

THE ONE WHO GIVES THE EXERCISES

By BRIAN GROGAN

This article is intended for those who are interested but hesitant in giving the Spiritual Exercises in the context of personal guidance of the individual retreatant. I exclude, then, those who prefer to give 'preached retreats'; and, of course, those who are already well-versed in giving the Exercises, for I still have much to learn from them. Rather I address myself to all those who have a basic familiarity with the Exercises, whether they are layfolk, diocesan or religious priests, sisters or brothers, who are contemplating giving them in a manner intended by Ignatius.¹ There are many ways to guide clients in retreat situations; and each way requires some expertise in the giver. But specific expertise is demanded of those who wish to give the Exercises according to their author's directives. I hope that what I have to write will help, you, the reader, to find out whether or not you have the skills required. You may decide that currently you should use your gifts in retreat situations other than those which fall within the scope of the authentic Exercises. But you may also discover that you can foster within yourself the qualities I am about to describe, come to learn the skills required, and in God's good time find yourself ready to 'give the Exercises'. It is not my intention to sketch in a portrait of the ideal retreat-giver. I have tried such an approach in an earlier draft of the paper; re-reading it showed me how effectively it would serve to discourage that interested but hesitant audience which I am trying to help. Nor shall I offer a list of 'do's and don't's'. I shall instead be personal. You, the reader, are asking: 'Should I try to give a directed retreat?' My response is to reflect aloud on why I am prepared to give such retreats, how I go about them, and what qualities they require in me.

IT WILL, I hope, comfort and hearten the reader to know that my experience in retreat-giving is decidedly limited. I have given the full Exercises on two occasions, to a total of some twenty persons; I have given eight-day retreats to some fifty

¹ On the integral Spiritual Exercises and the adaptations inspired by them, see George E. Ganss: 'The Authentic Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: Some Facts of History and Terminology Basic to their Functional Efficacy Today', in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, vol. 1, no 2 (November 1969).

persons, either in groups or alone. I have made the full Exercises in a personally-guided way once, and have made annually an eight-day retreat in the same way for the past twelve years. Prior to that, I was familiar only with preached retreats. Of these too I have give some, and found that they can be a source of great good; but I shall not treat of them here.

Perhaps I may already seem to be distancing myself from some would-be directors. If, however, I begin to speak of the fear which I face in giving a retreat, I may find some common ground with them. First, I want to admit that for me each retreat is a new beginning, a risk, a moving into the unknown; I experience inability and a sense of dread; I go through periods when I wish the whole retreat would be cancelled, or that some worthwhile excuse might free me from the engagement without too much loss of face. I have found that many potential retreat-givers are put off from ever beginning by just this sort of fear: This apostolic paralysis is a tragedy when such a person is judged to have the basic qualities for the work of retreat-giving. One meets, for example, men who are excellent confessors, who have sensitivity and good judgment; and yet when confronted with the apostolate of the Exercises, they experience a sense of uselessness, or ineptitude or a fear of failure; and these prove decisive. Such a fear is not from God and must be resisted. Perhaps it may help if I explain how I confront it myself.

Who is the Director?

In trying to come to terms with my fears over the years, the light has slowly dawned that in the retreat situation there is indeed a director; he is, however, not human but divine. God is the director; I am his helper, the *giver* of the retreat. To view the apostolic task in this light does effect a radical change in one's approach; or perhaps I should say that at least it has changed everything for me. My beginning fear usually is: I cannot make a success of this retreat, so it will be a failure. When grace enters my heart, I come to see that while I cannot make a success of the retreat, God can and will. My fear then becomes something more like 'holy fear'; a fear that I may get in God's way, that I may be a bad and useless instrument. I sense that I am not sufficiently familiar with God and with his ways to understand what is to happen in the encounter between the retreatant and God. My 'doubtful dread' becomes a holy fear when it leads away from paralysis and escaping from the task of the retreat, but to prayer, to

repentance, to penance if need be; in short, when it leads me to conversion and to deeper union with God.²

