'ON YOU I MUSE THROUGH THE NIGHT'[1]

The Midnight Meditation in the Spiritual Exercises

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I BEGAN TO WRITE this article while in the middle of directing this year's group of Jesuit novices, for whose formation I am responsible, through the month-long enclosed form of the Spiritual Exercises. For most of the last fortnight some of them have been getting up in the middle of the night to pray for an hour, and this practice will probably continue for another week or so. Of all that is involved in making the Exercises in this way (apart, perhaps, from dedicating a whole month to praying full-time in the first place), it is this aspect that seems most strange to many. What good can it possibly do? Why would anyone even consider trying it at all?

A first justification might be that it is a practice included within the actual text of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In his note on the five prayer exercises that he assigns to the First Week, Ignatius writes: 'The first exercise will be made at midnight; the second, soon after arising in the morning …. This distribution of the hours is intended to be followed, more or less, throughout the four Weeks.' (Exx 72) Introducing the Second Week he states: 'The first exercise, that on the Incarnation, will be at midnight' (Exx 128). In paragraph 190 we read 'The Third Week: The first day, the first contemplation—at midnight', an injunction here repeated for each of the next five days. Only in the Fourth Week does he suggest that ordinarily the first exercise each day should take place in the morning (Exx 227).

Of course the fact that the text of the Exercises mentions a practice is not in itself sufficient justification for offering it to a contemporary

[1] Psalm 63:6.

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exercitant. Ignatius is clear that the faithful director is one who notices what is helping the one being directed to experience and stay in consolation, that is, to remain with the experience of being in contact with whatever God is doing in the retreat. This is much more important than adhering rigidly to the letter of the text. If any suggested practice helps this contact with God, it is to be encouraged. If it hinders such contact, it should be dropped.

He himself applies this principle to the idea of prayer during the night in his notes for the Second Week:

> If the one making the Exercises is aged or weak, or even if he or she is strong but has been left somewhat weakened by the First Week, during the Second Week it is better for this person not to arise at midnight, at least sometimes (Exx 129).

He then proposes an amended timetable in which the five periods are redistributed within the hours of daylight. Nevertheless, the fact that he himself applies this exception only to an exercitant who is (either permanently or temporarily) weak, and adds the caveat 'at least sometimes', suggests that he would have regarded midnight prayer as the norm for most of those judged capable of making the Exercises at all.

It is still possible to argue that Ignatius' attachment to this practice belongs to a cultural context that is no longer ours. For example, elsewhere in the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* he suggests that 'the most suitable form of penance is to hurt oneself with light cords that inflict the pain on the surface, rather than some other manner which might cause noteworthy illness inside' (Exx 86). Even though it is clear from the context that his intention here is to dissuade those who might want to undertake more harmful penitential exercises, few directors today would encourage even the mitigated form of the practice sanctioned by Ignatius. But it is not clear to me how one could demonstrate that the encouragement to night prayer found in the Exercises is an outmoded element of this type. Thus, rather than considering that question further, I will move on to a description of how the midnight meditation actually works in practice, how it fits into the dynamic movement of the Exercises as a whole, and what benefits might be expected from it.

It is first worth noticing that, at least as currently practised, the 'midnight meditation' is unlikely to begin precisely between 11.59 p.m. and 12.01 a.m. Rather, the exercitant is advised to go to bed at whatever time has become usual in the earliest days of the retreat, and to try

to wake about three hours later. This may take some practice. Knowing that we are to wake and start to pray in three hours' time can be enough to ensure sleeplessness during some or all of that period for many exercitants at their first one or two attempts. But experience suggests that most can adapt over the course of a few days without too much trouble.

Night, *by Jan Saenredam*

The psychological basis for waking after three hours is that this is enough time for a person to pass through the first period of deeper sleep, and to wake when he or she is anyway in a shallower part of the sleep cycle.[2] Ignatius thinks it important that prayer periods be prepared. Here the preparation should have taken place before going to bed initially. He also values some reflection on the prayer after it has taken place, and this will normally happen before going back to bed. Minimally, exercitants are advised to get out of bed to pray, even if they choose to stay in their own rooms rather than dressing and going to a chapel or prayer room. Those who pray soon learn from experience that remaining prostrate in a warm bed in the middle of the night does little to aid conscious communion with God.

In a book published in 2004, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past*, the psychiatrist A. Roger Ekirch surveys written accounts of sleep habits before the advent of widespread gas or electric lighting.[3] He finds many

[2] Analysis of the elements that make up the sleep cycle can be found in many introductory psychology textbooks. See, for example, Peter Lloyd, Andrew Mayes and others, *Introduction to Psychology: An Integrated Approach* (London: Fontana, 1984), 387–396.

