

REIGNITING THE FIRE OF PRIESTHOOD

The Spiritual Exercises at the Heart of Tertianship

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Tertianship: Schooling the Heart

TERTIANSHIP IS A CRUCIAL and integral part of Jesuit formation. St Ignatius spelt out the importance of this stage of formation in the Jesuit *Constitutions*. He says:

It will be helpful for those who had been sent to studies, upon finishing the work and effort of intellectual formation, to apply themselves during the period of final probation to the school of the heart, exercising themselves in spiritual and corporal pursuits which can engender in them greater humility, abnegation of all sensual love and will and judgment of their own, and also greater knowledge and love of God our Lord; so that when they themselves have made progress, they can better help others to progress for the glory of God our Lord. (*Constitutions* V.2.1 [516])

Hence, Jesuits love to refer to tertianship as the ‘school of the heart’. It is usually done after some years either in active ministry or in higher studies, when a Jesuit may begin to feel that the initial fervour that he experienced earlier in his Jesuit life has somehow waned.

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, a former Superior General of the Jesuits, sees tertianship as ‘a fine opportunity of a fresh impulse and dynamism for Jesuit life’.¹ He points out that tertianship corresponds to the period between 1535 and 1537 when Ignatius and the first companions spent time in Venice and Vicenza while waiting for a ship to take them to Jerusalem. According to John O’Malley,

¹ Peter Hans Kolvenbach, ‘Directives on Tertianship’, in *The Formation of Jesuits: From the Letters of Fr Peter Hans Kolvenbach, SJ* (Rome: General Curia of the Society of Jesus, 2003), 123, available at http://www.sjweb.info/adusum/documents/formation/tertian_en.swf, accessed 29 January 2014.

The companions divided themselves into two groups of five in order to work gratis in the Ospedale degli Incurabili, principally with victims of syphilis, and in the Ospedale Santi Giovanni e Paolo. They nursed patients, scrubbed floors, emptied slop pails, dug graves, and prepared corpses for burial and buried them The two priests—Favre and Hoces—heard the confessions of the sick.²

Through these ministries to the most vulnerable of society, Ignatius and the first companions ‘discovered by experience what it is to labour in the service of the Kingdom of Christ in the concrete body of the Church and the humanity of their time’.³

In his *Autobiography*, Ignatius himself recalls that during this period in Vicenza,



The Vision at La Storta, by an unknown Italian artist, early seventeenth century

He had many spiritual visions and many consolations, as if they were a matter of course (the opposite to when he was in Paris), and most of all when he began to prepare himself to be a priest in Venice and when he was preparing himself to say Mass. Throughout all these journeys, he had great supernatural visitations of the kind he was accustomed to have while he was in Manresa.⁴

At the end of 1537 it became rather clear that Ignatius and his companions could not go to Jerusalem. They then decided to travel to Rome, present themselves to the Pope and be missioned by him. On the way to Rome, they stopped to pray at the church of La Storta. There Ignatius saw clearly that the Father had

² John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1993), 33.

³ Kolvenbach, 'Directives on Tertianship', 123.

⁴ *Autobiography*, n. 95.

placed him with God's Son.⁵ Thus, it was as if their 'tertianship experience', which consisted of intense spiritual encounters with God in prayer as well as zealous and humble service to the poorest of society, reached its climax in the vision of La Storta. It was there that Ignatius received the confirmation of his desire to serve God as a companion of Jesus under the banner of the Cross.

The Exercises: Wood for the Fire⁶

For me, like many others, eight years of priesthood seemed at times to have reduced sacramental ministry to routine obligations. Of these eight years, I spent four doing doctoral studies in theology. Ignatius, too, must have felt what Jesuits often feel when engaged in long and intense period of studies: a sharpening of the intellectual powers, but a corresponding blunting of the spiritual senses. I found that the inner fire was slowly being snuffed out; it had to be rekindled.

