THE MOOD OF THE PRINCIPLE AND FOUNDATION

By JOHN HARRIOTT

PERHAPS IT IS the onset of middle age, or the weather, or that the priest, like the policeman and the social worker, is so often treated as a repository for people's anxieties and misdeeds: whatever the reason I find myself with every passing year more and more aware of the sadness, the fear, the disquiet and puzzlement which underlie human existence. No matter how closely one agrees with Louis Armstrong that 'it's a wonderful world', or believes in the vision of Julian of Norwich that 'all manner of thing shall be well', it is hard to avoid the conclusion that these are not the views of the majority. At least among the young and the middle-aged – septuagenarians seem to cheer up once they realize the worst is over – 'a state of quiet desperation' seems to be more accurate than it ever was as a description of the human condition. Of course, as you and I know, there are plenty of exceptions to this generalization, but I am emboldened to think that it is not an entirely subjective and wildly inaccurate judgement if one takes account of the figures issued regularly by western governments covering mental disorders, alcoholism, drug addiction and other familiar evidences of latent unhappiness. Even a decade ago, the first chapter of Eric Fromm's book, *The Sane Society*, provided an accumulation of statistics pointing to a serious malaise in society, and few people would suppose that the situation has improved in the interim.

Perhaps this seems rather off the point as an introduction to a paper on the mood of the Principle and Foundation of the Exercises. My excuse is that one of the striking things in the Annotations is St Ignatius's respect and interest in the mentality of those embarking on them, and his frequent insistence on the need to tailor them to what we would call individual temperaments and capabilities. He is very far from wanting to force everybody into the same mould, or to dispense the same medicine for every various ailment. The charge that the Exercises are a form of brainwashing hardly stands up even

to a superficial study of his directions on how they are to be given. As usual, his basic principles, flexibility, variety of approach, regard for personal idiosyncracies, adaptation to circumstance, and the need to let God act directly on the soul of the individual without doctrinaire interference, personal prejudice or any attempt to regiment exercitants on the part of the retreat-giver, are strongly in evidence. It is a lesson we forget at our peril. If a director starts out with the spirit of a clerical demagogue, or schoolmaster determined to drum certain facts into his listeners' heads, or to provoke foreordained emotions and decisions, he is, quite bluntly, not giving the Exercises. Ignatius is a great believer in the Spirit blowing where it will, and he sets out to create conditions in which it can operate freely and be recognized as operating, with no matter what surprising results.

The point I wish to make is that we ourselves, like Ignatius, must be prepared when giving retreats to pay the closest attention to those who are making them – their collective characteristics and their individual differences. Every minute spent in studying these and reflecting on them, and in thinking out how their most evident needs can best be met, is time well spent. My own belief is that if the Exercises do not always seem to achieve the results we expect of them – and the same is true of a good deal of other apostolic work – it is because the retreat-giver is self-centred instead of audience-centred, or because he believes the Exercises are like a film which can be run in an identical way over and over again, no matter what the audience or the circumstances. Above all they are not a medium for impressing one's own personality on a captive audience, or winning disciples to one's own ideas and outlook. The exercitant is to be introduced to certain subjects, but what he makes of them is his own business and God's.

Having said that, I feel freer to return to a few generalizations about the audiences we are likely to be encountering at the present time, and why I believe the Principle and Foundation is peculiarly fitted to needs which are commonly met with among them.

Again, advancing years make me increasingly reluctant to be dogmatic, but generalizing from my own personal experience of paid-up church-goer and unbeliever alike, I would hesitantly suggest that the commonest spiritual or psychic ailments are a sense of loneliness, a feeling of self-contempt, the strain of living with the fact that in each of us there co-exist the extremes of good and evil (that we are capable of being in the same moment both saints and

sinners), and the difficulty of living simultaneously as a believer and a sceptic.