[3] A. Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past* (New York: Norton, 2004).

references to a pattern in which a first sleep, beginning about two hours after sunset, was interrupted by a period of wakefulness lasting for an hour or two, after which a further sleep of some four hours brought the night to a close. Psychological tests conducted in the 1990s showed that subjects deprived of light for much of the 24-hour cycle soon fell into a similar pattern. Ekirch even discovered books with prayers suggested for use during the midnight wakefulness. It is thus possible that the suggestion of midnight meditation made in the Exercises, which seems quite strange to us, would have appeared as much more normal to the contemporaries of Ignatius.[4]

But what sort of prayer is this midnight meditation? Through most of the Exercises, Ignatius distinguishes two kinds of prayer period. There are those in which there is new material to be assimilated. This might be, for instance, a passage of scripture that has not yet been prayed with in the course of this retreat, or a first approach to one of the Ignatian 'set-pieces' such as the Call of the King or the Two Standards. The other kind of prayer is that of deeper assimilation of material that is by now somewhat familiar, through the process of 'repetition', a return to those points in a preceding prayer period where the greatest consolation has been experienced. Typically, the first prayer periods of the day are given over to the first of these, and later periods to the second. A consequence of this is that, somewhat counter-intuitively, in the text of the Exercises the midnight prayer is always one of those which works at making a first approach to new material.

What sort of prayer is this midnight meditation?

There are two ways of understanding this fact. It seems likely that the way that Ignatius usually gave the Exercises, at least in the years after 1540 when the Society of Jesus had been formed, was to invite the one wanting to make them to stay either in the house where Ignatius himself was, or at least in a convent or other suitable house somewhere nearby. Nothing suggests that he would normally direct more than one person at any one time. Ignatius would thus carry out his busy day's work and then see the one he was directing in the evening, after their evening meal and after the exercitant had completed that day's prayer. In this case the next prayer period expected of the exercitant would be the one to be done at midnight, and this would necessarily be the first prayer of a new day, taking a first look at new material. What little evidence we

[4] My attention was first drawn to this phenomenon by an article on the BBC website at www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16964783 (accessed 16 August 2013).

have suggests that the early Jesuits followed a similar practice, although this pattern began to change after the first house specifically devoted to the giving of the Exercises was opened in Alcalá in 1553.[5]

In the setting of a present-day retreat house or spirituality centre, a director might well be working with four, five or six exercitants simultaneously, allowing for a meeting of up to an hour with each one. In such a case it is not possible for every one of these meetings to take place after the exercitant has completed his or her final prayer period of a given day and, indeed, as often such meetings will take place in the morning, the exercitant may well have completed only one or two of the prayers expected during that day. We can than ask whether the midnight prayer (assuming that an exercitant is doing this) remains the first prayer of a 24-hour cycle; or whether instead the prayer period following the meeting with the director, at whatever time that may be, becomes the first prayer.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these ways of proceeding. If the next prayer after I meet with my director is always the 'first prayer', then I am able to reflect in the meeting on a complete 24-hour cycle, usually starting with the assimilation of new material, then the ways this has been processed through repetitions, possibly drawing the threads together in the application of the senses exercise. The disadvantage may be that the midnight prayer can well be the third, fourth, or even fifth prayer of such a cycle, and is then more concerned with that deepening which belongs to repetition rather than initial assimilation.

By contrast, if the midnight meditation is always the first prayer, it retains the role it has in the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* as the initial consideration of new material and, as I hope to show shortly, this may be an advantage. The main disadvantage is that the director ends up hearing reports on the second part of one 24-hour cycle and the first part of the next. (If the director sees an exercitant after the second prayer of the day, for example, under this scheme he or she is hearing about prayers three, four and five of one day—each of which is some form of repetition—and then prayers one and two of the next, which bring in new material.) The exercitant will then be making three further periods of prayer, during which it may be assumed that some movement may well have occurred, before taking up any further material for prayer that

[5] See John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1993), 127–133.

the director may have suggested in their meeting. The danger is that such movement as may have taken place will make these suggestions somewhat less relevant.

