

TRANSFORMATION IN RETREATS, TRANSFORMATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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SPIRITUAL PROCESSES OCCUR both during formal retreats and during everyday life. In Ignatian spirituality as we now understand and live it, both kinds of process have a place; they differ in kind, but nevertheless they belong together. Both offer rich possibilities; there are, however, some situations in which one kind of setting may be much more conducive to growth than the other. How are we to understand this relationship? How can we steer the two kinds of process so that they do not just carry on alongside each other without any connection, or indeed get in each other's way, but rather inform and nourish each other?

Let me begin by stating my position, oversimplifying in order to make a point. In everyday life, the Spirit's transforming work takes place primarily through ordinary events; in retreats, the Spirit's transforming work takes place primarily through prayer. In everyday life, the challenge consists in letting everyday experience become a prayer; in retreats, the challenge consists in getting the prayer to incorporate and inform life that has already been lived or that is to come. In everyday life, the process moves chiefly from without to within; in retreats, the process moves chiefly from within to without. Some kinds of spiritual insight come more easily through retreats; others come more easily through everyday life. Spiritual direction has to deal with the different kinds of challenge in different ways.

Some Cases

I begin with a few accounts of my own practice, chosen more or less at random, and in no particular order:

- I was giving a retreat to some students. One young man was meditating on blind Bartimaeus. He became deeply shaken at his own blindspots, and began to see his life and his future in a quite new

way—much more realistically, in a good way much more humbly, much more trustfully, much more openly.

- A woman student had been leading a rather irresponsible life, in her studies, in her consumerist mentality, and in her relationships with men. The main reason for her making a retreat was that her training as a religion teacher required it. During the retreat, she was touched on a number of issues: she began to look at her life differently and to discover different values. My sense was that this went quite deep; but I also felt that in her everyday life the movements would fizzle out, and that in the end not much in her life would change. A year later I got a letter from her, quite unexpectedly. She wrote that her life had changed following the retreat: she had built up a new circle of friends; she was getting involved in her parish; she was thinking of getting married.
- A young man at university had been struggling for years with the question of whether he should enter the Jesuit novitiate. During a retreat, he decided to take the plunge the following year, in a deep Election process that could almost have served as a model. I was delighted—and really rather proud of my adept direction. Shortly afterwards, he fell violently in love. Once again he was being pulled this way and that, and eventually after some months he decided to get married, in a way that I did not think was very mature. My sense of competence as a director was rather deflated—perhaps a good lesson for my ego.
- A young sister asked me to take her on for spiritual direction: she had made final vows just six months previously. Over those months, her prayer life had completely broken down, because her quite stressful job had just overwhelmed her and eaten her away. Her relationships with her community were also tense—indeed they had almost broken off. She was just ‘functioning’, and was actually quite proud of ‘managing’—and given the great deal she had to do, this was indeed a respectable achievement. I felt I had to pull her in quite strongly, and try to get it across to her that religious life could not be lived in this way, and that she was putting her vocation in danger. After a few months of this, and after a retreat that was quite

tedious, dry and seemingly fruitless, her community life and her prayer life gradually came back together, at least to some extent. What was decisive was that she had learnt once again to acknowledge her needs and her feelings in everyday life. She had begun to let go of her perfectionism and of her obsession with getting things done.

- A novice made, clearly and joyfully, a full Election to enter the Society of Jesus during a thirty-day retreat. I was uptight about this, since I was increasingly getting the impression that he was unsuitable for the Society. However, during the Exercises I had to give him the freedom to make an Election, and accompany him 'like a balance' (Exx 15.6). Only later did I confront him with my perceptions. In the subsequent months he tested his Election, discovered in the light of everyday life that it was false, and left.
- Another novice spent the thirty days of the Exercises rather calmly, and did not arrive at a clear decision. The subsequent months, however, were very turbulent, and they eventually showed him where his path lay. Clearly he needed the experience of everyday life to show him the way through 'motions' and other indications.
- A mother of three small children came for spiritual direction. Her question was how she could find the time and the energy to keep her relationship with God alive in an everyday life marked by constant stress round the clock. There was also a strain and a flatness in her relationship with her husband, because both of them were subject to excessive demands and were hardly speaking to each other at any personal level. During our meetings, we were always talking about structuring time in ways that would create some freedom. Then the woman made a retreat with me. She made a major organizational effort to 'shovel out' the time: her husband took leave from work so that she could do it. She really enjoyed the days of retreat: the chance for a rest and for sleep; the fine spring weather; the opportunity to pray. She came to terms with herself and with God again. The basic themes were those of trust, of being loved, of being allowed to be herself, of gratitude—these were quite enough for a

deep and fruitful retreat that had its effects long afterwards. Even the time problems seemed to become manageable in its wake.

