

# IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION TODAY

## The Public Dimension

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**T**HE RENEWAL of contemplative prayer during the last decade or so is still going forward, spreading to more and more people, and thus proving its relevance. But perhaps, in view of the desires for social justice that have been re-awakening in the Church even more recently, as well as a new sense of the public (political, economic, social) dimensions of faith, it is time to reflect on the direction which this prayer-movement is taking or ought to take in the future.

I would like to limit my exploration of this fairly complex question by focussing exclusively on 'ignatian' contemplation as described in the Spiritual Exercises. By contemplation here is meant a traditional form of imaginative presence to the mysteries of the gospel as this was popularized (not invented) by St Ignatius.

Anyone who has practised this method even a few times will not need any extended description (but for those without at least some basis in that experience, description may seem rather lame). By 'mystery' here is meant any story-unit of holy scripture in which God is acting in human history. Examples are the mysteries of the rosary or those presented in the medieval mystery plays and religious paintings. A lengthy list of them is given in nos 261-312 of the Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius best describes the method of entering into these mysteries in his detailed discussion of the Nativity (Exx 110-17). In addition to 'seeing the persons', 'hearing what they are saying' and 'considering what they are doing', he suggests: 'I will make myself a poor little unworthy slave, and as though present, look upon them, contemplate them, and serve them in their needs with all possible homage and reverence' (Exx 114-16).

The mystery thus becomes a current event, an action of God which is going on now; and in this method of prayer I make myself present

through my imagination (however it suits me to do that), but in such a way that I may actually take part in what occurs. 'Reverence' — a specifically ignatian word — describes the right attitude of one who is in the presence of a divine mystery. It avoids the extreme of utter prostration (falling flat on one's face), which would inhibit personal involvement, and the other extreme of carelessness or frivolity, which would mean that one misses the transcendent power of God's presence. The particular mystery becomes real for the person praying — it is actualized for him at that moment in its eternal significance. It follows that the individual should become personally present by imaginatively taking part — through some humble contribution — in what is going on. Experience proves that this might also be realized by 'identifying' with one or other of the persons involved in the mystery.

It should be emphasized that the mysteries in question are not to be merely reconstructed by an imaginary return to the past, and entered into by a sort of movie-making effort of the fantasy. This is not, in fact, how people who contemplate them actually experience the mysteries. Because Christ is risen, all his mysteries somehow partake in his eternal now, and become really present to the person at prayer. However difficult it may be to explain this fact logically, the fact itself has long been recognized in the annual feasts of the liturgy. Christmas is much more than the remembering of an ancient birth: it is that birth itself made real among us now; and at Easter we say not merely that Jesus arose from the dead long ago, but that he is risen today in our midst. In the same way, closely related as they are to the central paschal mystery itself, all the other mysteries of scripture are realized in the now of prayer, and retreatants may experience the sacred events as actually happening to them.

What has been said so far, of course, merely describes the method of disposing oneself for prayer, and not the prayer proper, which consists in the actual inter-communion of God and the person praying: the divine Lord may communicate himself in some quiet or some unexpected manner (or he may withhold himself for a time). The prayer itself is experienced as what is received by the one who is entering into prayer. All he can do is try to be well disposed: that is, to make himself receptive of whatever the Lord may give him.

I have been describing the elements of ignatian contemplation in order to lead into my main point — the more crucial matter of social and public involvement. The usual discussion, such as the one above, confines itself to two main factors:

- (a) the method of the person's becoming present to the mystery (disposing oneself for prayer);
- (b) the Lord's presence in the mystery to the one praying (prayer proper).

This reveals a twofold movement: in (a), the person praying enters into the mystery by becoming imaginatively receptive; in (b), the divine Lord enters actively into the depths of the one praying (he communicates his own life to him).

I wish now to introduce two more factors which repeat the twofold movement just described; in effect, they extend and complete its significance. These are:

- (c) that the one praying should carry an awareness of his whole life-world into the mystery;
- (d) so that the divine Lord in the power of the mystery may pour himself into the life-world of the one praying.

My argument is that, if (c) and (d) are not allowed for in ignatian contemplation today, the original aim and function of this sort of prayer will probably not be realized.

