

# THE ELECTION IN THE ANNUAL RETREAT

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THE REFLECTIONS IN this paper presuppose a certain situation, namely the giving of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola in a 'condensed' form, lasting six, eight or ten days, to men or women religious, either as a 'preached' or 'directed' retreat. They also presuppose that these religious have done the Spiritual Exercises a number of times before in some form. The original Exercises had quite different presuppositions. They were meant to last about thirty days, were given by a director to one person, who was making them for the first time, and who usually had a major decision to make. Of the many adaptations, some spoken about or foreseen by Ignatius, others of later design or development, the 'condensed' Exercises (whose origin is attributed to St Peter Canisius) became so common as the form for the annual retreat of religious that they are even sometimes referred to as the 'classical form'. Their justification lies in the claim that the dynamism of the Exercises is such that, although one has shortened the time, basically the same results can be obtained as from the thirty-day retreat. This position is not advanced with quite so much confidence today. Nevertheless, we accept it here as a starting point, and we shall try to isolate one particular problem that arises as a result. This is the problem of whether, in such a retreat to religious, there is a place for the election in any real sense of the word. The question can be posed in this form: 'Given that religious have already made an election as to their state of life, is it not better to omit the election altogether?' The frequent implication is that, in such a 'condensed' form of the Exercises given annually to religious, it is sufficient to get the retreatants to make some practical resolutions about the day-to-day running of their lives.

The first objection to this solution of the problem is based on the interpretation that the election is the heart and centre of the ignatian Exercises: the summit to which everything before it leads, and from which everything after it flows. The psychological structure of the

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Exercises is geared precisely to aiding the exercitant in making a good and correct (that is, from God's view) election. One has only to think of the format of the second week: the presentation of the figure of the historical Jesus, the meditations on the Kingdom and the Two Standards, the challenges presented by the reflections on the Three Classes of Men, and the Three Degrees of Humility. All are designed to lead the exercitant to a sense of responsibility and to great generosity. Furthermore, there is the positioning, immediately after the election, of the contemplations of the third week, on the Passion of Christ, with the aim of strengthening the exercitant's resolve in abiding by the election already made. If one omits the election, the purpose of the contemplations on the infancy, public life and passion of Christ will be quite different from that which Ignatius intended in the Exercises. This is not to deny that such contemplations can and do produce other fruits of devotion and increase in the love of God, but they would not be those directly and primarily intended for the Spiritual Exercises. If, then, the annual retreat is meant to be really a 'condensed' form of the Exercises, the election must somehow retain its place.

But are not 'resolutions', in the ordinary sense of the word, sufficient? The reason why a negative answer must be given to this question is simply that resolutions on day-to-day living are out of proportion with the careful and intense build-up of the Exercises. This statement must not be misunderstood. We do not mean to minimize the value or importance of resolutions, or to say that one well-chosen and well-kept resolution may not be able to exercise a great and profound influence on the whole of one's life, or even that such resolutions may not form a sort of *addendum* to the election. (We shall return to this point later.) But one does not need the whole apparatus of the 'condensed' Exercises to achieve this kind of result. Such resolutions can be decided on by those who merely do the exercises of the first week. They are the natural extension of the general and particular examen. But much more spiritual energy has been generated by the end of the second week.

It may be objected that in the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* itself, this substitution of 'resolutions' for election is provided for.<sup>1</sup> Although this paragraph, which is headed '*Para emendar y reformar la propia vida y estado*' (for the amendment and reformation of one's own life and state), is addressed explicitly to those '*que están consti-*

<sup>1</sup> Exx 189.

*tuidos en prelatura o en matrimonio*' (who are settled in the state of a prelate or a married person), one would be forcing the text to take the latter clause in an exclusive sense: that is, as excluding religious or even single lay people who for one reason or other are unable to take holy orders or enter religious life or marry. If one refers back to the places where Ignatius speaks of definitive decisions that have been already made and are therefore irrevocable, such as the priesthood, marriage etc., the above mentioned groups of people must be understood as included by the author's use of 'etc'.<sup>2</sup> What is of importance in our present considerations, however, is that Ignatius, in speaking of amendment and reform of one's state, is envisaging the type of person who, although he cannot change his state of life, whatever it may be, has nevertheless discovered (maybe for the first time) that God is absolute master of all; and that consequently his chosen state of life, and all that it involves, must be subservient and dedicated totally to him. Are religious automatically outside this category? And if this situation is indeed verified, it will not be adequately met by what is usually meant by 'resolutions', but rather by a real ignatian-style election.