Ignatius, whether by good instinct or by careful reflection, does not speak of the 'director of the retreat'. Instead he uses the term 'he who gives the Exercises' (*el que da los ejercicios*).³ Involved here is something far more important than words; for me it is the basic truth that the director is God, and with him lies the main responsibility for the success of the enterprise of the retreat. It is he who has invited the retreatant to 'come apart' (Mk 6, 31), and it is he too who gives the grace whereby the retreatant responds generously to that invitation. It is God too who has been preparing the way for many a year, and who knows the needs of the retreatant 'infinitely better' than I.⁴ So the burden of 'success' must rest with him who alone can bear it. In my ungraced moments — and they are many — I fear that nothing will happen, because I cannot make it happen. In my graced moments that fear fades: I plant and water, and God truly makes things grow,⁵ as every retreat experience proves abundantly.

Not only do the retreatants grow, but through each retreat I too have grown in my appreciation of the masterful ways in which divine providence leads each of us uniquely. When I see others generously struggling to accept the radical values of the gospels, I find a like desire in myself, and an urge to become more familiar with him, so that I may be a more faithful interpreter of his call to the individual retreatant. Something of christian humour has grown in me too: humour is some measure of our appreciation of divine providence, as Hugo Rahner indicates in his book *Man at Play*. The dread which both retreatant and giver often experience at the opening of the retreat can be suitably lightened by that humour, which expresses a trust that all will be well, that something worthwhile will happen, since God knows what he's about.

² The fourteenth-century english spiritual writer, Julian of Norwich, is perhaps outstanding in her treatment of the distinction between this paralysing fear, which she calls 'doubtful dread', and the 'holy fear' to which the author of this article refers. She calls it a lovely or reverent fear. Cf E. Colledge and J. Walsh, *Julian of Norwich: Showings* (New York, 1978/London, 1979), pp 324 ff. Ed.

³ Louis J. Puhl, whose edition of *The Spiritual Exercises* (Westminster, Md., 1951) is the most widely known of the english versions, is regrettably careless in his translation of the spanish *el que da los ejercicios*; in the Annotations — Exx 1-20 — he translates correctly in the majority of instances; but in Exx 7 and 18, he renders the phrase 'the Director of the Exercises'.

⁴ Cf Exx 89.

⁵ Cf 1 Cor 3, 6.

Serving my betters

When I accept the truth that God is the director and I his helper and instrument, I am free enough to undertake the work of retreat-giving, no matter how aware I am of vast gaps in my inner life and my spiritual experience. I may very well be shown up as one who is indeed very poor in spirit; but does this matter, since the standards, the pace and the goal of the retreat are set, not by me, but by God? I once asked a man to guide me in an eight-day retreat: he refused. 'I'd have nothing to say to you' he said: 'you're on the inner track with all this spirituality stuff!' He was in fact a holy man; but like most of us, he had reflected all too little on his long experience of God. He was rich but did not know it, nor did he know who had made him rich. And so he declined my request because he felt that he had nothing to give. I have felt the same temptation myself: at least half of my retreatants are further along the path to God than I! But however poorly I am responding to God's calls in my own life, I can at least present Christ and the scriptures to exercitants, accompany them on their journey, support them and help them reflect on what is happening in their encounter with God, and hold them at those critical junctures where they see clearly what God wants, but experience the temptation to evade the issue and move to something else. And so, though I may be far from the goal myself, I know the way, and so can help others find it.

The retreat-giver, then, does not present himself or herself as a *guru*. By this I mean one who has become a master of the interior life, and who communicates knowledge of the path to God to chosen disciples who are capable and anxious to receive it. The disciples' role is to ask questions, to listen and to learn the wisdom which the master offers. Perhaps in preached retreats of the older style, relationships were of this guru-disciple type; but such is not the relationship between the giver and the exercitant in the mind of St Ignatius. Rather, it should be characterized by a growth in maturity and freedom; it should be a voyage in which one learns to sail the ship for oneself, by responding appropriately to the different winds that blow. It should be a voyage of personal discovery, rather than a guided tour conducted by a non-stop commentator.