The reason is simply that in our day the twin factors (a) and (b) can too easily become confined within a merely private and subjective realm. The object of stressing (c) and (d) is to open the person's prayer into the concrete realm of public life in society. It is an attempt to break out of the withdrawn spirituality of our time, and to make more explicit the public meanings that otherwise remain latent and implicit in personal prayer. And this should begin at the very core relationship of Christians with their divine Lord.

St Ignatius was, of course, very careful to insist upon the entirely concrete realization of such contemplations, but he did so in a manner and terminology proper to his age, when our modern difficulties of privatization and existentialist subjectivity were not pressing. At the conclusion of each 'point' in his directions for contemplating the Incarnation and the Nativity, Ignatius goes out of his way to emphasize what I have proposed to call the retreatant's 'life-world':

I will reflect upon this to draw profit from what I see (106). Finally, I will reflect upon all I hear to draw profit from their words (107). Then I shall reflect upon all this to draw some fruit from each of these details (108).

Then I will reflect on myself that I may reap some fruit (114) . . . and then to reflect on myself and draw some fruit from it (115).

. . . and all this for me.

Then I will reflect and draw some spiritual fruit from what I have seen (116).

Until fairly recently, these expressions, 'reflect', 'draw profit', 'reap fruit', were taken to refer to supplementary activities of a meditative sort: that is, they were interpreted as efforts of reason and of will in applying the lessons of the prayer-subject to one's individual life. I believe that this interpretation is erroneous, or at least a serious distortion.

Ignatius has not forgotten that he is dealing with a method of contemplative prayer in which personal insertion in the mysteries by means of the imagination is the appropriate way of disposing oneself. Certainly, the remarks quoted above make clear how eager he is that the retreatant should feel the full effects of the mystery, in all its details, upon his personal life-world. The same could be said, for example, about the application of the senses: at the end of each 'point', Ignatius again insists on the need to reflect and to draw fruit (Exx 122-25); and yet this is surely not the place for acts of reasoning and of willing, but rather for immersing one's whole self in the consolations already received. It should be added that Ignatius uses similar expressions in the points for contemplations on the Passion (Exx 194), and in the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God (Exx 234-37).

Perhaps our difficulty with these expressions used by Ignatius comes from the deep divisions in our own cultural world: divisions between private and public realms, between the individual and social aspects of life, between subjective and objective experiences. While these disjunctions were not unknown in the time of Ignatius, they were very far from being institutionalized in his culture in the way in which they tend to be in our own. What I mean is simply that Ignatius could take it for granted that what a person felt in his individual self would at once reverberate through his social relations. In his day, personal and social were concretely known as one. No huge gap had opened up between the cold, objective institutions of society and the alienated 'I-Thou' realms of subjective experience.

This difference between the cultural worlds of St Ignatius and of our own time can perhaps be most vividly seen in late medieval and renaissance paintings of gospel mysteries. The persons in each mystery

are often dressed like fifteenth-century men and women. Sometimes the patron of the picture, or even the painter himself, is humbly and reverently present in the mystery. In background scenery, sometimes medieval ploughmen are seen at work in the fields, or renaissance ladies and gentlemen travelling down the roads.

In short, anachronism was no problem in those times, because the main intention of the artist was to realize each mystery in his own life-world, to sense the 'real presence' of Jesus in his very midst. The power of each divine mystery did not make itself felt, as it tends to do with us today, merely by transforming the secret inner soul of the individual person at prayer and remaining hidden in those depths, but rather by flooding into the social, public world where alone each individual could be realized as a person. Ignatius did not need to mention these facts: no one would expect anything else in his day. When he urges me, therefore, to reflect on myself and to draw profit from each detail of the mystery, he of course assumes the public impact of divine action in the world, and wants to make sure that I personally do not evade its influence.

Consider the following conversation, from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in which two minor characters talk about the impact of the secret murder of King Duncan:

*Old Man:* Threescore and ten I can remember well;  
 Within the volume of which time I have seen  
 Hours dreadful, and things strange, but this sore night  
 Hath trifled former knowledge.

*Rosse:* Ha, good Father,  
 Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,  
 Threaten his bloody stage: by the clock 'tis day,  
 And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.  
 Is't night's predominance, or the days' shame,  
 That darkness does the face of earth entomb,  
 When living light should kiss it?

*Old Man:* 'Tis unnatural,  
 Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last,  
 A falcon, towering in her pride of place,  
 Was by a mousing owl hawked at, and killed.

