

# THE BASICS OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

By EDWARD YARNOLD

THERE USED TO BE a vogue for medleys of tunes with titles like 'Selections from Gilbert and Sullivan' and 'Popular hits of the nineties'. Now when we give an annual retreat are we offering something similar: 'Gems from the *Spiritual Exercises*'? Or are we guiding the exercitants in a unified process, including from the complete Exercises a sufficient number of the essential parts to ensure that the machine will work? I assume that the second suggestion is the correct one.

But at once one is up against a difficulty: the purpose of an annual retreat is different from that of the full ignatian Exercises. St Ignatius stated that the purpose of the Exercises was 'to help the exercitant to conquer himself and to regulate his life so that he will not be influenced in his decisions by any inordinate attachment'. All that is said about election in the Second Week shows that St Ignatius means by 'decisions', not so much everyday choices, but important permanent choices, particularly choices of a state of life.<sup>1</sup> The annual retreat, on the other hand, is not normally focused on such choices. In what sense, therefore, can we say that an ignatian annual retreat is the unified whole which performs the same function as a decisive thirty-day retreat? The answer, I think, is that fundamentally both types of retreat have this purpose: to confirm and strengthen the exercitant's commitment to Christ by helping him to penetrate more deeply into the purpose of life, the fact of his sinfulness and the paschal death-resurrection pattern of Christ's life. This is not merely theoretical knowledge: the Exercises also help him to discover and embrace the practical consequences of that commitment to Christ, and to discover and reject all that is inconsistent with it. Now the making of a major decision may be one of the practical consequences of the commitment; but it is not so essential that the Exercises do not produce the primary effect without it. Consequently an ignatian annual retreat is the integral Exer-

---

<sup>1</sup> First Annotation (Exx 1).

cises, not simply a selection of meditations from them.

The question of the election needs to be pursued a little further, and here we run into conflicting opinions.<sup>2</sup> Some would say that, though the election is not the be-all and end-all of the annual retreat, a small election of some sort needs to be made, not so much for its own sake as for the sake of providing something for the exercitants to get their teeth into. It is as if one had a mechanical coffee-grinder that worked with such sophistication and elegance that one went on grinding coffee in order to see the machinery work. If one did not put in coffee beans, the grinder would not work at all; and so one goes on grinding for the sake of grinding rather than for the sake of the coffee. Since the subject of the election cannot year after year be something like one's state of life, it is sufficient on this view to make an election about some less important practical matter. Failing that, I can make a choice about a particular type of christian life to which God seems to be calling me: am I, for example, to base my spiritual life on the desire to suffer with Christ, or on the wish to perform God's will faithfully at every moment, or on complete trust in God, or on the attempt to see my fellow men as members of Christ's Body?

The opposing view maintains that, useful as such an election may be, it is not essential to the Exercises. The coffee-grinder will work even without any coffee in it. It is enough for the Exercises to be focused on the deepening of one's commitment to God. This second view is one which I personally favour. But whichever side one takes, it is unnecessary, time-wasting and an encouragement to scruples to apply the whole weight of the machinery of an election to a trivial practical decision – 'What should I give up for Lent?'; or to a straightforward resolution: 'I must go to bed at a reasonable hour'. Resolutions will frequently need to be made, but I should not inflate them into elections and make the whole retreat revolve around them.

This brings us to a second prolegomenon. The Exercises should not be made to sound pelagian or semi-pelagian. Yet it must be admitted that St Ignatius's description of them does sometimes seem to over-emphasize the importance of our efforts and to under-emphasize the importance of grace. For example: 'just as strolling, walking and running are bodily exercises, so spiritual exercises are methods of preparing and disposing the soul to free itself of all inordinate attachments and, after accomplishing this, of seeking and

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf Fr Brian O'Leary's article on this point, *infra*, pp 46-53.

