

REMEMBERING AS A CRUCIAL SPIRITUAL TOOL

Pierre Favre's Spiritual Life in the *Memoriale*

Jos Moons

POPE FRANCIS DEARLY LOVES Pierre Favre.¹ This may well explain why he more or less bypassed the official procedures when, in December 2013, he canonized Favre. Around the time the canonization was announced, Favre seems to have become fashionable. James Martin wrote an introduction to his life for *America* magazine, as Edel McLean had done earlier in the year for *thinkingfaith.org*.² Moreover, 2014 saw republications of *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre* (Institute of Jesuit Sources) and of Mary Purcell's biography *The Quiet Companion* (Loyola Press).

Now Favre is usually particularly admired for his gift for spiritual accompaniment. Ignatius himself considered Favre outstandingly talented in dealing with the souls of other people and guiding others through the Spiritual Exercises.³ Here I would like to show that Favre may offer inspiration not only in his way of dealing with others, but also for his way of dealing with his own soul, as recorded in his spiritual autobiography, the *Memoriale*. Admittedly lacking the stylistic refinement of, for example,

¹ See, for example, Pope Francis's comments in 'A Big Heart Open to God', the famous 2013 interview with Antonio Spadaro, published simultaneously in various Jesuit journals around the globe and subsequently in book form. Francis admires especially Favre's 'dialogue with all, even the most remote and even with his opponents; his simple piety, a certain naïveté perhaps, his being available straightaway, his careful interior discernment, the fact that he was a man capable of great and strong decisions but also capable of being so gentle and loving' (*My Door Is Always Open: A Conversation on Faith, Hope and the Church in a Time of Change*, translated by Shaun Whiteside [London: Bloomsbury, 2014], 27).

² James Martin, 'Who Was Saint Pierre Favre?' *America* (24 November 2013), available at <http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/who-was-saint-pierre-favre>; Edel McLean, 'Pierre Favre: "Everywhere There Is Good to Be Done"', *Thinking Faith* (2 August 2013), available at http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130802_1.htm.

³ Thus Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, in *Remembering Iñigo: Glimpses of the Life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola: The Memoriale of Luís Gonçalves da Câmara*, translated by Alexander Eaglestone and Joseph A. Munitiz (Leominster: Gracewing, 2004), n. 226.

Augustine's *Confessions*, the *Memoriale* shows us Favre as he really is, precisely because it was not written for publication. Close reading of the first part (up to section 35) reveals how remembering functions as a crucial spiritual tool in Favre's life.

The Memoriale

Favre himself explains how the *Memoriale* came into being:

In the year 1542, on the octave day of the Body of Christ our Lord, there came to me a notable desire to do from that time on something I had left undone until then through sheer negligence and laziness. It was to begin writing down so as to remember them some of the spiritual things which the Lord had given me from his hand in prayer: whether as counsel about the course to take, or for contemplation or understanding, or for action, or for some other spiritual benefit.⁴

The point of the *Memoriale*, then, is to note down and to remember what God has given. Favre writes in order not to forget. He does so in two

parts. First, he looks back and recalls the divine gifts he has received up to the year 1542, in sections 1 to 35, preceded by an introduction. The story from 1542 onwards is recorded in sections 36 to 433.

In fact the *Memoriale* covers only a small part of Favre's life. Born in 1506 and ordained in 1534, Favre started to travel around Europe from 1539 onwards, and died in 1546. It was only from 1542 that he put his pen to paper and wrote down his memories and spiritual experiences. He showed himself to be especially committed in the first year of keeping the diary, as four-fifths of the *Memoriale*



Pierre Favre, by J. Kravögl, 1873

⁴ *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre: The Memoriale and Selected Letters and Instructions*, translated by Edmond C. Murphy and Martin E. Palmer (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 60. Subsequent references in the text.

had been written between June 1542 and July 1543. Dominique Bertrand points out that Favre's numerous letters are spread out much more evenly over the course of his life and may therefore give a better picture of who Favre was.⁵ We also have some small spiritual and pastoral treatises by Favre with instructions on matters such as fraternal charity and hearing confessions.

