

# THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AS BIOGRAPHY

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*'And he set out on his journey.'* (Autobiography, 17)

IN THE LIGHT OF CHANGING PRACTICE in giving the Spiritual Exercises during the last forty years, the Exercises before Vatican II seem to us today to be characterized by a one-sidedly ascetic and moral approach, and by an excess of theology. What will a later generation think of our own practice of the Exercises? Perhaps they will note that it was carried out with a strongly psychological approach, and also that work on the exercitant's autobiography played too large a part.

Some reflections will be presented here on the significance that Ignatius gave to work on the individual's life-history during the Exercises, with constant reference to what I shall call the 'biographical method'. It is difficult to find a single definition of this new discipline among the human sciences. In sociology and the historical fields it concerns the reconstruction of social and historical realities with the help of autobiographical texts or accounts. In the healing and counselling disciplines gaining insight into one's own identity with the help of autobiographical memories is central. Something like a 'narrative identity' is built up, which is informative about the main developments and crises in a life, and about how an individual comes to terms with them; to this extent the biographical method also leads to questions about the meaning and purpose of life. Here I shall be concerned chiefly with this last aspect, although questions of historical verification will also be touched on occasionally.

*The Way*, 47/1–2 (Jan/April 2008), 185–199

### ***The Biographical Method in the Text of the Spiritual Exercises***

In this first step we shall simply go through the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*—as if with a computer search-engine—to see where, in what context and for what purpose, Ignatius envisages working with one's autobiography, listing and briefly commenting on the places in question.

#### *The Fundamental Concerns of the Exercises*

In overview, the Exercises appear as a means to 'regulate one's life', 'preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all ... disordered tendencies'; 'to seek and find the Divine Will as to the disposition of one's life' (see Exx 1, 21). So what is in question is a basic reorientation of one's entire life. In general, one might say that what occurs in the Exercises is a dialogue with one's own life. Seeking God's will for one's life, it is presupposed that 'the Creator and Lord Himself should communicate Himself to His devout soul' (Exx 15): thus the reorientation of one's life is under the influence of God's action.

The Principle and Foundation (Exx 23) specifies the basic theological and anthropological principles for the wider process of life-orientation: that human beings, as created by God, live 'to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save their soul'. They are to evaluate all the things of this world according to whether or not they help towards this goal. The exercitant repeats this basic concern in the introductory prayer to each meditation in the course of the Exercises (see Exx 46, 49).

#### *Biographical Reflections Aiming at Conversion*

The First Week of the Exercises contains numerous and striking pointers towards a practice which corresponds closely to our 'biographical method'. Even before Ignatius sets out to give the first meditations for the Exercises themselves, he writes a long chapter on how to examine one's own sins and deal with this aspect of one's past life (Exx 24–44). These Examens are regular practices in prayer in everyday life, whether in the 'Particular and Daily Examen' concerning definite faults or vices (Exx 24–31) or in the 'General Examen of Conscience to Purify Oneself and to Make One's Confession Better' (Exx 32–43). The most comprehensive instrument for coming to grips with one's past life is the 'General Confession with Communion' (Exx



*'On the End of Man', from Antonius Sucquet, Via vitae aeternae,  
engraving by Boetius Adams Bolswert*

44), which is, so to speak, a fundamental re-examination of life. In practising the General Examen (Exx 43), exercitants are first of all to call to mind God's blessings in their own lives, before praying for knowledge of their sins and then, 'from the hour that we rose up to the present Examen, hour by hour, or period by period', examining all their thoughts, words and deeds. This is a scrutiny of their lives in intentions (thoughts), communication (words) and actions (deeds).

The exercises of the First Week proper (Exx 45–72) involve a very thorough examination of the exercitant's life, which is to lead to a complete conversion. The first exercise (Exx 45–54) accomplishes this first of all by looking at the sins of others (of angels, of the first human beings, of a single person). Each time this look at another is followed by a recollection of myself, of how much more I should have deserved to be damned for ever. This confrontation with the whole previous life-history takes place with the 'Three Powers'; the whole spiritual repertoire which (according to the anthropological view of that time) intrinsic human powers might employ—memory, understanding and will—is used. The climax of this exercise is a dialogue with Christ on the cross, in which each exercitant acknowledges all that Christ has done for him or her, and expresses 'what I have done for Christ, what I am doing for Christ, what I ought to do for Christ'. This means that insight into the exercitant's previous way of life and the intention of fundamental change come about in the presence of God as Saviour.