discovering the divine will regarding the dispositions of one's life, thus ensuring the salvation of his soul'.<sup>3</sup> The modern fashion, on the contrary, is to neglect or decry the use of *methods* of prayer or self-improvement, like the particular examen, partly on the grounds that they are too contrived and lacking in spontaneity, partly because they are pelagian in spirit. It is of great importance, then, to state clearly that to make efforts to arouse in oneself particular spiritual affections is not to deny the need of grace. St Ignatius, in the first exercise of the third week, emphasizes first the need of grace. 'The third prelude is to ask what I desire; here it will be to ask for sorrow, affliction and confusion because the Lord is going to his passion on account of my sins'.<sup>4</sup> A few lines later the emphasis is on the effort. 'Here I will begin with serious effort to strive to grieve, to be sad and lament. I will strive in like manner through the following points'.<sup>5</sup>

To speak of the need of striving, then, is not to deny the need of grace. Nor is the striving a preparation for grace. The striving itself is possible only through grace. In fact sometimes the striving will itself be the only fruit of the exercise. For example, I may not succeed in feeling sorrow with Christ's sufferings; the grace granted me may simply be to try to feel it.

This is an important point. God never refuses a prayer for grace: 'If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the holy Spirit to those who ask him'.<sup>6</sup> There is, therefore, a danger that the exercitant may feel that if he prays for the grace, say, of compassion with Christ's sufferings, but remains cold and unmoved, he must himself be to blame for his failure to experience compassion. The results can then be either despondency and a sense of failure, or else repeated straining efforts to squeeze out of himself the particular affection for which he has prayed. This is an insidious form of semi-pelagianism. If the grace is not given me, I feel it must be my fault; therefore *I* must make greater efforts to remove the obstacles I am setting up in the way of grace. On the contrary, not only are our efforts themselves the results of grace, and accompanied by grace; they may be for me, here and now, precisely the grace of a particular exercise. Sometimes in a retreat to travel hopefully is more important than to arrive.

But how does this fit in with St Ignatius' remark that 'since some exercitants are slower than others in finding the contrition, sorrow

---

<sup>3</sup> Exx 1.

<sup>4</sup> Exx 193.

<sup>5</sup> Exx 195.

<sup>6</sup> Lk 11, 13.

and tears for their sins that they are seeking, they may need to spend longer on a particular part of the Exercises'?<sup>7</sup> It is clearly implied that to strive is not enough: you should go on striving until you receive the grace you are striving for. Evidently this is more important if someone is making the Exercises for the first time, and in the full thirty-day form with a view to making an election; for the Exercises are intended to produce the dispositions needed for an enlightened decision. In an annual retreat it may be sufficient simply to strive and pray for the dispositions. But even in the thirty-day retreat, St Ignatius apparently would be prepared to settle sometimes for the striving, for he states that 'however slowly a particular person achieves the dispositions he is striving for, the Exercises should be completed in about thirty days'.<sup>8</sup> Of course the striving should always be a peaceful effort which relies on God rather than on self. Although the kingdom of heaven yields to violence, and we are told to work out our salvation in fear and trembling, 'it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work according to his good pleasure'.<sup>9</sup>

What has been said about the need to make efforts, and not to wait for grace in passive expectation, fits in with St Ignatius' repeated insistence on self-examination as in the particular and general examens, and the reflection after a meditation or contemplation. This typically practical and realistic teaching has also become unfashionable, and it is accordingly valuable to emphasize it. The christian life is not lived, and sanctity is not attained, by impromptu reactions to the needs of each moment, however sincere and spontaneous they may be. God's glory and the needs of our neighbours, whom we are told to love as Christ loved, alike demand that we take pains to discover what is best for ourselves and for them, and to ensure that we find out where we have gone wrong and correct ourselves. Our present age needs to be constantly reminded that God's will and our neighbour's good are data to be discovered and that good intentions are not enough.

After these lengthy preliminaries I shall now turn to what seem to me the essential parts of the Exercises.

