

# A BRIDGE TOO FAR

## Spiritual Exercises 50 and 52

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IN THE FIRST WEEK of Saint Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* there are two sentiments with which I have never come to terms. The first is about the sin of the angels and the second is about the single mortal sin of a man that landed him in hell. While making the Exercises as a Jesuit novice in 1952, I may have taken them at face value and done my best with the meditations. When making the Exercises again as a tertian in 1965, on the other hand, I slid over and past these two exercises, and I have never asked anyone else to pray them as written by Ignatius from that day to this, meaning the score of retreatants I have accompanied through the thirty-day residential form of the Exercises. I shall outline what I have used as alternatives, but first to clarify my objections to the use of Exercises 50 and 52.

### **Exercises 50**

I was introduced to 'the sin of the angels' as a six-year-old child in a Roman Catholic school. It was given, in effect, straight from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: the angels, including our guardian angels, were created by God full of light, but they had to be willing to serve—and this was too much for some of them. Especially, these angels found it beneath them to have to worship God-become-human some day in the future. So they rebelled, and were turned out of heaven. Angels, being angels, were apparently unable to change their minds, so they were stuck in hell permanently, but became determined to cause as much mischief as possible ever after, out of spite.

This story was disturbing enough, and it seemed to me even then to be an excuse to blame someone else for the wickedness of the world, because the sin of the angels lurched on into the sin of Adam and Eve,

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The first Point will be to draw the memory to the first sin, which was that of the Angels, and then to draw the intellect to the same, going over it; then the will, wanting to recall and understand all this in order to make me more ashamed and confound me more, drawing into comparison with the one sin of the Angels my so many sins—and where they for one sin went to Hell, how often I have deserved it for so many. 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; and so then to go through it more in detail with the intellect: and then to move the feelings more with the will.

in the story as it was told to us infants. This was my introduction to theology, told as if everything that followed was built on the foundation of this angelic sin. As I grew older, however, and as I was introduced to the Bible as a whole, it struck me that the story of the sin of the angels is by no means a constituent part of the Bible. It is a concoction from various bits and pieces in Old and New Testaments and the apocryphal writings. It is as if several people make references to it as something from their background knowledge, but it is never told in the Bible in the way John Milton tells it, all in one piece and asking to be believed as such.

Further, as time went by I became more and more sceptical about devils roaming around the world for the ruin of souls. I was conscious of the presence of a good God in my inner being, but no one else has access to my heart, certainly not Lucifer or some sort of personal devil of my own. I was eventually reassured to find in Karl Rahner's *Concise Dictionary of Theology* that, as a Christian, I may believe that evil is only personal—evil is only found where there are persons.<sup>1</sup> Floods are not evil; droughts are not evil; earthquakes are not evil. From my own experience I would claim that evil has entered my

<sup>1</sup> See Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Concise Theological Dictionary* (London: Burns and Oates, 1965), 20 and 126.

life when I am spiritually out of balance: too depressed or too stressed. Then I am likely to behave in ways that upset other people and cause a reaction in them that is even more off balance. There is a spiral, but the start of the evil is down to me, not to a personal (other) evil spirit.

There is a similar, though less sinister, vagueness when it comes to good angels. An angel is a messenger, bearing tidings from God, but how far can we personalise angels? The basis of the idea seems to be that no one can see God and live (see Exodus 33:20), so if I have received a message of great love, that could not have come from anyone but God, then there must be an intermediary or I could not go on living. Surely there are more ways than one of understanding ‘no one can see God and live’? Again from my experience, I would say that when a message like that has come to me, I have never been the same again—life has been radically different.

There seems to be no absolute need to personalise angels, but these messages are indeed personal in that they only happen in persons, and they come from a personal God. Going back to my childhood, I eventually stopped conversing with my guardian angel, mainly because I found God was enough. The Church seemed to make a similar shift when, after Vatican II, Saints Michael, Gabriel and Raphael were asked to share their feast days instead of having one each. They are three messages—not necessarily three separate persons, but three messages from a personal God to humankind. Michael: God’s strength; Gabriel: the Day of the Lord comes; Raphael: God cares for each one. My guardian angel is a personal message of God to me, to say that I am loved not simply as one of many but as my own self.

