

# WHAT ONLY GOD CAN DO

By GERALD O'MAHONY

WE HAVE heard much in recent years about discernment: communal discernment, discernment processes, even discernment workshops. The immediate source of all this holy activity has undoubtedly been the records left of certain practices of Ignatius Loyola and the first companions who formed the infant Society of Jesus: but more particularly, the procedure he has given us in his *Spiritual Exercises* for decision-making; and above all, what have come to be known as 'The Rules for the Discernment of Spirits'. Ignatius's own title for his rules is at once more traditional and less esoteric. They are set in the context, we must remember, of a retreat which lasts around thirty days, conducted on a one-to-one basis, and in an eremitical environment. St Ignatius is first concerned that the retreatant be purified from his basic selfishness: the first week of the month's exercises corresponds, he says, to what is usually called the 'purgative' life or way. (It is to be noted that each week does not necessarily contain only seven days — cf Exx 4.) So he offers, in tentative fashion, two sets of 'Rules for distinguishing and recognizing in the same degree the different movements which take place in the soul: so that the good may be accepted, and the bad rejected'; and the first set of Rules (Exx 314-27), he says, are 'more suitable to the first week of the Exercises' — the purgative time. The second set of rules (Exx 329-36) are 'more applicable to the second week', when the retreatant, whilst contemplating the mysteries of Christ's life from the moment of his Incarnation to the Last Supper, is also seeking to make a genuine and settled choice for Christ, which will affect the whole of his life. The last two weeks, when he contemplates, first, Christ in his Passion, and secondly, the mysteries of the risen and glorified Christ as they are revealed in the Gospels, and by Paul in his first Letter to the Corinthians (15, 8), are primarily and radically intended to confirm the retreatant as fully as possible in the choice made during the time which corresponds to the illuminative life (Exx 16).

It has often been noticed that the 'three ways' of the spiritual life — the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive — are never watertight compartments or stages (a statement confirmed in the articles by Frs Hitter and Fennessy above). Likewise it may be taken

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for granted that these rules which, Ignatius says, are more suitable to the second week, will have their definite application whenever the gospel-mysteries of the Incarnate Word of God are the subject of our contemplation: and never more so than in the Easter mysteries. In this article, we wish to consider how two of those rules (II and VIII — Exx 330 and 336) are of special significance as applied to the contemplation of Christ risen and glorified, revealing himself to his disciples, including St Paul. Our understanding is that the believing Christian, who lives in the atmosphere of the compassionate love of Christ as he exists now, shares with the Apostles their experience of Christ risen. As the first Johannine Letter has it — ‘our message concerns . . . the eternal Life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us’ (1 Jn 1, 1-2).

For the convenience of the reader, we cite here the two rules which we wish to apply to the contemplation of the mysteries of the risen and glorified Christ.

Only God our Lord gives consolation of soul without any intermediary cause. It is indeed reserved to the Creator alone to enter the soul or leave it, or to produce any movement therein which draws it wholly into the love of his divine majesty. I say ‘without any cause’: that is, without any previous feeling or knowledge of any object through which consolation could come by the activity of understanding and will (Rule II).

When consolation is present without cause, there can be no deception in it, since, as has been said, it comes from God our Lord alone. Nevertheless, the spiritual person to whom God gives this consolation must examine it with great vigilance and attention, and distinguish the exact duration of the present consolation from the time which follows it, when the soul remains fervent and supported by the benefit and the after-effects of the recent consolation. For often in this second period through our own thinking based on past experiences and the conclusions from our judgments, or through the agency of the good spirit or the bad, we form various plans and opinions which are not directly given to us by God our Lord. Hence it is necessary to examine them with great care, before giving them complete credence and putting them into practice (Rule VIII).<sup>1</sup>

Let us analyse these two rules, before we apply them to our contemplation of the resurrection accounts in the New Testament.

<sup>1</sup> We use the translation given in *Supplement to The Way*, 6 (May, 1968), on ‘Christian Formation’, pp 95, 96.

1. Ignatius is speaking of his own personal experiences.
2. He expects that God will grant the same experiences to persons making the Exercises 'with a large heart and liberality towards our creator and Lord' (Exx 5).
3. These experiences are self-authenticating: the retreatant can only conclude that it is God, who is very truth, who has done this.
4. Since the experiences are self-authenticating, the person experiencing them will be prepared (other things being equal) to die for the truth of what he saw. He saw it; it was real. How can he deny it without denying his very self? So, for example, Ignatius said he would be prepared to die for the truth of what he had seen and understood in prayer, even if the scriptures had not stated the same truths.

In these experiences, there is no preceding or adequate cause. Either the experience came completely 'out of the blue', or else the effect was totally out of proportion to what came before. So, for example, if Ignatius sheds tears of joy for two days continuously over a thought which he has known to be true before, but which has never before so moved him, then he concludes that this particular light is from God.