Even if one accepts the line of reasoning so far, the main difficulty remains to be faced. A 'real' election must be about something fundamental in a person's life. In the case of religious, apart from their baptism, there is nothing more fundamental than their consecration to God as expressed by their vows. There is indeed a close relationship between baptism and religious profession, a relationship that needs to be teased out more than has been done in the past. *Lumen Gentium* at least gives us a starting-point in its statements:

It is true that through baptism he (the religious) has died to sin and has been consecrated to God. However, in order to derive more abundant fruit from this baptismal grace, he intends, by the profession of the evangelical counsels in the Church, to free himself from those obstacles which might draw him away from the fervour of charity and the perfection of divine worship. Thus he is more intimately consecrated to divine service. This consecration gains in perfection, since by virtue of firmer and steadier bonds it serves as a better symbol of the unbreakable link between Christ and his Spouse, the Church.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Exx 171, 172: *así como son sacerdocio, matrimonio, etc.; así como es matrimonio, sacerdocio, etc.*

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

This relationship between baptism and profession makes all the more exigent the question: is not the idea of making an election about vows, which have already bound one for life and are closely linked with one's baptism, a contradiction in terms? Worse than that (it is said), is it not morally wrong to question the religious commitment once made? Such a commitment can be meditated on, deepened, expressed more perfectly in daily living, 'renewed' in this sense; but to say that the once-for-all giving of oneself to God can be made the subject of a real election during each annual retreat, is contrary to all traditional theology of the religious life. The religious state must be treated as 'irrevocable', in the same way as Ignatius regarded the priesthood and the married state in the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

One must tread warily here. Ten years ago, this line of objection would have been overwhelmingly strong. Today, however, it has lost some of its force. The 'once-for-all' interpretation of the vows may well be valid theoretically, but no longer existentially. At a time in the Church when so many are in fact leaving the religious state, even after making perpetual vows, it is hard for those who still remain religious to be so certain that their own commitment is unshakable. Added to this is the climate of opinion in which the very possibility of any permanent commitment, whether through religious vows, the priesthood or marriage, is being contested. It is being held as psychologically impossible (and therefore morally wrong) to say that one will remain in a certain way of life beyond a period of time and a set of circumstances which are clearly foreseeable. The idea of a commitment 'for better or for worse', stretching out into an unknown future, is at best merely a childish, romantic or idealistic dream.

The point to be underlined is that one does not have to hold these opinions to be affected by them. Of course, if one does hold the above 'modern' view of vows in general, an election during the annual retreat is no longer merely a matter for speculation on its possibility, but an obvious necessity.<sup>4</sup> In such a case there is no problem. We are rather considering those religious who hold (as the

<sup>4</sup> An obvious case is that of Institutes in which religious, after the novitiate, make temporary vows for a stated period, and may renew these several times before making perpetual profession. The Instruction *Renovationis Causam*, in granting the faculty to all Institutes to substitute promises for temporary vows 'during the probationary period', has in mind the sort of difficulty raised here, whilst stressing the irrevocable nature of the authentic religious commitment. Cf *Renovationis Causam*, 6-8; *Supplement to The Way*, 7 (June, 1969), pp 33-44 (*Ed*).

writer does) that this interpretation of vows is erroneous both psychologically and theologically, but who are, in some way at least, influenced by the prevailing climate of opinion. For them there can be a real difference between what they hold theoretically and what they feel existentially. We are suggesting, then, that religious today must constantly choose anew their way of life, their permanent commitment; and that *a fortiori* they must do so during their annual retreat, which in any view is a more intensive period of spiritual experience and discernment. Such a calculated and deliberate choosing, or 're-choosing', of their religious state, precisely because of the conditions of the world today, seems to merit the name of election. It is admittedly not the choice of a *new* state of life, but it seems to be much more than the acceptance (almost passive and resigned) of an 'irrevocable' previous decision in the sense intended by Ignatius. Is it not, in fact, a worthy and proportionate climax to the drive of the second week? There is an analogous situation in the life of every believer.

Since no country or culture is nowadays so christian in atmosphere and spirit that christian beliefs and morals can be taken for granted, there exists a need for each mature individual constantly to choose afresh to live out his baptismal commitment. In modern discussions of pastoral theology this is frequently emphasized. Especially for those who have received baptism as infants, the promises made in their name by sponsors must be deliberately, consciously and personally entered into by the adult at some moment or other – it will often be a moment of crisis. But this necessity is not exclusive to the case of those who received infant baptism. As in the case of religious vows, while a 'once-for-all' promise may be valid in theory (and in the case of baptism we have to preserve the doctrine of the sacramental character), nevertheless existentially much more is required. One can look on the public recital of the creed at the sunday liturgy as the ordinary way of re-making this baptismal commitment, while the renewal of one's baptismal promises during the paschal vigil is the more solemn, annual way. These acts are by no means superfluous, even though the person may be implicitly living out his christian commitment by leading a good, moral and faith-inspired daily life. Can we not say that the ceremony at the paschal vigil contains (at least for the thinking person) the more important elements of a real election?

