

# FREEDOM, MARRIED LOVE AND THE EXERCISES

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I WRITE AS A MARRIED LAY THEOLOGIAN, and as a member of Ignatian Associates.<sup>1</sup> For me, therefore, the question of the relevance of Ignatian spirituality to a life of committed married love is not an abstract one. How can the Exercises deepen my lived commitments? Should the experience my wife and I have had of the full Exercises in daily life be making a significant difference to our marriage and family life? In this article, I want to reflect on the theme of freedom in the Exercises, and on the ways in which this freedom can be expressed in the commitments of marital love.

## ***Freedom in the Spiritual Exercises***

Ignatius presupposes that people making the Exercises already possess their freedom. They are to enter the Exercises in a very similar frame of mind to that in which they are to leave them. The offering of one's freedom stands at the beginning and at the end of the thirty days. Whatever one says about 'freedom' in Ignatius, one cannot say in any simple way that it is the achievement or purpose of the Exercises as Ignatius used that term. Freedom constitutes a presupposition of the Exercises, the condition for their possibility, rather than their product.<sup>2</sup>

Michael J. Buckley SJ argues that the term *libertad* (translated as freedom) 'occurs seven times in the *Exercises*, but at junctures that are

<sup>1</sup> Ignatian Associates are Roman Catholic adults, both married and single. The movement was founded in connection with the 1991 Ignatian jubilee, and decisively encouraged by the 1995 Jesuit General Congregation. Following a two-year formation programme rooted in the Ignatian Exercises, Ignatian Associates may accept an invitation to make public 'promises' of 'simplicity of life, fidelity to the gospel and to our associate and Jesuit companions, and apostolic availability'. See <http://www.ignatianassociates.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Buckley, 'Freedom, Election and Self-Transcendence: Some Reflections upon the Ignatian Development of a Life of Ministry', in *Ignatian Spirituality in a Secular Age*, edited by George P. Schnier (Waterloo, On: Wilfred Laurier UP, 1984), 65-90, here 65.

critically suggestive of the peculiar meaning that it possesses for Ignatius'.<sup>3</sup> In Buckley's analysis of the Exercises the goal of freedom is ultimately interpersonal self-donation. In this light, the Exercises appear as a vitally important source of nourishment for married love.

Let us begin with the fifth Annotation:

For the one receiving the Exercises, it does much good to enter into them with great courage and generosity towards their Creator and Lord, offering Him all their will and liberty, that His Divine Majesty may make use both of their person and of all that they have according to His most holy will. (Exx 5)

Clearly, the exercitant already has 'liberty' or 'freedom'. For Buckley, this annotation points to a three-stage process. Firstly the exercitant recognises, acknowledges their freedom. Secondly, this freedom, this 'liberality and magnanimity', is offered to God. Thirdly, if God wills, this liberality is accepted by God, so that God can 'enter, dispose, employ and pattern that life as He wishes'.

A second text on freedom in the *Spiritual Exercises* highlighted by Buckley is the Examen:

I presuppose that there are three kinds of thoughts in me: that is, one my own, which springs from my mere liberty and will; and two others, which come from without, one from the good spirit, and the other from the bad. (Exx 32)

Interestingly, what is truly one's own is only what issues from one's free will. 'By liberty and choice a person incorporates into the self what is to constitute its definition.' Here Ignatius is *identifying* the self with its freedom—a point that will be important for us as this essay proceeds.

Buckley also refers to the challenge issued in the Principle and Foundation. 'For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things (in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it).' (Exx 23) 'Freedom' here ceases just to be a possibility that could be used for either good or bad and becomes 'the freedom that unites with desire and underlies determination'—in other

<sup>3</sup> The following paragraphs derive from Buckley, 'Freedom, Election and Self-Transcendence', 68.

words, free choice.<sup>4</sup> Our free choices determine who we become. We literally become that in which we choose to participate.