Loneliness (as many of you will know) is probably the most urgent and widespread social problem of our time. It is certainly not confined to old age pensioners living alone; it hits certain categories of people – young house-bound mothers, women whose families have grown up, youngsters in lodgings – with special acuteness. But it would be true to say that it is an epidemic which spares no age-group, class, or profession. Fr Erich Przywara described this feeling in the following words:

> You found comrades
> trusty companions to go with you
> often so close that they seemed to be another self
> but when solitude terrified you
> and you thought they were so near
> so much a part of you
> that in their love your loneliness must disappear
> like clouds in the waxing sunshine
> was it not just then
> that the doors shut more closely than ever
> and you came to know
> that every man keeps his own solitariness
> not to be unlocked by any human hand[1]

This sense of loneliness can be heightened by actual physical isolation, but its essence is a solitude of the heart which can afflict people surrounded by their family, or living in a religious community, or in establishments like university halls of residence. It is certainly a powerful motive underlying many current experiments, both religious and secular, in communal living, and the contemporary absorption with personal relationships. And it seems to be the fear of loneliness and an inability to cope with it which is responsible for many people seeking refuge in noise (such as endless playing of the radio and records) or drugs or alcohol. The trouble is that the flight from loneliness is a hopeless one. Of loneliness, as of God, the psalmist might have written: 'Though I flee to the furthest corners of the earth, thou art there'.[2] There is no escape. At least death has to be faced in utter solitude, and loneliness has to be faced up to and lived with if life is to be tolerable.

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[1] *The Divine Majesty* (tr Thomas Corbishley, London, 1971), p 28.

[2] Cf Ps 139.

The second characteristic is what I have called self-contempt. To someone brought up in a religious tradition which lays such heavy emphasis on humility, it has been a surprising and sobering experience to discover that, as far as I can judge, the majority of men and women need humility as badly as they need a hole in the head. One does not need to be psychic to discover that behind even the blandest, most self-assured and even arrogant exterior, there more often than not lies an abyss of self-distrust and an almost paranoiac self-disgust. I am not claiming that the reasons for this are rooted in the spiritual order. They vary widely. They include the disillusionment that comes with the realization that the goals which society sets are never going to be achieved: that power, good looks, wealth, social status, are permanently out of reach; or that having been achieved they do not deliver the satisfaction that they promised. Self-contempt can spring from recognition of the simple fact that as there are so many people on earth no single one can possibly be of any importance. However much a person is mentally eaten up with his own place in the world, it only needs the imaginative effort to take a rocket's eye view of the globe to make any one of the myriad dots inhabiting it seem very insignificant. A sense of worthlessness is a disease very easily caught, and this is especially true today. In a small village, everyone is easily persuaded that they matter. When the whole world is a village, no-one seems to matter. Identity is drowned in the sea of humanity which has suddenly broken upon the eye.

Another frequent cause of self-contempt is failure in personal relationships. This is perhaps the most common and most destructive of reasons. The deepest human instinct is to love and to be loved. The person who has once or twice offered love only to have it rejected, or been offered love and found no capacity in himself for accepting it, can quickly leap to the conclusion that he is utterly incapable of ever loving or attracting the love of others. Half the counselling that goes on in the world must at bottom be concerned with the problems that arise from this cause. And if one may be allowed an aside, I think as priests we ought to be far more concerned with building up a decent self-respect in those amongst whom we work than with pricking the bubble of pride: standing people on their own feet rather than kicking them when they are down.

Another variety of self-contempt is to be found especially among priests and religious, and other people who are idealists by profession and often enough by temperament. It stems from what is often

regarded in their eyes as a failure to live up to their ideals, and is usually encountered in its most acute form when, at whatever state of life, they are forced to look at themselves realistically and come to terms with flaws which previously they had successfully ignored or even not suspected. This is particularly true of older men and women who have led a fairly sheltered life: one which has not so far exposed them to stress or temptation, or whatever one chooses to call it. The fact is that in every individual there lurks both the murderer and his victim, the concentration-camp torturer and the heroic martyr, the self-sacrificing idealist and the ruthlessly selfish sinner. For those brought up on the dualist spirituality of former days, continually enjoined to live in the world as if they were not of the world, it can be and often is an absolutely shattering experience to discover how fallible and peccable they really are. Without previous warning that such moments of crisis are likely to occur, the discovery of contradictions within themselves, even to the point that in one and the same moment part of them is reaching out to God and another casually prepared to commit what they believe to be grave sin, religious can easily be plunged into a state of abject confusion and self-loathing. It is of course at precisely such moments and through such experiences that the true relationship of God to man can be recognized, and a thoroughly realistic confidence in the love and mercy of Almighty God can be awakened, which has no smack of self-righteousness or self-justification. But it is a lucky retreat-giver who does not run, quite frequently, into priests and religious who imagine that their salvation depends on arriving at their death-bed without a stain on their escutcheon. Such people are only too easily inclined to blame themselves for what is in fact the common condition of human nature, to imagine that they are outside the pale of divine love, and in consequence to sink into a state of enervating self-doubt and self-contempt.