#### *The Foundation*<sup>10</sup>

a) It has often been pointed out that the foundation is formulated in terms of natural theology, without any reference to Christ or the

<sup>7</sup> Exx 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Phil 2, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Exx 23.

scriptures. Ignatius's intention may have been to emphasize the remorseless logic of the meditation. Fr Rickaby tells the story of the young sailor, striding up and down clutching a piece of paper with the Foundation written on it, and muttering time and again the words 'Dammit, it's true'. It is this clarity of logic that gives this exercise its power. At the same time it must be confessed that the Foundation is theologically jejune. God's purpose in creating man cannot be adequately explained without reference to the doctrines of the Trinity and grace. The practical problem that faces the retreat-giver is to find a way of enriching the meditation theologically without sacrificing its simplicity and cogency. Perhaps in an annual retreat the cogency will anyhow have become dulled through familiarity, so that it is more important to develop the ideas theologically.

b) The Foundation states that it is God's purpose that we should praise, reverence and serve him, and puts this purpose before the exercitant as an object of unquestionable and supreme value. This again is something that needs to be emphasized for the present age, with its attraction for secularism. It is salutary to be reminded that adoration is the fundamental human virtue. This reminder is a counter-weight, not only to a horizontal spirituality that ignores the vertical, but also to an attitude to prayer which regards time spent in the attempt to pray as valueless and mere formalism, unless I can see myself getting something out of it. The age-old advice of spiritual directors and mystical writers, that in aridity the essential thing is to keep up the attempt, is too frequently neglected today, not only by relative beginners but even by some spiritual directors, who on this score seem to suffer a strange failure of nerve.

c) The use of creatures and indifference. St Ignatius's *tantum quantum* should be interpreted, not as a grudging limited concession ('use those things in so far as they help him obtain his end'), but as an encouragement not to hold back from any use of them which helps man to obtain his end. Teilhard's *Milieu Divin*, with its dedication 'for those who love the world', is a commentary on the Foundation.

It follows from what has just been said that it is a mistake in this meditation to contrast the *tantum quantum* with the *magis*, as if the former were less perfect than the latter. On the contrary, both imply a willingness to do what is most in accordance with God's glory. Similarly, the teaching on indifference does not represent a further stage of perfection: it is simply a spelling out of the implications of

the *tantum quantum*: this search for God's glory alone in the use or renunciation of creatures implies that we would not choose the attractive things of life, like health or riches, any more than their opposites, simply because they are attractive.

In my opinion, the Foundation is not the place for a formal self-examination on the ways in which we fail in indifference. Of course, if the exercitant feels moved by the spirit to make such an examination at this stage, he should do so. But the consideration is meant to be general: a principle, an axiom from which the rest of the first week is deduced. There is plenty of room for self-examination later in the first week and in the second.

### *First Week*<sup>11</sup>

The main purpose of the first week in the Exercises is to move the retreatant to contrition and a purpose of amendment, so that he may be in the right dispositions to enter the second week. In the annual retreat, however, the retreatant will normally be already in a state of contrition. For such a one, of course, contrition can always be deepened; but the Exercises of the first week serve another purpose, namely to help him to acknowledge his repeated venial sins.

Sin is another fact which it is becoming fashionable to deny because of half-understood notions about depth-psychology and guilt-feelings, and cant about the need to be liberated from such negative concepts as that of sin. Yet the basic fact about Jesus is that 'he will save his people from their sins'; that is what his name implies.<sup>12</sup> We cannot understand God's love for us unless we see it as love not so much for poor, weak, helpless but lovable creatures, but for selfish, ungenerous, unattractive sinners. This is true even of people in venial sin. By mortal sin we make ourselves God's enemies. While we sin venially, the Trinity still dwells in us, and we retain possession of created grace, which transforms us so that we are not only called but really are God's beloved sons and daughters.<sup>13</sup> However, overlaying this fundamental option to love God, there can be, at a more superficial level of our commitment, refusals of the practical demands of God's love. These basic refusals to say 'yes' to God, which we call venial sin, are a recurrent feature of the lives of every christian. This is why even the saints could call themselves sinners, why the liturgy repeatedly reminds us of our sins. The right attitude is that of the publican, who realizes that he cannot hold up his head

<sup>11</sup> Exx 45-90.