6. These rules are directed to those who have already been converted; they have begun to let God 'take over' in their lives.
7. There is a 'time proper' to the consolation, when the light comes from God alone, and a 'time afterwards' or afterglow, which is subject to the influence of either good or evil, and during which the mind and will are active on their own account.
8. Finally, it is God alone, as Creator and Lord, who can 'enter without knocking and leave when he chooses'; and, when present, totally occupy the mind and heart of his creature.

#### *The resurrection narratives: self-authenticating experiences*

First of all, the evidence of the apostolic tradition is overwhelmingly that 'God raised Jesus from the dead'. The apostles did not say at first that Jesus raised himself, or simply that they saw him, but that God raised him: that is, they saw Jesus *in such a way that they knew that only God could have shown him to them*. To give an explicit example, we might take the resurrection-appearance to Paul, which he puts on a par with the appearances to the Twelve (1 Cor 15, 3-8). The appearance of Jesus to Paul is described in the Acts of the Apostles three times.<sup>2</sup> 'A light flashed about him and he heard a voice, but saw no one'. Various, 'those who were about me saw the light but did

<sup>2</sup> In chapters 9, 22 and 26.

not hear the voice'. The voice was the voice of Jesus. Jesus appeared to Paul. But when Paul writes about the same incident to the Galatians, he brings the Father into the account as prime mover: 'But when he, who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles . . . ' (Gal 1, 15ff). Jesus appeared, in such a way that Paul knew instantly, and with no need of any other authority, that God had revealed him.

Arguably, then, all the appearances of the risen Jesus to all the witnesses were such that they expressed the experience by saying 'God has raised Jesus'; 'Jesus was raised from the dead by the Father's glory'. It was truly Jesus they saw, but self-evidently they saw him by courtesy of the Father. Thus, the Father has vindicated the life and death of Jesus and his teachings as those of his own true Son. Jesus in glory is God's 'right-hand man'; the Truth about God, the Way to God, the Word from God.

*Jesus is risen: an undeniable truth*

Secondly, the apostles, including Paul, were prepared to die for the truth of what they had seen. The most touching expression of this, that the recipients of those illuminations are prepared to die for their truth, is in the reply of Peter and John to the 'rulers of the people and elders', who had ordered them to speak no more to anyone in the name of Jesus. 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot speak of what we have seen and heard' (Acts 4, 19ff). To anyone who says to them, 'Jesus was wrong; you have not seen him risen', they can only answer, 'we have seen him: God has vindicated him. Your denying it cannot alter the fact. Your forbidding us to speak cannot change the truth'.

It is this unshakeable conviction repeatedly manifested by Peter and the other apostles which makes so apt their description as 'rock' and 'foundation-stones'. Peter is a rock because he saw Jesus risen, and it is God who revealed him. No power on earth can alter either the fact or the conviction of the witness. The apostles are foundation-stones because they are witnesses. The Jesus who lived in their company, and died, and was buried: it is this same Jesus who is now alive by the power of God. They saw him in the glory of God.

This 'seeing' which is the source of the rock-like quality is not a 'flesh and blood' seeing. 'Blessed are you, Simon, son of John. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in

heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock . . . ' (Mt 16, 17ff). Similarly, Paul, after his vision, saw no need to 'confer with flesh and blood' any longer (Gal 1, 16). He would also tell his Corinthians that when the dead rise again it is not with a physical body, but a spiritual one; not of flesh and blood, but in power and glory from heaven, that is, from God (1 Cor 15, 35. 42-50). The risen body can be seen only by faith from God, not by flesh and blood.

The original 'rock' is God himself: 'my rock, my stronghold' of the Psalmist. Peter and the other apostles, through this revelation from God that Jesus is alive, begin to be assimilated to him whom they have seen. As Paul says to his Philippians, 'The Lord Jesus Christ will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power [that is, from the Father] which enables him to subject all things to himself (Phil 3, 20-22).

#### *Consolation without preceding cause*

The resurrection appearances were experienced by the Apostles in the manner described by Ignatius as consolation without cause, at the least in any way proportionate to the enlightenment received. All the evidence points to the fact that after the crucifixion the disciples were crushed and heartbroken; the last thing they expected was resurrection. Until they saw Jesus risen, they had no notion what they were about to see. This is the whole tenor of Mark's gospel throughout its progress, from Peter's confession of faith until the resurrection itself. Such too is the description of the two disciples in Luke (24, 13-35), in Matthew in the independent parts of his narrative (cf Mt 28), and in John. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus are described as the very antithesis of people building themselves up to believe in a resurrection. They were going home. It was all over. Anyone who said otherwise was crazy. Paul, too, was taken totally unawares (Acts 9, 1-21). He was breathing out threats against Jesus's followers, and on his way to bring to trial those found guilty of proclaiming Jesus's resurrection and vindication by God.

