

THE ANNUAL RETREAT: PAST AND PRESENT

By THOMAS CORBISHLEY

THE TITLE OF this paper makes one whose first acquaintance with the *Spiritual Exercises* was way back in the 'teens of this century feel like an old fossil. But even fossils, as we know, have their place in the scheme of things, and can help us to appreciate the onward process of evolution. We are what we are today not least because fossils were what they were. The march of every man is a long, long affair, and it is sometimes useful to look back on where we have come from in order to know a little better where we are going. Few people today would need the advice which Lord Chesterfield gave to his son over two hundred years ago: 'Speak of the moderns without contempt, and of the ancients without idolatry'. The tendency on the whole is not to speak of the ancients at all.

Yet the book we are dealing with in our several ways is over four hundred years old. It is unlikely that it has been left to the present generation to penetrate into its deeper meaning in a way which has been denied to those ancients. Not, of course, that adaptation to the spirit of the age is a sense contrary to the spirit of Ignatius himself. He himself, as we know, insisted that anyone giving the Exercises should be careful to let the Spirit work in the individual retreatant in the way best suited to that individual's mentality and spiritual needs. What is true of an individual is surely true of a generation, of a level of culture, of a particular way of looking at the world. You will, therefore, I am sure, recognise that I embark on my assignment not as a *laudator temporis acti me puero*. On the contrary, it is only because I am convinced that together we can help to make the Exercises a more effective instrument in the service of mankind that I speak at all. Pleased as I naturally was to be invited to give this paper, my acceptance of that invitation was born of a conviction that my experience could be instructive and profitable.

The first time I encountered the *Exercises* – though I was unaware of it at the time – was when I made my first retreat, as a schoolboy. I have to record that the only thing I remember about that whole experience was a story told by the rather stout Jesuit who conducted it. (I believe it was Fr Cortie, the distinguished astronomer.) What effect he had on me I would hesitate to guess at. But, I fear, the same must be said about any one of the long series of annual retreats I made from 1920 until 1936 – the year of my ordination. I remember that one's chief interest centred on the personality of the retreat-giver much more than on the great themes of the Exercises. At the same time, it must also be recorded that the basic thrust of the Exercises – Fundamental Principle, Fall, Incarnation-as-Redemption, Resurrection, Love as the climax of the experience of God – was somehow

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so conditioning one's whole attitude to life that it became impossible to envisage life – whether religious, christian or simply human – in any other terms. 'For me, to live is Christ' took on a meaning which could never fade.

If there is one general criticism of this whole series of annual retreats which could be made it is that I cannot recall any occasion when the retreat-giver dealt in any meaningful way with the subject of prayer. It was either assumed that we scholastics had had sufficient training in prayer in the novitiate or that it was a subject which could be left to look after itself. The result was that the retreat was liable to become just a set of lectures, with a certain top-dressing of what one might call 'devotion', but with little or no reference to growth in the spiritual life.

Nor was the situation improved by the almost universal assumption that each retreat represented a new beginning, rather as though the spiritual life were like a game of snakes and ladders; the ladders being the retreats (with minor ladders provided by the bi-annual triduum) the snakes proliferating throughout the rest of the year. Since Ignatius made so much of the value of the Exercises in helping the exercitant to make up his mind about the way of life he should choose, it seemed to be felt that one could be true to the mind of Ignatius only by making the annual retreat an occasion for, if not a total reformation of life, at least a pretty thorough-going overhaul of every aspect of one's activities, culminating in the Resolution. One of the defects of this approach was that one either managed to keep one's Resolution, which meant that one was 'Getting On' spiritually, or (the commoner situation) one failed to keep it; in which case the retreat had been largely a waste of time, and one could only hope for better luck next time – but without much hope, since the next time was likely to be a repetition of the last.