'To Note Down ...'

As we have heard Favre say, the point of the *Memoriale* was to note down and remember. What does Favre note down? He often starts with facts and then moves on to the spiritual benefits related to them. For example, in section 6 he writes

In the year 1525, at the age of nineteen, I left my native place and went to Paris. Remember, my soul, the spiritual goads that your Lord had already planted in your conscience through your fear of him. They were some scruples and remorse of conscience by which the demon began to drive you to seek your Creator, if you yourself had not been so dull-witted. Without those scruples Iñigo perchance might not have been able to get through to you, nor you to desire his help as happened later.

This text shows that Favre's memory of moving to Paris at the age of nineteen made him recall what he had received: the fear of God and the spiritual advantage it brings, and the scruples that made him seek God. This quotation also illustrates that such benefits are more important than mere facts, for Favre devotes only one sentence to the facts and several to their benefits, a pattern found throughout the *Memoriale*.

Favre perceives his life as a dynamic of divine giving and human accepting. Sometimes this view is visible on the surface of the text, such as when, in section 1, he thankfully notes that God has brought him into this world and has given him the grace to have been baptized. Often divine giving and human accepting are hinted at in an implicit, subtle way, for example by speaking of 'receiving'. In his introduction we have seen Favre specify that he has received the idea of writing down God's blessings. The translators of the English text point to the Spanish original, which has *me entró un señalado desseo*, literally, 'a notable desire entered me ...'.⁶

⁵ Dominique Bertrand, *Pierre Favre. Un Portrait* (Brussels: Lessius, 2007), 171–177. He therefore deals first with Favre's letters, then with the *Memoriale*, followed by the treatises.

⁶ MHSJ Monumenta Fabri, 856.

They write, ‘his spiritual attitude to these interior movements is one of passivity throughout the *Memoriale* and can be seen in the very frequent use of the phrase “given to me”’.⁷ Almost every section contains one or more allusions to divine giving and human accepting.

What are the good things that Favre received? They are of many sorts. For his ‘first benefit’ Favre returns to his youth, specifically to his baptism and the goodness of his parents (n. 1). He also gratefully recalls God’s protection against dangers such as cold and hunger on his long journey on foot from Paris to Venice (n. 16). But the most important grace is of another kind, namely interior grace, for example, ‘a movement of devotion’ (n. 2), the fear of the Lord (n. 6), divine teaching (n. 12) and ‘consolation in the form of a total and good hope’ (n. 24).

The *Memoriale* shows that, over time, the content of these interior graces changes. They initially consist in fear of the Lord. In n. 2 Favre is grateful that his parents ‘brought me up in the fear of God our Lord’ as he thereby started to be conscious of his actions. At school he was instructed in the fear of the Lord through literature (n. 3) and he ‘went on growing’ in it (n. 4). Its significance is clear, as we have already seen: fear of the Lord helped Favre to search for God and the right path in life (see n. 6).

At this point, self-accusation and self-reproach have an important place in Favre’s soul. As we saw in his introduction, Favre blamed the fact that he had not yet started to remember and write down the benefits he had received on his ‘sheer negligence and laziness’. In n. 6 we heard another self-reproach, this time about his ‘dull-witted’ nature; there are more in sections 2–5.

A Fundamental Change

After Ignatius appeared on the scene and started to teach Favre, things changed dramatically. In n. 9, Favre writes:

May it please the divine clemency to give me the grace of clearly remembering and pondering the benefits which the Lord conferred on me in those days through that man. Firstly, he gave me an understanding of my conscience and of the temptations and scruples I had had for so long without either understanding them or seeing the way by which I would be able to get peace.

⁷ See *Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre*, 60 n. 5.