*Rosse:* And Duncan's horses (a thing most strange and certain)  
 Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,  
 Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,  
 Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would make  
 War with mankind.

This was written more than a generation after the death of Ignatius; and yet it still clearly assumes that any important event, even if secretly done, will at once have noticeable effects at every level of public life. The normal direction of interior motions, in fact, is outward into the external world. A dagger in the heart will put blood on the moon.

It was much later than Ignatius that Galileo and Descartes began to urge the separation of 'objective' and measurable dimensions from interior feelings and 'subjective' sensations. Furthermore, it was only in the eighteenth century that the habit of extracting general or universal truths from the mysteries became popular in western civilization. From that century and down to our day, 'reflection' has tended to mean a standing back, a removal of oneself from the scene, and an exercise of conscious reasoning to formulate abstract propositions that would belong equally to everyone, and of a conscious willing to apply universal truths to one's particular case.

All this is quite foreign, I believe, to the intentions of St Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*. For him, reflection was understood in the more elementary sense of letting the light of truth shine, as in a bright mirror, upon the life of the one contemplating. When he said, 'Reflect and draw fruit', he could assume a very natural and direct impact of the divine mystery in the public life-world of each person: that was not his concern. In his day, anything that an individual accepted and to which he committed himself would at once have an influence on his social world. His problem was the prior one: how to make sure of a personal involvement in the divine mystery. Once that individual response was obtained, once the mystery was allowed to have a bearing on the person's life, the public consequences were certain to follow.

In our cultural situation, on the other hand, the opposite results may be expected in those who have already been deeply affected, as so many have, by the popular forms of existentialism and analogous cultural movements. They will very easily take the mystery 'personally': that is, individually and privately. Experience shows how quickly the interior impact may be obtained with most people today. It is the social and public outflow that is usually blocked off.

For us, whatever is most meaningful in subjective terms seems, for that very reason, to be alien to the institutional forms of public life. A strongly reinforced dividing wall has been erected between subjective experiences, however powerfully felt, and the social implementation of their seemingly obvious consequences. So long

as the meaning of 'social' is restricted to inter-personal and inter-subjective realms, the effects will easily flow. But as soon as 'social' is extended to public structures, the cultural gap or division tends to prevent any further influence.

Very often this has reached the proportions of fatalism. The political and economic world appears to be controlled by such powerful alien forces, it marches to so different a drummer than my heartbeats, that no relationship between 'in here' and 'out there' seems possible. Ignatius, were he to return to our counsels today in order to help us adapt his Exercises to current needs, would likely spend a good deal of time simply marvelling at the peculiarity of our ways. After he had grown used to us, he would probably warn us energetically against misinterpretations of his meaning.

He would urge us in particular, I believe, to put the emphasis today on factors (c) and (d) above: namely, on our bringing with us, into our contemplation of the divine mysteries, our whole life-world, the concrete reality of our social and political existence. The purpose of this imaginative effort to dispose ourselves aright in prayer is that the power of the Lord's divine initiatives, as received in our prayer experiences, may not be intercepted and turned merely inward, but rather pour itself into the public sphere and make itself felt in the social realities of our time.

What will this amount to in practice? To discover this, it will help to note the difference between the level of direct experiences in prayer and the level of interpretation of those experiences. When it comes to interpretation, a whole range of new difficulties arise from the conservative, liberal, radical or reactionary bent of each retreatant, his ideological approach to the issues lurking in his life-situation. While I am convinced that ideologies are inescapable for Christians in their public life today, I cannot begin to deal with that important question here. The level of interpreting prayer experiences belongs to the review of prayer, to interview with a director, and in fact both to longer-range preparations for retreat and to a later pondering on the whole series of repeated prayer-periods. I wish to limit my discussion here to the prior, more elementary level of direct experiences themselves, and to seek a basic openness which will enable the retreatant to move freely about in the public realm rather than become confined to the inter-subjective and private realm from the start.

With these limitations to our discussion, we can say that at the level of directly experiencing the divine initiatives in prayer, where

there is genuine openness to the public realm of the praying person — whatever ideological commitments may in fact be influential with that individual — then the power of the incarnate mysteries ought in concrete fashion to shape or motivate or illuminate the person's life-world.