It was likely to be a repetition of the last almost literally, since most of those who were appointed to give us our retreats appeared to believe that the mere recital of the text of the Exercises produced its effect *ex opere operato*. It seems to me that we have to recognize that whilst, as I said above, the main thrust of the Exercises, from Fundamental Principle to the Contemplation for obtaining Love, is of abiding value, much of the imagery which Ignatius uses to put across his ideas soon ceases to bite – at least for most people. One has to accept the fact that some do find comfort and reassurance in the repetition of the familiar elements – the soul imprisoned in the body, the christian warrior setting out on his crusade, the throne of smoky flame; but it is unfair to the rest of the listeners to make one's retreat largely a string of quotations interspersed with entertaining or edifying stories, rather like the sugar which helps the pill down. I recall the great sense of relief with which I once received a letter from Fr C. C. Martindale, in which he talked about 'the sort of retreat which is sheer encouragement, without perhaps one word of the text of the *Exercises*'. So few of the retreats which I had endured could be described as encouraging; so many had been largely 'faithful' to the letter, and therefore, it was assumed, to the spirit, of the Exercises.

The growing sense of dissatisfaction with the conventional way of handling

the Exercises in the average annual retreat came to a head in my tertian-ship. At the end of the 'Long Retreat' I was filled with a sense of irritation and frustration. Since I had made my first Long Retreat eighteen years earlier, I had been through a course of philosophy and theology, I had spent four years at Oxford University, I had become a priest. Yet it was as though none of this had happened. I was treated as though this was my first encounter with the Exercises, as though my knowledge of theology or any of the ancillary disciplines was rudimentary, as though I was not really committed to the Society of Jesus, or even to Christ. The flat familiar routine was gone through; no attempt was made to deepen the theological dimension, to open up the whole field of prayer, of the meaning of the ascetic life, to discuss the jesuit vocation in the existential situation of the twentieth century. It was as though we were just going through the motion of 'doing the Exercises', as they might have been done by anybody at any period in the last four hundred years. Doubtless it was all very good for me, as they say, if only in a negative way.

But at least I hope that others have benefited from my experience. For when it fell to me in my turn to give retreats, at least I tried to make sure that what I was saying, which was always within the framework of the Exercises, was presented in such a way as to suit the particular group or community I was addressing. There was, of course, always the problem that the average community would include men or women older and wiser than myself in the ways of the spiritual life, as well as a younger element that was just beginning to find its feet in religion. It was therefore necessary to provide a menu which was sufficiently varied to accommodate all tastes. Above all, I have always gone on the assumption that the average religious community is made up of men or women of reasonable good will, for whom the chief obstacle to growth in the spiritual life was not malice or even weakness, but rather a combination of boredom and discouragement: a discouragement due as much as anything to the insensitiveness and incomprehension of far too many 'old-style' retreat-givers, who gave *their* retreat year after year to enclosed nuns, teaching or nursing sisters, priests, professional men, or whatever. Difficult as it is, flexibility is, it seems to me, absolutely essential if the annual retreat is to be more than a penitential exercise, to be a real help to a deepening of one's spiritual awareness, of one's theological appreciation, and not least of one's understanding of God's revelation in scripture, in his world, supremely of course in Christ.

Above all, I have always tried to bear in mind that remark of Fr Martin-dale's about 'sheer encouragement'. Nor shall I ever forget the encouragement I received at the end of my very first retreat, given now over thirty years ago, when an elderly nun – a jubilant – said to me: 'Father, I want to thank you for this retreat; in future, I'm going to enjoy myself'. What a lifetime of repression lies behind that sad utterance! And if I quote the judgment of a certain Provincial, I do so in no boastful spirit, but as a warning and a reminder. 'Father', she said, 'your retreat is absolutely unique; it's so *sane*!'

A warning that, polite as they may be, nuns do see through anything that is unreal, pretentious, unrelated to the realities of life as it is lived. And a reminder that the realities of life for nuns are much the same as they are for us. It is only by being totally honest with oneself that one can hope to carry conviction. It is no use saying something you do not really believe in yourself, in the hope that it will sound impressive. It won't.

When I spoke about 'flexibility', what I chiefly had in mind was that, not only must one try to speak to *this* particular group in their sort of language, but also that one must, all the time, be incorporating into the retreat one's own developing ideas about human nature, the Church, theology, prayer, literature: anything that goes to make up the stuff of human living for a christian and a religious in the twentieth century. If 'your' retreat is a note-book originally compiled in the tertianship, which you take out every summer, blow the dust off and make a tour of two or three convents with, at least I hope it is a loose-leaf note-book, so that from time to time you can introduce new material (and I don't mean new funny stories), incorporating something from your latest reading. Nor do I suggest this out of a desperate desire to be 'with it', but simply because it is only in this way that your retreat will continue to be a living thing and not just a stereotype.