In the second to fifth exercises (Exx 55–72) this process is radicalised in the form of detailed reflection, working through the whole of the past life. In going through my life, 'from year to year, or from period to period', I should first remember exactly where I was at those times, and reflect on my dealings with other people and my duties

***Detailed  
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(Exx 56). This whole process of looking into myself unsparingly in the sight of God leads to an ever-growing astonishment that, in spite of everything, God has supported and led me so far, and to a colloquy of gratitude for God's endless mercy (Exx 60–61). The meditation on hell is a threatening visualisation of where my previous way of life could finally lead me (Exx 65–71), and ends with a prayer of relief that Christ has hitherto preserved me from this dreadful fate and 'that to this moment he has always shown himself so loving and merciful to me' (Exx 71). This radical form of work on one's autobiography ends with reconciliation in the form of the general confession (Exx 44), in which conversion, penitence, reconciliation and a new sense of direction come to fruition.

So the specific character of the biographical method in the First Week is that it enables exercitants to look at the dangers and errors of their past lives face to face with the gracious and forgiving God, so that they may then be converted and consent to be led once more by God's commandments.

*The Biographical Method and the Person of Christ*

With the beginning of the Second Week of the Exercises (Exx 91–189) Ignatius invites us to a change of perspective, which leaves the First Week's use of biographical method behind. Exercitants do not dwell any longer on critical inspection of their former lives, but their whole attention is directed to 'Christ the Eternal King', in order to take up his call and prepare to carry out his will. And this focus remains in the three following Weeks of the Exercises—in contemplation of the life, passion and resurrection of Christ. One might say that with the beginning of the Second Week use of the 'biographical method' begins on the person of Jesus Christ, so as to find inner familiarity with him, to love him more, and to follow him more closely (Exx 104). Each point for meditation, that is, each look at the 'Mysteries of the Life of Our Lord', ends with the recommendation: 'And then I shall reflect on myself, to draw some profit from each of these things' (see Exx 106, 107, 108, etc.). There is also so much participation in Jesus' life and destiny that it is almost as though I am trying out which role I myself could take in the salvation of the world: 'I will make myself a poor little unworthy slave ....' (Exx 114). That it is time for exercitants to look away from their own lives is reinforced by the recommendation that, from the Second Week onwards, it will be useful to read books about the *imitatio Christi* and the lives of the saints (Exx 100). The 'Mysteries of the Life of Our Lord' (Exx 262–312) will not be discussed further here.

I do not consider it appropriate to call the spiritual process of a life-decision—Ignatius calls it an 'election'—a use of 'biographical method', because usually work with autobiography is concerned with the past, not with impending decisions. Nevertheless, in the instructions and exercises for this process there are some points that once again contain elements of biographical method. In the meditation on the Two Standards (Exx 136–147) and the following exercises, once again exercitants examine the whole repertoire of motives determining their actions: are these motives located more in a dynamic suggestive of the enemy of human nature (riches, honour, pride) or in the kenotic way of Jesus (poverty, ignominy, humility)? Above all, the concern is to know the real motives, and not to be blinded by apparent ones ('to ask for a knowledge of the deceits of the rebel chief and help to guard myself against them', Exx 139). Ultimately, the question is: might I be fooling myself with my noble motives? This ought to be one of the key



*'Emissio spiritus', from Jerónimo Nadal, Evangelicae historiae imagines*

questions in any work on autobiography. What image of my life, my values and motives, develops from looking at the way I have come so far? Does this image suffer from fine colouring (my good reputation, 'honour'), or is it characterized by sober honesty ('humility')?