The third common characteristic we can expect to meet at the present time is the inability to see any point to life, any general purpose for mankind as a whole or the individual in particular. We live in an age of creeping scepticism, surfeited with scraps of information, constantly made aware of our ignorance of whole areas of science and learning. The paralysis of judgment occasioned by such reflections afflicts both non-believer and believer alike. Even among the serried ranks of novice-mistresses or monsignori, one can be pretty certain that there will be some who are not at all sure what they really believe or are justified in believing; and these may

well be the most honest and courageous people present. The retreat-giver who does not appreciate that, no matter what the outward appearances, any group of religious and priests with whom he is dealing is likely to be worried by acute and basic problems of faith, is trying to make bricks out of straw. The barbed wire between believer and non-believer has a lot of gaps in it these days, and the same doubts and the same hunger for God can be found on both sides of it.

If this diagnosis is roughly accurate, it will already be evident why I believe that the Principle and Foundation, whose utility has apparently been questioned in recent years, is not less but more important than it has ever been. Like Chesterton's house, it is the starting point for a journey round the world, to which one finally returns and sees in a new light as if for the first time. The Principle and Foundation is nothing less than a concise answer to the basic questions of human existence. What is the focus of that existence? God. What is man's purpose on earth? To praise, reverence and serve God. What is man's ultimate destiny? Eternal salvation. How does he achieve it? By single-mindedly playing the rôle in life for which God has equipped him. It is a terse military man's answer to the basic question, 'What is the object of the exercise?' (The pun is inadvertent.) Its very brevity gives it force: for both the believer and the unbeliever it is a clear sign-posting of the mazy road through life. It meets the need of the unbeliever who cannot make sense of the data of existence which baffle him, and the need of the believer who has lost sight of the overall vision of the christian faith in the minutiae of religious practice.

It is, too, a theological statement about the essence of christianity. Ignatius has a habit of going to the heart of the matter; and the heart of the matter in this instance is that christianity is not essentially an ethical system nor an ideology but a vision of the meaning of man. Within the general context of this faith, as Ignatius shows himself aware both in his Exercises and in his Constitutions, there is ample latitude for different theologies, liturgies, life-styles, individual understanding and development, as opportunities and circumstances dictate. Even if his disciples and interpreters have not always possessed the same amplitude of spirit, there can be no doubting the flexible and liberal cast of Ignatius's own mind.

Equally, there is little doubt that what he supplies as his Foundation is precisely that bedrock christianity to deny which is to cease to be a christian. The rest of the Exercises is an examination of these basic truths through the prism which is Christ; or, if you like,

variations on a basic theme, until the melody is scored into the mind. And it is a liberating summary. Once the journey has been mapped out, the traveller can wander as he will, adventure among ideas, experiences, act upon and react to all the phenomena that life has to offer, sometimes succeed and sometimes fail; but he can always know where he is going. It is this liberating vision which, I believe, people today need and look for urgently, and which is worlds removed from the detailed handbooks, the codes and lists of prescriptions, which are so often dispensed in the name of christianity and which weigh people to the ground before they have even taken their first steps. The christain faith does not give details of the journey in the manner of a railway timetable: it does not provide an encyclopedia of answers to every question that teases each individual human being. But it does tell us who we are and where we are going. It does not hand out, except at a secondary level, sweets and sauces which provide occasional stimulation for the palate, or medicines for every fleeting ailment. Its pabulum is the coarse bread of life itself, and the cure for the literally deadly sickness which afflicts us from cradle to grave.

If there is a problem, then, it does not lie in the content of the Foundation. More probably it lies in the way that we communicate its elemental principles; perhaps, for example, as Fr Rickaby suggests, by presenting it as a rhadamanthine and daunting commandment rather than as an ideal to be pursued little by little. Nothing is more harmful than making the ideal the rule for beginners: and this is a trap into which religious communicators easily fall. But to return to the main point.

