

THE 'SUPREME RULE': AN APOSTOLIC VIEW

By JOSEPH HITTER

THE MEANING of following the Christ of the Gospels in the vocation of St Ignatius Loyola is already sketched out for us in the Exercise which he inserts between the first and second weeks of the *Spiritual Exercises*.¹ The retreatant was to make this exercise at the time when his grateful love for his Saviour and Lord had taken possession of his mind and heart as he contemplated the dying Christ on the Cross, and answered with a full heart the question, 'What ought I to do for Christ?'², to whom he owes everything.

One might say that Christ himself answers the question unequivocally to the rich young man's 'what else should I do?' Initially, his answer to the retreatant is no more than 'follow me'.³ Ignatius, however, begins by painting a symbolic picture, rich in contemporary and traditional detail, which draws a bold outline of what he understands the following of Christ to mean. It is an action-parable which dominates the rest of the Exercises.

The Gospel offers abundant examples of Christ's apostolic call; so that, *prima facie*, Ignatius's *exemplum* takes us by surprise. It is drawn rather from a body of literature and profane history shared alike by the exploits of Charlemagne's warriors, so finely hymned in the *Chanson de Roland*, or even further back in the celtic myths surrounding Arthur of Tintagel and Merlin's magic. It was a *corpus* of little fact and much fiction shared by germanic tribes which produced *Beowulf* and the *Battle of Maldon*, and one that had a long and lingering life. For Iñigo de Loyola in the cave of Manresa, it was very much a reality. The ideals, if not the actuality, of the Crusades lived on in men's minds, and there was nothing mythological about the national and religious character of the wars of liberation

¹ The autograph has no title. Instead, it has a perfectly intelligible and enlightening rubric 'The call of the temporal king helps to contemplate the life of the eternal King'. It is the *Versio Vulgata* which has given the exercise the title *Regnum Christi* — 'The Kingdom of Christ'.

² Exx 53.

³ Exx 91: the second prelude of the Exercises.

in the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella. No matter what we might think of the converted Ignatius keeping vigil and hanging up his sword before the shrine of the Virgin of Montserrat, the fact remains that the parable retains its place, and presumably its importance, when the book of the Exercises is presented for the approval of the Holy See, many years after he has turned his back resolutely on his knightly dreams, and begun the pilgrimage which ended in the founding of the Company of Jesus.

There are further surprising elements in the retention of the original form of the parable in the final redaction of the book of the Exercises. Wherever Ignatius departs from his typical laconic style, it is for the obvious purposes of instruction⁴ or clarity;⁵ here he retains the narrative style with its rhetorical devices proper to a younger Ignatius, but seemingly at odds with one whose European temper and feeling has been enlarged, as would befit the founder of an Order international in its immediate range of vision. It follows then that he attaches a special importance to the retention of the example in its intellectual and affective context. For him it specifies essential aspects of the following of the Christ of the Gospels viewed from the stand-point of General of the newly-formed Company of Jesus. Far from being a sentimental reminiscence of the way in which he first viewed the dedication of the young knight to Christ and his Lady, he considers the *exemplum* as pointing up elements of perennial value, especially for his Company, in the *sequela Christi*. It is retained in its pristine form not because of the sharpening of spiritual swords against the attacks of the Reformers, nor because he sees that young men need heroes to worship. It is rather that, for him, the parable has a timeless quality, which, when properly understood, contains nothing repellent to 'men of peace', even of the present time; its military setting turns out to be of minimal consequence.

The world of the parable

As with any parable, it is a story which must be set in a particular time and place. Ignatius's comes from the world of the *comitatus* or *gefolgschaft*. It has, in fact, something in common with the recent bands of mercenaries in Africa and elsewhere: they are in it for the pay, but very often equally attracted by the personality of a particular

⁴ E.g. The specific kinds of prayer in the first exercises of each week, the three methods of prayer, the various rules.

⁵ E.g. the distinction between temperance and penance, Exx 83.

leader. So it was with the jostling for power in late medieval Europe. Soldiers of fortune were gathered together under recognized leaders, entering into union with them, pledging themselves only by their word. The perennial nature of such association is well attested early enough by Tacitus and in ancient teutonic heroic poems. Sometimes the individual would enter the *comitatus* of the leader in a way which implied membership of his family and domestic community.

Closer to the time of Ignatius, the *comitatus* and the frankish *beneficium* took the form of a simple military grouping, into which the knight entered by a personal and legal contract with a more powerful señor or liege-Lord, for puposes of military service. It was not a question of a vassal signing over his personal freedom: the terms of the contract were restricted to service as part of a defence-force in peace and of actual engagement in time of war. The lord's part of the bargain was to take the knight under his protection, to fit him out with his military and other equipment, and to maintain him.