I almost did not make it to my tertianship, in September 2013 in Manila. Earlier that year, my Provincial had asked me about joining the programme after completing my doctoral studies in London. Wanting to impress the Provincial by my obedience, and confident that I could finish in June 2013, I immediately said 'yes'. By March, however, it was clear that I could not return to Manila in June because I could have my viva only in August. What if I had to make major revisions to my thesis? Or worse, what if I did not pass the viva? Would I be able to make the tertianship as planned? Encouraged by both my Provincial and my thesis adviser that everything would go well with the viva, I booked a one-way ticket back to Manila on the latest date possible. Viva day came. Minor revisions, thank God! I worked on the final draft, packed my bags, said goodbyes to my friends in the UK, and flew to Manila. I arrived one day before the tertianship was scheduled to begin.

At the heart of tertianship is the experience of making the full thirty-day Spiritual Exercises a second time. The first time a Jesuit makes the Spiritual Exercises is during the novitiate, within the first year of his entrance into the Society of Jesus. It was November 1994 when I first made the thirty-day retreat. In 2013 I returned to the same novitiate to

⁵ *Autobiography*, n.96.

⁶ *Wood for the Fire* is the title of Ramon Bautista's book which contains prayer points based on the Spiritual Exercises. Ramon Bautista is the assistant tertian instructor of the Manila tertianship. See Ramon Bautista, *Wood for the Fire: 70 Prayer Exercises to Help Us Pray with Our Hearts* (Manila: St Paul, 2006).

undergo the same Spiritual Exercises. This time, however, I brought with me nineteen years of Jesuit life: eleven years in basic formation, four years of teaching in a diocesan seminary and the four of doctoral studies at the University of London.

Having completed almost two decades in religious life, I had acquired three large boxes full of books, celebrated hundreds of Masses and heard hundreds of confessions. I must have travelled thousands of miles from my rural home province of Bicol in the Philippines to the bustling High Street Kensington in central London. I must have written thousands of pages, what with my master's thesis, doctoral dissertation and other short papers. But where was the Spirit in all this? I remember a former Jesuit superior asking me after I gave him a litany of my achievements: 'but where is Christ in all these'?

As the thirty-day retreat came closer, I was anxious and afraid that I might not survive thirty days of silence. My prayer life and prayer style had changed so much over the years. I wondered whether I still knew how to pray at all. But as I entered the retreat, I discovered that it was not really a question of prayer method or prayer style. It was ultimately a question of desire. Do I really want to encounter God? Do I really hunger and thirst for God like a deer that yearns for a running stream (Psalm 42:2)? Do I still have the appetite for spiritual food? Or have I lost the taste for things of the spirit? Have I been so full of earthly delights such as knowledge, achievements, titles, gadgets, money and popularity?

The meditations of the First Week, which opens with the Principle and Foundation, urged me to confront myself and my 'inordinate attachments'. I realised that I had come to tertianship and entered the retreat with what Pope Francis describes as the 'desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience'. The Pope could very well have been referring to me when he said:

Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.⁷

Thanks to the loving patience and able guidance of our tertian instructor, who accompanied me through the Exercises, the Spirit was able to set

⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 2.

the wood on fire. I was able to get in touch with my deepest desire to meet God face to face and to converse with God as one would with a friend (Exodus 33: 11; Exx 54).

The Second Week begins with the Meditation on the Call of the King (Exx 91–100). The retreatant begs for the grace that he or she ‘may not be deaf to his call, but ready and diligent to accomplish his most holy will’ (Exx 91). Here I reviewed my practice of obedience. Did I obey my superiors merely out of compliance? Or did I obey them out of love for them as the living representatives of Christ? The Contemplation on the Incarnation (Exx 101–109) was especially significant because I saw the thousands of people I had encountered in my years as a Jesuit and as a priest: the poor scavengers of Manila’s rubbish dump; the elite students of Philippines’ premier Jesuit university; the seminarians from far-flung dioceses of Mindanao; the hard-working Filipino nurses and domestic helpers I met in the UK; the desperate victims of super-typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan. The scene was overwhelmingly heartbreaking, especially as I witnessed my own part in the brokenness of the world. As Brian O’Leary observes:

The tertian, however, has a longer and more profound experience both of his own weakness and of the brokenness of even good-hearted people, the deafness, sloth, and unwillingness of the world to hear