To return to my main theme: I do not ask retreatants making the First Week of the Exercises to consider how blessed they are to be given another chance, when the brilliant angels only got one chance, for better or for worse. I do not think God is like that. I know God is not like that. And I am unwilling to ask people to base an hour’s serious meditation on such a flimsy premise. In any case, if all this is supposed to have happened before time began and before our first human parents, then where did the story come from, and who had the telling of it?

The second is to do the same—that is, to bring the Three Powers—on the sin of Adam and Eve, bringing to memory how on account of that sin they did penance for so long a time, and how much corruption came on the human race, so many people going the way to Hell. I say to bring to memory the Second Sin, that of our First Parents; how after Adam was created in the field of Damascus and placed in the Terrestrial Paradise, and Eve was created from his rib, being forbidden to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, they ate and so sinned, and afterwards clothed in tunics of skins and cast from Paradise, they lived, all their life, without the original justice which they had lost, and in many labours and much penance. And then to discuss with the understanding more in detail; and to use the will as has been said.

### Exercises 51

I find no difficulty in presenting the sin of Adam and Eve as one of the meditations of the First Week. Here the story is completely scriptural, and though it is told in the form of a myth the basic truths can be upheld. St Ignatius himself, in one of his letters to departing missionaries, goes further than he does in Exercises 51. He writes that 'of all imaginable sins', one of the greatest is ingratitude, 'being as it is a refusal to acknowledge the goods, graces and gifts that we have received and so the cause, principle and source of every evil and sin'.<sup>2</sup> Add that to the story in Genesis, and one can imagine Adam and Eve being given the free gift of a paradise, only to disregard the countless trees they have been freely given and concentrate on the one tree apparently not given to them. Ignatius is very emphatic in saying that ingratitude is the original sin, and the story meditated in the Exercises is all the richer for thinking along those lines.

Another part of the Genesis story with which we can readily concur is the way evil spirals. I mentioned above how it is often one unguarded remark or act that upsets someone else, who then reacts in

<sup>2</sup> Ignatius to Simão Rodrigues, 18 March 1542, in Ignatius of Loyola, *Letters and Instructions*, translated by Martin E. Palmer, John W. Padberg and John L. McCarthy (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 72 (MHSJ EI 1, 192–196, here 192).

a way more violent, perhaps eventually creating deadly hatred in the one who started it all.

### **Exercises 52**

Ignatius asks us to reflect on a hypothetical man who only ever committed one mortal sin in his lifetime and then died unshriven. The unfortunate goes automatically to hell with no chance of a reprieve. Thus our retreatant, who is here and alive and not in hell, no matter how many mortal or venial sins he or she may have committed, has a special reason for gratitude. He or she is alive, with the chance and encouragement to repent, to get forgiven and to start again on a new life.

My trouble with this imaginary situation is that I do not think God would arrange any such thing. And neither can I ever ask any retreatant to think like that. The story sounds like a medieval or renaissance melodrama in which the villain is so utterly villainous that he arranges for some poor innocent to be tempted beyond endurance: the innocent gives way to seduction, then the villain kills him or her so as to send the hated innocent straight to hell. Notice it is a villain who arranges this sort of thing; it is not something we would ever expect from the good God.

There is likely to be quite enough for the retreatant to be happy about in the present without comparing it to the worst possible situation. There is a story told of St Alphonsus Rodrigues, doorkeeper at the Jesuit college in Mallorca, that when passers-by greeted him and asked how he was, he would reply, 'I'm very well, I'm not in hell!' That in itself can be good news, and we do not need alternative scenarios about some poor unfortunate who was caught unawares. The encounter

**The third is likewise to do the same on the Third particular Sin of any one who for one mortal sin is gone to Hell—and many others without number, for fewer sins than I have committed. I say to do the same on the Third particular Sin, bringing to memory the gravity and malice of the sin against one's Creator and Lord; to discuss with the understanding how in sinning and acting against the Infinite Goodness, he has been justly condemned forever; and to finish with the will as has been said.**

between Jesus on the cross and the thief to whom he promised paradise is more encouraging than a thousand such stories. God, who gave two thousand years of second chances to the Chosen People and the same again to Christ's Church, cannot be one for snap judgments, surely?

