

THE FIRST WEEK AND THE LOVE OF GOD

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THE MEDITATIONS of the first week of Ignatius's Exercises have often been trenchantly criticized, on the score that there is no mention of love in them; and that is, in fact, a fundamental fault of the whole Exercises. Ignatius is concerned to stir up strong and powerful motives of fear through the contemplation of sin and its consequences; and this is the mode of conversion towards which alone he directs the person who is making these Exercises.

The voluminous literature on the Exercises and the ignatian 'method' often provide material for such criticism. Nor can it be said that the meditations of the first week belong to the spiritual school of love. Certainly at first sight they seem to belong to a school of intimidation, after which a meditation on God's mercy seems like sunshine after a storm; and not infrequently they have been so presented. Directors of the Exercises have projected their own ideas on the thoughts of Ignatius without first digesting his insights. It is in these situations that these meditations seem to lead simply to the detestation and fear of sin; whilst the intention of Ignatius that they are to lead to an understanding and appreciation of a higher spiritual reality is overlaid by an ignorance of Ignatius's use of the phrase 'the purgative life'.

Before attempting to demonstrate how erroneous these opinions are, we first wish to discuss three principles which apply to the ignatian Exercises as a whole. The first is that it is necessary to distinguish between the content of a particular exercise and its purpose. For example, in the third week, the subject-matter is the Passion of Christ; whilst the aim is to 'suffer with him', to offer oneself 'to be broken with Christ broken' (Exx 203). We can use the content for different purposes, and reach our goal in different ways. We can also distinguish different types of retreats according to this principle. We make or give a retreat according to the mind of Ignatius and in the strict sense of the word only if we follow him, not only in our use of the subject matter, but much more faithfully in the motivations and the purpose of the Exercises as they succeed one another in the course of the four weeks (Exx 4). In other words,

in giving a thirty-day retreat to those from whom much is expected with regard to God's glory and design, the purpose of the Exercises of each of the weeks should be the purpose of Ignatius himself; and the subject matter must equally approximate to that set forth for the four weeks, if we wish to follow the retreat in the way St Ignatius himself presents the Exercises (Exx 20).

It remains true of course, as Ignatius himself says, that to those who have little natural capacity . . . 'it is more suitable to give him easier exercises', in order to prepare him for a good confession, and not proceed further to the meditations of the second week, which he would not understand. Ignatius is speaking of those who are not prepared either psychologically or by grace. For such people, he is content to set a lower aim for the meditations. In the same way, we may also take some of the contemplations of the second, third or fourth weeks in retreats for such people, taking care not to make too severe demands on them. We can propose any scene in the earthly life of Christ or his Resurrection, for the purpose of helping the exercitant to repent of his sins and be converted. The principle is much more directly applicable, of course, to the meditations of the first week.

The second principle is that the whole Exercises of St Ignatius are welded together in a psychological and logical unity. Each exercise is related to the final purpose; and consequently each part — be it a whole week or a single contemplation — can be understood fully and completely only in relation to what follows and to the final purpose.

The third fundamental principle is that in the Exercises we must set ourselves to attain (or help the retreatant attain) those dispositions and decisions which St Ignatius assigns for each exercise, especially those of more decisive importance, in logical and psychological order, and with resolution and understanding, according to the appropriate task and subject matter of each week. It goes without saying that one makes the Exercises according to St Ignatius, only if one's heart is set on receiving those attitudes and dispositions he attaches to for each exercise throughout the thirty days. To my mind therefore, it is advisable in a retreat to mention in advance the purpose of the entire week, as well as that of each exercise; and that all one's forces should be directed to the acquisition of its purpose, its disposition and attitude.

We are now in a position to consider the attitudes and dispositions which St Ignatius wishes the retreatant to make his own at the beginning of the second week. All the commentators agree that the

exercise on the Kingship of Christ directs the retreatant to the third mode of humility; and the contemplations of the second week stress the grace of following Christ along the lines and in the spirit of this humility. The third degree supposes, however, the first and second degrees; so that the retreatant should have already attained to these first two degrees when he comes to the end of the first week. Otherwise, the exercise on the Kingship, and the ensuing contemplations, will find him unprepared logically and psychologically under the divine grace to make the resolution in the colloquy which concludes the exercise on the Kingdom. It follows, then, that the primary purpose of the first week is to bring the retreatant at least in disposition, desire and resolution, if not in actuality, to the second degree of humility: the definitive and complete rejection of sin, a deep-felt and penetrating contrition, and that impartiality with regard to creatures which depends entirely on such contrition and which brings to maturity the spirit of compunction and conversion.