The prayer of intercession

The retreat-giver who has a right sense of order, that is, a sense of the primacy of God in the whole enterprise of the retreat, will spend

much time interceding with the Lord for the retreatant. This is something which any Christian can do for another; it requires no special skill, only concern. For when I am sufficiently concerned, I give the time, and over the years I have found that the amount of time I have given to the prayer of intercession has grown a good deal (I blush to think of my earliest retreatants reading this!). Fr Anthony de Mello has proposed that unless one believes effectively in the prayer of intercession, it would be better not to undertake to give the Exercises. Ignatius's advice to the giver does not include the obligation of praying for the exercitant, which is perhaps remarkable; Polanco, however, may be quoting his master when he says somewhere that it is the task of the giver of the Exercises to love and pray for the exercitant. This tradition of praying for and loving the person entrusted to one's spiritual care goes back to the early Fathers, to Polycarp, in fact, the disciple of St John.⁶ St Monica's prayer for Augustine might serve as a paradigm.⁷ The prayer of petition is centrally emphasized in the New Testament, more than any other form of prayer; the Letter to the Hebrews reminds me that I do not intercede alone, but that Christ joins my prayer to his own and presents *our* prayer for the retreatant to the Father.⁸

It often helps to tell the retreatant that you are praying for him or her. I usually express it as part of my side of the contract in the retreat, and I find that retreatants are usually both surprised and very grateful. The effectiveness of this form of prayer is truly extraordinary: one sister confessed to me: 'Knowing that you were praying for me just changed everything. It kept me going when my prayer was a mess, and made me believe that God does care for me after all. We sisters are not used to the idea that a priest could be concerned enough about us to give up his time to pray for us'.

It is through praying in this way that I come to love the exercitant properly: sustained intercession is the antidote to the development of unhealthy relationships, whether of antipathy, of possessiveness, or whatever. One comes to regard the retreatant as God does, with a love which is reverential and hopeful. Before me is the image and likeness of God, his masterpiece, his work of art.⁹ I pray that in the daily meeting with the exercitant I may remember this truth. I find that when I do, the retreatant begins to grow in the realization that he

⁶ Cf Hausherr, Irénée: *Direction spirituelle en Orient autrefois* (Rome, 1955), pp 130-41.

⁷ Cf *Confessions* IX, 11.

⁸ Cf Heb 7, 25.

⁹ Cf Eph 2, 10.

or she is high in the Lord's favour, and when this happens, the retreat 'takes off'.

Don't push the river!

I have been told that I suffer from 'N-ach', which is the psychologist's shorthand for 'Need for achievement'; certainly in my earlier days of retreat-giving I tended to have a too-ambitious programme for the retreatants. I found, however, that once one gets a reputation for forcing the pace, the volume of requests for one's services tends to diminish. I learned slowly that one needs the patience of God; God takes a lifetime (and longer, if purgatory is somehow in time!) to bring about our full conversion. So I have had to learn to walk at God's pace, and his pace is that of the honest retreatant. The graces of the Exercises are lofty ones; it is a critical yet a liberating moment when a retreatant says: 'I know what I should be praying for, but I'd be dishonest if I pretended to you that I'm praying for it'. It is preferable to stand still and admit that one is doing so, than to dance sluggishly and unwillingly to another's music. The admission allows both retreatant and giver to grasp where the real problem lies. God does not give immediate response to all our requests. It is not failure on the giver's part if the retreat ends without a resolution of the problem. The real failure would be if the retreatant felt that she or he had to be dishonest. Hurried along by the giver's desire that all the graces prayed for should be won, the retreatant can be blocked from revealing the true state of affairs. I find that I now often ask: 'what were you praying for?' When the answer is, 'quite honestly, nothing', both of us can look at the situation and try to puzzle out together what to do next.

Raise the ante!

