SAVED, CALLED AND COMMISSIONED

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IT IS EASY FOR EXERCISE TO BECOME no more than a routine of empty, repetitive movements. We pedal madly on fake bicycles or run on treadmills, getting nowhere in order, appropriately, to maintain a statically youthful appearance. Real athletes, on the other hand, train for a specific future event, carefully measuring their progress towards it. They push themselves, take risks, and move forward.

In the First Annotation, Ignatius of Loyola explains the objective of the Spiritual Exercises with reference to physical exercise. Just as 'strolling, walking and running' (Exx 1) prepare the body for activity, so too spiritual exercise disposes the soul for the Lord to act in it. We break faith with the nature of the Exercises when we understand them as a static ritual. They are intended as a dynamic process that will reveal, impassion and motivate. We are not meant to spin the wheels and stay in the same place. We must begin a journey.[1]

I sometimes feel that there are people who are content to make the same retreat over and over again. They want no changes, and they make no progress. They recharge their batteries, perhaps gain some temporary relief from anxiety, but that is all. Because the modern world assumes radical individualism, our retreat experiences tend to be individualistic. But without looking beyond the borders of our own individuality we cannot genuinely act out of love. Every age, of course, brings its ideological assumptions to the journey of the Exercises, but some of these constitute baggage so heavy that the journey cannot be undertaken at all.

[1] In the *Autobiography*, Ignatius refers to himself in the third person as 'the pilgrim'.

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This essay will explore some contemporary tendencies and assumptions, in an attempt to rediscover the dynamic process of the Exercises. It will address in particular the tendency towards what I have called radical individualism in modern Western cultures. How and why this tendency arose are beyond the scope of this article; my interest is in its distorting effect on the experience of the Spiritual Exercises, and how that effect may be overcome.

The Ignatian assumption is that change is possible, by the grace of God, and that it is a good thing. You become a different person, with new priorities, new criteria, and a new way of looking at the world. Perhaps most importantly, you move from being centred on the self to being centred on Christ. If this move is unsuccessful, however, the effort to become Christ-centred may end up focusing on overcoming personal defects and failings, and there is a danger of this leading to a self-centred, guilty, ascetic religiosity.

The most important locus of radical change in identity occurs in the Exercises when the pilgrim moves from the First Week to the Second. The oblation to the Eternal King (Exx 98), means *I no longer live for me, but for you.* This unconditional alliance with lordship is difficult for modern people to understand, with its imagery of king and court. Consequently in contemporary retreats the temptation can easily arise to focus on the individual's neediness, drawing on a skewed version of the First Week material, because it is all about the *individual self.* We may be tempted to avoid the Second Week experience, or modify it unrecognisably, because it challenges too many of our assumptions.

A genuine experience of the Ignatian Exercises, however, will involve recovering some ideas that are unfamiliar to us today. The Pentecost story (Acts 2:1–14) assumes that the good news can be understood in any language, at any time, in any place. Even so, fundamental adjustments and adaptations must often be made. The treasure is there for all, but the price is everything you have.

How the Exercises Became Modern in the Nineteenth Century

When archaeologists deciphered Mayan writing, they discovered that, in certain ceremonial places, a few lines were added every so often to honour a new king or to mark some notable event. But the last few lines of the inscriptions, the most recent, were gibberish. It seems that the

scribes no longer understood what the figures meant. They just knew that they periodically had to add a few.[2]

The Society of Jesus was suppressed in 1773, only to be revived in 1814. The period in between was long enough to ensure that many professed members of the old order had moved on to greater glory by the time the new one appeared. There would have been a lack of experienced men to participate in the formation of a new generation. One imagines a time of great hope, a new start, but without any Father Ignatius to guide youthful spirits. There was no one to decipher the ancient inscriptions.