The task, then, set by Ignatius in the second week is no other than to induce the retreatant to strip himself of the love of worldly ease and the esteem and respect of his fellow men, and to desire instead the love of poverty and contempt, at least in such a way as to decide in all earnestness to follow in the footsteps of the poor and despised Christ. It is inconceivable, however, that the retreatant will be able to make such a decision without having been lifted up to the second degree of humility through the graces of the first week. Instead, he will continue to wrestle with his problem of making an end of his sinfulness and attaining that change of heart which is true conversion.

Moreover, Christ appears in the Kingship Contemplation as One whom the exercitant already knows as Saviour, Lord and Friend, and who turns to him with a serious request: he calls upon him to follow in his footsteps, even as far as to experience ignominy and poverty. Is this call of Christ a reasonable request if the retreatant is not already psychologically ready to make this offering? Hardly. There is no question here of a command but of a request: the appeal is to generosity, to a grateful, faithful and generous love. Ignatius, then, cannot reasonably expect this offering from the retreatant unless the previous exercises have led him to this generous love. Consequently, the basic task of the first week is to draw out the dispositions of deep gratitude towards Christ, so that the heart is ever more ready to ask and to respond to the radical question of the very first exercise on sin: 'what have I done for Christ, what am I doing for Christ, what ought I to do for Christ?' (Exx 53) Whatever

leads the mind and heart of the exercitant from this colloquy, where he faces the living, suffering, crucified Christ, is foreign to the temper and purpose of the exercises of the first week.

If the director, then, feels moved to proffer further exercises on death, purgatory and the last judgment — and Ignatius leaves him free to do so, they are not to be given in any way which would detract from the fundamental purpose; rather they must strengthen it.

It is our judgment, then, that the exercises of the first week have as their ultimate aim to prepare the exercitant, other things being equal, to make the oblation set out at the end of the exercise on Christ the King.

At the beginning of the first exercise of the first week, the meditation on the triple sin, we should ask 'for shame and confusion at myself, as I see all who have been damned on account of a single mortal sin, and all the times I have deserved to be damned for ever on account of my numerous sins' (Exx 48). It would, however, cut right across the purpose of Ignatius to allow the exercitant to get bogged down in these dispositions. We need a clear grasp of the structure of the exercise. Ignatius directs us to begin the meditation or contemplation by beseeching an initial grace; and in the course of the meditation, the subject matter is so arranged as to lead us to the higher aim expressed in the colloquy, which prompts us to pray for a greater grace. In other words, the grace prayed for at the end of each exercise is always more special than that sought at the beginning. So it is here. Our endeavour is to meditate on sin not only to experience shame and confusion, but to participate in the colloquy: the situation in which Christ is present before my eyes, hanging on the Cross, as one dying for my sins, and considering what I should be saying to him. Ignatius has no need to spell out what is obvious: the justice of God that abominates the sin and punishes the unrepentant sinner with such severity, and the mercy of God with which he spares me. In the light of divine justice I weigh my iniquity, and in the light of the mercy of God I consider Christ's special love for me. It is the crucified Christ to whom I am drawn, for whose sake God, whilst he hates sin so much, spares me although he sees the same sin in me.

To be imbued by this truth, to experience it in the depths of one's spirit, is the purpose of this first exercise. The retreatant should feel the tension of his own iniquity and God's gracious goodness towards him. If these dispositions penetrate and intensify in his spirit, the road to a life in the divine service opens up before him.

He can begin to understand the traditional meaning of the words of the psalmist: 'You have enlarged my heart, so that I can run in the way of your commandments' (Ps 119, 32).

Nonell was perhaps the first in recent times to clarify the ignatian purpose of the first week exercises: to demonstrate how they lead to loving gratitude to Christ the Redeemer, in order to make our hearts receptive to the Contemplations on Christ.¹ Ignatius here makes use of the same words which we will use in the contemplations of the second week. It is as if he were saying: 'Look on Jesus, the helpless baby, contemplate Christ in the different mysteries of his public life, see him hanging on the Cross in such a way as to recall ceaselessly that this Christ is the One to whom you owe everything: it is he whose kindness, indulgent and merciful love you have experienced during the first week with such intensity and contrition; and you will be led along the same path as he'.

Here perhaps is the secret of the Exercises: they not only enlighten, they give power by exciting in us a personal love for Christ. It is a love which must be the aim of the very first exercise of the first week.

