

# SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND RELIGIOUS MATURITY

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THIS PAPER is situated within the wider context of the symposium on Ignatian Spirituality and Reform, which will undoubtedly focus on many aspects of Ignatius and his vision and its relevance for today. The Spiritual Exercises – whether considered as methods, directives or experience – represent a concretization of ignatian spirituality in the lived experience of a person. My reflections are based on a twofold experience: (1) being with others as they discover new levels of their christian faith life, and (2) using the wisdom and methods set out in the book of *The Spiritual Exercises* in order to help them in their exploration. The theory expressed originates with others, but is chosen because it is verified in my own experience and that of other directors with whom I talk.

I would like to begin by recalling the vocation of the people of God, to describe it in terms of personal presence, and to reflect briefly on how we experience it existentially. Vatican II reaffirmed the universal call to holiness, that is, the call to the fulness of lived relationship with God. As Van Kaam points out, each of us has fundamental modes of living presence to the world, although one or another of these modes – religious, aesthetic, practical – may predominate according to the uniqueness of the individual. The wholeness of our value-experience of these fundamental modes of presence has broken down, and our quest is towards greater unity of the presencing self. Each person, precisely as christian, must learn to integrate the religious mode of presence into her total life, because the call to holiness demands such personal incorporation for adult relationship with God.

Molinari describes as part of this religious maturity the inspiration and regulation of one's entire activity by personal religious convictions, so that one's whole life is integrated and animated by personal relationship with the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Molinari, Paul: 'Education for Maturity', in *Supplement to the Way* 15 (Spring, 1972), p 18.

Yet today we observe ourselves as a people of God who grope to integrate our faith-vision with our new view of a world in the midst of profound cultural revolution, a world which frantically demands new experience while suffering a profound alienation from its deepest meaning. We see the demise of authoritative direction when our people, whose mission is to all humanity, are called to confront moral issues arising from new technology. The people of God, called to preach the gospel directly and through what they are, often oppress others and seemingly remain unmoved by the plight of members of the third world. At the same time we see a religious resurgence within the churches and outside the institutional church as well. We experience ourselves as a people who recognize our need, within an increasing diaspora-situation, for the support of a faith-community. People need living witnesses who can help them recognize and integrate their experience of faith in God with their experience of the world. To paraphrase Nouwen, all need the articulation of religious experience by compassionate men and women who know where they are going.<sup>2</sup>

We sisters believe that we are called to the same mission as all the people of God, and in a public manner to lead others to discover the kingdom of God through the personal individual and corporate witness of our lives. We know, theoretically and existentially, the need of the Church and all humanity to find living, personal faith in the presence and activity of God within life. We have always believed we were *sent to* people, but realized a few years ago that our 'language' was no longer understood by them. So we made our first adaptations in changes of custom, dress, life-style. We became socially aware and responsible, politically active. Now we have established that we are *in* the world. But we are also *sent by* our Church and God to point to and to preach the good news of the coming of the Kingdom. We have to establish that we are not *of* the world. For the benefit of the Church we must witness a living faith, because it is our mission and our gift to do so.

This being 'in' and not 'of' the world is a mystery of solidarity and intercession which touches the deepest dimension of the mystery of the incarnation. Bloom reflects that intercession happened,

when the Son of God became the Son of Man, when the Word of God became flesh, when Jesus came into the world, who being truly man, could put his hand on the man's shoulders without destroying the man

<sup>2</sup> Nouwen, Henry: 'Generation Without Fathers', in *Commonweal* (June 12, 1970), p 287.

by the fire of divine touch, and who could, without blasphemy and sacrilege, put his hand on the shoulder of God without being destroyed . . .

He takes his stand in total, final solidarity between man and God; turning to God, he is man and stands condemned; turning to men he is God and stands rejected. He must die. And his solidarity doesn't go simply to the sweet selected few who will recognize him or believe in him. No, his solidarity goes to everyone. He is not God for the good versus the bad, the believers versus the unbelievers, or the creed or the colour of a nation, or of a social group. He has made himself solid with everyone.<sup>3</sup>

As sisters, our call to religious maturity involves a radical consecration in the heart of Christ as well as radical solidarity with the world in order to unify the reality of who we are and what we do. The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius can help us respond to this call.