The new Society had little to go on—some of the founding texts, but not many. Mostly there were local rule-books: the hallowed procedures, schedules and menus of particular communities.[3] It also had a Roman Catholic world on the defensive, trying desperately to come to grips with an increasingly secularised time. Innovation was feared. In the Church of the nineteenth century, change was considered, *a priori,* to be change for the worse. The Exercises, therefore, as conceived by the fledgling Jesuits of 1814, consisted of five daily hour-long sermons. Retreatants listened in silence. Afterwards, they would be encouraged

[2] See Charles C. Mann, *1491* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 24.
[3] For a history of this period, see William V. Bangert, *A History of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1986).

to write proposals on how they might become more virtuous. They would hear Mass in Latin, confess, eat and sleep. It was a thirty-day ordeal to be endured, during which little spiritual growth was likely to take place.[4]

The routine they called the Exercises would have seemed unfamiliar to Ignatius. The daily practice, in his time, consisted of *brief* sessions of guidance, and five hours of silent personal meditation. One would listen to the Lord, not to the director. The handbook (called *Spiritual Exercises*) states specifically that a director should speak as little as possible, so as not to interfere with a retreatant's experience of God, and that he should in no way give directives that might tip the balance in a retreatant's discernment process (Exx 15).

Through recent research and reflection, something closer to the genuine Ignatian method has now been resurrected. And yet we still see a tendency to lapse back into long talks and short prayers and a persistent bias towards individual sins and personal virtues.[5] The postmodern generation, in its search for security, seems to grasp at unreasoned certainty because if you can reason towards something then there is a possibility that it may not be so, that your reasoning is unreliable. The acceptance of authority for its own sake avoids engaging with postmodernity's pervasive scepticism.

This assumption, however, makes the discernment process unthinkable. If the Ignatian Exercises are to be used as a reference for retreat experiences, then we must be aware of the dynamic nature of the process they were intended to inspire. The blueprint calls for personal meditation and discernment, a progression of conversion and healing that leads onwards to calling, commitment and mission. This is not because Ignatius said so, but because it is the Christian experience of discipleship, rooted in the gospel.

Righteousness: The Wrong Word

Most English translations of the Bible render both the Old Testament *zdk* cluster, from the Hebrew, and the Greek New Testament concept

[4] Many of the older men in the Society today can recall at least their first thirty-day retreat, given in this fashion, as an ordeal.

[5] There are groups that claim to give the 'authentic Ignatian Exercises' because they have held on to the nineteenth-century practice. I think in particular of the Lumen Dei movement.

dikaios, as *righteousness*.[6] A correct theological understanding of righteousness would be that one has become holy, by the grace of God. There are problems, however, with some of the connotations that this word has in English, and a more accurate translation, in some ways, would be *justice.* Even then, some accommodation must be made. The contemporary mind tends to think of justice in terms of the legal or justice system and the punishment of offenders.[7] Biblical justice, on the other hand, is pardon, clemency and indulgence. It shows no preference for the powerful, wealthy or well connected. Sinners are saved, even though they do not deserve it. Debts are paid, and communal balance is restored. Biblical justice is all about relationships. Righteousness, for the modern mind, is about the fate of the individual sinner.

The word *righteousness* is often associated with *rightness,* or *correctness.* This can lead to an equation of salvation with the affirmation of correct theological statements. And this, in turn, can become a rationale for self-righteousness: for looking down on others, who are

Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery, *by Lucas Cranach the Younger*

[6] In the King James Bible, *righteousness* appears 302 times, two-thirds of them in the Old Testament. *Justice* appears only 28 times, all in the Old Testament. *Righteous* appears 238 times, three-quarters in the Old Testament. And *just* appears only 94 times, three-fifths in the Old Testament.

[7] This explains some retreats that do nothing but rehearse catechetical content.

wrong and, therefore, damned. Right and wrong become confused with correct and incorrect, and are elevated to objects of religious fervour in and of themselves, without reference to God.[8] This can turn religion into a contest of apologetics, an ongoing argument about who is right and who is wrong. Salvation takes on a distinctively Gnostic flavour: we are redeemed or forsaken not by love, or grace, or good works, but by what we know and affirm. Even when righteousness remains an ethical category—doing right or wrong rather being correct or incorrect—there is a danger of its becoming legalistic or pharisaical.

Why is this important for retreat experiences? If men and women make retreats to become righteous in a sense that is distorted or confused in these ways, their experience is in danger of becoming self-centred, rather than God-centred: personal meditation will be limited, and they will be less likely to experience the divine presence or form a bond with the Lord; they will also be less likely to hear a calling to serve their neighbour. In such cases retreat directors may find themselves filling a void with words.