*Decisions Consonant with One's Own Life and with Christ's*

In the concrete instructions for the choice of a way of life (Exx 169–189) four points stand out concerning how to deal with the previous life-history. First, Ignatius indicates that there are decisions in life on which nobody can go back ('unchangeable choice', Exx 172). Contrary to the view customary today—that every decision can be changed—it is clear for him that many commitments cannot be dissolved (for example

priestly vocation and marriage). Secondly, in reflecting on the choice he recommends an imaginative exercise in which I am to try to move out of my own self-awareness and into another person's. Since everyone has blind spots in looking at the self, exercitants are to take on the deliberations of someone else facing a similar decision (Exx 185). This change from self-consciousness to a foreign consciousness is an important element in serious use of the biographical method. Thirdly, during these reflections, he recommends exercitants to place themselves at the point of their death and to evaluate an impending decision from that standpoint (Exx 186). This change of perspective abandons deliberation in the here and now and seeks for a judgment of the impending life-decision—and thereby of life as a whole—from the perspective of the hour of death. And fourthly, seeing the decision in the perspective of Judgment Day is recommended (Exx 187). What will be the 'Last Judgment' on my life? Clearly I shall not pronounce the last judgment myself, nor will any human being: Christ will pronounce it. So here there is a change of perspective from a human view to God's view. This is an eschatological approach to autobiography. Ignatius makes the last three recommendations again, in exactly the same form, when it is a question of distributing one's property for the sake of imitating Christ (Exx 339–341).

In the Third and Fourth Weeks of the Exercises anything like biographical method recedes completely into the background. Here the point is no longer to clarify anything about one's self and one's own life-story; the exercitant strives to take part as intensively as possible in the paschal mystery, in suffering with Christ's suffering, sharing in the joy of the resurrection, and receiving the consolation that the risen Christ gives.

In the 'Contemplation to Attain the Love of God' (Exx 230–237) a perspective recurs whereby exercitants should look at their whole lives. To be able to respond to God's love with their whole hearts, they should call to mind all the gifts they have ever received from God, so as then to give a loving response with all the powers available to free beings (Exx 234). This is an astonishingly grateful use of biographical method to attain a generous self-dedication.

*Rules for the Discernment of Spirits: A Basic Biographical Model*

The two groups of Rules for the Discernment of Spirits (Exx 313–327 and 328–336) essentially deepen what was said before under the

heading ‘clarification of motives’. By which spirit do I allow myself to be directed? The first two rules in the first group (Exx 314–315) deserve to be emphasized in the context of biographical method. Here Ignatius explains that spontaneous emotional evaluation of the conduct of one’s own life is strongly influenced at the time by the fundamental direction that life has already taken. Those who lead depraved lives take pleasure in them and see themselves justified by the resulting positive affects. Those who want to direct their lives more and more towards God find consolation and confidence in that. This shows that the fundamental models of biography incline towards the affective strengthening of the self, and that critical self-examination is a laborious task. Self-evaluation is a sensitive business, and a serious biographical method makes every effort to cope with this.

The affective strengthening of self-evaluation is especially complicated when someone is tempted ‘under the appearance of good’ (Exx 10), that is, when well-meant motives are mixed with motives of quite another kind, without the person concerned being aware of them. This can—biographically speaking—lead to very long-lasting confusion. Therefore in the second group of rules Ignatius recommends that ‘We must carefully observe the whole course of our thoughts’ (Exx 333), that is,

... consider the series of good thoughts, how they arose, how the evil one gradually attempted to make him step down from the state of spiritual delight and joy in which he was, till finally he drew him to his wicked designs (Exx 334).

Here real work on the autobiography is done: through a long-term analysis of personal motives and the experiences following from them it should become clear what was reliable in the end and what turned out to be ‘beautiful seeming’.

### ***Opportunities and Limitations***

The foregoing survey gives an inescapable demonstration of how deeply the process of the Exercises probes in a debate with the past life, and what fundamental changes Ignatius expects from this. At the same time practice of the Exercises shows that there are also certain dangers, limitations and snares in such a proceeding. I should like to treat the opportunities and the limitations under four headings.



*Finding Oneself and Ordering One's Life*

Days of recollection or retreats offer many people for the first time an opportunity and a procedure for engaging with every stage of their past life as a whole, so as to 'put it into order'. The Second Vatican Council's pronounced opening up to a theology of salvation history and teaching on revelation, and the resulting ecclesiology of 'Church on a journey' and anthropology of 'human being as pilgrim', have made drastic changes in the way the Exercises are given. In catechetical work with confirmation groups and religious days for school classes it has already become almost standard practice to look into the individual life journey. In this the implicit or explicit assumption is: 'Look at the road that you have already travelled and you will understand where you are'. All in all, this change to prayer with autobiography is a very important new orientation.