Buckley then turns to the first meditation of the Exercises to continue his argument for 'freedom as the ambivalent potentiality for self-determination'.<sup>5</sup> Ignatius writes:

I say draw into memory the sin of the Angels, how they, created in grace, not wanting to help themselves with their liberty to reverence and obey their Creator and Lord, coming to pride, were changed from grace to malice, and hurled from Heaven to Hell. (Exx 50)

In this meditation 'grace does not substitute for freedom'; even in a profoundly graced life—that of the Angels—freedom 'is still a question'. The question for Ignatius is 'what are you going to do with your freedom?' To answer that question is to actualise oneself profoundly. To suppress that question is to destroy one's own humanity. The point is confirmed in the 'Take, Lord, receive'.

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will, all that I have and possess. You gave it to me: to you, Lord, I return it; it is all yours; dispose it entirely to your will; give me your love and grace—that is enough for me. (Exx 234)

Freedom, therefore, is a reality in the person whom the Exercises presuppose. My free choice to become this or that, my answer to the question of what I am doing with my freedom, defines who I am. And my freedom has a specific purpose: it enables me to enter more fully into relationship with God through a surrender of my freedom and will to Him. This last point is crucial. The purpose of freedom in the Exercises is not to achieve more freedom, but to develop the capacity to surrender one's freedom to the incomprehensible mystery of God. Personal freedom ought to end in interpersonal liberality and mutuality. Indeed, the purpose of personal liberty is nothing other than interpersonal liberality, mutual love.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Buckley, 'Freedom, Election and Self-Transcendence', 69.

<sup>5</sup> Here I follow Buckley, 'Freedom, Election and Self-Transcendence', 70-71.

<sup>6</sup> Buckley, 'Freedom, Election and Self-Transcendence', 72.



The Marriage Feast at Cana by He Qi

For Buckley, therefore, 'the person is their freedom'. Without freedom, there is no authentic subjectivity or self-responsibility. Moreover, the ultimate purpose of this freedom is self-donation, self-giving love into the freedom of an Other, namely God. But this love for the transcendent God has nevertheless to be shown in deeds and events. It needs to be objectified, and married love is one such objectification. We need, therefore, to explore the connections between the love of God which is the goal of the spiritual life and the objectifications of this love in such vocations as marriage. And we can turn to the theology of Karl Rahner for one classic account of the matter.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Love of God and Love of Neighbour***

When human life is lived to the full, the 'I' is always related to a 'Thou'. We experience our own subjectivity only as we encounter others, in dialogue and in trustful and loving encounter. Moreover,

<sup>7</sup> I have written on this elsewhere, see Thomas M. Kelly, 'Love of Neighbour in Karl Rahner's Anthropology: Implications for a Theology of Marriage', in *INTAMS Review*, 10/1 (Spring 2004), 61-73.

human beings experience themselves by experiencing the other as *person* rather than as *thing*.<sup>8</sup> Self-discovery is impossible apart from the simultaneous discovery of one's neighbour.<sup>9</sup>

It follows that the experience of discovering the self's freedom and of giving it over to God that we find in the Exercises depends on how we have donated that freedom to others in the concrete reality of life. One's experience of oneself and one's encounter with the 'Thou' is the 'same experience under two different aspects'.<sup>10</sup>

For Rahner, *caritas* (charity, love of neighbour) is not something which 'vanishes in its ground, the love of God, dissolving itself or becoming in itself unimportant'.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, neither one's love of neighbour nor one's love of God can be experienced exclusively on their own, as if the other did not exist. Support for this claim, can be found in Scripture. St Paul understands,

... love of neighbour ... as the fulfilment of the law (Romans 13:8, 10; Galatians 5:14), and hence as the 'bond' of perfection (Colossians 3:14) and as the better 'way', in other words as *the* Christian form of existence simply and finally (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13).

The double commandment expressed in Matthew 22 and Mark 12 is, as a single reality,

... valued in the Synoptic tradition as the life-giving (Luke 10:28) epitome of the Old Testament revelation in the Scriptures and the prophets (Matthew 22:40), greater than which there is nothing (Mark 12:31).<sup>12</sup>

Love of neighbour becomes the only criterion in the gospels by which humanity will be judged (Matthew 25:34-46). In the Johannine literature, the claim is made even more radically:

<sup>8</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Experience of Self and Experience of God', *TI* 13, 122-132, at 127.