The contract was, however, a solemn one. The knight promised reverence, obedience and service (*reverentiam, obsequium et servitium*), and was received in the presence of the lord's family, his *curia*. He knelt before the lord, and was asked if he accepted the clear-cut conditions of service. He placed his folded hands between those of the lord; and with a solemn oath of allegiance, willed all that belonged to him, including his flesh and blood, to the service of his lord, always granted that this would be to the latter's glory and honour. His likes and dislikes would be those of his liege-lord; he would never expect a better lot than his; he would serve him in strategy and tactics, as well as in action. The Lord's friends and enemies would be those of the vassal. The Lord's insignia and emblems, his coat of arms and shield would be his. In terms of attitude and disposition, Shakespeare sums it up for us in the relationship between Adam and Orlando:

Master, go on and I will follow thee,
To the last gasp, with faith and loyalty.⁶

The knight became the same flesh and blood with his lord: their joys and sorrows, loot and losses, victory and defeat, were totally shared.

Such, then, is the parable. But we are not recommended to make detailed comparison with the earthly and the eternal Lord. Ignatius

⁶ As *You Like It*, Act II, Scene 3.

simply expects that his *exemplum* will be of help in contemplating the apostolic task of Christ our Lord. He expects that we shall 'see' more clearly what he means when he speaks of responding to the call of the Gospel-Christ. And this is the gist of the first two points of the second part:

. . . if we give weight to that call of the temporal king to his subjects, then how much more worthy of consideration is the sight of Christ our Lord, the eternal king, and the entire world in his presence, when he calls — all of them together and each one in particular — as follows: 'My will is to conquer the whole world and every enemy, and thus to enter into the glory of my Father. Therefore, he who will come with me will have to labour with me; so that, following me in suffering, he can likewise follow me in glory'.

(96) The second, to consider that all who have right reason and judgment will offer their whole persons for the task.⁷

It is in the third point that Ignatius leaves his parable and begins the contemplative process, rather than, as one might have expected, directing the exercitant to offer himself with Christ in his mission of spreading the Good News throughout the world. Rather, the key words of ignatian contemplation are pressed into service, and we read: ' . . . a greater desire to be moved by love', 'signalize themselves in a total service', 'go against their own natural feelings (*contra su propria sensualidad*)'. We are led, that is, in a completely different direction.

Our previous expectations are due, perhaps, to our neglect of the full historical force of the parable, which, we may presume, was at the forefront of Ignatius's mind when he first sketched out this exercise in the cave at Manresa. The knightly offering is made in the presence of the whole family, the *curia* or court of the Lord. And so it is that the parable indicates to us that we are making our own offering 'in the presence of . . . the heavenly court'.⁸ Furthermore, it belonged to the dedication ceremony that the knight should protest that it was his will and desire, his deliberate determination, to assume the accoutrements of his new lord: his raiment, insignia, coat of arms — in short, all his apparel and external emblems which could indicate total mutual engagement, even as the exchange of wedding-rings symbolizes the mutual *translatio* of man and wife. It was clear from this ceremonial and all that it symbolized that it was the knight's

⁷ Exx 95-96.

⁸ Exx 98.

intention to enter into the circle of the friends and family of his lord—to become like him. Hence the essence of the oblation, 'to imitate you in enduring all injuries, all ignominy and all poverty', is highly logical, particularly when this is seen to be the insignia of the Lord Christ. Small wonder then that we find the substance of this conclusion emphasized in the *Examen Generale* of those who are offering themselves to join the Company of Jesus:⁹

... they desire to clothe themselves in the same apparel and uniform of their lord because of the love and reverence which they owe to him ... because of their desire to resemble and to follow closely our Creator and Lord Jesus Christ, by putting on his apparel and uniform ... to imitate and to follow him.¹⁰

For Ignatius, then, the authentic following of Christ, as it is enunciated in the Gospel, presents itself according to this ideal of chivalry. The knight will wish to take on the armour of his lord, bear his coat-of-arms and the rest of his insignia, in order to demonstrate the truth and reality of his dedication: which is in the Cross, its shame and its poverty, as well as the glory to which it leads. Just as the wearing of the apparel and insignia of the Lord in the parable is the sign and reality that the knight belongs no more to himself but to his Lord and family, so the sign and proof of the following of Christ is the voluntary acceptance of his poverty and the ungrudging endurance of his humiliation. For Ignatius, this is the pauline meaning of 'putting on Christ', and 'bearing on his body the marks of Jesus'.¹¹

It is with our hearts and minds full of the quiet contemplations on the mysteries of the Christ-child that Ignatius confronts us again with his particular mode of the *sequela Christi*. In his 'Meditation on the two Standards', he now presents the insignia of Christ the King—the poverty and the humiliations—as his Lord's battle-strategy. They are the road to victory, to 'all other virtue'. The exercitant's special petition is now to be accepted—to be received under his Lord's colours in the greatest spiritual poverty, not excluding actual poverty; and in bearing reproaches and injuries, so as to be more like his Lord.¹²

⁹ Ch 4 [101] 44. Cf Ganss, *op. cit.*, pp 107-08.