One of the purposes of the second exercise of the first week is to arouse in us 'intense and increasing sorrow and tears for my sins'. If we look more closely at this word, *crecido*, 'ever increasing', we realize at once that this sorrow is one that pierces; its object goes beyond simple contrition. It would be inadequate and insufficient to treat this exercise as though its purpose were simply the resolution not to sin again. If we have in mind the ideal preparation for the second week, the mature purpose of this exercise will be twofold: the first, to intensify in us a grateful love for God who has been so forbearing and indulgent towards me, to the extent that his creatures have continued to serve me even when I rejected him: the second is to abhor not only venial sins but every kind of disorder in my actions. So, says Ignatius, in the second point, we have to 'weigh up' the sins, and 'look at the ugliness and wickedness contained in every capitally sinful act, even if it were not against God's law' (Exx 57). In other words, we are to consider sin in its quality of disorder, which deviates from the end for which we were created. Every deviant is detestable, whether or not it offends God's infinite majesty.

In the third exercise of the first week, the heights to which St Ignatius wants to lead us during this time become even more apparent.

¹ Cf Jaime Nonell S.J.: *Analyses des exercices spirituels de S. Ignace Loyola*, tr. E. Thibaut (Brussels, 1924), pp 239ff.

This single meditation should convince the sceptic that the end of the first week is not merely a definite rejection of mortal or venial sin, and certainly something much more than attrition. The triple colloquy is clear evidence of this — the dialogue first with our Lady, then the Son, the Incarnate Christ, and finally the heavenly Father. It is well known that this was Ignatius's own practice whenever he considered that he was seeking an extraordinary grace: one that seemed to him to demand the special intercession of the blessed Virgin and Christ incarnate. Similarly, the graces in the triple colloquy have an extraordinary note about them, and are never to be sought 'by rote' or over-confidently expected.

The contents of this triple prayer confirm such a view: first, 'that I may experience in myself an interior knowledge of my sins and a loathing for them; that I may experience in myself the disorder of my actions, so that, loathing them, I may do better and bring order into my life; then, to ask for a knowledge of the world, so that, loathing it, I may cut myself off from worldly and empty things' (Exx 63). It is hardly necessary to stress further the extraordinary nature of such graces. We might mention, however, that the triple prayer repeats in its own way the stated purpose of the whole Spiritual Exercises: 'to conquer oneself and set one's life in order without making any decision because of some ill-ordered attachment' (Exx 21). By making the triple colloquy, the retreatant has already set out on the 'high road' which leads to the *magis* — perfect service of God (cf Exx 23).

It is a commonly-held opinion that the whole Exercises direct the retreatant towards the practice of evangelical counsels, the perfect following of Christ in poverty, chastity and obedience. We would not wish to affirm that every retreatant should necessarily choose some form of the consecrated life according to the profession of the counsels; but that he should choose, in a way that is consistent with his own state of life, constant union with Christ: 'First, in complete spiritual poverty, and in actual poverty as well, if the divine Majesty be served by that and wants so to choose and receive me; secondly, in enduring ignominy and outrages, the better to imitate him in that way. . . .' So Ignatius will have the retreatant pray in the three colloquies of the Two Standards (Exx 147): petitions adumbrated and anticipated in the oblation of the Kingdom (Exx 98). This is also true of the triple colloquy of the third exercise of the first week, as the following reflections will show (Exx 63).

1. It seems that the first of the three prayers is asking for more than perfect contrition for sin in the here and now. The retreatant is to

seek for *interior* knowledge of his sins; and what is more, this experiential knowledge is to lead to abhorrence of his sinfulness. Only thus can he be aptly prepared to 'order his life' in the full ignatian sense of the word.

2. As for the second prayer, there is little doubt that it contains in germ the second mode of humility, where the retreatant should 'arrive at the point where . . . not for the whole of creation, nor if I were to lose my life, would I entertain the thought of committing a venial sin'. This state of mind is evidently not possible unless, in the first week, he has already experienced in himself the disorder of his actions, so as to loathe it. Disorder for St Ignatius is not sin: rather it is something which one desires or is attached to or feels towards, not in order to serve God the better, but for its own sake, for one's own longing for esteem, pleasure or comfort. So it is that Ignatius directs the retreatant, here in this exercise of the first week, against the disorder which appears in the Two Standards as the snare of the devil. Hence it will not do to present the exercises of the first week simply for the purpose of rejecting one's own sins and sinfulness; it is a question of helping the retreatant to overcome, or at least to have the desire to overcome, the disorder of his actions. In this way the retreat-master points the direction towards the final goal of the Spiritual Exercises.