First Week Anxiety and Second Week Discipleship

One of the most controversial aspects of Roman Catholicism is the confessional. Some value it, as a unique opportunity. Others fear it, as an unfair requirement. Outsiders often consider it an invasion of privacy, an intrusion upon conscience, or a usurpation of the divine privilege of clemency. Many consider it medieval, but there is also something about confession that sits well with today's individualistic subject. Continual examination of conscience can feed the obsession of strivers for personal perfection—and of prisoners of personal guilt. Sacramental absolution is intended to alleviate anxiety and guilt; and without it they can continue to smoulder. However, if penitents focus on the finer points of their personal lives, this can create even more guilt and greater anxiety.

Ignatius was at one point beset by guilt strong enough for him to consider suicide. He became so scrupulous that he believed nothing pleasing to God could ever come out of him. His recovery came about

[8] A teetotaller once confronted a Catholic priest in the dining car on a train for having a beer. The priest responded that Jesus drank wine. The teetotaller, filled with self-righteous fervour, quipped, 'And I would have liked him a whole lot better if he hadn't!'.

through a call to action: he put on the colours of Christ, to find a new identity in a companionship with Jesus. In one sense it would not matter who he was any more: he had lost himself in his Lord. As Paul said, 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). Thus, ordinary men and women are saved, called, and commissioned by their Lord and King. They become a part of him. That is discipleship.

Guilt, Honour and Shame

The First Week is focused on the self in relationship to God. It opens up the heart to the loving grace of God. Conversion means keeping control over oneself and putting the passions in order. Some would eradicate all passions; but they are gifts from God, to be domesticated, not eliminated. It is a matter of priorities. Retreatants meditate on their lives, remembering, from year to year and from place to place, what has happened, why they are who they are, and why they do what they do (Exx 55–60). They see themselves before God, deserving a harsh judgment and receiving a merciful one. They are then invited to consider what they might do for Christ in return, as a gesture of thanksgiving (Exx 53). The stage is being set for oblation before the Eternal King (Exx 98).

Confessional in St Nicholas' Church, Prague

Among the methods of the First Week are self-analysis, self-scrutiny and self-examination.[9] These

[9] In the Additions (Exx 79), a darkened room is recommended for introspection. This is changed in the Second Week (Exx 130), because light is required to see outside oneself. Introspection is over.

methods are easily accessible to modern individualistic subjects. But as the Exercises move forward, it becomes clear that Ignatius emphasizes not guilt and conscience but honour and shame.[10] Sinners are called to feel shame and confusion, rather than guilt, in the gaze of the loving God in the First Week (Exx 48, 53), so that they can pour out their lives to that same God as Lord in the Second Week (Exx 95–98). It is a question of honour.

Tuning the Ear to Hear the Call

The contemplations of the Second Week are no longer so focused on the self. The protagonist is a Lord you would follow anywhere, and for whom you would do anything. In the First Week, one meditates, looking inward, using memory, reason and desire.[11] In the Second Week, one contemplates, using sight, taste and touch (Exx 121–126). Through the five senses, the disciple moves outward, into the world of the Other. In the Incarnation (Exx 101–109), the subject observes the planet from the point of view of the most Holy Trinity. The motivating force behind the divine gesture of salvation is compassion. The divine gaze teaches a retreatant to see and hear the signs of the times. The joys, hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the world are to be shared by the disciple of Christ. At the Nativity (Exx 110–117), the retreatant looks at the tender, vulnerable child in a manger. Look at him, Ignatius says, not at yourself. The retreatant asks for intimate knowledge of our Lord to love him better and to follow him more closely.

Ignatius asks you to consider how what you are seeing might affect you.[12] But this is not an examination of conscience, but a call to bonding. How does this experience alter your identity forever? This process, however, can be misunderstood. It is possible for today's retreatants to look for something to feel guilty about in every scene from the life of Christ.

[10] For a thorough treatment, see *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society.* edited by J. G. Peristiany (Chicago, U. of Chicago P, 1974).