This section appears to contradict what has just been said. It is intended, however, to illustrate the need for flexibility in the retreat-giver, so that he can adapt his approach to differing situations. It is true that the giver should walk at the exercitant's pace, that he should not be anxious to 'push the river' or hurry the exercitant along. This quality of patience comes appropriately into play when there is genuine movement. However, in my experience, many exercitants come to the retreat in a state of quiet resignation to a life of 'safe, uninteresting mediocrity' — the phrase is Newman's. They are

innocent but often dull; their horizons are narrow: they lack any sense that they have a unique role to play in God's redemptive plans; and so they can read and pray their way through the radical passages of the New Testament without a shiver, because they do not grasp the fact that the Lord is challenging *them*. Where this sense of challenge is absent or only dimly present, there is little genuine movement, and the giver of the exercises must intervene. Let us listen to the advice of that master retreat-giver, Peter Favre. He speaks of those

... who believe themselves always to be impelled by one and the same spirit, though — as they will acknowledge — with greater or less intensity at different times. . . . They neither entertain thoughts such as would deviate from truth and goodness, nor have they any clearly wayward inclinations. . . .

Now a highly effective way by which a man can learn to distinguish the spirits is to propose first that he should choose a state of life, and then choose from among the varying degrees of perfection within it. Try proposing to him higher standards regarding his ways of acting, his beliefs, his hopes, his charity: put the challenge in such a way that he can apply himself to it both in heart and deed, and you will usually discover that this method makes it much easier for him to experience the difference between the good and evil spirit.¹⁰

Should the giver of the Exercises be ready to challenge the retreatant in the manner Favre describes, when he speaks of leading people to examine themselves concerning a higher degree of perfection in their lives? I believe he should, and I do not think that this contradicts what I said above about moving at the pace of the retreatant. I give the Exercises without any predetermined agenda or time-schedule: yet I must constantly ask: Where is God leading? What is the next feasible step? There must be a relationship of honesty such that the retreatant can admit: 'Nothing's happening', and I can respond with tentative suggestions, which may range from proposing that the exercitant might pray more, for example, at midnight, or that some suitable form of penance be tried, to questions which would involve a definite broadening of horizons, such as: 'Have you ever thought of living among the poor?'; 'Have you considered putting your talents at the service of some voluntary organisation?' Ignatius's directive about the need to ply the exercitant with questions when he

¹⁰ Bl. Peter Favre: *Memoriale, MHSI Fabri Monumenta* (1914), nn 300-02, pp 638-39.

is not moved by the differing spirits is in question here.¹¹ Perhaps in doing so one runs the risk of provoking anger or loss of the retreatant's friendship; but more often I have found that the retreatant is somewhat flattered that I have such an exalted view of the plans which God may have in store for him or her. Looking back, I regret those retreats which I have made or given in which there was no element of challenge: they were largely, I fear, wasted time!

Reflection on experience

The best preparation for giving the Exercises is to make them in a personally-guided manner, such that one comes to experience the various graces, and begins to practise the art of discernment. As to the graces, perhaps that of the First Week is the most subtle: I can well remember the day it dawned on me that I was truly a sinner, yet loved with infinite compassion; it was a hot, sticky day in upstate New York, and I had been labouring long, with the help of a happily insistent tertian master. We were due to end the First Week in a few hours' time, and I was aware that I had not yet appropriated what Ignatius was talking about. Suddenly the light dawned, and I remember saying to myself: 'God forgive me for trying to tell others what the grace of the First Week was, before experiencing it myself!' The grace may have dimmed since then, but I can still recognize it or its absence either in myself or in others. The art of discernment! Since the central role of the giver is to help the retreatant to discern the spirits, he must be in touch with his own feelings, tugs, aversions, inclinations. By nature and by training I see myself as over-cerebral; for long I was unaware of the world of feelings and affectivity. 'Feelings don't count!', my Master of Novices used to say, and I learnt the lesson well. Over the past few years I have tried to learn — without too much help from my brethren, I must confess — to get in touch with my feelings, to acknowledge and articulate and recognise how they influence my decisions. For me, this is a new language, and I speak it poorly; but unless I try to speak it, I cannot teach it or understand it when it is spoken by the retreatant.