In reading this passage we witness a fundamental change. Favre no longer sees his shortcomings as reasons for self-accusation and self-reproach. Breaking away from what is in fact a self-centred attitude of self-criticism, he starts to speak about the gifts of consolation, of understanding and peace. The bad spirit is still around, but Favre now finds that God always provides 'true remedy' (n.12). Henceforth the God who consoles has the final word, and not despair, fear, scruple or worry.

The growing affinity with God and with consolation is manifest in the diary entries. According to n. 13, Favre sensed

that God was confirming him in his plan to follow Ignatius in a life of poverty, and in n. 14 he notes that, whereas he used to be unsure about his future and 'blown about by many winds', he had now become firm in his decision to become a priest. Further, he sees that each year, when he and Ignatius' other First Companions renewed their vows, they received 'a spiritual increase' (n.15). Now that Favre has met Ignatius and been taught by him, almost every section records consolation in one form or another.

In addition to reducing the impact of Favre's scruples and inner unrest, Favre's spiritual growth makes his self-reproach vanish into the background. For example, on the road to Lyon, Favre and his Spanish travel companions were arrested by the French and imprisoned for a week. Without any trace of self-accusation or self-reproach, Favre simply notes that he felt despair, but that God gave consolation. As he writes in n. 24:

Nevertheless, I had some temptations to discouragement from time to time, fearing that we might not be freed soon or without causing much cost to the doctor [Dr Ortiz, one of his companions]. But at the



Pierre Favre and the vows of the First Companions, by Moede Jansen, 1875

same time—as their contrary and their cure—I received consolation in the form of a total and good hope of almost all that, in the event, came about in our release.

A third development coincides with a profound change in Favre's life: from 1539 onwards he started to travel. Again, God gave consolation, in this case in the form of methods of prayer related precisely to his changing circumstances and contexts. As Favre notes in n.21, addressing himself, as he often does, as 'O my soul':

In January 1541 we left for Ratisbon [Regensburg], where the imperial Diet was in session. On the journey you received great consolations in different prayers and contemplations, and you were given many new methods and subjects of prayer as you travelled along. For example, as you drew near to some place and looked at it or heard it talked about, you received a method of asking grace from our Lord that the archangel of that region with all the angel guardians of its inhabitants might be well disposed to us.

From section 19 onwards, Favre mentions various similar benefits that help him to find God in changing, and at times trying, circumstances. In n.25, for example, he speaks about the fervour he sensed as he imagined several of the chief political and religious powers of the time, such as King Henry VIII of England and Martin Luther, and the desire he felt 'to pray for them without taking note of their faults'.

The changes in the depth of Favre's soul can be better understood against the background of the 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits' (Exx 313–316). In these Rules Ignatius claims that the bad spirit attempts to create confusion in those who try to follow the good path. For example, he will sow scruples, or impress people with the faults of others (or their own). This might be called the bad spirit's 'plan B'. Not having succeeded in stopping somebody from doing what is good, he will try to make it as difficult as possible. In doing so, the bad spirit will, of course, keep a low profile so that he is not exposed. He may even dress up in what seem to be Christian values, such as humility or zeal, as long as these help him to achieve his goal. By contrast, the good spirit will confirm a person on the good path and help him or her to move forward.

Favre's story is a case in point. At first, although the good spirit stirred in the depth of Favre's soul, the bad spirit undermined his relationship with God and his progress on the good path. For although his scruples and the fear of the Lord made him search for God, they also prevented

him from finding God. The work of Ignatius had been to unmask the bad spirit, who hinders, and to introduce Favre to the good spirit, who consoles, confirms and helps forward. How the good spirit works is shown in a very particular way in the various forms of prayer Favre received: these helped him to find God and to make progress along the good path amid constantly changing circumstances.

‘So as to Remember’

In his book on Pierre Favre and discernment, Brian O’Leary explains that the genre of the spiritual journal and the practice of discernment of spirits are related. It is by noting and pondering what is going on that one comes to see where God is and is not present. The early Jesuits were very much aware of the significance of their experiences. As O’Leary writes,

For all the early Jesuits, experience was of the greatest importance in the spiritual life. It was something that they treasured as given to them by God, revealing his will, expressing his love; in order not to forget what it had taught them, they recorded it in writing.