It seems, then, that there is only a reason to keep the midnight meditation as the first prayer of the day if there is some way in which this is better as a prayer of initial assimilation of new material rather than the deeper appropriation of graces already given. An indication that this might be the case is given in Michael Ivens's seminal commentary on the Exercises. He writes: 'Neither the text of the Exercises nor the *Directories* explain the reason for night prayer …. Apart from the penitential aspect, sufficient explanation is found in time-honoured monastic practice.'[6] The 'monastic practice' with which Ignatius would have been most familiar would have been that of the Benedictines—recent research suggests that the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* owes much to the writing of García de Cisneros, abbot of Monserrat from 1493 to 1510, which Ignatius had got to know during the months he spent at Manresa, at the foot of that mountain.[7] The principal night prayer in this form of monastic life is that of the office of Matins, from the Divine Office. This prayer, uniquely in the cycle of the monastic day, includes substantial readings from the Old and New Testaments, the writings of the Church Fathers and material detailing the lives of saints (especially martyrs), as well as the usual chanting of psalms. It was a prayer that broke sleep in the middle of the night and, if the monks did not return to bed after it, they were at least permitted to rest until the next office, Lauds, celebrated at dawn.

This suggests that, in stipulating the practice of midnight meditation, Ignatius was drawing on a tradition that used prayer in the middle of the

[6] Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 101.
[7] Javier Melloni, *The Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola in the Western Tradition* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 6–13.

night to present material which would then be assimilated throughout the rest of the day in prayerful reflection. It should come as no surprise that this is the same function that the exercise performs within his own system.

Just as psychology can explain why it might be most effective to wake for such prayer about three hours after falling asleep, it can also suggest something further of how this assimilative process might work. Those new to midnight meditation will often complain that they are unable to think clearly at that hour, and so find the process of grappling with a new scripture passage or set-piece exercise then intellectually difficult. Far from being a drawback, it may be that this is precisely the point. Because our critical faculties are not at their sharpest in the middle of the night, we are forced to approach the material in a different way. Prayer here more easily bypasses the intellect, that consciousness that we tend to associate with the head (or left-brain functions), and acts more readily at the levels of heart and gut, those parts of ourselves that are subconscious (right-brain functions). Material initially appropriated in this way then filters through into consciousness throughout the rest of the day's prayer, when the intellect has a chance to process it more effectively. Throughout the Exercises, Ignatius is always concerned to keep head and heart working together. See, for example, the election material, in which the interpretation of heart-felt movements of spirit (the 'second time' of Exx 176) is set alongside the intellectual weighing-up of the head's reasons in the 'third time' of Exx 177.

If it is to work in this way, however, it is important that the midnight meditation be the first prayer of a 24-hour cycle, whenever the meeting with the director takes place. A repetition (even of the 'application of senses' variety) will operate very differently. If this presents challenges for directors who find themselves meeting their exercitants at the mid-point of a day's prayer, those challenges will simply have to be resolved by the director. In the experience of this author, at least, this is possible; and the exercitant is not greatly hindered by taking on board new material two or three prayer periods after receiving direction.

I have argued here that what has been called the 'Ignatian day'— the pattern of prayer that makes up the experience of the Exercises— invites someone making an individually guided retreat (whether or not this is the full version of the Exercises) to a progressive focusing and simplification of material. In this way what is initially presented as a text 'out there' is gradually assimilated and appropriated, coming to centre more and more clearly on this particular retreatant's relationship with God at this time.

This is, I think, a process commonly recognised by contemporary directors. I have gone further in suggesting that the midnight meditation, frequently employed in the enclosed Exercises, has a particular role to play in this process, enabling the first contact with new material to be brought in under the radar, as it were, of the conscious intellect, so that it is first processed by other (deeper?) faculties of the subconscious heart and gut. Only after this, in the various repetitions, is it brought more directly into the clear light of day of the conscious mind.

I end with an admission that takes me back to where I began. In my experience, directors are pragmatic, and tend to stick to what they know works for them and for those whom they have directed. A good case could be made for believing that this is how Ignatius himself compiled and refined his text during the two decades or so in which it was being put together. Twice when I have been directed through the full Exercises myself, the midnight meditations that I have made have been the first prayers of the day, in the way that I have described. What I have written here is an attempt, to some extent, to understand what might have been going on in these situations. Now, as a director of others (including the Jesuit novices currently making the Exercises with me), this is how I tend to operate and, in so far as I can judge, it 'works'. Others might be able to testify to different ways of proceeding that are equally, or perhaps more, effective. The questions of how the material presented for prayer in an Ignatian retreat (whether in the full Spiritual Exercises or in one of the adaptations of them) is assimilated, and of how this assimilation relates to the rhythms of the retreat day's activities, are important ones. The issue of the midnight meditation is only one part of this broader concern. There is scope for further shared reflection here, especially perhaps from those who have a broad experience of directing, or indeed of being directed.

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