The disciples in general could hardly have been expecting the resurrection of one man in the here and now. That the dead would rise again at the end of time, at the last day, on the Day of the Lord, was indeed part of their expectation: they had heard the Lord say so to the Sadducees (Mt 22, 23-32). But that Jesus, one man, should be raised from the dead here and now, that the end-time should have already begun, that the last day should be in some sense here, that Easter Sunday was the Day of the Lord, with themselves alive and

looking on: none of this was in the least sense part of their expectation.

On this same point of unexpectedness and 'effect out of all proportion', we might note how the empty tomb could apparently mean different things to different people. Peter (Jn 20, 1-10; cp 21, 7), Mary Magdalene (Jn 20, 11-15) and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24, 24) all either saw or heard about the tomb without its meaning 'resurrection' to them at first; and Matthew speaks of the chief priests and the elders putting quite a different construction on the evidence of the empty tomb (Mt 28, 11-15). Then suddenly the empty tomb is the means through which God speaks: 'He is not here, he is risen'. The young man (young men) or angel(s) are the equivalent of the compelling theophany: 'God told us this, not flesh and blood. Did I say God? But no man can see God and live. Well then God surely sent a messenger, for the message came from none but God'.

There is, in most of the resurrection narratives, a 'moment' when recognition comes: Peter at the tomb, John seeing the grave-cloths, Mary hearing her name spoken, the two disciples at the breaking of bread, John in the boat, Thomas. More than once, the 'flesh and blood' aspect alone is experienced; but to another standing side by side with the first, it is the 'truth from God'. And when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted' (Mt 28, 17).

#### *A second conversion*

The two rules of St Ignatius cited above are directed towards those who are in some sense already 'converted': towards those in the illuminative way of the second week of the Exercises, and not to those still in process of purification and basic conversion. If we apply this criterion to the resurrection narratives, we find that the glorified Jesus is not seen by anyone and everyone. By and large, Jesus's enemies do not see him, and not all his friends see him immediately. The seeing depends on God, but there is a certain 'veto' by which flesh and blood can prohibit God's action. The notable exception is Paul. He was stopped in his tracks in the act of persecuting Jesus, by Jesus who loved him. The contrast between his own murderous intentions and Jesus's forgiveness of him in his sins becomes a central point of Paul's whole teaching (cf Rom 5, 8). Paul had seen Stephen stoned to death and had been complacent about the stoning. He had not seen the crucifixion; but he saw and heard Stephen witnessing to his vision of Jesus in God's glory, and forgiving his murderers as Jesus had done (Acts 7, 54; 8, 1). There, possibly, was laid the explosive charge which

smouldered in Paul's heart and memory, and made him ready for God to speak to him.

*The 'now' and the 'afterglow'*

In the illuminations of which Ignatius speaks, he is careful to distinguish the 'time belonging' and the 'time subsequent'. What do we find when we apply this distinction to the resurrection-narratives?

Paul perhaps provides the best starting-point. He never checked his basic vision with anybody. In the Letter to the Galatians he makes it clear that he stakes his claim to be an apostle because of his own personal call from God in his vision of Jesus. That is self-authenticating. It is, because it is; no amount of 'checking' could alter it or improve it. But his own subsequent reasoning from his vision, his ethical and theological theories: these he will check (cf Gal 2, 2; Acts 15, 2).

It was different for the Twelve themselves. They checked their vision against their own memories of living with Jesus from the beginning. What they saw in the first moment of resurrection-vision was from God and unquestionable. The essential expression of this first moment is 'God has raised Jesus from the dead'. Their subsequent arguments from the central vision are always checked and modified against their experience of Jesus in the flesh. If the Spirit within them leads to a conclusion which they know from experience that Jesus himself would have approved, then so be it; it is of God. If the Spirit appears to lead them to a conclusion which their memory of Jesus says is false, then it is not the Spirit of Jesus who is guiding them in these particular deliberations.

Here is the essential difference between the apostolic experience of the resurrection and that of one who is illuminated today in the manner spoken of by St Ignatius. In the 'time belonging' to their vision, the Twelve could know that the Jesus whom they were now seeing was the same Jesus whom they had known in the flesh. They could also check their 'subsequent times', their theology, their theorizing, from their 'moments of enlightenment', against their experience of living with Jesus in the flesh. This neither Ignatius nor any present-day mystic can do. Only the apostles could say, 'The *same* Jesus who lived and died has been raised'. Hence the vital and irreplaceable importance of the New Testament documents, in recording for us the apostles in the process of checking the revelation of the Spirit of Jesus against their memories of Jesus in the flesh, and of the living tradition of the Church today, which gives us a further authentic check for any conclusions we may draw from insights given us by God.