There is yet another way of looking on the possibility of a religious making an election on the subject of vows, and again it is closely

linked with the times in which we live, and more especially with the efforts at the renewal of religious life inspired and encouraged by the second Vatican Council. In any age in the Church, a religious who is faithful to his vocation, and who is getting to know God better through prayer, will grow in the understanding and appreciation of his vows. Nowadays, however, it often seems that much more is taking place than just this kind of normal growth. There is frequently the situation where the religious now has a completely different conception of his vocation and of his vows than when he made his first commitment. Many had a strictly canonical understanding of the vows, which has now become more evangelical. Many interpreted them in a decidedly individualistic manner, and this has now become more ecclesial. Many held a narrowly ascetical view, which has now blossomed out into a broader, 'mystical', vision. Furthermore, a certain dualism, which regarded one's vows as somehow distinct from the apostolate has in many cases become harmonized into more integrated synthesis. In this situation, cannot one speak truly of an election, where the religious gathers together his years's thoughts and experiences, and deliberately chooses to live out his vows *in the new meaning* that he has discovered in them?

This presentation of the contemporary situation is hardly an exaggeration. Are there not many leaving the religious life today precisely because they claim that they did not understand what the vows involved then they first took them? And do we not hear older religious saying: 'This is not the order that I joined'? Religious are finding themselves in a radically new situation. Some respond by opting out. But surely those who remain are making an equally fundamental, even if exteriorly less obvious, choice or election. Given what we know of the difficulties attached to the making of such an election, it is not unreasonable to hold that often it can be made only during a time of more intense spiritual awareness and openness to the Spirit, such as the annual retreat. If this line of argument is accepted, then to omit the election from such a retreat, or to water it down in some way or other, is at best imprudent, and could have grave consequences for many people's vocation.

The foregoing ideas give life and meaning to attempts at personal reform in day-to-day living, which are usually referred to as resolutions. We have already suggested that these latter could be looked on as an *addendum* to the election. If, during the annual retreat, a religious makes an election on his state of life of the kind discussed above, then his resolutions, which bring his new ideals down to the

details of day-to-day living, will be more than just a tightening-up of the ascetical life. They will be the concrete expression of his determination to live out his religious vows in this *newly-understood* manner. A difficulty with resolutions made during the annual retreat is that they often tend to centre on an ideal or ideals set up at some time in the past, but never reached or fulfilled. This can lead to depression and frustration. If, on the other hand, they can be linked to a *new* vision, to a fresh and vivid ideal, then they will generate more lively enthusiasm and banish discouragement arising from past failures.

The arguments advanced in this paper have been based on an interpretation of the religious in the world today, grappling with problems of vocation which may be special to our time. It can, however, be further argued that even if one prescind from these particular circumstances, the presentation of the election ought never to be omitted from the 'condensed' Exercises as given annually to religious. Such an omission would seem to disregard the fact that there are definite turning-points in the spiritual life of every person. From time to time, God makes known to us that something new is wanted, some expression of generosity and love which up to now has not been asked. (We have only to think of what spiritual writers mean by a 'second conversion'.) This will not occur every year of our lives, and indeed there is no guarantee that it will occur during the time of retreat at all. But given that, under divine Providence, we possess in the Exercises an excellent means of finding the will of God for us, it seems at best a pity to omit the election and in so doing change, at least somewhat, the purpose of the Exercises themselves. Is it not feasible that we religious tend to shy away from the idea of a second conversion, from the possibility that God may want more than the 'all' which we thought we had given by our vows? Or is it that we do not really believe that the spiritual life is a dialogue, intensified during times of retreat, in which God really can and does offer us personal invitations to greater intimacy with him? We sometimes succumb in practice to the secularization theory that God wants us to learn to live as though he did not exist. This is the very antithesis of the biblical and ignatian view of how God works in the world. It is an agnosticism which, if followed through, would first paralyse and then kill our spiritual life.

In summary then, we are suggesting that in the annual retreat for religious, if this is given in the form of the 'condensed' Spiritual Exercises, the election ought not to be omitted. On the analogy of

a christian constantly making the existential choice to live out the commitment of faith, the religious also can, and in these days *must*, choose anew to live out fully the commitment of his vows. Even if it is not at all evident where religious life is going, he has to commit himself to an unknown future. An added reason for the election is that with the process of renewal in religious life, he may (and hopefully does) have a very different understanding of the vows than when he first pronounced them. Finally, the fact that, at certain times in each person's life, God asks for some completely new giving of self, suggests at least the prudence of presenting the election as a means which God may well use to present the individual with his loving invitation. In all these cases, the practical day-to-day resolutions, viewed as an *addendum* to the election proper, will gain depth, meaning and relevance.