

# THE ANNUAL RETREAT: PRESENT AND FUTURE

By GEORGE EARLE

IN THE 1970s I hope we are going to answer two questions. In our annual retreats shall we give the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius or shall we try to promote alternatives? Are we going to relate more closely our annual retreats and our everyday lives?

## *The Exercises and the alternatives*

What is the case for giving or making the Exercises every year? In the first place, the Exercises which we have made, studied and constantly repeated are the most important experience of our lives. Through these Exercises we have experienced the love of Christ. We have a personal grasp of what Christ does for us and for our fellow men. This is the truth which the Church wants us to teach and which the world wants to hear. 'Today this text is being fulfilled'.<sup>1</sup> 'I am with you always'.<sup>2</sup> We cannot pass on a fading memory. Christ must be *present* among us.

A second reason for giving the Exercises frequently arises out of a familiar argument for *not* repeating them. The argument goes like this: the election is fundamental to the Exercises; the election cannot be repeated; therefore the Exercises cannot be repeated. Serious choice – I prefer this word to the technical term election – has to be constantly renewed. Marriage vows do not automatically project into the future the joy and fervour of the marriage ceremony, the party and the honeymoon. Married love is battered by the pressure of earning a living, setting up a home, having children, bringing them up, disagreeing with them, losing them, the flatness of middle age, the emptiness of retirement and old age. The husband and wife have to rediscover and relive their promises to one another. In the last ten years I have been a tertian, a junior member of staff, a new and nervous headmaster, a reasonably experienced headmaster, an ex-headmaster. We change; circumstances around us change. To make our choices real and present we have to go back to the source from which we drew the light and the strength to make our first choice. Then the choice has to be reapplied to our new situation. Without this constant and double renewal of our choice it becomes false and lifeless.

When we talk about giving the Exercises annually what do we mean? What do we have to retain? What modifications can we introduce?

The content of the Exercises vis-à-vis the annual retreat has been presented in Fr Yarnold's paper and I do not intend to repeat what he has said. But the method is just as important: St Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* are as

<sup>1</sup> Lk 4, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 28, 20.

much a manual of pedagogy as they are a syllabus. Fr Corbishley has pointed out that it would be possible to give four or five lectures a day and yet completely to miss the spirit of the Exercises.

Of course the Exercises have a structure, a structure which must be observed if we are to call our annual retreat The Spiritual Exercises. This structure is the pattern of our lives: the story of God's free gift and of our free response. Therefore freedom is essential to the method. It is the freedom of the holy Spirit at work, respecting his plan for this particular person. It is the freedom of those who are making the Exercises, who freely choose to cast away all obstacles that stand between them and God and freely to embrace the love of Christ. The director must stand aside.<sup>3</sup>

As soon as we say 'free gift' and 'free response', we are talking about generosity. God's generosity must be matched by our generosity. Christ's gift of himself must be matched by our gift of ourselves.<sup>4</sup> The Spiritual Exercises should therefore affect the whole of a man. Prayer is essential: prayer of the mind, prayer of the heart, prayer of the feelings, prayer of the body. Prayer should lead to deliberation, decision, action. 'Take and receive O Lord *all my . . .*'<sup>5</sup>

While remaining faithful to the content and method of the Exercises, we can make changes. I agree that we should not stick slavishly to the text and imagery of St Ignatius. Fr Corbishley has mentioned some adaptations. I would like to mention a few more which seem to me to belong to the present and the future.

First of all the liturgy. In the Exercises, experience is crucial: St Ignatius's experience at Manresa is passed on through the experience of the director and becomes the experience of each retreatant. There is no better way of expressing this experience than the liturgy. In the Mass, the administration of the sacraments, the liturgy of the word, in para-liturgical ceremonies such as scripture or penitential services, we are proclaiming and acting out our experience of the gift received and the gift which we hand back. All our readings, responses, prayers, homilies, occasional words here and there to point a meaning; silences can be woven into the texture of the retreat.

The bible too should enrich the retreat. Man groping towards God, his place in God's plan and as a member of God's people, his patient, often agonizing, waiting for someone to come and deliver him, the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Christ, the Spirit-filled experiences of the early Church; simply, eloquently, concretely, the bible tells the story of sinful man with his hands outstretched to his ever-faithful, ever-merciful God.

Both the liturgy and the bible are calling men out of their isolation. They are addressed to groups of people. If we take them seriously there is no room for individualism. Liturgy, bible, an understanding of the Church, have taught us that man on his own is a pathetic, autistic child. It is no coincidence that St Ignatius's experience was shared with others and led to a

<sup>3</sup> Exx 15.

<sup>4</sup> Exx 5.

<sup>5</sup> Exxx 234.

group of companions. Please God the retreats of the future will be less 'private' and will increase our awareness that we are one with each other in the Lord. If we take the two great commandments together in our personal prayer and our shared prayer, we shall not be unfaithful to St Ignatius and his first companions.

Now in the Body of Christ, which is after all the group we are talking about, we have noticed that many of our fellow limbs are lay people. We sometimes forget that the Spiritual Exercises were given in the first decade by a layman to laymen. I hope that more and more laymen and women will be making the authentic exercises of St Ignatius for periods of eight to thirty days. I hope too that we shall come to recognize it as natural for our lay co-workers in parishes, schools and missions to join us in our annual retreats.

I intend to say something in the second part of this paper about flexibility and mobility. Here it is enough to note that we have thought of the annual retreat which lasted eight continuous days and took place in one house. In the future we may come to distribute our time differently and to be prepared to move from place to place. St Ignatius was a pilgrim.