The Principle and Foundation focuses attention where man's attention needs to be focused – on God, a God who is the creator and destiny of man, who alone can meet his deepest hungers and solace his natural afflictions. To all the problems I have mentioned above, God is the only answer. His continual presence is the only solace for man's loneliness, and indeed he is the reason and the object of that solitude of the heart which nothing human or finite can assuage. To quote Fr Przywara again:

> Therefore occur
> these solitudes in your life
> therefore are they the true life of your life
> since in them the true inner face of all that is
> reveals itself
> for during them the veil falls

> the veil that else for your eyes of flesh and blood
> shrouds ultimate reality . . .
> in their unstirring peace
> the one only God
> speaks to your soul[3]

It is to provide at least hope of that experience that the Exercises are directed. The only comfort which can be held out to the lonely, and for which their conditions prepares them, is the conviction that God is present to them.

For those whose self-respect has been eroded or destroyed, it is the conviction that they are the work of God's hands, fashioned by infinite Wisdom with all the necessary equipment to achieve a satisfying and mature humanity, named by him as his children, that can restore their pride in themselves independently of all human judgments and criteria of success. And the point is driven home by Ignatius's insistence that health and wealth and prestige are all subordinate to the harmony between what the individual is and has achieved, and what God wishes him to be and to achieve. In an age when people are bent into all kinds of crooked and painful shapes by social pressures, that is a liberating and curative principle.

For those who cannot bear to be human and are disgusted by the flaws and tensions within themselves, it is useful to be reminded that it is God who has made us as we are, and made himself one of us as we are. As our creator, he can understand us better than we understand ourselves, make allowances for our condition, know what expectations are reasonable. For those who are paralysed by scepticism, bombarded into insensibility by a barrage of facts, it is helpful to be faced bluntly with statements which, if true, reduce all else in the world to matters of secondary interest, and which cut a path through all life's experiences and philosophies.

At the same time, it would be very surprising if the product of a sixteenth century mind, however prophetic and visionary, with a sixteenth century audience in view, did not need some adaptation to the contemporary mentality and sensibility. Even if it does, as I have argued, meet modern man's questions and afflictions, it may still prove unpalatable if it is served up uncooked *à la mode.*

It is in the communication that there is most room for the flexibility and experiment which Ignatius prized; and also most room for dispute. All I can do is throw out a few considered reflec-

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[3] *Loc. cit.*, p 29.

tions which can serve as a basis for discussion.

First of all, as I remarked earlier, we must make greater allowances than Ignatius for scepticism among our audience, even concerning the most basic christian beliefs, and even though it may comprise professional christians, priests and religious who have been over the same ground twenty times before. In blunt terms, Ignatius could take a general belief in the existence of God for granted. We cannot. It used to be said that a retreat was not the place for academic philosophy or even theology. I used to believe this myself. At one level it is still true that a retreat is not a study circle. But the giving of retreats has convinced me that a place must be found at every stage of the Exercises for a christian apologetic – however distasteful the word – which at least demands serious consideration. Not of course with any notion of substituting thinking about God for communication with God, but at least with the object of reinforcing that latent belief which in the ordinary course of life must come under some pressure. No one can get far in considering his relationship with God if he is nagged by a doubt whether there is a God to relate to: or very profitably meditate on the work of redemption and its effects upon himself if he is not at all sure that Christ is God. I say this though well aware that God can on occasion provide directly a depth of conviction that by-passes the ordinary paths of reason. But one grows increasingly suspicious of religious sentiments and devotions disconnected from theology: and by theology I mean theology as it flourishes today, the present state of learning, not a bewhiskered theology four centuries old, or a few faint reminiscences of scholastic manuals of the nineteen twenties.

This is not to advocate ploughing remorselessly through theoretical proofs for the existence of God and his creation of the universe. But if the Principle and Foundation is not to degenerate into dogmatism, bluster, or pious sentiment, it will be well to resume whatever reasons convince the retreat-giver himself that at least the balance of probability rests on the side of God's existence. If that blows the retreat from the start, too bad. If the retreat-giver cannot make out a case for his own beliefs that commands a decent respect, he is not likely to be of much utility in the later stages of the Exercises. But he cannot get it off to a better start than by convincing his listeners that the agnostic does not have all the best tunes.