What, then, might this 'concrete fashion' be like? Let me take the example of an ignatian contemplation: the episode of calming of the storm.

With the coming of evening that same day, he said to them, 'Let us cross over to the other side'. And leaving the crowd behind they took him, just as he was, in the boat; and there were other boats with him. Then it began to blow a gale and the waves were breaking into the boat so that it was almost swamped. But he was in the stern, his head on the cushion, asleep. They woke him and said to him, 'Master, do you not care? We are going down!' And he woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Quiet now! Be calm!' And the wind dropped, and all was calm again. Then he said to them, 'Why are you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?' They were filled with awe and said to one another, 'Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey him' (Mk 4, 35-41).

Let us assume that our praying person, whether on a short retreat or in daily life conditions, is a business executive currently embroiled in a dispute over new income distribution policies to be adopted by his firm. This conflict has been upsetting him both at the office and at home. Because his own level of income is directly involved, not only has his standard of living in a highly inflationary situation become uncertain, but his future role in the company will be affected by whatever decision is taken.

If this person's prayer experiences are restricted to the private realm, perhaps he will sense the storm in the boat, as he takes his place alongside the sleeping Lord's disciples, to be nothing more than the upset feelings that he tends to take out on his wife after work. Perhaps he will recognize the storm as fears disturbing his inner peace, or exaggerated anger directed at his children's petty behaviour at home. He might well experience a consoling peace, when Christ awakes to rebuke the wind and waves and to remind his followers how firmly they ought to trust him. He could easily respond with real confidence in the Lord's dominion over his inner anxieties. Jesus is here the master in the sense of one who enables a disturbed person to find 'peace of soul'.



But all this prayer, in itself very good, has clearly been channelled into the realm of subjectivity alone. The interior confidence gained would indirectly influence the person's way of relating to his wife and children and even his private dealings with business partners. It would not, however, bear directly on the public issues of his family's attitudes towards their material standard of living, and of his company's decisions on income distribution policy. Such areas of contention are usually excluded from prayer; and I am suggesting here that they ought not to be excluded. Our whole life-world is relevant to the mysteries of Christ, and the divine power incarnate in our midst ought to flow freely into the full concreteness of that public existence.

I should insist again that the ideological questions raised for interpretation of these prayer experiences cannot truly disappear even if we dislike them. When ignored, they become even more enslaving, they bind our hands behind our backs. Whether we wish it or not, the Lord is nudging us today into the public realm. The gospel of Jesus must make itself felt in our actual world; otherwise through our intransigence, it will be relegated to the back rooms of power, and silently listed with what is easily controlled by others.

Should the contemplation be entered into with an entire openness to the public realm, then (in the example given) the storm is felt not merely internally in private or subjective areas, but as blowing strongly in the social, political and economic fields of life. And Jesus who sleeps awhile can be awakened by our own concern. He is Lord of that public storm and not merely of our inner states. He commands the winds of consumer exploitation and the waves of political oppression. His word of rebuke to the storm reveals to us personally, not of course any removal of the issues from our lives, but the ways in which blocks to public commitment, doubts about the value of the struggle, depression over reverses, resentments against differing views, and every other stay to involvement in the public realm, can be overcome by the power of the gospel.

One objection should perhaps be mentioned. It could be said that a retreat by definition, and even contemplative prayer in the everyday situation, implies a withdrawal from the cares and concerns of ordinary life. The proposal to open them more firmly to the public realm, because it appears to reverse this direction, would therefore seem to make prayer more difficult. To this it should be answered that the 'apartness' of prayer must always be maintained: not the actual circumstances of daily cares and concerns, but a consciousness

of their deeper reality and meaning should be brought to prayer apart. What is desired today is that the person in full awareness of his concrete life-world may be brought into the presence of divine mystery. What is opposed to this is the tendency to turn 'apartness' into 'withdrawal' from consciousness of the real situation of our public lives.

Naturally, the questions mentioned so briefly here are large ones, and new emphases in prayer alone will not make them go away. But amid a wide range of efforts to tackle the larger problems of our day, this matter of our special orientation during the quiet moments of contemplation cannot be neglected. After all, it is often 'in prayer apart' that the Lord enters our lives, converts our hearts to himself, and begins to renew our real existences. The question here is to remove blocks in our earliest dispositions, blocks that might from the very start prevent his operations from having their proper effect.