<sup>12</sup> Mt 1, 21.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Jn 3, 1.

before God, and prays, 'Lord have mercy on me a sinner'; or of St Peter who said, 'depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man'. Even though we are in a state of grace and pleasing to God, we have clouded our peace with him by our selfish refusal of the demands of love. We must therefore rely for our sense of security, not on our own achievements, but on God's mercy.

This is a lesson which needs to be repeated again and again, especially to good people with sensitive consciences. People who have been in religious life for many years are particularly vulnerable to the temptation to despair. 'I am only too conscious of my repeated particular failings, my general lack of generosity. How can God still be pleased with me? How can he go on working through me? I am a failure'. For such people the message of the first week is not that their guilt-feelings are illusory; it is that they must trust not their own achievements but God's mercy. There are other people who are afraid to admit their faults even to themselves, because they wish to place their confidence in their own success and are afraid of failure. For them too the message of the first week is to trust, not in themselves, but in God's mercy. The writer was not altogether wrong who said that contrition is learning to live with yourself.

### *The Kingdom*<sup>14</sup>

It is most important to grasp the point of the Kingdom, because it stands to the rest of the Exercises in the same relationship as that of the Foundation to the first week. Indeed the wording and logic of the Kingdom bear several resemblances to the Foundation even though at first glance they are so different. Thus:

<i>Foundation</i>	<i>Kingdom</i>
Man is created	Man is called
Praise, reverence, service	To labour with Christ
To save one's soul	To enter into glory

Commentators sometimes go further and compare the contrast in the Kingdom between the persons who have judgment and reason and those who wish to distinguish themselves, with the *tantum quantum* and the *magis* of the Foundation. I do not accept this comparison because, as I have said, I do not believe that the *magis*

<sup>14</sup> Exx 91-100.

represents a more perfect state than the *tantum quantum*; whereas the disposition of those who wish to be distinguished is more advanced than that of the persons who have judgment and reason.

But there is a more important resemblance between the two exercises, namely in the relationship which they bear to those that follow. The right attitude to sin is based on the right attitude to God's will, which is contained in the Foundation. Similarly the attempt to assimilate Christ's way of life in the second, third and fourth weeks depends on the principle contained in the Kingdom, namely the desire to imitate Christ in his progress through labours to glory. This desire is not founded on reason as the Foundation was: it is founded rather on love. It is put forward as a self-evident axiom of love that one should wish to imitate Christ in what one might call the paschal shape of his life.

Some commentators regard the Kingdom as a meditation on our rôle as apostles: we are called to help Christ to conquer the world. This outward-looking process should not, however, obscure the basic point of the exercise, which is the call to follow Christ in his journey through suffering to glory. It is not, however, St Ignatius's intention that this exercise should become a detailed consideration of the sufferings we are called to share with Christ. The aim is rather to bring the exercitant to the acceptance of the principle – a principle not of logic but of love, to be embraced with the heart and will, rather than seen like the Foundation by the reason: the principle of the taking up of the cross and following Christ. This is a call, an invitation to be freely and generously accepted, not a command to be obeyed.

How far is the parable of the earthly king essential to the meditation? It illustrates the loyalty that a leader can rouse in his followers; but other illustrations more relevant to modern conditions lie to hand. It is designed to arouse the enthusiasm and generosity of the exercitant; but in most countries today the concept of royalty has lost its magic and better symbols can be used. Perhaps, then, the mention of a king could be dropped altogether from the exercise without loss. Some retreat givers try to inject new life into it by a consideration of the New Testament teaching on the kingdom and the reign of Christ, or perhaps the liturgy of the kingship of Christ. But there is a danger that this expedient will obscure the purpose of the meditation.