What do these cases show? Sometimes the step forward that people need to take requires a retreat; at other times it requires everyday life. Sometimes a retreat opens up something that then brings fruit in everyday life; at other times a quiet or even a flat retreat prepares the ground for something new to be opened up in everyday life. Sometimes a calm retreat, in which one just relives one's core commitment, nourishes an everyday life that is quite fragmented and tense; at other times a rather stormy retreat, with powerful movements, nourishes an everyday life that is tranquil, even too tranquil. Sometimes the retreat-giver makes the mistake of overestimating the fruit; sometimes they underestimate it. Sometimes they will make mistakes, and yet God writes straight with crooked lines; at other times they will do all the right things, and yet the Spirit's working seems nevertheless peculiarly weak. Probably the retreat-giver needs to listen out very carefully for what is most helpful at that particular moment: in our individualised, complex world there can only be a few generally valid rules. The director must have the inner freedom necessary to lead in a quite personal and sensitive way. Often they will feel unsure, and need to work on the basis of spontaneous intuition. They will have to admit that they do not always understand what is happening, and that they cannot steer things or keep them under control. They need constantly to be exercising their listening skills, and to be praying for inner freedom.

Different Ways of Proceeding

Scripture and Prayer

In *retreats*, people are working chiefly with scriptural meditations, and sometimes also with other imaginative or prayerful exercises. The retreat-giver opts to stress particular themes, which they 'give'. They can follow a set order in their choice—for example the classical stages of the *Spiritual Exercises*—or take their lead from what is going on in the retreatant's life. Often these two methods come close to each other, and even amount to the same thing. By means of the themes that impose themselves, a process is set in motion—a process in which life-experiences re-emerge, are worked through, and are interpreted in



Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

new ways. Particular experiences then surface, in ways that can be consciously stimulated and to some extent steered—but what directs the process is what is actually going on within the retreatant.

In *everyday life*, when the spiritual process is extended over a longer period, people are more likely to be working with forms of reflection on experience: review of the day (the Ignatian Examen), or other forms of prayer on the basis of their own lives. These may be laden with content, with the person looking back directly on particular experiences and drawing them into prayer. Alternatively they may be more diffused, with the person simply being present in silent meditation before God and wordlessly holding their inner life—their feelings, questions and yearnings—open to God. At times they will use scriptural texts as well, but more as ‘background music’ than as a direct medium actually enabling them to take a look at their life-experience. Scripture is there to help the person interpret experiences that are already present; it gives consolation, and some orientation for dealing with them.

Processing Experience

In *everyday life* a person’s experience is often very much part of their prayer. Indeed, it can so dominate both heart and head that they can hardly pray any more. The events of the day overwhelm them to the

point of becoming all-absorbing. Many people are quite dominated by painful experiences which sometimes seem almost violating in their effects. If this happens, then great effort is required for the burdens not simply to become too much. The times of silence can easily just become occasions when they just talk to themselves, and go round and round the problems in the vain attempt to sort it all out on their own. Instead, the person needs to open themselves enough for their experiences to be taken up into a prayer that is trustful and truly an occasion of dialogue.

In *retreats*, by contrast, everyday events initially recede into the background. The retreatant ‘switches off’; they enjoy the rest, the sleep, the countryside. On the basis of such nurturing experiences they become able to pray again, trustfully and gratefully. Nevertheless, everyday life does surface again, after at most a few days, and becomes powerfully present in their prayer as an interior reality. At this point it is important that nothing be excluded or put to one side—rather, what is painful must be allowed in, and held before the Lord. Thus the prayer will lead to phases of desolation. These dry periods have to be endured, in the hope that the person will be led again into periods of greater consolation.