On the question of the 'afterglow', and the ways in which one can draw various conclusions from a divine illumination, it is significant that Paul's initial vision is at the heart of most of his subsequent teaching. He is 'turned' by Jesus, forgiven while still a sinner; and this experience provides the heart of the Letters to the Galatians and to the Romans. Jesus says to Paul, the persecutor of Christians: 'Why are you persecuting me?' Here is more than the germ of his development of the doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ.

The gospel-materials themselves are also largely assembled under the influence of and subsequent to the resurrection appearances. In the light of the resurrection, all is changed. To cite a justly famous phrase: 'When Christ rose, the *whole* of his life rose with him'. The resurrection makes sense for the first time of all that Jesus said and did (cf Jn 20, 28-30).

Another feature of the 'time subsequent' to an illumination from God is that the recipient tends to be in a daze, overcome with joy to the point of tears, and full of a marvellous peace. One of the modern metaphors which readily springs to mind is 'clouds'. There is a cloud of glory, a cloud of joy, happiness and tears, and an overwhelming sense of unworthiness in experiencing the gift and condescension of God. These experiences would seem to correspond to the resurrection narratives at several places: the women in fear and trembling, afraid to say anything to anyone (Mk 16, 8; cf 1 Pet 1, 8), 'unutterable joy'; the eleven 'still disbelieved for joy, and wondered' (Lk 24, 41. 52); Paul is dazzled and blinded for three days by his vision (Acts 9, 8; compare St Ignatius weeping for the rest of the day over his vision of the Trinity); after the final appearance to the apostles mentioned by Luke in Acts (Acts 1, 3-11), they are left gazing 'into heaven' at a 'cloud': phrases which would seem to refer to 'vision' and 'afterglow' ('time belonging' and 'time afterwards') respectively.

Incidentally, this last appearance, recorded as the Ascension, centres finally round a further revelation: that Jesus 'will come again as you saw him go' (Acts 1, 11). Again the mention of two men in white robes points to the source of the revelation, the nature of the experience: this is theophany. The intensity and power of the presence of Jesus as revealed to them is such that these brief appearances simply cannot be the end. Heaven and the power and the glory are so self-evidently greater than the physical sun that shines in the physical heaven (cf Acts 26, 13; Mk 9, 3), that it is only a matter of time before heaven triumphs in Christ Jesus.



*Gratuitous presence*

Finally, we come to the last point we made above, that only God the Creator can treat our poor house as his own: enter when he will, stay as long as he will, leave when he will. If we have found ourselves so possessed, we can be sure that God was in possession. Surely here we have something corresponding to the resurrection accounts, when they tell us of the appearance of Jesus 'when the doors were shut' (Jn 20, 19), of the total absorption of those to whom he is present, of the sudden departures, the remaining dazed mind and clouds, and the complete conviction afterwards that 'God has raised Jesus'.

What of Jesus showing his wounds (Lk 24, 40; Jn 20, 25)? Need we postulate anything more real, *is there anything more real*, than the sort of experience which Ignatius is describing in the Rule we have cited? The resurrection appearances were often to more than one person at a time. The kind of experience of which Ignatius speaks has also been known to happen to more than one person at a time. Certainly we may point to St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross sharing the same vision; but, less remarkably, is not this the ideal of 'communal discernment'?

What of those resurrection appearances when Jesus shares a meal with his disciples (Lk 24, 41-43; Jn 21, 9-13)? Here, the narrative seems to swing between emphasizing the sameness of Jesus and the transformation of Jesus. The function of the meal-narratives seems to be partly to show the personal identity of Jesus risen with Jesus in the flesh: that is, his sameness. Paul also uses language which swings between 'same' and 'different' when he speaks of the risen body as a 'spiritual body', which sounds like a contradiction in terms (1 Cor 15, 35-44). However, as is evident from the breaking of the bread of Emmaus, there can be no doubt that these narratives spoke 'Eucharist' for the first Christian communities; as indeed they do for Ignatius and every Christian blessed with this 'recognition' of Jesus.

We are not suggesting that the resurrection appearances were not more spectacular or overwhelming than anything experienced today: only that they are essentially of the same nature as the experiences described by Ignatius in the Spiritual Exercises. Further, St Paul is our witness that the resurrection appearances did not cease for all time with the Ascension. We may speak of 'experiencing the resurrection' as a gift which God can grant even today; though we must remember that only the chosen witnesses could truly experience that Jesus was '*the same, risen again in glory*'. But it is equally true that they are his witnesses for our sakes.