ‘object relations’.

⁷ One could use the term ‘images’ to denote these structures, but that term carries the connotation of conscious and developed pictures of oneself, others or God. What I am describing here are not so

Consider instant likes and dislikes, for example. Such instant reactions occur because we assimilate the new person or situation to a pattern developed earlier in life; we transfer the old pattern onto the new person. We can learn to differentiate this new person from the past person or situation if we are willing and able to stay in the new situation long enough to experience the new person as different from the past person.

We have similar structures that pattern our relationship with God, patterns that begin to develop very early in life and govern our approach to God as we begin the Exercises. Just as we need to allow new people to teach us that they are different from what we expect if we want to develop healthy relationships with them, so too we need to allow God to teach us new patterns of relating to God. For this very purpose we enter upon the Exercises. But the patterns we have of relating to God resist change. Many people have not allowed their relationship with God to develop as they have allowed other relationships to develop. Since these patterns of relating with God develop as ways of making sense of our presence in this world, they ward off existential anxiety, anxiety before the ephemeral nature of life itself. People may consciously want to develop a more mature relationship with God, but to do so brings them into a situation that threatens these 'world-ordering' patterns. Without knowing why, they will resist the changes required by a new experience of God.

***People resist
the changes
required by a
new experience
of God***

In addition to these relatively unconscious sources of resistance exercitants will encounter more conscious ones. Soon after entering upon the Exercises, they ask God to reveal sinful patterns that hinder them from living out God's dream. As they become aware of these patterns, they may realise that God wants them to look at attachments that have a strong hold on them, and they will try to avoid such attention. Later in the Exercises, the cost of discipleship may lead to resistance to knowing Jesus more intimately. The very process of engaging in these Exercises will bring resistance to the fore in much the same way as engaging in the process of psychotherapy does.

much pictures as the psychic structures to which we assimilate new experience. For the most part these structures operate without conscious awareness. We only become aware of their presence when we reflect on experiences that disturb our ordinary way of acting.

How will resistance show itself? It varies with each person, of course, but one of the clearest is the lack of 'spiritual movements' (Exx 6.1). Engaging in a real relationship with God will never be boring. When the conversations between director and exercitant become boring, then directors can suspect that resistance is at work. That is when they need to inquire about the exercitant's daily order, fidelity to prayer, and so on. But I would like to focus our attention on another way that resistance shows itself, in the relationship with the director.

Transference

In psychoanalytically oriented counselling the main line of resistance to therapeutic change comes through distortions of the relationship with the therapist. Instead of feeling involved in a 'working alliance' with the therapist, the client begins to have feelings and thoughts that get in the way of this alliance. Sometimes these feelings and thoughts are 'positive', such as a strong attraction towards the therapist, or even love for them; at other times they are 'negative', such as a strong dislike or fear of the therapist. The therapist is treated as though he or she were a loved or feared important person from the past. Such reactions are called 'transference' and distort the 'working alliance' that has led to effective therapeutic work up to that point. Instead of focusing on their self-defeating behaviour and its origins and effects, clients now focus on the therapist in either a love- or a hate-relationship. Psychoanalytic therapy now focuses on helping the client to examine these distortions in order to see how such distortions in real life have led to the self-defeating behaviour that brought the client into therapy in the first place.⁸

In psychoanalysis not only is transference expected to occur, but its appearance is fostered by many of the arrangements of the therapy itself, such as the frequency of meetings (four to five times a week), the position of the client (on a couch), the position of the analyst (behind the couch), and the neutral attitude of the analyst (like a 'blank screen'). These arrangements and the intimate nature of the

⁸ For a more complete explanation of the concept of transference in psychoanalysis see Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, pp. 158-161.

conversations lead to the eruption in the therapeutic session of the very attitudes and behaviours that have been self-defeating in life.

Directors of the Spiritual Exercises try to help directees develop more healthy ways of relating to God, but they do not foster the development of transference. The whole purpose of the Exercises is to 'leave the creator to act immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord' (Exx 15.6). Hence, directors eschew arrangements that would make them easy targets for such transference reactions, such as a couch for directees or the adoption of a neutral or 'blank screen' attitude onto which exercitants can project the distortions that colour some of their significant relationships.