Therefore, ‘from the point of view of discernment, these journals are working tools, working-documents to be reread, and pondered and prayerfully searched for signs that will lead to a discovery of God’s will’.⁸ The *Memoriale* is just such a tool, its purpose being ‘to writ[e] down so as to remember them some of the spiritual things which the Lord had given me from his hand in prayer’, as Favre notes in his introduction. In n.9 Favre adds another word, to *ponder*: ‘remembering and pondering’ the benefits given by God.

Favre does not take his project lightly. There is a seriousness in his tone, and in the self-admonition not to forget, that suggests Favre fears he may overlook these benefits or fail to appreciate them sufficiently. Right from the first lines of the *Memoriale*, Favre exhorts himself to remember:

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. He redeems your life from death and crowns you with his mercy and his kindness
Cry it aloud ceaselessly, O my soul, and never forget the favours

⁸ Brian O’Leary, *Pierre Favre and Discernment: The Discernment of Spirits in the Memoriale of Blessed Peter Favre* (Oxford: Way Books, 2006), 31. Compare the introduction by Michel de Certeau in *Mémorial*, translated by Michel de Certeau (Paris: DDB, 1960), especially 76–79 and 82–86.

which our Lord Jesus Christ has done for you and goes on doing for you from moment to moment through the intercession of his Blessed Mother, our Lady, of all the holy men and women in heaven, and also of all the living and the dead who pray for you in the Catholic Church.

In section 19 the self-admonition takes the shape of a litany of imperatives to remember:

In May 1539 Master Laínez and I, at the bidding of the Roman Pontiff, left Rome for Parma ... and remained there until September 1540. Remember, O my soul, the graces you there received and which bore so much fruit in that place through the labours of Jerónimo Doménech and ourselves in preaching, hearing confessions, and giving the Exercises; remember too what took place at Sissa. Remember also that illness of yours which began on April 25, 1540, and lasted almost three months. You know, nor can you forget, the great spiritual profit you were able to derive from it according to the knowledge given you by our Lord for the purpose of causing you to bear fruit in spirit. Remember your debt to the entire households of Laurencio and Maximo, who received you into their houses. Remember in a special way the opportunity you took advantage of there so as never to lose your devotion to the feast of SS. Peter and Paul and principally to the feasts of St John the Baptist and of our Lady of the Visitation, for your debt to them is so great that you must never forget it.⁹

There are many other examples of this self-admonition, 'Remember!', such as in section 9, quoted above, where it is articulated in the form of a prayer: 'May it please the divine clemency to give me the grace of clearly remembering and pondering the benefits which the Lord conferred on me in those days through that man'. In section 35, which concludes the first part of the *Memoriale*, Favre seems to echo the self-admonition with which he started the introductory section when he opens by saying: 'Note here, my soul, and remember'

A Crucial Spiritual Tool

The purpose of the *Memoriale*, I have suggested, is to avoid forgetting what God gives. Yet what makes it so important for Favre to remember?

⁹ The original Spanish has a different sentence structure and therefore features fewer instances of 'remember'. Even so, the whole section depends upon a few 'remember' imperatives. See MHSJ Monumenta Fabri, 861.



Good and Evil, by André Jacques Victor Orsel, 1832

What is at stake? One may refer to Brian O’Leary and claim that this, like other early Jesuit journals, functions as tool for discernment. But why does Favre focus on remembering so as not to forget, and why is he so serious about it? I think remembering forms a crucial element in Favre’s spiritual life. It is by noting, remembering and pondering that Favre is able to recognise and welcome the good spirit, and to unmask and subdue the bad spirit.