I have argued that we need to renew our experience of the Exercises fairly regularly. 'Fairly regularly' does not necessarily mean every single year. From time to time the pattern can change. I must leave to others a description of the admirable work of the *Cursillos* or the Lombardi 'Better World' retreats. Here I make only one suggestion. We need to know more about the bible, the liturgy, Vatican II or our own jesuit Constitutions. We are busy people, we do not read enough, we do not think enough, we have heavy professional commitments in schools, hospitals, administration. Our aim in some annual retreats could be to acquire a more personal and prayerful grasp of a gospel, the writings of St Paul, one or two of the great books of the Old Testament, the teaching of Vatican II on the Church, the liturgy or religious life. The retreat giver could present a brief outline of his subject with a few key texts, which could provide the basis for prayer. So long as several hours a day were spent in prayer there would be a clear distinction between this kind of retreat and a study week.

Many priests give retreats which are held annually for sixth-formers, students, alumni and alumnae, or other groups. Usually these 'retreats' last only two or three days. Often they consist mainly of talks, discussion groups, films, vocal prayer in common. Clearly they do not remotely resemble the Exercises of St Ignatius. It is a pity that the term 'retreat' is so often used to describe these worthwhile religious gatherings. Ideally a real retreat should last long enough and should contain enough personal prayer for the retreatant to be brought face to face with his Lord and to become conscious of the demands that Christ is making on him. It would be foolish to imagine that a serious choice can be made in any kind of retreat. For a lifetime's commitment to be considered, the retreat should observe the conditions set out by St Ignatius and the retreatant should possess sufficient stability and maturity.

*The annual retreat and everyday life*

In this shorter, more tentative section I want to state a problem and two possible lines of solution.

The problem is as follows. I would not wish to criticize those who have given me retreats. I think they have done their work well. Most have conveyed the spirit and the content of the Exercises. Nor would I wish to beat my breast as a retreat maker. I have tried faithfully to carry out the instructions of retreat directors and the promptings of the holy Spirit. Many hours of my retreats have been enlightening and even moving. But there seemed to be a chasm between these retreats and everyday life. There was little contact between what I saw and experienced during retreats and what I saw and experienced during the rest of the year. The disorder which I put aside and the darkness which I penetrated seemed to envelop me again within a matter of hours. I realized that it was silly to expect retreat life and ordinary life to be identical, but should they be so very different?

My solutions look at the two facets of the problem: the annual retreat and everyday life.

My first solution for the annual retreat is that those who live and work together should occasionally make a retreat together. My own community did this last year. Personal prayer helped the group and the group helped personal prayer. Group retreats could be extended to those with common interests such as parish priests, superiors, headmasters.

Even in a group retreat there is a danger that the old problem will reappear: the curtain comes down, we file out into the streets and real life seems as tentacular as ever. Is it not possible to build a bridge between the two worlds? If the retreatants can only manage eight days, they could spend five or six days in the usual conditions of silence and solitude and two or three days with a combination of prayer and discussion about the relationship between what they had discovered in prayer and the problems that were going to confront them on the morrow. This is exactly what St Ignatius and his companions did when they had an important collective decision to make. Retreats of this sort could give us our first lessons in communal discernment. There might be a positive advantage in spending the last days of such a retreat amidst some of the pressures of everyday life.

My second suggestion comes from the *Exercises* themselves:

In the case of a man of education or ability occupied with public affairs or essential business [not a bad description of some of our retreatants], if he can spend an hour and a half on the exercises, he should be given a homily on the purpose of man's creation: in the same way he can be given the particular examination for half an hour and the way of going to confession and receiving holy communion. Every morning for three days he should make the meditation on the first, second and third sins. For three more days, at the same time, the meditation on the tale of his own sins, and for three days

after that, at the same time, he must do the meditations on the punishments appropriate to sins, being given along with all three meditations the ten additional practices. The same treatment should be kept for the events of our Lord's life, as is fully described in the exercises below.<sup>6</sup>

It is worth noting that St Ignatius is clearly thinking of giving the complete exercises. This approach might help religious communities or groups of lay people to connect the retreat with their everyday situations and promote an inter-penetration of the two worlds, the world of the retreat and the world of ordinary life. In a school we invited senior boys to commit themselves for periods of ten days at a time during which they were given a short talk each evening and spent some time in prayer the next day. The Exercises were thus spread over the whole of Lent. I hope we shall see an extension of this type of retreat for priests, religious and lay people.

Finally I shall take a brief look at my problem from the point of view of everyday life. Sometimes the reason why the time of the retreat and the rest of our time are so separate is that we tacitly – with varying degrees of consciousness – accept some sort of disorder in our normal lives. Sometimes there is sin or the danger of sin. Sometimes we seem to be facing a situation that is beyond us. Maybe our faith is troubled and we seriously wonder whether the holy Spirit is at work in the Church as we meet it every day. Maybe there is fear or hatred in our hearts and we systematically condemn and destroy our colleagues. Maybe we know that the universal love to which we are called in time of retreat and which we profess in those moments of fervour is not reflected when the telephone rings or the morning post arrives. Maybe there is no community to give meaning to our prayers or the pages of St Paul. Maybe we are just much too busy. Maybe we are incapable of coping with our professional work for which we may have had little training and for which we may have a positive distaste. Maybe our problems are altogether too large, too complex, too indefinite, too wearisome. This is the age of the consultant whose role is to insist on the radical self-questioning and self-criticism that the man on the inside cannot face. It is not my purpose to solve readers' problems. I am simply suggesting that some problems call for clarity, courage and prayer that must extend far beyond the period of an annual retreat. Maybe we need a consultant. If we called in St Ignatius I suspect that he would refer us to his 'method of making the General Examen'.<sup>7</sup> But that must wait for another paper.

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<sup>6</sup> Exx 19.

<sup>7</sup> Exx 43.