This follows the need for spiritual direction; I need to be developing in self-knowledge and in knowledge of God. I have presuppositions, prejudices and blind spots; I easily warp the good; I set limits to the demands of God on me because my openness

¹¹ Exx. 6 (Annotations).

is limited. Good spiritual direction helps me to uncover those limiting attitudes in myself which are certainly not from God; through it I become a little more aware of what is going on in my heart, and so I can have some idea of what is going on in the heart of another. Why was Peter Favre so highly regarded by Ignatius as a giver of the Exercises? Surely it was because he was so spontaneously in touch with his feelings, as the *Memoriale* reveals on every page. At an early age he fell under the influence of Ignatius. He was immature; but with Ignatius to reflect with, he travelled a long road. We see him, on page after page, adverting to and responding appropriately to his rich inner experience.¹²

A recent article highlights the importance of the supervision of the giver during the retreat itself.¹³ Of course this seems like a counsel of perfection. The occasions on which it is feasible will be limited, since the giver is often working alone; and even in a team, an able and willing supervisor is not easily found. Nevertheless, it is an excellent idea: which of us is so transparent as not to cast any shadows? How free am I in regard to what God is doing in the exercitant? Am I presuming that God must act in certain ways? Do I advert to my likes and dislikes of various retreatants? Am I aware of the retreatants' reactions to me — such reactions may extend all the way from falling in love to antipathy — and how am I to deal with them? These and a host of other questions should arise; and a good supervisor with whom one can 'check out' during the retreat would be invaluable. Another help would be a feedback process, whereby retreatants' comments would be passed on, where helpful, to the giver.

Some capacity for teamwork is important, especially where a number of retreat-givers are working in the same building. If one of the group has no desire nor capacity to co-operate with the others when the situation arises, I doubt his capacity to listen or to learn; and if he lacks either quality, he is hardly suited to retreat-giving.

A good listener

Are you a good listener? Ask your friends. To be able to listen well is an essential quality of the retreat-giver. To listen sensitively, without intruding oneself, is the best way to help the client to articulate,

¹² Cf Brian O'Leary, *The Discernment of Spirits in the Memoriale of Blessed Peter Favre: Supplement to The Way*, 35 (Spring 1979), *passim*.

¹³ W. A. Barry and M. C. Guy: 'The Practice of Supervision in Spiritual Direction', in *Review for Religious* 37 (1978), pp 843-52.

clarify and distinguish what is going on in prayer. The retreat situation may be a unique experience for the client; perhaps never before and never again will someone be there simply to listen. The rapport essential for a relationship between giver and client is established by listening; for listening shows acceptance. Clients yearn to be taken 'where they're at'; they dread being forced onto some procrustean bed of the retreat-giver's making. Through listening, one helps the client to become aware of those unconscious attitudes which set the course of life for good or ill. To illustrate: at the end of a retreat an exercitant told me that two words I had said in the course of an interview had changed everything for her. I enquired what these two sapiential gems might have been. Alas!, I had simply said, 'And then . . . ?', at a point where she had paused, unwilling to recount a very painful experience. My question had enabled her to go on to share something of which she had never spoken before. Thus she looked at it openly for the first time, and became free of it.

Knowledge

I have spoken of the need for personal experience of the Exercises and of their graces; I have indicated that one needs to be practising discernment at some level (whether through spiritual direction, supervision during the retreat, or through the examen of consciousness, or all three), and that one must be trying to stay close to God in prayer, especially that of intercession for the retreatant and for oneself. One needs to have a living awareness that the primary role in the retreat is God's, and so one needs to be able to listen both to him as well as to the client. Lastly, I would add that there are some intellectual requirements: among these I include a basic competence in theology. Good theology has always been delicately poised between extremes: one needs to know what are correct and incorrect positions on sin, christology, grace, providence, salvation, and so on. Not that interviews are to degenerate into theological debates, but rather that both giver and client operate out of certain theological frameworks. The more correct these are, the more easily the Spirit can operate. Familiarity with scripture and with contemporary exegesis is also important. There are many collections of helpful texts available now, and most clients are reasonably familiar with the New Testament at least; and so the retreat-giver need never feel at a loss for texts. What he needs is to be able to illuminate the passage briefly and point the retreatant towards the riches contained in it.