The *Exercises* is unashamedly a guide-book, but one which comes from a saint who had entered profoundly into the mystery about which he wrote. The exercises within the book represent the fruit of Ignatius's vision. They originate from his experience of the living God, arising out of his wisdom and ordained to further penetration into it. Ignatius's articulation is continuous with the Church's tradition of spirituality, and that tradition needs to be rediscovered constantly as living in every age. Coathalem points out that the purpose of these exercises is to lead man to situate himself concretely in the 'primordial elements of the historical economy of salvation'. 'They are made not to be read but to be practised'.<sup>4</sup> Because they touch the sources of life, the Exercises are trans-cultural, not only from sixteenth to twentieth-century times, but also from west to east. Since they are meant to help man transcend his empirical self and to realize his true self through becoming open to the Transcendent, they can give christian insight and meaning to the tradition of contemplation at the heart of eastern mysticism.<sup>5</sup>

Briefly let us look at a three-fold fruit of the Exercises in terms of (1) the personal faith discovery of God's presence and activity, (2) the deepening of the relationship resulting from this new vision and call, and (3) its fruit in compassionate service to others.

<sup>3</sup> Bloom, Anthony: *God and Man* (Paramus, New Jersey, 1971), pp 43-44.

<sup>4</sup> Coathalem, Hervé: *The Spiritual Exercises and Salvation History* (Program to Promote the Spiritual Exercises), p 2.

<sup>5</sup> It was the experience of the early jesuits that the Exercises could be given to 'infidels' and 'heretics'. See Joseph F. X. Erhart, S. J., *Doctrine of Father Jerome Nadal on the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (Program to Promote the Spiritual Exercises), p 327.

1. *The Exercises provide us with a new personal faith-vision through helping us come into contact with our religious experience.* Bloom points out that our faith originates in this experience:

. . . if you try to see the way in which faith originates in those people who were the great men of faith, the heroes of faith, you can see that it always originates in an experience that makes the invisible certain, and which allows them, having discovered that the invisible is as real as the visible, to go further in searching the invisible by methods of their own.<sup>6</sup>

Roberto Assagioli provides insights into the dynamism of the process to self-realization which illuminate the process to personal faith-vision.<sup>7</sup> He describes self-realization as different and something more than conscious awareness of the self, although it is a process which begins with self-actualization, the discovery and presence to self, God and the world. Self-realization is 'the experience and awareness of the synthesizing spiritual Centre'.

For the christian, self-realization means ultimately the discovery of life as opening out into God, of life 'hidden with Christ in God'. Through the gift of the self-revelation of God-who-is-love we discover the foundation and possibility of true love for Self. Ignatius insists upon the gift-ness of both the illumination and the work of integration of one's life in faith. The exercises are meant to allow the 'Creator to work directly with his creature', to impart himself to the devout soul, 'embracing her to his love and praise, and disposing her for the way in which she can better . . . serve him' [15].<sup>8</sup>

Man's drive toward integration is a basic and normal urge of human personality and, as Assagioli points out, this spiritual development is a long and arduous journey.

It involves a drastic transmutation of the 'normal' elements of the personality, an awakening of potentialities hitherto dormant, a raising of consciousness to new realms, and a functioning along a new inner dimension.<sup>9</sup>

A change goes on in man's way of knowing from a cognitive to a more fully personal value-knowledge which results in an illumination, a spiritual awakening, a new vision. This represents a partial

<sup>6</sup> Bloom, *loc. cit.*, p 32.

<sup>7</sup> Assagioli, Roberto: *Psychosynthesis* (New York, 1965).

<sup>8</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Joseph Rickaby, S.J., (London, 1915). Paragraph numbers in [ ].

<sup>9</sup> Assagioli, *loc. cit.*, p 39.

integration, but the whole self is being changed. This personal growth involves an awareness and struggle with the basic conflicts inherent in human nature; it involves trust of self, others and God.