Styles of Accompaniment

During *retreats*, the one guiding operates reticently, and seeks to give the Spirit a space within which to work freely. They only steer the process to a very limited extent. In another way, however, they can become quite directive, through the choice of material for prayer, although the choices they make must always be responding to the experiential material that is surfacing. Sometimes their choices will be wrong: a biblical text will fail to touch a person, a particular theme turns out not to be as important as it seems. When this happens, the retreat-giver will need to correct any plans that they may have, and try to get a quite new feel for what will be helpful in this situation. They will give advice only rarely. Especially when it comes to life-decisions, they will try as far as possible to be like the Ignatian balance, and in no way to exert influence on the decision. It is the exercitant who must make the choice, quite freely and independently—and this applies even when they would prefer to unload the responsibility onto the retreat-giver. If it is still too early for a decision to be made, it should, if at all possible, be postponed rather than made badly. If external

pressure—an impending religious profession or wedding day—is forcing a decision, then the task is to seek the kind of compromises that keep options open.

In *everyday life*, the one guiding will more often be dealing directly with specific issues that arise. Particularly with people who are not yet able to make their own decisions, they will sometimes have to give specific advice. They will generally encourage the one they are directing to bring their questions and concerns into their prayer, and to ask God for counsel, support, and perhaps some kind of specific signal. Nevertheless, the guide may well have to intervene more often in what is happening, even if this does not correspond entirely to standard teaching about the director's role. The boundaries between spiritual direction and general pastoral care or counselling are fluid—a point that the spiritual director just has to accept realistically. Their role is to give the person in front of them whatever it is they happen to need, including advice.

I have sometimes come across people who had got themselves into a serious mess. After some hesitation and overcoming of inner resistance, I have eventually intervened quite directly and authoritatively, with clear instructions or even a moral lecture, in order to bring the person into a better situation. On the occasions when this has—with God's help—worked, I have then been able to return to the far more congenial role of true spiritual accompaniment.

Phases of the Exercises

The *Principle and Foundation* normally goes quite straightforwardly during retreats. The exercitant experiences a sense of calm, gratitude, joy and confidence. It is a time for renewing and deepening a relationship with God that may have become repressed. In an everyday life situation, by contrast, the spiritual struggle can often consist precisely in the attempt to salvage the Principle and Foundation: in other words, in trying to hold on to a relationship with God *despite* the pressures of everyday life, or better *in and through* its various demands. In this context, fundamental questions of faith can often surface: Whom can I trust? What can I still believe amidst suffering and evil? What does it mean to pray?

The *First Week* is often a powerful experience during retreats. Exercitants can become shocked at the evil within themselves and in

the world. They can experience shame, contrition, perhaps anger; they seek forgiveness. Alternatively, they can experience severe anxieties or hurt, and want to seek reconciliation or healing. During retreats, these realities are experienced directly: they happen interiorly, as realities remembered or anticipated. The silence and the sharpened sensitivities of the retreat situation can make these interior processes very intensive, and deep moments of inner healing and reconciliation can take place. In everyday life, these processes will probably be less intense interiorly, but at the same time they will be somehow more direct, given that the person is living on a daily basis with the reality of failure, hurt or anxiety, and experiencing it almost physically. The process has an intensity of a different kind, and care needs to be taken that it leads, even in the everyday life situation, to some kind of spiritual reconciliation and healing—through prayer and through the effects that prayer has on psychological and relational processes. A person who has experienced the graces of the First Week in a retreat situation will, for their part, need to ‘put into practice’ the forgiveness and healing they have been given by God and that they have experienced ‘interiorly’. They will need to learn to express in concrete actions what they have received, and thus to bear witness to it.

In the *Second Week* of a formal retreat, people are working chiefly with the Mysteries of the Life of Jesus. By imagining the ideal case, the exercitant comes to choose their own form of discipleship, or



Balaam Meets the Angel on the Road

alternatively—if the choice has already been made—to reform it (Exx 189). This process of imaginative prayer can be a very deep and rich experience, one that is life-changing. However, the decisive point is whether or not the style of discipleship that has been envisaged and planned can be earthed *after* the retreat is over, in everyday life. The exercitant just has to see whether they can live out their ideals, and, if so, to learn how to do it. They may well come up against their limitations again. The difficulties of real life may well deflate them, and make it impossible for them to live out more than a part of their vision. They will need to learn to take small steps, and not to make the better into the enemy of the good. It is important to see that this process is not a weakening of a person's idealism, but rather its deepening. They are living out the reality of discipleship, and thus entering more profoundly into the joy of being a disciple. If they can accept interiorly the fact that being a Christian is a fragmentary experience, they will come to rely more radically on the power of God, who is the source of all our desires and brings all our actions to completion. I try to tell my novices that the Exercises are really a two-part process. The thirty days in silence are only the first part; then there is a whole year afterwards of testing and deepening. Only if this second part has been done thoroughly can a person responsibly proceed to a commitment through vows.