A purely mathematical or philosophical line of argument is not, however, enough. We are not concerned merely to point to a formidable *ignotum* at the end of the line. We must also be concerned with

the question: What is God like? As it stands, the Principle and Foundation is only too likely to put the modern retreatant off rather than stir his enthusiasm. Ignatius, as we have all heard countless times, leaned heavily on the courtly ideal. Duty, even painful duty, was a word which in the context of his time had a powerful emotive force. That is not true today. If we simply state as he did that it is man's duty to praise, reverence and serve God because God made him, the effect on a modern sensibility is likely to be very different from the effect on that of a spanish grandee. The modern man does not suffer statutory obligations gladly. He is likely to retort that if the christian God is so swollen with vanity and so overbearing that he insists on his creatures giving him their praise, reverence and service, then he will have nothing to do with such a God. He thinks of relationships, I believe quite rightly, in terms of love freely given and freely accepted. Whatever is forced on him against his will is worthless, especially in what he chooses to give to others. He has no taste for an 'ought', because it is the rule, but only with an 'ought' because it is deserved. The Principle and Foundation, therefore, needs to be presented in terms of attraction, not imposition. We need to make the point that we do not praise, reverence and serve because God in some draconian way insists on it, but because if we catch the faintest glimpse of God we cannot help ourselves. We praise him in as instinctive a way as we would praise a human being who impressed us by his beauty or skill, reverence him as we would reverence a person who was shiningly good, serve him because we feel driven to it, because we want to, because it is a pleasure. In crude terms, it is the difference between clapping because a little man waves a board at us saying 'Applause', and rising to our feet clapping like mad because the orchestra has taken wings.

Certainly, the full force of God's attraction and lovableness can only be felt in meeting Christ; but Christ is the complete, not the sole, revelation that God has made of himself. We can initially and at least at second-hand recognize something of the attractiveness of God and feel the first promptings of an inclination towards him: this by examination of the world around us. The retreatant can be asked to reflect on whatever and whoever in his ordinary life draws him to praise, reverence and service, even if these are not words he commonly uses. It may be as earthy as footballers, beautiful girls, sunsets, mountains, steam engines, old people or kipper ties. But there is no great difficulty for the retreat-giver in roughing out instances of goodness, wisdom, beauty, power, fertility, creativity,

or what have you, in the ordinary circumstances of life, and making the point that God is the source, the inventor, of everything in life that we admire and feel drawn to; and that in this roundabout way we can feel drawn to him. Such an approach to God is not a substitute for but a complement to the approach through Christ. And it prepares the way for meeting a God in Christ whose relationship with us can only be described in terms of love.

If we do not tackle the Principle and Foundation along some such line, then I think we do both God and Ignatius an injustice, and injure the exercitant. Of course, a few tough-minded warriors may regard this approach as too soft. They may delight in the idea of a God who can pound his creatures into a pash if he wants to, of man being such a nothing that he must toe the line whether he likes it or not, and may be unable to get beyond the notion that the acme of virtue is stoic obedience. But the key to God's dealings with us must surely lie in Christ's relationships with ordinary men and women, and in our own experience of human relationships at their finest. The relationship of emperor to his court, of bully to his fag, of sergeant-major to his raw recruits, does not seem to me to represent either. Nor, equally, if one may go on to say so, can we or should we talk in such terms of Christ, or the Church, or the local parish priest. In strictest terms, it may be abstractly true that we must do what God wants because we have to. The Principle and Foundation may seem to be saying just that. But the whole tenor of the Exercises is against such an interpretation. Ignatius's whole purpose is to turn that 'have' into 'want', and to show that what we most profoundly want is what God wants *for* us. 'Thy will be done' is not a teeth-gritting surrender to destruction, but the consignment of ourselves to the arms of infinite Goodness and infinite Wisdom. That insight sets the tone for the whole of the Exercises. If we get the first note wrong the whole melody goes awry. This is why the Principle and Foundation is to be prized: but at the same time handled with care. St Ignatius was certainly not exhorting us all to shout 'Heil' on the word of command. The Principle and Foundation is meant to be the first lesson for lovers, not a die-stamp for fascists or forelock-touching peasants.