In connection with the Kingdom, and indeed with all the contemplations on Christ's life, it is necessary to touch on the difficulties



involved in imitating Christ.<sup>15</sup> There seem to be three main difficulties. First that the gospels, in fact, do not provide enough historically accurate information for us to be able to imitate Christ. Secondly that the New Testament does not in fact tell us to imitate the details of Christ's life except those which exemplify what we have called its paschal shape. Thirdly that our situation is often so different from his that we do not know how to imitate him. How, for example, does a jesuit in the United States Congress imitate Christ? Or a province Procurator? However, imitation of Christ is not normally a detailed attempt to copy his actions, it is an attempt to assimilate his values, his totally unselfish and loving service of others, his passionate quest for his Father's will, his confidence in his Father, his hatred of hypocrisy and all sin, his repeated recourse to prayer, his compassion for the weak; but above all, the paschal shape of his life. We ought to imitate Christ because he is the embodiment of God's idea of what a true human life should be. All this presupposes knowledge about the sort of man Christ was, and this we know more fully than the precise *things that he said and did*. Indeed, we could imitate Christ, even if we were totally uncertain about the historical facts. All growth in grace is growth in Christ's human grace-filled life in us. It becomes more and more part of ourselves; so that as we grow in grace we necessarily grow in his likeness, just as an acorn grows into an oak, not an elm.

*The Two Standards and the Three Classes*<sup>16</sup>

Broadly speaking, the aim of the Two Standards is to teach, that of the Classes to prevent us from dodging a particular decision that needs to be taken ('so that we may embrace that which is best'). In an annual retreat, if no substantial election is to be made, the Classes have little purpose and could be omitted. The Standards however, have a value apart from any election: the understanding of the respective standards of Christ and the devil.

A word about the devil. Exercitants will probably know that some catholic theologians today maintain that belief in a personal devil is not 'of faith'. I think therefore that if one uses the symbolism of the standards of Christ and the devil, it is worth pointing out that the meditation does not lose its force if the devil is taken as a personification of evil. It might however be better to avoid the symbolism and speak instead of the opposition between, on the one hand,

<sup>15</sup> The problems involved in the 'imitation' of Christ are dealt with at greater length by Fr John Ashton, *infra*, pp 28-45.

<sup>16</sup> Exx 136-157.

Christ's values – his teaching about true human fulfilment and the pattern of his life – and on the other hand, the way in which we are deceived by ourselves and by others into making selfishness the motive of our lives and self-interest the criterion of our choices.

Although St Ignatius does not make this meditation simply a *consideration* of the Two Standards, but expects us to pray for the grace to accept the one and reject the other, nevertheless the emphasis is on knowledge. The knowledge he has in mind, however, is more than theoretical knowledge, it includes an affective response: the contrast between the devil on his 'great throne of fire and smoke, a horrible and terrible sight to behold', and Christ our Lord 'in a lowly place, beautiful and gracious to behold', is not in the composition of place but is part of the first point of the exercise, which sets the tone for the other two. Similarly in the third point, the devil's 'harangue' to his demons, to 'ensnare men' and 'bind them in chains', is contrasted with Christ's 'discourse' to his 'servants and friends' telling them to 'help all men by encouraging them'.

The Standards, of course, is not a meditation on sin. Sin has been rejected in the first week. Nor is it a meditation on the human weakness that leads to sin: self-indulgence, for example, that can lead to gross intemperance or impurity. The meditation is about strength and deliberate choices rather than weakness. It is concerned with our habitual self-seeking which influences our choices and can emerge into open sin. The point is that this influence is hidden; we need to have it pointed out to us so that we can gradually learn to recognize it. It seems to be in the spirit of this exercise that we should spend some time here on self-examination, for the fruit of the contemplation is not only knowledge of the devil's deceptions in theory but 'help to guard myself against them'.

St Ignatius traces the progress from lust of riches through empty honour to pride. This is not the only possible line of descent. The starting point could be love of reputation. To ask how far self-love determines my choices is not the same as to ask whether my motives are free from self-love. We shall rarely be able to give a hundred per cent affirmative to the second question about motives; but to be able to avoid making self-love the criterion of at least our major decisions is something not beyond the range of possibility.