¹⁰ The same points are reflected in the Spiritual Exercises, in the Third Mode of Humility, to which we shall refer later on (cf Exx 167-68).

¹¹ Gal 6, 17.

¹² Cf Exx 146-47.

Clearly, for Ignatius, the acceptance of poverty and the endurance of humiliations are fundamental to the following of the gospel-Christ, the essential disposition for assimilation to him. In this case, the image used by Ignatius designed to emphasize this is one of contrast; the knight is already on the battlefield, weighing up his Lord's tactics against those of the enemy.¹³ The banner of Christ is a synonym for the Lord's insignia. To 'fight under the standard' is to wear his armour and apparel. The insistence of the early commentators is that the founding of the Society took root in the mind of Ignatius through his repeated praying of these two exercises: a company of those who were decided to 'fight under the standard of Christ'—the exact words used in the Constitutions.¹⁴ It was not initially a question of taking on specific apostolic works, but the formation of those who would make their own these principles and attitudes of Christ, even where these went against natural feelings to the extremes of ignominy and humiliations.

The *sequela Christi* as it features in these two exercises is the necessary result of that 'love which surpasses knowledge',¹⁵ the personal relationship and intimacy with the God-man. In all the contemplations of the Second Week, the third prelude directs us to ask for 'an interior knowledge of our Lord, that I may love him more and follow him'.¹⁶ This indeed was the purpose of the meditations of the First Week—to help us to enter into that union of love with the person of our Saviour and Lord which has its beginnings in gratitude.

The same incentives are seen to be at work in the Third Mode of Humility—the personal love for Christ, the affective attachment to his person which drives us to imitate him the better, to become more like him, so that we 'choose poverty with Christ poor rather than riches . . . and be accounted as a worthless and a fool for him who was first held to be such, rather than wise and prudent in the world'.¹⁷ This is indeed the folly of the Cross, the love of Jesus that is lunacy in the eyes of the world.

It must be stressed that the parable of the Kingdom also contains this particular element: the parallel with Christ's personal love. It was not by any kind of coercion that the knight was led into the service of the Lord. Nor to throw in his lot with him by self-interest. His desire to wear his Lord's coat-of-arms and insignia, to share his life, arose not out of vanity or ambition; he was prompted by the high

¹³ Exx 140, 143.

¹⁴ Exx 98, 146.

¹⁵ Eph 3, 15.

¹⁶ Exx 104, 105, etc.

¹⁷ Exx 167.

esteem and affection towards his person. So it is with Christ our Lord. Like Paul, one can even boast of sharing his poverty and humiliations.¹⁸ For such a one, to be better off than Christ would itself be a matter of shame. He could not bear to be comfortably honoured while he looked on Christ destitute. Rather he would count it a privilege to share the lot of the suffering Jesus.¹⁹

Such considerations throw light on other statements in the Exercises. For instance, we are advised in the fifth annotation to enter into them 'with a courageous heart and with generosity, offering our Creator and Lord all our will and liberty, in order that his divine Majesty may dispose of his person and of all that he has according to his most holy will'. Equally, the eighteenth annotation directs that one who lacks this magnanimity should not continue the Exercises after the First Week, since he is unlikely to profit from them. Over and again during the Second Week, this generosity is the keynote of the Contemplations, with the lesson of the parable as its background.²⁰ If it was unimaginable for a knight to enter wholeheartedly the service of his Lord, much less persevere in it, then how much more impossible to enter Christ's service, without sharing his lot and desiring to grow in his likeness.

Another point stressed by Ignatius in this knight/Lord relationship is the mutuality of the trust, and the depth of it. The Contemplations of the Christ of the Exercises seek first to acquire an ever-deepening knowledge-in-love of Jesus. This in turn depends on a sense of trust having its source in the ravishing, living personality of the Lord, who draws and attracts the exercitant into the affective love which is the spring-board of apostolic action.