<sup>9</sup> See Rahner, 'The "Commandment" of Love', *TI* 5, 439-459, at 443.

<sup>10</sup> Rahner, 'Experience of Self and Experience of God', 128.

<sup>11</sup> Rahner, 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God', *TI* 6, 231-249, here 232.

<sup>12</sup> For the scriptural argument here, see 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God', 234-236.

According to John, we are loved by God (John 15:12) and by Christ *so that* we may love one another (John 13:34), a love which is the *new* commandment of Christ (John 13:34), which is his specifically (John 15:12), and which is the task imposed on us (John 15:17). And so, for John, the consequence of this is that God, who is love (1 John 4:16), has loved us, not so that we might love Him in return, but so that we might love *one another* (1 John 4:7,11). For after all we do not see God—God cannot be authentically reached just in Gnostic-mystic interiority alone, as if love *conceived in this way* could really attain God; and hence the ‘God in us’ of mutual love is the only God whom we can love (1 John 4:12), to such an extent that it is really true ... that ‘those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen’ (1 John 4:20).

But just how is this identity between the two commandments to be understood? Does Scripture maintain that the love of neighbour is some kind of preliminary stage prior to a more authentic and purer love of God alone? Rahner does not think so. He notes that the scholastic tradition had always consistently taught that love of neighbour was an aspect of,

... the infused supernatural theological virtue of *caritas*, by which we love God in His Spirit for His own sake and in direct community with Him.<sup>13</sup>

This means that love of neighbour is not simply preparatory to a supposedly higher love of God, nor for that matter merely an outflowing of love for God. Rather, love of neighbour is, in itself, an act of loving God.

If it is only in self-giving that human freedom is realised, and that the goal of the Exercises is attained, then the external world is essential to human flourishing. The experience of creaturely freedom and responsibility occurs only through a particular kind of interaction with persons:

... the loving communication with the human *Thou* as such (not as mere negation of the ‘I’ of nor as something different from the ‘I’—an ‘I’ which just wants to find *itself*, even though in the other).

<sup>13</sup> Rahner, ‘Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God’, 236.

Rahner can then conclude:

The act of personal love for the human 'Thou' is therefore the all-embracing, fundamental human act, an act giving meaning, direction and measure to everything else.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to emphasize two points. First, love is never 'had' here and now. Love is not a static reality, but rather something that is always in the process of becoming, and of becoming more:

Love today is, therefore, what it should be today only if it acknowledges today that it is something of which more will be demanded tomorrow, if it is really already making tomorrow's demand of itself today.<sup>15</sup>

Love even between human persons never rests motionless; it always intends *more*, desires *more*, and *is more*, all the way into that mystery that we call God. Secondly, love of neighbour is not love of God simply because it might somehow intend God as it *passes through* neighbour. For Rahner, *caritas* is nothing other than interpersonal love understood explicitly in its full theological context, for the God whom we love in *caritas* is really present, through God's self-gift of grace, in the human other.<sup>16</sup> Moreover we have no other access to God. This openness can only occur in the concrete, with and through a specific person, in specific acts of personal and radical self-donation. It is a specific person who is the goal and end of intentional love, not some distant horizon. It is precisely in the free and loving experience of the human other, of the *Thou*, that we can embrace and accept—but never control—the reality of God within which we live and move and have our being.

**Love is  
always  
dynamic**

The categorical and explicit love of neighbour is the primary act of the love of God. The love of God unreflectively but really and always intends God ... in the love of neighbour as such. Moreover,

<sup>14</sup> Rahner, 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God', 241.

<sup>15</sup> Rahner, 'The "Commandment" of Love', 452. This article has an interesting discussion of the place of love in relation to the other virtues, especially in the thought of Thomas Aquinas.

<sup>16</sup> Rahner, 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and Love of God', 243: '... *caritas* means nothing other than the absolute radicality of this love (love of the human other), given that this love is open to the immediacy of the God who communicates His own Self in grace'.

the explicit love of God has as its vehicle that opening in trusting love to the whole of reality which takes place in the love of neighbour. It is radically true—a matter of metaphysics and ontology, and not merely ‘moral’ or psychological necessity—that those who do not love the sister or brother whom they ‘see’ cannot love God, whom they do not see, either. Moreover, one can only love God whom one does not see *in and through*, as a loving person, loving one’s visible sister or brother.<sup>17</sup>

What, then, of marital love? While Rahner limits his consideration of ‘love’ to *caritas*, I suggest that other dimensions of love, in addition to this one, can be, and indeed must be, part of our journey toward God.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Eros and Philia***

Freedom has been given to us so that we may give ourselves in return: we surrender ‘all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will, all that I have and possess’ (Exx 234). Most Christians live out this self-surrendering love through marriage,<sup>19</sup> which involves—even if always in imperfect form—elements of erotic love (*eros*) and friendship (*philia*), as well as unconditional love (*caritas*, *agape*). Ignatian spirituality can help a person discern how they are to give themselves to the particular other whom they love in a privileged, exclusive way—in other words to their marriage partner. In this context too, the Election can occur, the Election ‘in which the providence of God and the choice of the person become one’.<sup>20</sup>

Any honest theological consideration of marriage in the light of the Exercises must move beyond idealization to lived reality. The different loves (*eros*, *philia*, *agape*) have often been treated as if they were separate realities—realities which may perhaps coincide in certain relationships such as marriage, but which are better considered

<sup>17</sup> Rahner, ‘Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and Love of God’, 247.

<sup>18</sup> Where Rahner uses the term *caritas*, I use the term *agape*.

<sup>19</sup> In this essay, I presume a sacramental marriage in the Catholic tradition as the context out of which I write. However, I do not limit these reflections to only Catholic, or even Christian, marriage.

<sup>20</sup> Buckley, ‘Freedom, Election and Self-Transcendence’, 74.





The Marriage Feast at Cana by Hari Santosa

individually, if not indeed as in conflict.<sup>21</sup> I want to argue by contrast that *eros*, *philia* and *agape* are closely interdependent. If, for all their difference, marriage does not somehow unite them, then sacramental married love is neither sacramental, nor married, nor love.

Sexual love at its deepest involves profound reciprocity. One brings one's entire self, needs, desires, and hopes into the self of another; at the same time, one receives the other's needs, desires and hopes in a reverent, fitting manner. In an article published some years ago, the French psychologist Antoine Vergote described sexual love (*eros*) in terms very similar to those which Rahner used for *caritas* or unconditional love (*agape*) and warned against idealistic accounts of Christian marriage that ignore the erotic:

... sexual love, and therefore love within marriage, is made up of the unity in tension of diametrically opposed forces and tendencies: tenderness and aggressivity, sensual taking and gratuitous giving.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Søren Kierkegaard, 'You Shall Love Your Neighbour', in *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, edited by Michael Pakaluk (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991), 242; Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 63.

By failing to recognise the dynamic structure of sexual love, one condemns the enterprise of a love marriage to failure.<sup>22</sup>

In this context, fidelity becomes particularly significant. Only a relationship of fidelity will enable the trust necessary to express one's sexual yearnings fully and honestly. True self-communication in sexual love presupposes a freely chosen marriage commitment.

**Marital love  
depends on  
the freedom  
promoted by  
the Exercises**

Vergote is here deepening Rahner's account of *agape* by introducing elements of *eros*. In particular, this account of marital love depends on the freedom which the Exercises nourish. Through erotic desire, sexual love seeks to know and communicate itself dialogically in the context of radical fidelity. It surrenders the self to another, and in so doing proclaims the absolute value of the other. A married person's freedom, dependence and responsibility come to life in the self-surrender implicit in their marriage commitment—a self-surrender presupposing a basic or primal trust learned through previous relationships. This radical gift of self to the other, and the radical acceptance of the other as gift, is also the visible way in which we make a reality of God's love for us.

The sexual act brings about union, not fusion. A rightly ordered *eros*, however strong the temporary sense of oneness, involves an acceptance of the other's distance and difference. The other remains a Thou. The other cannot be reduced to what satisfies my needs, or to what I find useful.

The Irish moral theologian Enda McDonagh complements Vergote's insight by introducing *philia* or friendship into the picture.<sup>23</sup> Friendship mediates and moderates the claims of sexual desire; in turn, sexual encounter can strengthen friendship. *Philia* 'can provide the proper setting for *eros*-love', while *eros* can enrich *philia* through 'the desire for the delight in the company of the other'. Moreover,

... (d)esire-love may develop into friendship love and even Christian love, but unlike them it seeks at first the good of the

<sup>22</sup> From a typescript translation of Antoine Vergote, 'Eclairage psychologique sur le mariage d'amour et ses conditions de réussite', *INTAMS Review*, 3/2 (1997).

<sup>23</sup> Enda McDonagh, 'Friendship, Marriage and the Risk of God', *INTAMS Review*, 4/2 (1998), 145-154. I draw particularly on 150-152.

desire-lover rather than that of the desired-loved. It is what attracts ... the desiring subject that is the trigger. In the further exchange of human subjects, desire may begin to fit into a broader context; *eros* may begin to assume some of the reciprocity and benevolence of *philia*.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, when we recognise that *eros* and *philia* are mediators of *agape*, we get beyond the destructive rigorism often found in the tradition:

*Agape*-love cannot escape or skip over the human. It must move through these supremely human dimensions of *eros* and *philia*. It does not replace them. It transforms them. In personal and ecclesial history *agape* as love of God has been used to suppress human relations with the neighbour or spouse or children. The corruptions by which people are used as stepping-stones to God, or ignored in the pursuit of loving God only, need the corrections of *philia* and *eros*.

The friendship that occurs within marriage can point beyond itself:

Human otherness in friendship and marriage can open the path to divine otherness. Friendship and marriage draw people beyond themselves. They suggest a transcendence of the human partnership. They encourage the risk of following through to the inexhaustible and finally unknowable origin and fulfilment of such living and loving, the ultimate in otherness. They move people towards the great risk of God, of accepting and delighting in the God who is love.

### **Beyond Perfectionism**

Thomas Aquinas taught that the divine *caritas* was based on a 'communication' of God's own happiness *to us*. It is therefore not simply transcendent. It includes also a human *response* to the divine initiative, a response that takes the form of friendship with God. When Ignatius speaks, in the context of a prayer about divine love, of how love is *comunicación* between lover and beloved (Exx 231), he is echoing Thomas's teaching about *caritas* involving a form of friendship. And what for Thomas distinguishes true friendship from the lesser love

<sup>24</sup> McDonagh, 'Friendship, Marriage and the Risk of God', 150-152.

that is merely disguised self-interest is its desire for another person's good.<sup>25</sup>

If marriage is a sacrament, it should somehow embody the divine love, *caritas*, *agape*. This ideal may seem impossibly high. But perhaps if we understand that in marriage *agape* is inextricably linked not only with *philia* but also with *eros*, we may be able to develop a more realistic vision. No-one has ever argued that either *eros* or *philia* must be *perfectly* realised in married love. Perhaps, then, the same can apply to marital *agape*. There is a kind of love, experienced within marital life, that at least strives towards the disinterested self-giving that is both *agape* and *philia*. But what might this look like?

Perhaps all we can do is to name some possible instances. The experience of self-donation not only in moments of marital bliss, but also, and especially, in moments of real suffering and poverty. The experience of offering and accepting forgiveness, along with the free and mutual acceptance of brokenness that such forgiveness implies. The recognition that the patience, understanding and generosity of both spouses have limits. The experience of transcending (which does not mean neglecting) one's own needs and wants for the good of the other. If God's own being is irrevocably united to humanity, then our attempts to enter into a loving commitment with another are truly expressions of *agape*, of divine love, however limited and imperfect we may be. When we make these attempts with all our mind, our spirit, and indeed with our bodies, we enter at once into the mystery and irreducibility which is another human being, and also into the mystery which is the self-giving God.

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<sup>25</sup> See *Summa theologiae*, 2-2.23.1.