After all that, is there anything more specific I can say about the sort of retreat I have tried to give? First of all, whilst remaining faithful to the broad framework of the Exercises, I feel free to depart from the text, the imagery, as well as anything which belongs to the once-for-all treatment, such as Ignatius originally envisaged. Only in this way, it seems to me, can one make sense of the idea of an *annual* retreat. The suggestion, at least by implication, that it should be regarded as an occasion for yet another effort at reformation would, in effect, mean that the Exercises were not intended to bring about a lasting result but only a temporary improvement which would need to be realized again and again. And if it is retorted that experience shows that we do decline in 'fervour' during the interval between one retreat and the next, my answer to this is that such a decline is to be arrested not by further self-examination and the mechanism of Resolution, but by a deepened appreciation of the whole meaning of the following of Christ. This, I believe, is best achieved by a combination of scriptural interpretation and theological exposition.

It is here, above all, that the framework of the Exercises provides such an excellent opportunity. If, as seems to me inevitable, one begins with the notion of creation, the best treatment is surely through a discussion of what underlies the whole Genesis account, not handled with the naivete of a literal interpretation but in the light of the whole modern approach. After all, you will find that perhaps half the nuns or priests you address have read at least the *Milieu Divin*; and if you cannot help them to relate their reading to their annual retreat, there is a serious danger that the retreat will seem *less real* than their ordinary life, which would be to make the Exercises less meaningful than they should be. If, however, these are presented in a way which

enables your listeners to see them as affording a wide-ranging theology and a comprehensive psychology as the basis for a soundly-based ascetical practice, not only will you have made the retreat meaningful at the moment, but you are more likely to enable its effects to be carried on through the ensuing months.

You will recall that St Ignatius lays it down that, for certain types, it will suffice to give the first week exercises. It does not seem to me to be contrary to this mind to handle these same exercises very lightly when it comes to giving an annual retreat to contemplative nuns, or to the majority of religious of any order. I am not suggesting that they should be omitted. The very requirements of a comprehensive theological survey demand that Fall and Sin, and even the doctrine of Hell, be presented in sober and unsensational ways, should be sketched precisely in order to make sense of the whole idea of redemption. Moreover, it is possible to make such a presentation in a way which will leave it open to those who are personally helped (as some undoubtedly are) by such reflections, to use them as they see fit. On the other hand, we must also recognize that not a few are psychologically disturbed by an over-emphatic insistence on, say, mortal sin as a real danger or damnation as more than a remote possibility.

Since the following of Christ is our common christian and religious vocation, it is inevitable that the centre-piece of the retreat should be the Incarnation, looked at scripturally, theologically, devotionally and what, for want of a better word, I must call historically. Scripturally, first of all, by which I mean relating the fact of the Incarnation to the whole biblical framework, focusing up (in the spirit of Ignatius's own contemplation) not geographically but chronologically – the old covenant seen as God's preparation for his new covenant, his final gift of himself, through Mary, to mankind. In an age when we are being more and more encouraged to give a biblical dimension to our whole religious thinking, it would be a great failure on our part if we did not make the scriptures an integral part of our retreat.

Next, theologically, by which I mean not a disquisition on the hypostatic union but some real effort at what is called an incarnational theology. Without so much as mentioning von Hügel or Bonhoeffer, still less Harvey Cox, we can nevertheless put across certain of their ideas and thus link up both with the Fundamental Principle and the Contemplation for obtaining love. (May I interpose here that there is no point in keeping this latter, as it were, up one's sleeve, to bring it out at the end with a conjuror's flourish. Your audience knows it is there all the time, and it can provide a continuous background throughout the various movements of the retreat.) The only sort of christian presentation which makes sense is one which insists on the whole story, both of creation in general and mankind in particular, as the story of the interaction between the grace of God-in-Christ and that natural order of things which remains incomplete and unfulfilled until its own perfection is subsumed into the divine reality from which it issued in the beginning. For that reason, I always find room for and make much of a contemplation