Transference reactions, however, can be expected to occur in any helping relationship such as spiritual direction, and these can be used by the directee to resist the development of a more mature relationship with God. In addition, some of the arrangements that have to be made for the sessions in the enclosed thirty-day Exercises very easily arouse transference reactions. For one thing, directors and exercitants meet every day for thirty days in succession, for conversations that can be quite intimate. In addition, the only outlet in most cases for conversation during these days is the session with the director. Finally, directors, no matter how much they try to relate to their directees as one Christian to another, cannot help but be seen as authority figures during these thirty days, and as such they will draw to themselves some of the ambivalence exercitants may have had towards authority figures in the past: parents, teachers, employers, priests and others. While directors may desire that the main action of the drama of these days take place between God and the exercitants, their position in the drama leaves them open to the distortions of transference, and resistance will easily slip into these grooves.

***Transference
can impede
maturity***

How will this type of resistance be recognised? Transference reactions show themselves by their intensity, their ambivalence, and their inappropriateness. Exercitants may show a positive transference by taking an intense interest in the life of the director, and asking personal questions that have little to do with the matter at hand. They may show a negative transference by a sudden coolness and wariness in speaking of their experiences with the director. The clear indication that these are transference reactions will be that they divert the conversation away from what is happening during the prayer sessions



of the previous day. The enemy of human nature could not find a better means to slow down or even derail progress toward a more mature relationship with God. Whether the transference reaction is positive or negative, the exercitant may spend hours ruminating about the director instead of communing with God.

An example may help. Years ago, when I first directed the Exercises in an enclosed setting, one exercitant remained somewhat distant and aloof throughout the entire period of thirty days. Only later did it come out that on the first night at the retreat house he had felt trapped in his room, a circumstance that brought him back to the time in his earlier life when he was locked in his orphanage room at night. The whole retreat, it turns out, was coloured by this reaction transferred from the past. I was quite inexperienced at the time and did not know how to help him talk about his obvious unease with me and with the situation. Here is a clear case of a transference reaction to the whole situation of the retreat. No doubt this reaction became a powerful vehicle for resistance to new initiatives by God during this retreat.

How can directors deal with transference reactions? For one thing, we need to remind ourselves that such reactions reveal the vulnerability of exercitants during the Exercises. Resistance is to be expected and it will, in all likelihood, take the form of a distortion of the reality of the director. Such reactions are not a personal affront to

the director; they indicate that something dynamic is happening, and are a cause for rejoicing, even if they make the director's job more challenging. Positive transference reactions may be missed, at least in the beginning, because directors are human and enjoy being the object of positive thoughts and feelings. But these, too, can become challenging when they become intense, and directees make demands on directors' emotional investment in them.

Negative transference reactions are, at first, more difficult for directors because all of us are aware of our shortcomings and prone to become defensive about them. So questions such as 'How many retreats have you directed anyway?' or implied criticisms such as 'My spiritual director doesn't ask as many questions as you do' may hit a vulnerable spot. Moreover, exercitants during a period of thirty days get to know directors' foibles and shortcomings. When resistance to God's initiative arises, they can use this knowledge, perhaps unconsciously, as a weapon of resistance to strike close to the bone. But directors need to keep in mind what their job is and what they undertook when they entered upon a 'working alliance' with this exercitant. Positive or negative transference reactions towards directors, even if uncomfortable, are a sign that the dynamic of the Exercises is working.

But we still must answer the question of how to respond to these transference reactions, which can be quite personal and challenging. It makes no sense to attack the reactions directly with such remarks as 'You're treating me as though I were your mother' or 'I'm just the target of your anger because you're angry with God'. Such reactions tend to feed into the distortion, because the director is here taking on the role of the all-knowing authority figure. Nor is it helpful to try to force the exercitant back to talking about the experience of prayer if the relationship between director and exercitant itself is the problem for the exercitant at this moment.

Directors need to address the issue of their relationship with the exercitant when it becomes clear that transference reactions have become the vehicle of resistance to a new initiative from God. I could have been more helpful to the exercitant mentioned earlier had I focused on the unease I picked up. I might have tried something like this: 'I sense that you feel ill at ease; is there something troubling you?' or 'You seem on edge when you're with me. Am I correct?' Such remarks might have opened the door for him to talk about his

experience of feeling trapped in his room and eventually about his relationship to me. At least they might have given him the idea that he could talk about troubling issues in the situation of the retreat.

If the transference reactions are positive and show themselves by excessive interest in the director, the director could open up the door by saying something like this: 'I know that you are interested in me, but it seems that we have got away from the usual topic of our sessions together, namely what is happening in your relationship with God. Let's focus our attention on what happened when you prayed yesterday and see where that leads.' This kind of question invites the exercitant to recall the 'working alliance' and also brings the conversation back to the matter of what is going on during the day. The response may reveal that thoughts about the director are often intruding into the time of prayer. Then the director can help the exercitant to take a look at this pattern and to try to find out when it began. In this way they may find that the intrusive thoughts about the director began when a particularly troubling aspect of the relationship with God came up in prayer.