We can read and reflect on these concepts, but they may or may not resonate with our experience of personal faith-integration. I find frequently that sisters and others harbour fears and doubts about the authenticity of their faith-existence. Often the director must patiently and gently help another to discover and own these fears, so that she or he may discover the Spirit. Each of us must travel the road from existential unbelief in God's love to personal knowledge of it. The Exercises, individualized as to their choice and use, can enable a person to discover the truth of her faith-existence. Ignatius appreciated that each one's path to God is unique, and he offers his introductory notes, directives and rules in a systematized but free fashion in order to help those who receive and give the Exercises to obtain some understanding of what they are about [1]. He offers the Exercises to help a person dispose herself for the removing of disordered attachments, with the aim of actually leaving all things in affect (*en affecto*), so that being able to serve God becomes the motive for taking a thing or leaving it [155]. This dry description really points to the mystery of personal discovery of God's love for me and my response to this love which becomes the ordering principle of life. The almost pelagian-type description of the Exercises as useful 'for overcoming oneself . . . without being swayed by any inordinate attachment' [2] in today's terms refers to the dynamic realization of the 'synthesizing spiritual Centre' who is God. This journey into God is accompanied by 'spiritual stirrings' such as consolation and desolation, being troubled by various spirits. These are signs that accompany the transformation of the distorted ego-self to the true self which is a reflection of the Father.

2. *The Exercises enable us to realize a deepening, new relationship with the living God. Prolonged training in discernment enables us to integrate and direct our activity under the inspiration of faith-convictions.* With new faith-vision comes a personal call to greater authenticity of gospel-living. We are to be trained towards a whole-hearted love and fidelity throughout our entire life. Assagioli points out that new vision is characterized by a 'sense of joy and mental illumination that brings with it an insight into the meaning and purpose of life'.<sup>10</sup> However, the personal self is yet only temporarily over-powered but not

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p 46.

permanently transformed. A long experience of education begins, an experience which can be alternately discouraging or elative. We need to learn how to live with affectivity and insight, which can produce emotional upheaval, to move towards a period of stabilizing and development of autonomy.

Training in discernment of spirits involves awareness and judgment regarding spontaneous interior movements, as Ignatius points out in his remarks which preface his rules 'for understanding to some extent' those different movements. Application of tactics in working with these account for many additional directives in the book of the *Exercises*. The ability to articulate and to label what is going on permits the necessary disengagement that will permit freedom for the kind of choices which bring on ever greater integration into one's radical stance of commitment to Christ. We no longer have a 'pillar and cloud' as signs of God's loving care and fidelity. We have much more – the Spirit of God dwelling in our hearts who enables us to cry out 'Abba, Father!' Through training in discernment of his Spirit, God enables us to discover daily his care and faithfulness. Exercises such as the Two Standards and Three Classes of Men help us explore the quality of our stance within the freedom which comes from a universal vision.

So many of us are engaged in studying communal discernment and attempting to put that process into action. This rests fundamentally upon a vital, personal faith-life, and the freedom and ability to discern, of each individual within the community. Through that dynamism we grow in the authenticity of our faith-lives. Our choices spring from a new kind of relationship with God and deepen it. Clarke speaks of 'decisional prayer'.

An integral life of prayer for any christian is going to include contemplation and decision and must succeed somehow in incarnating contemplation in decision, and making decision in turn minister to further contemplation.<sup>11</sup>

Ignatius asks us to contemplate God in the person of Christ, moving first of all from the basis of our mutually chosen relationship, that of Saviour and sinner-saved. We are then invited to contemplate Christ, asking for that interior knowledge which is born of companionship. Ignatian contemplations are much more than 'a stroll through the gospels'. We are seeking to put on the mind of Christ,

<sup>11</sup> Clarke, Thomas E.: 'The Ignatian Exercises – Contemplation and Discernment', in *Review for Religious*, vol. 31, no. 1 (January, 1972), p 66.

that fulness of knowledge which has its fruit in love and service. Ignatius suggests through his preludes how to prepare to enter into this mystery from our own depths, in order to dispose ourselves to receive the grace God wills to give. Progress through the four weeks is directed to profound conversion and 'putting on of the livery of Christ'.

3. *The Exercises are directed towards our more personal penetration into the paschal mystery of death/resurrection which bears fruit in compassionate service.* Concrete choices deepen the mutuality of love, which Ignatius points out is both deed and exchange [231]. Our lives reveal the mystery of receiving all from the Trinity as gift, returning all as gift through our love-motivated choices and service, and becoming gift to others as we are drawn towards greater authenticity and final integration in Christ.

The integration of every aspect of personal life to all of reality involves a drastic transmutation and regeneration of the personality. Assagioli describes it as

a long and many-sided process which includes phases of active removal of the obstacles to the inflow and operation of superconscious energies, phases of development of higher functions which have lain dormant or undeveloped: phases in which the ego must let the higher Self work, enduring the pressure and the inevitable pain of the process.<sup>12</sup>

It is a process involving affective self-awareness leading to new personal consciousness and awareness of presence, a process full of alternations between light and darkness, joy and suffering.

With reference to our recent past as sisters we might reflect on the observations by Jung on the need to grow for health. He writes that the drive to be normal is a splendid ideal for the unsuccessful, but for people who have more ability than the average, to resign themselves to the normal signifies unbearable boredom, sterility and hopelessness. 'As a consequence, there are many people who become neurotic because they are only normal, as there are people who are neurotic because they cannot become normal'.<sup>13</sup> Many complex reasons have been documented for our experience of ennui, discontent and inauthenticity; but I suggest that one reason is that we did not dare to aspire to mysticism, by which I mean the finding, the faith-discovery, of God in all of reality. The Exercises are fruits of Ignatius's own gift of mysticism for himself and the Church.

<sup>12</sup> Assagioli, *loc. cit.*, p 49.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Assagioli, *loc. cit.*, p 54.

Surely this is what Ignatius describes in his Contemplation to Obtain Divine Love [230]. It is a mystery without beginning or end, in which all continually comes from the Father and all is returned to him, in which the Spirit impels us to give the gift of self to others; and yet we find others and ourselves in the same Spirit. The Exercises help us to dispose ourselves for the giving of God so that we can discover the words of Paul as our own:

I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts . . . but I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God and based on faith. All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death . . . I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Need for Direction*

Our personal exodus takes us through 'strange lands full of surprises, difficulties and even dangers'.<sup>15</sup> In the Directory of 1591 the words of Davila were adopted which compare the movement of reform, expressed in the election, to

a sort of birth – a supernatural birth in which pain and travail and involuntary sadness are experienced; these are liable from time to time to torment both parent and offspring and to stifle them, unless a conscientious and experienced midwife is present, and especially light from heaven, and strength and perception from above.<sup>16</sup>

Ideally such a director-midwife should be a 'trained and experienced traveller along the way to Self-realization'. Although these gifts may not be combined to the fullest degree in most of us, they point up the need for men and women of professional competency and of prayer, gifted with truth and wisdom for the benefit of others.

The *Exercises* is a director's manual which emphasizes respect and reverence for the timing of the individual and the timing of God. Use of the many suggested exercises and rules calls for all the care, sensitivity and compassion of which the director is capable. Ignatius and his early companions defined the Exercises in dynamic terms, making the kind of claims we can appreciate today. They did not describe so much the imposition of the structure of the four weeks,

<sup>14</sup> Phil 3, 9ff.

<sup>15</sup> Assagioli, *loc. cit.*, p 39.

<sup>16</sup> Rahner, Hugo: *Ignatius the Theologian* (New York, 1968), p 140.



but rather the activity of God and of the place of various exercises. They were, as we all know, given one to one. It often seemed necessary to prepare people through many exercises to arrive at the fundamental freedom and maturity of intellect, affectivity and the religious level required to make the long retreat. Due to lack of time and strength, Ignatius and his companions seemed surprisingly content to give 'light exercises' over short lengths of time, even to those from whom they might expect great fruit.

Each stage of our personal journey in the exodus of the people of God brings with it struggles which were different from those which preceded in an earlier stage. What is appropriate in one stage is not in another; and spiritual direction can help us in our steady growth. Personal integration at one time may be more appropriately and successfully aided by the psychological counsellor. All along the journey, spiritual direction can empower the person to move toward covenant relationship with God and can help in the tending of this new relationship.

We learn to appreciate the process of on-going formation of the people of God. The question regarding the annual retreat is not 'Shall the four weeks be imposed in eight days?', but rather, 'What exercises during this time will enable the person to move a little more into the mystery of her own self, through her affectivity and prayer, to discover herself, hidden, as Paul says, with Christ in God?' In a directed retreat the director personally meets another and walks a part of this journey with her. The eyes of both are on God, the retreatant finding in the director a confidant given to her in God's providence, the director discovering this unique person. Both experience that dimension of human companionship necessary for each of us to receive our self; both salute God present and active.

The quality of living the reality of being in, yet not of, the world springs from our authentic faith-life. The intentionality of our service must be directed by a profound fidelity to the mystery of the Church in relation to Jesus Christ. As women, we know we are fashioned by God to bring others to life and to nurture life. As Christians we know that life is born of union of wills with the Father in the Spirit. The spirituality arising from the Exercises is really a matter of this vision and life.