### *The Three Modes of Humility*<sup>17</sup>

St Ignatius intends this meditation to be a final preliminary before

<sup>17</sup> Exx 165–168.

the election. Of course the meditation has great value even in an annual retreat where no election is being made, because of the sharpness with which it puts before us the full implications of the gospel. It may be necessary to say something about the extent to which the third mode can be a principle of choice. The over-riding factor in making a decision that concerns other people (and most decisions do) is the good of the people concerned. For example, in deciding whether to advise someone to give up religious life or not, it is irrelevant to ask which advice will be harder for me to give and so make me more like the suffering Christ. In fact, God's grace, as far as I have allowed it, has made me into the particular person I am, with my particular inclinations and gifts, at least partly because my sort of person can help other people. By going against my inclination I may make myself less able to help others. But there may be situations in which I can allow my desire of the cross to be the decisive factor in my choice. And in all cases, the third mode is needed as a safeguard to prevent me from choosing for the sake of my own comfort or convenience or career.

Since in the second and third weeks much is said about the suffering of Christ and our own sharing in it, it may be desirable to discuss the theology of suffering. In passing, one may say that St Ignatius does not speak of the wish to share Christ's physical pain, perhaps because this is too disturbing and emotional a thought to put before an exercitant at such a susceptible time, just as it should not be suggested to him in retreat that he should take vows.

I propose four theses as a summary of the theology of suffering.

1. God the Father is not pleased by his Son's sufferings, or by ours. What pleases him is the faith, obedience and love with which suffering is accepted.
2. Of the many complementary ways in which one can explain the atonement, vicarious punishment is not one. We are not redeemed by the fact that Christ endured punishment which should fall on our shoulders. Such a theory makes God the Father into a Shylock demanding his pound of flesh, even of his innocent Son. The New Testament, on the contrary, does not represent the Father as one who receives satisfaction or inflicts punishment, or is reconciled to man, but as one who gives up his only Son to reconcile the world to himself.
3. As Teilhard de Chardin suggests, the paschal shape of life is not a new principle to which christians are called but is rooted in human nature itself. 'It was necessary for Christ to suffer' because he had

learnt that this was his Father's will. But the Father's will is not arbitrary: Christ had to triumph through suffering because that is how all human achievement is won; the grain of wheat must die to bear fruit, because that is the nature of man as well as of wheat.

*The Resurrection*<sup>18</sup>

In giving the exercises on the risen life, I think the following points should be borne in mind.

- a) We should pray for the grace to rejoice simply for Christ's sake, because of his glory. Here it may help if one adds to St Ignatius's considerations the New Testament teaching about the significance of the resurrection for Christ himself: for example, 'designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead'.
- b) The Christ whom we meet in his Church, and especially his sacraments, is the risen Christ.
- c) Through baptism we share now in the resurrection of Christ. It is an active principle helping us to grow in holiness. Christ in his role of consoler does not bring a peace that is simply affective, but one that is based on well-founded confidence in the power of his resurrection. To resign oneself to failure as a person is to deny the power of the resurrection.
- d) In the light of the words 'it was necessary for Christ to suffer and enter into his glory', we should not, during the fourth week, put aside the thoughts of the third mode of humility, but consider it in the peaceful and joyful light of the resurrection.
- e) Although the last day of the retreat should not be treated in the spirit of the beginning of a school vacation, it can be a good thing to look out from the cloistered calm of a retreat into the normal life that lies ahead. The contemplation for obtaining love has a useful role here, for its aim is to form a habit of seeking God in all things.

These are what I regard as the key exercises and this is the way I think that they should be treated. Throughout the retreat, however, much more use can be made of the liturgy than St Ignatius envisaged. Not only can much be made of Mass, the Office and para-liturgical services, but the Exercises can be linked with the theology of the sacraments: the baptismal promises, for example, with the Kingdom and the Standards, baptismal regeneration with the resurrection; and the fourth week could be ended with a meditation on pentecost and the sacrament of confirmation.

<sup>18</sup> Exx 218-229.