Pursuing the matter in this way reminds us of Ignatius' advice in the fifth and sixth Rules for the Discernment of Spirits appropriate for the Second Week. In these rules Ignatius points out that we need to attend to the whole course of a series of thoughts and reactions. Anything that leads eventually to disturbance in the relationship with God probably comes from the bad spirit. Once we have discovered his influence, Ignatius writes:

. . . it helps the person who was tempted by him to look immediately at the course of the good thoughts which he brought them at their beginning, and how little by little he aimed at making them descend from the spiritual sweetness and joy in which they were, so far as to bring them to his depraved intention; in order that with this experience, known and noted, the person may be able to guard for the future against his usual deceits. (Exx 334.2-4)

The bad spirit often uses transference reactions, I believe, to deflect exercitants from their purpose during the Exercises. Noting the deflection and helping exercitants to examine the course of their thoughts and reactions in a non-judgmental manner brings them back to the reality of the relationship with God, and also reminds them that

the relationship with their directors is at the service of this primary relationship.

Supervision

Directors of the full Spiritual Exercises are engaged in challenging and demanding work. They are asked to play a role that facilitates the primary relationship between God and the exercitant. In the process, they find themselves confronting their own relationship with God, their own resistance to that relationship, their own struggles with the enemy of human nature, and their own psychological dynamics. This work brings their whole person into play, not just their intellectual knowledge.

In the field of psychotherapy, it was when the whole person of the therapist came to be seen as the therapeutic vehicle that the process of supervision was developed, as a way of assisting therapists to become more effective helpers. Supervision focuses attention not on clients but on the therapists themselves, and on their experience of engaging in psychotherapy. Supervisors do not ordinarily give advice about how to treat the client; rather they try to help therapists understand their own experience in order to become better therapists. Supervisors act toward the therapists whom they supervise in a way analogous to the way therapists act in the helping relationship. Just as the therapist focuses on the experience of the client in order to help the client become a more mature and free person, so the supervisor focuses on the therapist's experience as a therapist in order to help the therapist become a better professional helper.

***Supervision
focuses not on
exercitants, but
on what directors
themselves are
experiencing***

Supervision in the context of the Spiritual Exercises works analogously. The supervisor or supervisory group focuses on the experience of the director in directing others through the Exercises. Supervisors are not so much interested in what exercitants experience as in what their directors experience while conversing with exercitants. This will reveal the personal strengths and weaknesses of the directors so that they can become more professional and helpful directors of the Spiritual Exercises. If we had been using supervision when I first gave the full Spiritual Exercises, the supervisors would have asked me to examine my feelings of unease as I directed the man mentioned earlier. In this way they would have helped me to notice that something was

awry in our relationship. I would not have had to reveal anything about the exercitant except the unease I experienced as I listened to him. Once I understood my unease I could have taken some steps to discuss with the exercitant what seemed to be happening between us and to invite him to look at what was going on in him. Supervision need not involve a breach of confidentiality.

In the course of supervision directors may discover weaknesses in their own psychological dynamics. They may find themselves caught in a relationship of what is called countertransference⁹ with a directee, for example, and recognise the need to engage in some psychological counselling of their own. They may also discover that areas of trouble in their own relationship with God hinder their effectiveness as directors. In this case, they will need to do some work on this relationship and take it up with their own spiritual directors. The point is that supervision aims to help directors to become better professional directors of the Spiritual Exercises. This means engaging in whatever is needed in order to make oneself a better instrument in God's hands, a better actor in the drama of the Spiritual Exercises. Supervision of the kind proposed may be the best way in our time to implement Ignatius' advice in the *Constitutions* for helping novice directors become more professional.¹⁰

William A. Barry SJ resides at Campion Centre, Weston, Ma, where he is a co-director of the tertianship for the New England Province, a spiritual director and a writer. He has a doctoral degree in clinical psychology from the University of Michigan, and has taught there, at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, and at Boston College. His latest book, co-authored with Robert G. Doherty SJ, is *Contemplatives in Action: The Jesuit Way* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002).

⁹ That is, the director begins to act toward the exercitant on the basis of an interpersonal pattern from the past. For a discussion of countertransference in spiritual direction see Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, pp. 170-174.

¹⁰ For more on supervision see Maureen Conroy, *Looking into the Well: Supervision of Spiritual Directors* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1995).