Some basic counselling skills are needed to give the Exercises; if one does not have them by nature, one must try to acquire them.¹⁴ Good programmes for training are available: the trainee learns to pick out the skills of good counsellors, and to rate himself and his fellow-trainees in play-back sessions. In supervised interviews and group sessions the trainee can explore his own inner world and learn to spot his own reactions, of indifference, hostility, fear, and so on. Authenticity or genuineness in the trainee becomes crucial; when present it facilitates the emergence of a trusting relationship, so that the client becomes free to reveal himself in his strengths and weaknesses. Empathy can be learnt. It is a sensitivity to the other's feelings and a verbal facility in communicating what one has understood. The client can then say, 'He's with me; he understands me and he seems to like me, no matter what I say!' A client has the right to expect this of any retreat-giver. A client should not expect psycho-therapeutic skills, but that the giver should be able to spot psychological problems when they arise: that he should be aware of the difference between counselling and spiritual direction, and know the limits of his own ability.

Promotion of justice

Giving the Exercises is an ecclesial event: the work must relate to the contemporary situation of the Church and the issues which she authoritatively calls us to embrace. Thus over the past ten years, I have had to relate to the Exercises the Church's new emphasis on the promotion of justice in our world. How this is to be done well is a matter of continuing debate; but it is a debate which no one giving the Exercises can afford to ignore.

Various ways of linking the Exercises with the justice issue are proposed: experience of and reflection on unjust situations might precede the Exercises, so that the exercitant brings to his prayer a wider dimension, a greater compassion. Likewise, similar reflections after completing the Exercises can bring about a creative response in a person who is generous, capable, captivated by Christ and the demands of the Gospel, and anxious to do only what God wants. Few retreat-givers of experience would wish to use the Exercises themselves to

¹⁴ A useful book is Charles B. Truax and Robert R. Carkhuff: *Towards Effective Counselling and Psychotherapy* (Chicago, 1967). It indicates the qualities which clients may seek in counsellors, and outlines an effective programme by which such qualities might be developed.

educate the retreatant to justice. This would be to pre-empt God's freedom to set the agenda. God's concern with the retreatant may lie elsewhere during the time of the Exercises. He may, for instance, be calling a person to the contemplative life. What is important is that the retreat-giver should be sensitive to the dimension of justice. His awareness of it will be heightened if he has lived among the poor and deprived, and he will be better able to guide others if he is sensitive to his own reaction, whether of attraction or rejection, to the issue.¹⁵

Conclusions

God is the director: positively this expresses itself in intercessory prayer for the exercitant; negatively it means that one leaves God and his creature free to encounter one another directly. Responsibility for growth and development lie with them, since they are the partners in the relationship. The retreat-giver is present, not to teach, but to guide and facilitate. He or she needs enough imagination to grasp that God leads everyone in a unique way. There can be no pre-determined agenda, no package deal; rather, the approach must be tentative, pragmatic, experimental. Capacity to listen accurately, an attitude of loving respect for the retreatant, and an ability to be genuine and honest: these are the qualities which help the formation of a trusting relationship with the exercitant. One's personal experience of God, which comes through prayer, through making the Spiritual Exercises and, in general, through living out the christian life, can be enriched and made available to others, if reflected on with the aid of good spiritual reading and spiritual direction. Such qualifications are sufficient, I believe, for one beginning the ministry of retreat-giving.

¹⁵ Cf on this question, John F. Wickham, 'Ignation Contemplation today', in *Supplement to The Way*, 34 (Autumn 1978), pp- 35-44.