It is worth noticing, however, that none of the exercises which pivot on the parable—the Two Standards, the Three Couples of Men and the Third Mode of Humility—make any express reference to the call to apostolic work. The Election follows only after these exercises, which are designed to help the exercitant over the matter of his choice; but neither the third prelude nor the colloquy refers exclusively to the following of Christ in poverty and in humiliations in the apostolic life. The Three Weeks, their purposes and their petitions, are all directed towards the call to the way of gospel perfection, of the evangelical counsels. Here is the matter of the Election. Such a way may be entered upon in religious life, in the

¹⁸ Cf Gal 6, 14.

¹⁹ Cf Phil 3, 7-11.

²⁰ Cf Exx 157, 168, 179, 189.

diocesan priesthood, or in the world; even in married life. The call itself is general, to every Christian.²¹

If one seeks for originality in the ignatian way of the following of the gospel-Christ, one must conclude that there is none. He was a man in some respects ahead of his time, in others old-fashioned, one might say. And there is nothing original in that. But he was certainly a man of large vision, with the makings of a great soldier or the calibre of a great statesman. And those qualities converge, in the context of the grace of his conversion, in the structure of his understanding of the *sequela Christi*. He goes for the substance, leaving aside the accidentals; he concentrates on what he believes to be the essence of the following of the Christ of the Gospels.

At the same time, his context is original, in that the parabolic picture of the fundamental exercise on the Lordship of Christ is brilliantly drawn and consistently and authentically applied. It makes, so to speak, 'a point of honour' out of the following of the Christ of the Gospels; no other saint, except perhaps that other great Spaniard, Teresa of Avila, can approach the sense of vigour and integrity which he brings to it. And even then we may be permitted to believe that his influence may have been at work on her, together with their similar outlook of chivalry:

Here I am, my Father, I will not turn away my face from you, nor have I the right to turn my back on them [persecutions, sickness, dishonour]. For your Son gave you this will of mine in the name of us all, and it is not right that I for my part should fail.²²

Ignatius, too, appeals to the same sense of honour of those who determine to follow Christ our Lord: '... how he would deserve to be blamed by all the world and reckoned a recreant knight'.²³

Further, in contrast to Augustine's total separation of the Two Cities, which held the field up to Ignatius's time and long enough afterwards, Ignatius sees the spiritual combat taking place on the very same battlefield of the world, 'omitting no provinces, regions, states of life, nor any single individual, into which the Lord of the World ... sends so many persons throughout the whole world to spread his sacred doctrine among all states and conditions of persons'.²⁴

²¹ The case of the person already in an 'irrevocable state of life' is dealt with in Exx 189.

²² *Way of Perfection*, trans. E. Allison Peers (London, 1963), p. 138.

²³ Exx 94, 59; cf Exx 74. Exx 141.

²⁴ Exx 145.

There is a reality and clarity of vision here which one of the great leaders of Christianity had lacked.

When it comes to the exercise on the Three Couples of Men, he demonstrates his practical knowledge. He sees that there are clearly three ways of following the gospel-Christ, and three degrees of commitment. The first desire to come as near to having their cake and eating it as is possible without losing every vestige of peace of soul. The whole-hearted go to the root of the matter. They see that it is a question of a disordered desire for what might lead them away from God and the fulness of his love. Theoretically, when this point in the course of the Exercises has been reached, the exercitant should be confronting himself with the basic question whether he is serious in his determination to enter on the way of true assimilation to Christ, to follow him in the way in which is to be outlined in the succeeding exercise on the Third Mode of Humility.

It has often been noticed that 'imperfect' and 'perfect' humility are, in the Western Spiritual Tradition, as different as chalk from cheese.²⁵ So Ignatius is summarizing when he writes:

The third is the most perfect humility, that is to say, when, including the first and the second . . . for the better following of Christ our Lord and the more actual likeness to him, I wish and choose poverty with Christ poor than riches, — reproaches, with Christ laden with reproaches than honours — and I desire to be accounted a good-for-nothing and a fool for Christ's sake, who was first held to be such, rather than wise and prudent in this world.²⁶

We shall, perhaps, never know why Ignatius avoided the word 'love' in this statement—or in many other places in the Exercises for that matter. For this he has been unjustly pilloried, notably by the ex-Jesuit, Henri Brémond, in his *Histoire des sentiments religieux en France*. But this would be to forget that for Ignatius 'love' was the gift of theological charity: the foundation-stone of the christian revelation, and as such, a word to be used sparingly.²⁷

²⁵ Cf e.g. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, chs 13 and 14, ed. Hodgson (London, 1958), where other examples of the difference are cited.

²⁶ Exx 167.

²⁷ We are grateful to Fr Hitter for allowing us such freedom in editing his article for the purposes of this issue.