[11] Elder Mullan translates *voluntad* here as *will* (3, 50–52, 176, 234), a much more limited concept that leads to a Pelagian understanding of the meditation. The Pelagian heresy, condemned in the fifth century at the Council of Carthage, supposed that on saved oneself by one's own efforts, that God's grace was secondary. Spanish *voluntad* includes will, but also desire, feeling and emotion. Compare Robert R. Marsh, '*Id quod volo*: The Erotic Grace of the Second Week', *The Way*, 45/4 (October 2006).

[12] *Reflectir para sacar provecho* (Exx 108, 116). Mullan translates as: 'reflect in order to draw some profit from each of these things'. This is more than abstract reflective thinking. It means allowing oneself to be interpellated by the narrative. The Spanish evokes the metaphor of a light shining, which would solicit a response, or 'reflection', in the retreatant.

Service is moved backward into the world of guilt, sin and repentance. Instead of a vocation, these retreatants hear a scolding voice that accuses them of omissions. Their solidarity with those in need is a cold, penitential practice, whose objective is not really to serve others, but to attain ever higher degrees of personal virtue, which nevertheless always fall short.

There is a very telling error in a standard English translation of the Second Week consideration of the Three Pairs of Men (Exx 155). The movement of the piece is towards radical commitment, in order to serve the Lord in the best possible way. Elder Mullan gives us '*forcing* [oneself] not to want [a certain benefit] or any other thing, unless only the service of God our Lord move them . . . .' The Spanish original says *poniendo fuerza,* which more precisely means *to make every conceivable effort.* The English notion of forcing oneself evokes coercion, and leads to Pelagianism. The Spanish supposes that there are limits on what human endeavour can accomplish, and that other factors come into play, including, most importantly, the grace of God.

Retreatants who self-righteously force themselves to do things, perhaps against their natures, callings or better judgment, turn the spotlight back on to their individual accomplishment. They become over-achievers to try to earn God's love. Then, they attempt to serve the Lord by forcing compliance in others. This could explain why a lot of what we call evangelization, at every level, looks more like colonisation. Discipleship, on the other hand, is about letting oneself get carried away. Instead of controlling the details, it is a matter of giving control to the Lord.[13] If you commit to the project, you become a seed to be sown by the Sower. Personal achievement ceases to matter. Total availability becomes the key.

Discipleship ... is about letting oneself get carried away

For pilgrims, the criterion is this: be not deaf to the calling, but rather quick and diligent in response. It is no longer about a thousand and one sins, but about real unlimited service.[14] The objective is no longer personal perfection or virtue. Those who are saved, called and commissioned will be more concerned about faithfulness to vocation.

[13] See Carlos Cabarrus, 'La pedagogía del discernimiento: la osadía del dejarse llevar', *Diakonia* (Sept 1987).
[14] Compare Exx 91–98, 315, 328–336. See also Cabarrus, 'La pedagogía'. The point of the Examen, for the disciple, is to allow the Good Spirit to carry him or her away.

A Pilgrim Church

There can be a temptation for Christians to emphasize the line that divides the saved from the lost, to the exclusion of everything else. Contemporary insecurities exacerbate the phenomenon. Retreat experiences, be they Ignatian or some other variety, can give too much prominence to individual sins and repentance. It is true that saving grace is urgent, and it is the precondition for calling and mission. But that is not all there is.

If we only aspire to lives that are 'not evil', we cannot consider ourselves disciples of Christ. Discipleship is more than getting back to zero. Sincere followers of the saving Lord give of their lives generously. Goodness and compassion imply calling and mission. Listening to the Lord requires trust. Discernment of mission requires an open heart. Fixation on individual sin and personal perfection distorts the good news of the Kingdom.

Christianity is not static, but dynamic. This pilgrim Church on earth moves, as a community, in the direction of the Kingdom. A spirituality that does no more than aspire to holding the line breaks faith with the gospel. Moreover, such stasis increases the chances that we will fail and fall back into the mire. Christianity is much more that an eternal cycle of falling off the wagon and climbing back on.

The retreat experience cannot dwell on sin and perfection. Indeed, neither can homiletics, catechism or theology. We must move on to bonding and loss of self, to become available for calling and mission. We are here for others, not for ourselves. To discover mission, we must learn to listen; that is the purpose of silent retreat.

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