of the hidden life, insisting that the redemption of the world is going on here in Nazareth just as effectively as on Calvary, Calvary being the final demonstration ('for us men and for our salvation') of what Christ's obedience meant in practice. There is, I know, a school of thought which regards the hidden life contemplation as put in for the benefit of the lay-sisters (or brothers as the case may be). Apart from the fact that this division is in any case out of date, such an attitude of mind shows precisely a failure to grasp what is meant by an incarnational theology.

When I talk about treating the Incarnation historically, I mean that we have to present Christ's ongoing work of redemption as a process continuing throughout history, specifically in the Church. Perhaps especially in these days when not a few people are anxious about 'what is happening' to the Church, it is important to emphasize the idea of the Church as the sacrament of Christ. 'Thinking with the Church', in the days of St Ignatius, meant defending the Church against the attacks of the reformers. In our day, it means putting on the mind of Christ in the largest and fullest sense of that much underrated phrase. If we ourselves take our retreats seriously and encourage others to do the same, we shall become increasingly sensitive to the ideals which Christ lived and which he wishes us to live. It will enable us to discern in the Church what is authentic and what is merely provisional, opportunist, the result of personal prejudice, timidity, arrogance or ignorance. 'Thinking with the Church' means thinking with Christ. It cannot mean thinking that whatever 'the Church' says or does I must accept. It means that I have to recognize that *I* may be wrong. It cannot mean that I have to swallow what is patently contrary to the mind of Christ.

Nor must I limit the action of Christ to the institutional Church. The 'whole of creation' in fact is looking towards the redemptive fulfilment which is being brought about by Christ's life-giving spirit. Obviously, except with an audience which is intellectually sophisticated, this sort of idea will not be developed in any fulness, if at all. But it must at least be consciously present to the mind of the man giving the retreat, if, again, he is to make the Exercises more than an excursion into a nostalgic isolationism. Ignatius was a man of his time. His scientific lore was as limited as his theological expertise. What is surprising is that, given his intellectual limitations, he could yet produce a work which has had such a profound and continuing influence in the Church. But loyalty to him and to his book of the Exercises is best shown by the sort of development which I have here tried to sketch out. Precisely because he was a man of his time, we must be men of our time. The sort of language which modern man finds meaningful would have been meaningless to Ignatius and his contemporaries. *A pari*, the sort of language he used could well be so meaningless to our contemporaries that to employ it might well be to misrepresent the essential truth which he was seeking to convey.

What, then, by way of conclusion, has all this to do with prayer? Here, I suggest, we must distinguish between the prayer *of*, that is, *during*, the

retreat and the ongoing life of prayer during the rest of the year. As regards the latter, we should see the retreat as a time when our listeners are storing up material for their prayer during the coming months, like bees storing up their honey for the winter or, if you prefer, like spiritual humps. As to the retreat itself, experience shows how much people, especially nuns, welcome any help you can give them, either individually or by way of public discussion in this matter. And here again we must recognize that the approach of Ignatius himself was most flexible, not only in his suggestions about different ways of praying, but even more in his recognition of the diversity of individual temperaments and inclinations. The fact that his 'contemplations' always followed the same scheme in the book of the Exercises does not rule out the possibility that, in the actual presentation of them, he himself would have varied his technique and would expect us to do the same. It is, obviously, much easier for the retreat-giver to follow a stereotyped line. But it can destroy the lasting value of the retreat.

I am sure that it is advisable to make it clear to one's listeners that they are not expected to get through all the material presented to them in the immediately ensuing period. In the same way, it is necessary to point out that such theological ideas as one may be putting forward are not intended to satisfy intellectual curiosity. What matters is that *intima cognitio*, that personal appreciation of God's loving care for his children, for this individual child, an appreciation which comes from a true spiritual perceptiveness, a very different thing from theological expertise. But some awareness of the story of God's involvement with his creation is no bad way of arousing that sense of awe which is, if not the beginning, at least an important element in a true spirituality.