Although Jesuits tend to view the world positively, the Ignatian tradition acknowledges that the spiritual life is a complicated matter. As both a good spirit and a bad spirit try to work in the soul, the discernment between these is paramount, in order to welcome the former and leave or reject the latter (see Exx 313). That may sound simple but it is, in fact, quite difficult, especially as the bad spirit operates in cunning ways, as Ignatius explains succinctly in his Rules for Discernment (see Exx 325–327 and 331–332), and as C. S. Lewis has painted so vividly and enjoyably in his *Screwtape Letters*.

One of the best tricks of the bad spirit is to personalise his approach. He makes use of the peculiarities and character flaws of the person at hand. In the case of Favre this was particularly astute: Favre’s personality

offered ample opportunity for manipulation by the bad spirit. Favre was as uncomplicated and 'charming' in dealing with others as he was complicated in dealing with himself and his own soul. Luís Gonçalves da Câmara recalls the enjoyable story of how Favre could not decide how much to pay his barber in Paris.¹⁰ For Favre these small matters were serious questions. He was constantly worried about what he was going to do and which was the right path. His discernment was typically compulsive and scrupulous, and seems influenced, moreover, by what look like the symptoms of bipolar disorder. He was unstable and alternated between cheerfulness and discouragement.

This helps us to understand the significance of remembering for Favre. The shrewdness of the bad spirit requires a solid response. Insight is a first step. We have seen how thankful Favre was for what Ignatius had taught him about the good and the bad spirit. Yet insight is not enough; a well-directed effort based on a well-thought-out training programme is also necessary. Given the bad spirit's abuse of Favre's sensitivity and his inclination to discouragement, recalling God's gifts was an especially powerful exercise. By noting, remembering and pondering, Favre immersed his soul in God's gracious presence instead of the bad spirit's discouraging one.

The fruits of Favre's insight and training are evident. In the opening section of the *Memoriale*, Favre writes that he noted the divine benefits with the same consolation that he had experienced in the past, namely 'with a special awareness of thanksgiving, contrition, compassion, or some other spiritual feeling from the Lord, or by way of counsel of my good angel'. Although Favre notes God's graces most often in a matter-of-fact style, as when he recalls his baptism and education in n. 1, there is always an implicit feeling of thankful relief and trusting confidence. Occasionally Favre writes with a rhetorical pathos that allows the reader a glimpse of his inner excitement at God's grace, such as in the litany of 'remember, O my soul' in section 19, and in the sequence of prayerful statements in both the opening section and the concluding section (n.35).

Ignatius recommends to everyone an exercise that was especially suitable to Favre's tormented soul. At the end of the Spiritual Exercises, retreatants are invited to recall God's gifts in the so-called *Ad amorem*

¹⁰ See *Remembering Iñigo*, n. 356: 'Favre had scruples in Paris whether he should give the barber a *double* or a *liard*'. Gonçalves da Câmara goes on to explain that this illustrates 'how greatly the early Fathers valued poverty', which seems to be stretching the point; the story is typical of Favre's scruples.

contemplation. They are invited to dwell on all the gifts they have received, on how God dwells in all creatures, on how God works for them in all creatures and on how all good things descend from above (Exx 234–237). The instructions for opening the meditation clarify the intention of the prayer:

To ask for what I desire. Here it will be to ask for interior knowledge of all the great good I have received, in order that, stirred to profound gratitude, I may become able to love and serve the Divine Majesty in all things. (Exx 233)

This instruction captures the Ignatian conviction that an increased familiarity with God's gifts leads to more love for God and greater zeal for serving God. The *Memoriale*, with its focus on remembering, is a personalised tool for exercising just that familiarity.

Pierre Favre's *Memoriale* shows that the spiritual life is not straightforward and that living with open hands alone is not sufficient. Favre needed the inner clarity of discernment of spirits and a well-directed and deliberate effort to find the right path and to proceed along it. For Favre, noting, remembering and pondering God's gifts were crucial instruments for finding God and staying on the right path, and they remain powerful tools for any spiritual person.

Jos Moons SJ is an Amsterdam-based Jesuit, who is a student chaplain and PhD student at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology.