RETREATS FOR STUDENTS

By JOHN DALRYMPLE

TWENTY YEARS ago a retreat was about the only thing that Catholics took time off their usual routine to attend. Whether you were a housewife or a bishop, you felt justified in breaking away from daily duties in order to make a retreat; but apart from that you kept your nose to the trail and carried on at your allotted task. Things are different these days, because as well as retreats, there are now innumerable courses on offer all over the country. Readers of this periodical scarcely need reminding of the wide variety of courses and summer schools which are set up for practically every kind of person and interest in the Church today: courses of general interest for the average Catholic, specialist courses for special people like bursars of convents, week-end courses for busy people, three-month schools in theology for the less busy, refresher courses for priests, updating courses for sisters: a glace at the calendars of the pastoral and theological centres which have sprung up throughout the country show what a mushroom growth there has been in the conference industry since Vatican II.

In view of this I think it worth beginning by noticing the difference between a conference and a retreat. A conference is aimed at widening the knowledge of the participant. A subject is chosen, speakers and discussion groups are set up: all with a view to better knowledge and understanding of the chosen subject. The appeal is predominantly to the mind. A summer school in theology, for instance, hopes to give new insights and understanding of theology to the participants. A meeting of the December Group at Spode House researches into the marxist analysis of our society. In a conference, it is the content and the way it has been understood by the attenders which matters. On the other hand, a retreat appeals to the consciences of those who take part in it. It is both more practical and more self-examinatory than a conference. It pricks, probes and judges those who attend. I am not saying that the intellectual content of a retreat is unimportant. I think it *is* important, but it is important for the purpose of helping the retreatant to order his life better *vis-à-vis* God and men, not merely to fill his mind with new thoughts. John McQuarrie describes conscience as 'a kind of synoptic self-

understanding, the self's own awareness of how it measures up to itself, that is to say, how far it is failing or succeeding in bringing to actualization its own potentialities for being'. That sort of awareness is the target of the retreat-giver, as he faces his audience for the opening talk of the retreat. He is addressing himself to their intellects acting as consciences, not to their intellects as information gatherers.

The distinction between a conference and a retreat is particularly worth bearing in mind when it comes to thinking about retreats for students. Students all over the world, lay and clerical, inhabit an intellectual world where filling the mind with new thoughts is the first aim. Students may not go on many courses, but this is only because their whole life is, in a sense, a 'course'. They are students precisely because they want to learn more about a particular subject. Furthermore, what might be called their unofficial life, lived outside the curriculum of their particular school, is also a markedly intellectual and idealistic one. They gather more often than any other class of people, to discuss ideas and argue about intellectual things. Notoriously their arguing easily lifts off ground into the realm of pure ideas, and is seldom aimed at self-examination or the practicalities of conscience. That being so, I find it important, when beginning a retreat for university students or seminarians, to stress the practical side of the retreat and remind them that they are there to examine their consciences and face up to themselves. I try firmly to guide their theological thinking into the pragmatic areas of their own life-styles and their own prayer lives, just because it is so easy for students to enter upon up-in-the-air discussions about life-style in general or prayer in general. The 'self's own awareness of how it measures up to itself' is, then, the target area for the retreat; and ideas in general about God, Incarnation, Church, Society, Self are only important as avenues towards the thinking of the retreat. They are, if you like, the outer rings of the target, whereas the inner rings and the bull are the individual consciences of the retreatants. I should also add that it is necessary, sometimes, to remind students in a retreat that they are there to examine their own consciences, not those of other people. Every day of the week students gather to examine the consciences of other people: the university and seminary authorities, leaders in Church and State, western society, and so on. I think this is good, because it is a sign of student-awareness of the world they live in. But the point of a retreat is to take the searchlight off other people for a bit and turn it, honestly, on oneself. The heartening thing about students is that if an appeal is made to their honesty,

and they are invited to examine themselves with that sort of clarity, they respond so generously and with such openness.

Before I finish these preliminary remarks, I think it worth observing that retreats to university students and seminarians differ, in two aspects. Firstly, retreats in seminaries tend to be compulsory in attendance, while those to university students are voluntary. Secondly, seminary retreats are all male, while university retreats are 'co-ed'. Both these aspects are, admittedly, fairly surface ones, and doubtless deeper down there is greater similarity than there is difference. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the retreat-giver, an audience which is comprised of volunteers, not conscripts, and which has both sexes in it, raising rather than diminishing each other's morale, is a more promising prospect than the single sex conscripts of the seminaries.

Times

Most people going on retreat relish the fact that it will give them a period to pause from their daily routine, that they will be given time to themselves at last. The use of time during a retreat is crucial to the success of the retreat. What we use that precious gift of time for in the retreat is really important. I suggest there are four uses of time in a retreat which are important if consciences are going to be stirred and resolutions made.

First: there should be time for silence. The most effective deadener of the conscience is surely noise. Noise all around us, especially the noise of other people which sets up an internal noise out of the necessity of replying to them, is the characteristic feature of daily life. I am not saying it is a bad thing in itself. Man is a social animal. Company is part of life. But to enable the conscience to be stilled and capable of reflection, there has, I think, to be silence, when the necessity of making and replying to conversation is withdrawn from the retreatants. This withdrawal can be a very uncomfortable affair, and I am not putting forward silence in a retreat as necessarily a welcome or cosy element. It can be quite frightening for a busy, gregarious person suddenly to find himself in the desert of silence. I think this is particularly true of students, many of whom, for instance, can only study and write essays to the accompaniment of music on the transistor. Even in their own rooms they abolish silence from their lives. Students also welcome noise as an effective antidote to shyness. Turn down the lights and turn up the noise, and the shy newcomer

feels less naked and vulnerable in company. All these are reasons, I suggest, why silence in retreat is a good thing. It challenges the conscience more brutally than any words from a preacher; for after all, students live in a world of words and learn quickly to cope with challenges in that direction. So in giving retreats I try to face retreatants with the challenge of silence. Silence can be broken in many ways. The obvious way is by talking. But there are other ways in which one can run away from one's conscience in retreat. One is reading too many books. Another is writing too many spiritual notes. Another is getting involved in a committee to prepare the liturgy every day. Another is endless singing or guitar practising. I see all these sort of activities as means of escape from the one thing necessary in a retreat, which is to sit still and let God do the talking.

I am not putting forward silence as a means of blotting out one's daily life so as to live in the presence of God more fully during the retreat. This is a misunderstanding of the purpose of retreat. One should not leave one's life outside the retreat. One should bring it right in, with all its ugliness as well as beauty, all its distractions as well as purpose. The subject for scrutiny in retreat is precisely one's daily life of perpetual business and noise. I suggest, though, that the best conditions for examining our life in retreat is the somewhat unnatural and uncomfortable one of silence, which by its very calmness and lack of business forces us to examine our lives with honesty. We have to look under the carpet to see what we have brushed there, and into the hidden corners to see what we want to forget we have placed there. The Devil does not like to see us in silence and stillness. You will remember that Screwtape did not counter his subject's first thoughts of faith with arguments for atheism, but by suggesting 'Let's go and have some lunch'. A metaphor may help. Think of a pool with bullrushes and fish in the muddy depths. I can only see into those depths, examine the roots and look for the fish if the surface of the water is still. It takes some time for the surface to become calm and free of ripples, and every time a stone is thrown into the pool I have to wait some time for the ripples to die away and the water to become transparent again. It is similar in retreat. Too much talking, discussing, reading, writing can be so many stones thrown into the pond to disturb the water. Some of us are rather adept at throwing those stones.

What about discussion? Should there be time for discussion in a retreat? After what I have said about silence, you will expect me to condemn the idea of discussions in retreat. I certainly think discussion

is of secondary importance to silence, and would argue that whereas a retreat with no silence was bound to be a failure, a retreat with no discussion might well be a great success. Nevertheless, I do not want to be dogmatic on the point. There is no doubt that many people are helped in retreat by discussions, not because it is an escape for their conscience, but because it helps to focus their conscience on areas in their life that matter. When that is so, it is a good thing to set up discussions during a retreat, though I think that it is then good for the retreat preacher to exercise self-discipline and cut down equivalently on the talking time by giving less talks himself. My own experience about discussions in retreat, for what it is worth, is that permanent communities like, for instance, seminaries, do not need time for discussing in a retreat. They will have been doing plenty of it already, probably of a very serious nature. So for them silence is the better retreat atmosphere. But *ad hoc* communities in retreat, such as you get among university students, can be helped by setting up discussions. It helps to 'gather' them into a community for the retreat. I have found it useful the first night to get students talking as deeply as possible about their expectations for the retreat which is just beginning. Sharing like that can be very useful all round, not least to the poor fellow whose job it is to conduct the retreat! After such a start, later in the retreat there can be less talking and more silence to allow space for consciences to be activated. As always, the silence of the desert is the aim of the retreat. *Vacare Deo* is the aim, even of discussions, during retreat.

There should be time for counselling during retreat. Most retreat givers would say that their most valuable work in retreat is done in their room when people come along to discuss personal things. Some even go so far as to say that the talks they give in retreats are only valuable as opportunities to expose themselves to the retreatants, so that the latter can come along for private talks. Certainly, if a retreat is aimed at the consciences of the retreatants, the time for counselling is a very important part of the retreat. Consciences are often more effectively 'serviced' by counselling than by public talks. So I think it important in a retreat to invite people to come along at any time. The word 'feedback' is a useful one here. Not only because feedback is valuable for a retreat giver to help him gauge the community he is trying to help, but also because people, especially students, welcome the opportunity to have a comeback at the preacher; and that sort of comeback is often the most appropriate situation for personal problems to be aired and counselling to begin. Add that

retreatants do not have to come along singly. Many of them find it easier to come along with a friend or two to discuss problems. This can be most relaxed and fruitful. I am sure I am not the only priest who has ended up hearing a joint confession of two friends who came together to see the priest. Incidentally, if the retreat giver is to be effective in this area, he must during the retreat be totally accessible to the retreatants and share their living conditions. With university students this sometimes means bringing along a sleeping bag and sleeping in a dormitory. Good! This is what christianity means. I once, sadly, made myself unpopular in a seminary by insisting on this point. When I arrived I found that the seminary staff lived in one (very well appointed) house and the students in another (rather more spartan) building. I insisted, during the retreat, on sleeping, eating and living in the student building and so was available to them all the time. Had I been living in the 'Officers' Mess' this would not have been possible. I heard later that some of the staff took exception to my 'standoffishness' and called me unchristian. But I think the absence of christianity was in the structure of the seminary, not in my reaction to it.

Time for silence, time for discussion, time for counselling. In my view these three are intermediate goals in a retreat.[1] They should be designed to lead towards the ultimate goal of giving people space to meet God. In other words, the most important time to be arranged in a retreat is time for the retreatants to be alone, face to face with God. Perhaps one can just simply say that the most important thing in retreat is to allow plenty of time for prayer. *Not* prayers, nor prayer-experiences, nor para-liturgical services, but simply prayer, the prayer of being in God's presence, communing with him, letting him speak in the depths of one's heart, listening attentively in one's conscience to the word of God which both judges and comforts us, if only we allow time and space for that to happen. That, surely, is the first aim in any retreat, and any other activity which the retreat encourages must be judged by whether it conduces to the direct encounter with God or not. Silence, discussion, counselling, without prayer, have the unfortunate effect of making Christians more self-centred: a self-centredness which is in no way more acceptable for being spiritual in content. The worst form of egoism, as John of the Cross noted, is the egoism of the spiritual person who has exchanged personal ambition to be materially rich, for personal ambition to

[1] Recent literature on the Directed Retreat absolves me from making any mention of it here.

be spiritually rich. Both kinds of ego-inflation are against the gospel — not just the first. So the retreat giver has to be careful that he does not encourage his audience to become more than ever centred on self as a result of the retreat. The only way I can see for this to be prevented is for the silence, discussion, counselling to be made positively to lead to prayer, not just to self-examination. If the retreatants can be exposed to the Holy Spirit directly in prayer, the retreat father can sit back, happy that he has done his task; and the rest can be left to God. Like John the Baptist, he must decrease as the retreat goes on. So it does not matter much if people do not come to him for a chat, as long as they are praying, meeting God face to face and being judged and loved by him directly. Whether this takes place in prayer groups or private prayer or in the communal liturgy of the retreat is of no importance. It probably depends on temperament as much as anything else. The important thing is for the retreat to be full of time for prayer. Everything else is secondary.

Content

It is time to say something about the content of the retreat, the spiritual input which the retreat giver provides for the retreatants. This is the most difficult element to talk about, because one can only talk in the vaguest terms. Each retreat tends to be different from the retreat one gave before, because the retreatants are different. So I can only speak in the most general terms. This does not mean that my intentions are vague. I am quite clear what I want to say in a retreat, even when I am not so clear as to the exact approach to be used. I would like to describe what I think needs to be done in a retreat by using two similar, but distinct, models.

The first model I describe as *It-Ism-Him*. Following Von Hügel, I hold that the fully integrated Christian has three elements, or preoccupations, in his faith. First, there is the institutional element, the belonging to the Church which brings its own obligations and duties and, as I have said, its own preoccupations. We are all to a greater or lesser degree concerned about the Church, its image in the world, its internal structures and lines of communication, and so on. This is the element of *It*. No Catholic can afford to pretend that this element does not exist (though some are weaker than others in their preoccupation about it) for the reason that Jesus Christ founded this institution.

The second element is *Ism*. This is the thinking, intellectual element in christian discipleship. To be a Christian means to be concerned

about ideas — ideas about family life, life-style, society, morality, the rights and wrongs of human living. At no time in its history has the christian movement turned its back on ideas like that, because to turn its back would be to cease to be concerned about being faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world. And so the serious Christian is serious about ideas. This is especially true today in western Europe where we are living through a culture-change, and every traditional idea about human living is being challenged, discussed, modified or rejected by society. Christians are in the middle of this culture change, not outside it. Think of a list like this: Justice and Peace, War, Revolution, Pacifism, the Arms Race, the Place of Woman in Society, Contraception, Abortion, Euthanasia, Prison Reform, Gay Rights, the National Front, the Third World. Such random topics show that the follower of Jesus Christ has plenty of homework to do if he is to try to interpret the gospel in and to the modern world, and be faithful to it himself. The element of *Ism* is important. It cannot be ignored.

The third element is *Him*: the devotion to the person of Jesus, which is meant to be the heart of Christianity. We are disciples of a Person. That Person we know to be in some mysterious way still alive and with us. He is in this world not as a passive presence, but as an active, dynamic master, offering union with himself, offering to lead us to God the Father, with a will for each one of us and a burning love. To be a Christian has always meant to be devoted to him, to Jesus Christ our Lord, and to shape our lives round prayer and obedience to his will. To be a Christian means to be warmly devoted to Jesus. *It* and *Ism* are important in the christian life, but they take that importance from the pursuit of him. Without that personal pursuit, concern about Church and Ideology fall short of christian discipleship.

When giving a retreat my aim is to take in all three elements, but to be chiefly concerned about the third. Retreats are not theological courses, so their chief concern is not the ideology of being a Christian in the world. Nevertheless they must not ignore this element, because to do so would be to be unconcerned about Christ's will. So one has to approach the devotional life through the natural preoccupations of the retreatants about living as Christians in the world. Depending on the audience, one stresses one or other element in order to be as integrated as possible. But always one's aim is to help them to love God. The two types of student we have in mind exemplify this point. In my experience, seminarians have a preoccupa-

tion with the Church. This is understandable, seeing that it is going to be their whole life in the future. They tend to measure their lives and think about the gospel in terms of the Church. Even the radical ones, who would not like to be labelled ecclesiastical or clerical, often show an excessive concern about the institution in their very choice of subjects to burn about: clerical celibacy, women priests, the promise of obedience. For men like this a retreat must aim to lead them through these relatively superficial concerns down to the heart of the gospel, which is discipleship of Jesus Christ and a passionate interest in being close to him. Retreats for seminarians should centre as soon as possible round that one point of discipleship of Christ, so that the more surface problems of pastoral, ecclesial life can be seen in terms of that discipleship, rather than as isolated institutional matters. Unless they dip below the institutional preoccupations to Jesus himself, seminarians may turn out to be intelligent functionaries in the Church, but not spiritual leaders.

University students have on the whole a different problem to face. In my experience they are not too concerned about ecclesiastical matters. Their preoccupations centre round *Ism*. Arriving in the university from the average catholic home, they suddenly find themselves in a whirlpool of ideas. All round them students are exchanging views about all those problems of human living which I listed above, from the marxist analysis of society on the one hand to gay liberation or vegetarianism on the other. In the middle of all this, the catholic student suddenly discovers that being a Christian is not easy in the sense that there is no given christian answer to these questions. Consequently, if he is keen, he will spend a lot of his time and energy at the university working out for himself where he stands and what views he holds on these ideological matters. For him, being a Christian may become an almost exclusively intellectual business. A retreat, therefore, for university students ought to take cognizance of where they find themselves in the middle of these *Ism* concerns, and try to lead them deeper down once again to the personal relationship with Jesus Christ which is the heart of it all. Students who stop short at the wordy stage of intellectual problems have further to go before they can call themselves disciples of Christ. The ultimate aim of the retreat giver must be to lead the retreatants to see that the very heart of their religion is a wordless mystery of divine love, which is simply beyond all talk, can never be intellectually grasped, but must be received in all humility with the faith of little children. I like these words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God.
But only those who see take off their shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

How often we are content to pluck blackberries round the throne of God instead of taking off our shoes to adore!

Before I finish I would like to go over the ground just covered, this time using the model of Faith-Religion. Religion I take to be all the man-made apparatus of response to God which, through the ages, the Church has encouraged. Anything in the Church with the word 'movement' beside it tends to be Religion: the Liturgical Movement, the Biblical Movement, the Catechetical Movement, the Charismatic Movement. All these are ways of responding to God's love. They are, or should be, adverbial. They describe how we approach God in Christ. Faith, on the other hand, is the approach or response itself. It is deeper down than Religion. It is in itself 'a naked intent unto God': our leap in the dark towards God with utter confidence that he is there and loves us. Perhaps it never appears without the colouring of Religion in one or other of the latter's guises. But let us remember that Faith is the noun: my response to God; and Religion is the adverb: the biblical, liturgical, pastoral ways in which I do this. Put briefly, I think a retreat should be concerned with deepening the faith of the retreatants and not be too concerned about religion at all. Students, being students, are fascinated by the religious technical aspect of their faith. If you advertise a liturgical or a sociological or a charismatic retreat, you would probably get many drawn by the fascination of the adjectives. But a retreat is above all a time when we are invited to strip our christianity of the surface modifications and go deep to examine our faith. In other words, let us not waste time on what might be called the technology of religion — techniques for communicating in a community, techniques for prayer, speaking in tongues — but go as quickly as possible to the heart of the matter, which is the quality of our faith, stripped of all the adjectives and adverbs. In doing this we will be doing the same as concentrating on *Him*, Jesus Christ, rather than on *It* and *Ism*, the institution and the ideas. George Herbert wrote:

A man may look on glass,
On it may stay his eye,
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass
And then the heavens espy.

A retreat is a period when the minimum of time should be spent on looking at and cleaning the glass of the window, and the maximum of time on looking through it to God. That is, after all, what the window is for: looking through, not at. So it is, I suggest, with retreats. They are for looking at God with a purified conscience in faith. Only minimally should they be spent on peripheral religious matters.

I have tried not to be too dogmatic in what I have said. I put forward these ideas to be discussed, rejected or modified. Many may not agree with what I have said. But I think you will all agree with me when I say that giving retreats to students is more exciting and rewarding than any other kind of retreat, because students are young, keen, eager, see issues very clearly, and have a generosity towards each other and our Lord, which makes at least one middle-aged priest ashamed of his compromises and lack of faith. [2]

[2] Fr Dalrymple's original title for this paper was 'Insights into retreats for students at seminaries and universities'.