***Look at the road you  
have already  
travelled***

At the same time, however, it is notable that spiritual work on their life-history has led not a few people into perpetual crises about themselves and into a tireless digging up of more and more new autobiographical details. Through this activity many people want to understand, at last, what the matter with them is. The search for God in the Exercises has turned into a search for identity. Our astonishment at how a major psychoanalysis can stretch to 300–500 hours of therapy can equally extend to the many exercitants who never want to stop bringing to light more and more new things from their life-histories, so as to reach clarity about themselves. Wanting to 'put one's life in order' can lead to a turn towards the self in autobiographical retrospection, and finally into constant navel-gazing. The individual ego becomes massively large and important. Self-fixation is certainly not the putting in order that Ignatius intends in the Exercises. Perhaps this is all a temptation for the 'narcissistic generation', just as earlier crises of anxiety and scrupulosity about the self might be considered symptomatic of obsessive or neurotic generations.

If the liberating gaze at the Saviour and the liberating dialogue with the Crucified One 'as with a friend', do not take a prominent place in all the exercises, it becomes difficult to escape from such biographical imprisonment in the self.

*Anxious and Careless Characters and Periods*

It was Ignatius' experience with those making the Exercises that the whole range and variety of characters was exposed as they looked at their own lives. So he warns insistently that unstable people—who can easily become enthusiastic about something—are inclined to make life-decisions that are weak and not thought through (Exx 14). He develops his insight into the different characters in greatest detail in the notes on scruples (Exx 345–351), which speak of delicate and lax consciences. This is a matter of completely different characters, which become apparent especially in the exercises of the First Week, when exercitants examine their consciences and weigh up their sins.

The enemy considers carefully whether one has a lax or a delicate conscience. If one has a delicate conscience, the evil one seeks to make it excessively sensitive .... If one has a lax conscience, the enemy endeavours to make it more so .... (Exx 349)

The Enemy leads the one with the delicate conscience to discover a sin in the smallest detail, and he tells the one with the lax conscience still more soothingly that massive faults were not really so bad.

When the biographical method is used in the Exercises, such differences of character may be taken into account—and many other types of character can be identified. What comes out in spiritual work on one's autobiography often depends not so much on how the exercise is introduced and guided, but predominantly on exercitants' own characters. These offer the background against which they look at their own lives and judge them. They each have their own filters, colouring the way they look at their own existences.

Something similar is probably true of historical periods. A period with strict morals, with extremely high expectations of complete self-discipline, and for which 'mortification' is a byword, might form guilty and anxious characters. In such a period fear of damnation because of one's many personal sins would be a 'normal' phenomenon among devout people. A period such as our own, however, characterized by a high degree of permissiveness, by a plurality of values and of ways of understanding life, and in which autonomous self-determination has become almost the highest principle in life, makes it very difficult even to understand what might be meant by sin. Perhaps the constant search for what gives more and more pleasure is a strategy of the enemy of



*'Put Thy Trust in God Only' from Antonius Sucquet, Via vitae aeternae, engraving by Boetius Adams Bolswert*

human nature to make the lax consciences of a culture still laxer. Work on the autobiography in the Exercises can—in the sense of what we have called the ‘affective strengthening’ of the self—lead to the loss of critical distance from the contemporary age’s temptations. When, however, a person has lived through several different periods, autobiographical work in the Exercises can lead to a ‘clash’ between different phases of life. Autobiographical work and spiritual conversion to God are always also work on the paradigm-shifts between periods,



*'Without Him Thou Canst Do Nothing', from Antonius Sucquet, Via vitae aeternae, engraving by Boetius Adams Bolswert*

and thereby on paradigm-shifts in one's own life. Chasms yawn between asceticism of will and well-being.

*From Reflection to Contemplation*

The change of perspective from reflection to contemplation between the First and Second Weeks is decisive for the question of how

important the biographical method in the process of the Exercises is. In the First Week exercitants are to put their lives in order, so as to become free to contemplate the Mysteries of Christ's Life, to allow themselves to be called by Christ to imitate him, and to make life-decisions accordingly. This change of perspective implies also a change of method in spiritual practice.

The exercises of the First Week have a strongly reflective and discursive character: the great movements of human history as a consequence of the Fall are gone through, the whole of one's own life is intensively reflected on, and key consequences are drawn from it as to where it all might lead. A human being's whole spiritual potential is engaged with memory, understanding and will, to comprehend the dramatic threat in one's own life and to induce an about-turn.

With the real first exercise of the Second Week, the contemplation on the Incarnation (Exx 101–109), there is a change not only in the direction of view, but also in its nature. Penetrating meditation material is replaced by the 'gaze' at the mysteries of salvation: a peaceful, lingering wonder; being there; willingness to be moved, to be brought into the event; finding inner familiarity with Christ and the other actors in the scene.

The gaze is also freed from the self. Work on one's autobiography is important, but not the most important thing. Looking on Christ 'with all possible homage and reverence' (Exx 114) gradually allows what is really important to appear. People do not remain trapped in the magnetic fields of their own history, but fall more and more into the magnetic field of God's salvation history. Being redeemed, they may free themselves from themselves and become capable of the gift of themselves. This new vision leads to a new selflessness, perhaps never known before.

*'Finding God in All Things'*

When people have prepared themselves in this vision to take part in the paschal mystery, they and their lives move into a new light. A union with God opens up, a loving community of giving and receiving, which takes note of God's presence in all created things. This vision also shows how God in all things works for the sake of human beings, and how everything good in them comes down from above (Exx 230 ff.). A dimension of presence opens up by which, in mystical, attentive contemplation, one already begins to share in the everlasting vision of

God. True, the 'beatific vision' as yet takes place through a veil but, all the same, it has already begun. As regards biographical method, it may be said that the whole of life already radiates in God's light.

The fundamental Ignatian expression 'finding God in all things' is located at this point on the spiritual journey. And at this point—as in the Easter experiences of the disciples—the whole previous life-journey can really be illuminated by the light of the Risen One. This is the goal of the Exercises towards which Ignatius' spiritual journey is always directed, beginning with the exercitant's first practices in prayer—as, for example, the examination of conscience or the application of the senses. All the same, a degree of caution is recommended in presenting this fundamental expression to a beginner. It can lead to distortions in spiritual life, and bring about the exact opposite of what is really meant. Not for nothing does Ignatius stress before the beginning of the Exercises that exercitants are 'to know nothing of' what is to come to them in later exercises (Exx 11).

This warning seems to me particularly important for people of our own day. The autobiographies of many people have become 'handwork biographies': pieces are put together that really do not fit at all. The great plurality of values and experiments in life allows things apparently to coexist which are really quite incompatible. An open and tolerant syncretism of religious convictions has spread, in which clear limits no longer seem to be possible. In this context the identity of many people is no longer comprehensible, because it is a mere patchwork. And in this context spiritual autobiographical work becomes almost impossible, because the concern 'to put one's life in order' falls to pieces at the very beginning.

For people with this intellectual history and spiritual situation the basic expression 'finding God in all things' can easily become sweet poison. It can suggest that the completely orderless plurality of a 'patchwork identity' need not be at all worrying, because God allows Godself to be found in all things. So Ignatius' fundamental expression becomes a tranquilliser, reassuring one that the basic work of clearance on one's own life is not really necessary. God will show Godself, after all, in everything that is part of one's life.

When it comes to this—and it really happens this way at times—everything is turned upside down. The fundamental starting-point of the Principle and Foundation, that all created things are to be tested, as

to whether they lead to the real service and praise of God or not, is emptied of meaning. Or to put it more strongly: the catechumen's profession of faith at the font on Easter Night ('I renounce' and 'I believe') is no longer taken seriously. The *Exsultet*, sung earlier in the radiance of this most holy night, which 'separates all who believe in Christ from the malice of the world', has lost its meaning: a 'separation' from many aspects of the former life is not in fact desired. 'Anything goes'—so I do not need to renounce anything.

'Finding God in all things' is a gift of grace to people 'who go on earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise in the service of God to greater perfection' (Exx 315). That means people who in the First Week have looked at their autobiography and gone through a foundation-laying process of conversion. Then, in the Second to Fourth Weeks, they have turned from their own preferences and sought what more resembles Christ's way of life, thus opening them to a genuine effort to know God's will. From this perspective I consider it no accident that in the first four hundred years of Ignatian tradition the key expression 'finding God in all things' is seldom to be found as a heading for Ignatian spirituality. This has happened only in the last thirty to forty years. This expression points out very well the goal of the spiritual way, but, precisely because it fits so well with our time, it can be poison for beginners.

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