Destruction caused by super-typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan in Tacloban City

the Good News. He is, therefore, more likely to experience his own vulnerability and helplessness, as well as being more sensitive to the vulnerability and helplessness of others. He may well find himself called simply to be with others in their suffering, just as in the Spiritual Exercises, the Third Week is an invitation to be with Jesus in his—nothing more, nothing less.⁸

In Christ's Presence: Hearts Burning

It was the encounter with Jesus in the contemplations of the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks that reversed the inner movement towards despair that I felt over the suffering and sinfulness of the world, and over my helplessness to do anything significant about it. Jesus' primary stance towards the crowds, the sick and the sinners was to be fully present to them. He made his presence felt to them in a unique and personal way. He called the disciples by name (Luke 6:3–16). He touched lepers and the dead (Mark 1:41; 6:41). He noticed the woman who touched the edge of his cloak (Mark 5:30, 34). He looked at the rich young man with love (Mark 10:21). He walked with the disciples to Emmaus and listened to the stories of their shattered hopes and broken dreams (Luke 24:13–35) and, as he journeyed with them, their hearts burned within them. He opened their eyes to the reality of his risen presence as he explained the scriptures and broke bread for them.

In the retreat, Jesus allowed me to experience this same loving and life-giving presence. As I reviewed my life from as far back as I could remember, I saw how he has indeed been present all through my life. In the *Contemplatio ad amorem* I rediscovered that he has been dwelling in me, 'giving me existence, life, sensation, and intelligence; and even further, making me his temple, since I am created as a likeness and image of the Divine Majesty' (Exx 235).

God has not only been dwelling in me, but also labouring and working for me. Ignatius observes how God,

... acts in the manner of one who is labouring. For example, he is working in the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle, and all the rest—giving them their existence, conserving them, concurring with their vegetative and sensitive activities, and so forth. (Exx 236)

⁸ Brian O'Leary, *Sent into the Lord's Vineyard: Explorations in the Jesuit Constitutions* (Oxford: Way Books, 2012), 54–55.

For a Jesuit who measures his apostolic efficiency by the number of Masses said and confessions heard, this is a refreshing eye-opener: it is not I who ultimately does the work. It is God who labours for me. But God does invite me to labour too: 'whoever wishes to come with me must labour with me, so that through following me in the pain he or she may follow me also in the glory' (Exx 95). Perhaps this is the key Ignatian insight that reignited the fire within: that I am a companion of Jesus. I am neither the main actor nor the messiah. Neither am I alone in my struggles and pains. Jesus is there, present to and for me as he was for the lepers, the sinners, the women and the crowds. And he calls me to share the same presence to others through my priestly ministry.

***Jesus is there,
present to
and for me***

Jesus made his presence felt during the retreat, not only in the contemplations and meditations, but in a special way in the daily Eucharist that we shared as a community at prayer. It was deeply moving for me to return to that beautiful chapel of the Sacred Heart where I spent hours of prayers and attended many Masses years ago as a novice. Everything about the Mass seemed solemn and special. The evening Masses were a perfect way to gather the abundant graces received from the day's meditations and contemplations. There was real feeling in the dialogue, 'Lift up your hearts!' and 'We lift them up to the Lord!' How beautiful it was that although my heart was brimming with blessings, it was no way heavy to lift to the Lord.

The retreat was truly a feast prepared by the Stranger-turned-Host who walked with me along the way (Luke 24:15–32). The Divine Host indeed set the table before me till my cup overflowed (Psalm 23:5). Through the daily encounter with him in the contemplations and in the Eucharist, the Lord fed me with his Word, by which his listeners in the temple were 'spellbound' (Luke 19:48). The Word that had somehow become a tasteless manna in the desert of my soul suddenly tasted like honey (Ezekiel 3:3). The body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist became once again the staple nourishment of my Jesuit priestly life. I am grateful to my retreat director for sharing with us some notes on the Eucharist, including Pierre Favre's lines here, which helped me understand the implications of rediscovering the place of the Eucharist in my life:

If Christ communicates himself to me each day when I celebrate [Mass] and if he is ready to communicate himself in all other ways in my prayer and in the works done for his sake, then I too should communicate myself and abandon myself to him in all ways, not only

to him, but also to all my fellow men, whether good or evil, for his sake. I could do this by speaking kindly to them, preaching to them, doing them good, working and suffering for them, laying myself open to them to the utmost extent in order to console them as far as I can be of help to them, and, to end, by giving all my entire self and whatever I possess.⁹

After the thirty-day retreat, some of us tertians had lost weight. But all of us felt lighter, physically and spiritually. As the retreat ended, I begged the Lord that I might constantly get in touch with my hunger for God. I prayed that the inner fire that had just been rekindled might not be blown away by the winds of earthly pursuits: reading books, writing papers, attending meetings and so forth. I prayed that I might always be mindful of Christ's presence in me and of his call that I might in the first place be present to people in all their joys and pains, rather than trying to solve their problems all at once. I hoped to be attentive to that inner voice which draws me to the Eucharist, both as its recipient and as its minister.

I came out of the retreat with a renewed vigour to share with people the bread that truly satisfies all spiritual hungers and the drink that truly slakes our eternal thirsts. I felt the same urgency to preach the good news that St Paul felt (1 Corinthians 9:16). And it could not but be God's perfect timing that Pope Francis released his apostolic letter *Evangelii gaudium* just days before we ended our retreat. There I was, ready and eager to share the peace and the joy that spring from the good news. I carried away from the retreat the hope that the joy of the good news might move and impel me to share whatever material and spiritual bounty I received with the poor around me, for only when the good news of the Kingdom is preached to the poor can I say, *He has come indeed. He is here.*

Spreading the Fire: Ministry after the Retreat

After making the Spiritual Exercises, we tertians were given the chance to select a particular ministry for our last 'experiment', immersion with the poor.¹⁰ My retreat experience confirmed my desire to do prison ministry

⁹ Pierre Favre, *Memoriale*, translated by Edmund C. Murphy, in *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), n. 255.

¹⁰ The 'experiments' (*experientias*) are a series of six tasks or activities, including making the full Spiritual Exercises, going on pilgrimage and working with the poor and sick, that are part of Jesuit formation.



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Mass inside the National Bilibid Prison

for my final experiment in tertianship. In the retreat, I was reminded of the importance of repetition for St Ignatius. For him, repetition is not redoing an exercise altogether, but focusing on those movements that gave the retreatant either consolations or desolations (Exx 118). For me, this experiment was a repetition of sorts, because I also volunteered for this ministry in 2009 while waiting for my visa to be approved to study in UK. Returning to this ministry enabled me to relish and savour the graces I received during those two months in 2009. This time it was only for three weeks, but it was no less moving and meaningful.

On both occasions, I did prison ministry with the Philippine Jesuit Prison Service (PJPS) in the national penitentiary of the Philippines called the National Bilibid Prison. My work there could be summed up in three words: *celebration*, *confession* and *conversation*. As I was not doing any administrative work like the two other Jesuits in PJPS, I had the chance to spend time in the prison compound and be immersed in the realities of prison life. There I celebrated the Eucharist, heard confessions and conversed with the inmates.

Celebrating the Eucharist with the inmates was a daily activity. Each celebration, whether it was a simple daily Mass or crowded Sunday Mass, was always moving and meaningful. One could not but be touched by the sincere and heartfelt singing of *Panginoon, maawa ka* (Lord, have

mercy) and by the full bodily expression of involvement in the celebration, as the inmates literally lifted up their hands while saying ‘We lift them up to the Lord!’ They were fully present in the Eucharistic celebration. On some days, I thought, ‘Isn’t daily Mass just too often for the inmates and too much for the priests?’ I realised, though, that if we do not offer the inmates the Word of God and the body and blood of Christ for their daily sustenance, we might as well just be like any other organization providing welfare assistance to the inmates. As Peter Kolvenbach says: ‘The real presence of the Lord invades our present and this present becomes also, so as to be genuine in the Lord, presence to the other’.¹¹