3. In the third petition of the triple colloquy, here in this first week exercise, Ignatius directs the retreatant to ask for the grace of detesting that spirit of the world which is the source of all sin and disorder. As is evident from the contemplations of the second week, the ordering of one's life means that it is to be patterned on that of Christ himself. This involves the abhorrence and detestation of all that is contrary to order; that is, to the attitudes and dispositions of Christ's life and spirit, which is what Ignatius, following the evangelist of the Fourth Gospel, means by the spirit of the world and its disorder. So he will have those who wish to enter his Society accept, or at least desire to accept, the same principle. Detestation of this spirit of the world is essential if one is to embrace whatever Christ loved and embraced. It is the condition for following Christ in the third mode, the most perfect humility:

It includes the first and second modes, and consists in this: in a case in which the praise and glory of the divine Majesty is equal, I want and choose poverty with Christ's poor rather than wealth, ignominy with Christ ignominious rather than fame, in order to imitate Christ our

Lord and be more like him in reality; and I prefer to be thought a fool and madman for Christ, who was first taken to be such, rather than to be thought wise and prudent in this world (Exx 167).

Along with the heartfelt search for contrition and the grateful love for Christ, which is the object of the first week exercises, the dispositions mentioned above, as elaborated in the second week, must, it seems, have their place, if the retreatant is to begin to seek within his spirit the possibility under grace of this high imitation and following of Christ.

As for the fourth exercise of the first week, we may recall the words of Ignatius that it is 'to go back over the third', and to make, without digression in the understanding, a steady review of what has been contemplated in the previous exercises. 'The same three colloquies are also to be made' (Exx 64). Evidently, Ignatius attaches crucial importance to what has been contemplated in the third exercise; he is deeply concerned with the direction of the whole first week, in his insistence, especially, in making again the three colloquies.

Likewise, the fifth exercise of the first week, the meditation on Hell, is concerned with much more than the mere avoidance of grave sin. Doubtless Ignatius emphasizes current theological expression when he makes the point that 'if, through my faults, I should ever forget the love of the eternal Lord, at least the fear of punishment may help me not to fall into sin' (Exx 65). This, however, is the petition for the initial grace. The ultimate goal and petition of the exercise will be discovered in the colloquy. And this, in the meditation on hell, is of extraordinary significance, both in style and subject-matter. Ignatius first underlines the completely gratuitous, naturally incomprehensible love of Christ by which he has preserved me from eternal loss (cf Exx 71). This consideration is certainly designed to intensify the same dispositions and interior experiences which overwhelmed the spirit of the retreatant in the preceding meditations, in the contemplation of his Saviour: a boundless gratitude, remorse over his own sins and the firm resolution not to sin again. Ignatius, however, in his purpose is looking beyond this. Certainly, reflection on punishment can induce a horror of venial as well as mortal sin. But the roots are in the disorder. Because of these one begins to forget the divine benefits and love grows cold. It is here that the weakening of the relationship begins.

The fifth exercise on hell has therefore little to do at the last with imperfect forms of fear; and the meditation is abused whenever

it is used to frighten people into attrition, the confessional, or whatever.

The purpose of this exercise is ultimately directed to the hope for extraordinary degrees of divine love. It would be foolish to ignore the fact that Ignatius lived during that era now known as the *fièvre satanique*, so that some of his language appears exaggerated or even ludicrous to a modern ear. But this is secondary; nor do we yet understand fully the subtleties of this special 'application of the senses'. We still need to work at and to reflect on the text if we are to grasp fully how Ignatius proposed these exercises of the first week to those who had already travelled far on the road to sanctity.

The fifth exercise thus fits harmoniously with the other four of the first week. Ignatius pursues the same strategy throughout: with all the spiritual insight at his command, he creates an environment in which the retreatant can strive after such a disposition of soul as to enable him to enter into the exercises of the succeeding weeks with full effect. This meditation can thus be understood as a development out of the preceding four, built up with the same impressive psychology, with the same end in view: to be filled with the generous love of Christ.

A deep and protracted consideration of God's ineffable goodness is the most natural way of responding to this love. The intimate contact with Christ will deepen the personal love for the Saviour which is of unique importance in the christian life. It would be highly irresponsible and damaging if in our retreats — made ourselves or given to others — we ignore or underrate the ignatian purpose of the first week.²

² We are indebted to Fr Hitter for permitting us considerable freedom in editing his original manuscript. J.W.