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The *Third Week* is probably experienced in everyday life more often than is generally supposed. People may well be going through it whenever they are badly handled by those in authority, or being bullied. They may be suffering from another's envy and jealousy, or under physical or psychological violence; they may be powerless in face of an evil that seems utterly dominant. Sometimes the one praying is experiencing the evil directly; sometimes it is their friends or other people who are suffering, and their own experience is one of solidarity (compassion in a literal sense). In either of these cases, the only thing to do with such situations is to endure them and hold them before God. Perhaps looking at the Cross will bring consolation and support. During retreats, the process typically goes differently. The exercitant begins by looking 'interiorly' at the passion of Christ, and is moved, pained, by what Jesus suffers. Then they discover specific situations in their own life that reflect the scenes of the passion narrative, and move on to pray with these experiences as they surface within the memory.

The *Fourth Week*, like the *Second Week*, is often an upbeat experience during retreats, full of joy and consolation. This is a good thing: it can energize the exercitant and give them all kinds of stimuli. In everyday life, the experience is rather more low-key. It involves a deep 'yes' to life as it is; people come to a kind of reconciliation with themselves, with their life and with God—a reconciliation in which the suffering they experience in everyday life is not excluded, but rather integrated. Probably only very mature people, and perhaps only older people, can enter into the *Fourth Week* experience in everyday life—certainly only the kind of self-possessed people whom the classical German mystics would have called *gelassen*. Sometimes you will come across this kind of maturity in people who have suffered a great deal. Such people already radiate a sense of being whole and reconciled, in ways that you cannot quite put your finger on or get hold of. A formal retreat may help prepare a person for a state of such maturity in everyday life; and conversely an intense life of daily prayer can prepare the ground for such maturing to occur through the gifts of the retreat.

The Exercises and Everyday Life

Ignatius envisaged that his companions would make the Exercises over thirty days just once in their lives. Through the Exercises they would let themselves be transformed, and orientate themselves to the following of Jesus. A one-off experience would have lifelong effects; and afterwards a normal life—or at least a normal life lived with spiritual intensity—would be enough. Ignatius thought that even a person who was working very hard could be adequately oriented towards God in everyday life. This ideal hardly seems realistic any more. Is it that we have become spiritually inert? Or is it that the modern world is too noisy, too turbulent, too stressful for this ideal to be liveable? At any rate, even in 1608 the sixth Jesuit General Congregation prescribed an eight-day retreat for all Jesuits each year. Behind this surely lay the experience of how, besides a thirty-day retreat made once or twice in a lifetime, an annual shorter period of retreat is very helpful for everyday life, and even indispensable. Prayer in everyday life and the annual retreat can nourish each other and interpenetrate.

What is this interplay like? When it works, the external events of everyday life can lead to powerful life-experiences that are relived, worked through, and made spiritually fruitful in a retreat situation. What grows interiorly during the retreat can then be put into practice in everyday life.

To put the matter once again oversimply: in everyday life, the spiritual process moves from exterior reality inwards; in retreats, the process moves from interior reality outwards—though in a person who has been living an organic life of annual retreats and daily prayer over a long time, the inner and outer lives of course reflect, nourish, and complement each other, to the point of becoming one and the same integrated reality.

One final point. Extroverts, people who are stimulated primarily by exterior reality, people who live out of intense human relationships, people who let themselves be influenced strongly by exterior events, people who define themselves primarily in terms of what they do—such people will probably find their spiritual challenges and their sources of real transformation primarily in everyday life. Though retreats will be difficult for them, retreats will also do them good, because they will deepen and interiorise the process that has already taken place. Conversely, introverts, people who are led forward primarily by an affectively rich inner and autonomous spiritual life will find spiritual fruit and sources of transformation more easily in retreats. And similarly, though the engagement with outer reality demanded by everyday life will be a strain for them, it is nevertheless good for them. It earths and solidifies the process that has already taken place in their interior lives.

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