Hearing confession or, better, inviting the inmates to receive the Lord’s forgiveness tangibly through the sacrament of reconciliation, certainly opens a door both for the penitent and for me as the minister. For in the encounter with an inmate, whose life has been entangled in a hopelessly complicated web of juvenile mischief, broken family, an unfair justice system and a hostile prison environment, and in the clash between the letter of Canon Law and the spirit of gospel teaching, the minister has to extend a gentle hand and pronounce the incomprehensible divine verdict: mercy no matter what. For the penitent inmate, doubtfully searching for redemption, and for the priest, arrogantly wishing to smooth away the rough edges in his own and others’ lives by sheer cerebral activity and willpower, the mercy of God is a powerful balm: it soothes the consciences of the men on both sides of the confessional box.

And for inmates who do not come to confession, a casual, friendly conversation provides them with an opportunity to share their stories: to recount their wounded past, to air their difficulties and struggles while serving their sentence and to affirm their hope for a better life when they finally walk to freedom in one, three, ten, fifteen years—only God knows when. These conversations allow the inmates to be called by their given names, instead of the family names that lump them together with their parents and siblings, or their prisoner numbers which totally ignore their individual identity as people. Such informal, casual, mundane conversations, in which Jesus, Mary or Joseph are not mentioned in any way, do help to keep that flickering flame of hope burning amid loneliness, regret and despair.

¹¹ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, ‘The Eucharist’, letter to all Major Superiors, 15 February 2006, *Prayer and Service*, 4 (October–December 2006), 309–316, here 313, available at <http://www.apostleshishopofprayer.net/docs/archivio-riviste/P&S-en-4-2006.pdf>.

It was a privilege, too, to be with two brother Jesuits who selflessly and joyfully offered the best of their time, energy, skills and talents to the inmates and their families who come to visit them. It was a blessed time sharing in their daily tasks. All of what we were doing aimed at realising the vision of PJPS: rebuilding lives and rekindling hope.

In a way, the prison ministry I undertook after the retreat was a repetition of the Third Week, in which the *id quod volo* is simply being with Christ in his suffering and pain: to be present with and for him. In the prison ministry, we try to be there for the inmates, to be present with and for them in their journey to freedom, both from the iron bars that enclose them and from the inordinate attachments that enslave them. If the key grace of the Third Week is the confirmation of the election by which the retreatant chooses to follow Christ poor and humble, I believe that this experience of prison ministry confirmed the graces I received from the Spiritual Exercises.

A Fresh Start: A New Fire

The first module of our tertianship was the sharing of our vocation stories, or what our tertian instructor refers to as our 'history of grace'. In revisiting this history we were guided by André de Jaer's words:

The Jesuit cannot know himself without including his whole past in the present. It is especially good, particularly during tertianship, to reflect on the journey from its very beginning up to now, not in order to count up the scars of old battles, but rather to rediscover the actualities of one's own Jesuit self.¹²

The Spiritual Exercises proved to be a privileged time to relive those key moments of encounter with Jesus Christ in my life: from the time I served as an altar boy, to the earlier encounters with the Jesuits in secondary school, the eleven years of 'hidden life' in basic formation, the eight years of priesthood, and now the final stage of formation in preparation for definitive incorporation into the Society of Jesus. Through the Spiritual Exercises and the experiment which confirmed its graces, my heart revived its zeal and vigour.

As de Jaer says:

¹² André de Jaer, *Together for Mission: A Spiritual Commentary on the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, translated by Francis C. Brennan (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2001), 18.

There is a sense in which I enter the Society of Jesus every day: ‘Today I begin’. That approach helps me to shed a lifeless notion of vocation—something a little tired and weary, perhaps used up and weighed down by the years—and to rekindle an attitude towards vocation as a fresh, energy-imparting election for today.¹³

As our tertianship drew to a close, Lent was beginning. I awaited the new mission to be announced by the Provincial on Easter night. On that night, the Church celebrates the new risen life of Christ. On that night, with the rekindled fire in my heart, I will bless the new fire and proclaim, ‘*Lumen Christi!*’ ‘*Deo gratias!*’ The night is over. Day is here: a fresh start.

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¹³ de Jaer, *Together for Mission*, 19.