### ***Alternatives***

What do I use as alternatives to Exercises 50 and 52, to ensure the flow of the First Week of the Exercises? To put it simply, I use a selection of gospel contemplations in which the retreatant is invited to identify with a sick person cured by Jesus. To do this need not get in the way of the Second Week gospel contemplations which follow, since the Second Week contemplations are active, not passive. In the Second Week we are standing side by side with Jesus, desiring to help him in the healing of the world. In the First Week we are still sinners in search of forgiveness.

The starting point, as in the synoptic Gospels, is to recall that Jesus is the Son of God (Mark 1:11) and that he is willing to call us his brothers and sisters (Mark 3:35). If then I am allowed to know myself as child of God, then why am I lying paralyzed when I could be up and about and on my way home? 'Son, your sins are forgiven' says Jesus (Mark 2:1–10), meaning 'My Father's son'.

If I am aware of myself as unclean, in any sense of the word, then the healing is in the words of Jesus to the woman suffering from haemorrhages, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease.' (Mark 5:34) God's daughter is not unclean in God's eyes.

If I feel overlooked in my life, left out of things and marginalised, then I can identify with the leper whom Jesus was happy to heal and to welcome back into human society (Mark 1:40–45). In effect, Jesus is saying, 'Any son or daughter of God is as good as anyone else in the world, and as worthy of inclusion in my Kingdom'.

If I am over-stressed in daily life and perplexed or confused by an ocean of worries, then I can identify with the man who had a legion of demons inside him (Mark 5:1–20). Through Jesus the worries can all end up in the sea—the waters of baptism—leaving only a daughter or son of God at peace, with the choice either to follow Jesus or to go home with his blessing.

I can admit to blindness and deafness if I find it difficult to believe in such ready forgiveness (Mark 7:31–37; 8:22–26). In both cases the cure is gradual. The cure of the epileptic boy (Mark 9:14–29) can be used for anyone unduly ashamed of a sudden lapse from grace. The woman bent double, straightened up by Jesus, can be used as a model for anyone too busy to live a healthy, balanced life. A daughter or a son of God can afford some light and laughter in life (Luke 13:10–17).

Those feeling lost may identify with the lost sheep, the lost coin, or the lost younger brother (all found in Luke chapter 15), and be confident that the Good Shepherd has indeed already found them and is glad to forgive.

The story of the Gentile woman and the dogs sounds unhelpful on first hearing, but the message is triumphant and very apt for Ignatius' First Week (Mark 7:24–30). She asks for the healing of her daughter, and is at first refused because she does not belong at the table with the children of the family. So she asks for some crumbs of comfort, as if she were a house dog under the table (she is kneeling as she pleads); and Jesus gives her, not just a crumb, but everything she asked for, hence a place at the table as one of the children. The character of the sacrament of baptism is that it gives us a place at the table. The forgiven sinner of the Exercises is reassured of a personal place at God's table.

Lastly there is the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). Any sinner is like the traveller who fell into the hands of robbers, left stricken and helpless by the roadside. Jesus himself is like the Samaritan, a stranger from a different land who nonetheless stops and bends to help. Oil and wine and bandages may be imagined in the gospel contemplation, then a painful ride to the nearest inn, then being put to bed by the stranger and the innkeeper's wife and a long overnight vigil. In the morning, Jesus says he is going away for a time, but before going he pays the bill for his stay and mine. Then, most remarkably, he says that when he returns he will not look for repayment, but will pay anything still owing for my convalescence. From the story told and imagined like this, we may become prepared to think of Jesus' forgiveness as stretching from the past and into the present, and indeed into the future, and to wonder at what it cost Jesus.

I think these gospel contemplations have more power to create a 'forgiven sinner' in the one who prays them than the story of the fall of the angels or the poor man in hell for one mortal sin. I am only

appealing from Ignatius to Jesus. Apart from these two numbers, 51 and 53, of the Exercises—just two numbers out of 370—I have no major anxieties about going along with Ignatius. The flow of the Exercises, from ‘forgiven sinner’ to ‘disciple called by Jesus’, from First Week to Second, Third and Fourth Weeks, matches perfectly the flow of the gospels, and in particular the Gospel according to Mark. Mark shows Jesus adopting, healing, feeding, enlightening, before there is any call for a return of love in action. Half-way through, Peter and the others loved Jesus in words, but were unable to follow him to the end till they had learned to pray long and hard for the Spirit that Jesus would send.

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