SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE DIRECTED RETREAT

By GERARD W. HUGHES

I GAVE my first eight-day preached retreat in 1960, setting off with a file containing thirty-two talks. We had been warned that we would always be thanked at the end for 'a lovely retreat, most helpful', but that the acid test came later — were we invited to give another at that house or with that congregation? I was thanked for a lovely retreat, but was not invited again to that house or to that congregation. However, I was not worried. I felt a certain security in that file of thirty-two talks. I continued giving two or three preached retreats annually during school vacations. The contents of the file grew, but I was beginning to feel uneasy with these retreats, an uneasiness which I found it difficult to explain at the time. I think I understand better now, over ten years later. In this paper I shall analyse the uneasiness, show the place, usefulness and limits of the preached retreat, and point out the essential differences which I think exist between a directed retreat which includes a session providing suggestions for prayer each day to the whole group, and one in which there are no such daily sessions.

My uneasiness over preached retreats was an instance of a much more general question about the nature of faith. At that time I was in contact with a variety of people of different religions and none. The goodness I saw in them, integrity of life, openness to truth, fair-mindedness, concern for others, did not, in general, correspond to any particular religious belief or practice. I also saw dishonesty, refusal to face truth, lack of concern for others in people who were practising Christians. I could not dismiss this fact by reminding myself that I am a sinner in a Church of sinners. It seemed to me that the way in which religion is presented and practised can foster closed attitudes, shield us from experience, encourage cowardice in the face of truth, bolster up the individual and foment group-selfishness. 'Thank you for a lovely retreat' could mean 'Thank you for not disturbing me and justifying me in my present way of life'. I was beginning to see more clearly

the danger of living inside a cocoon of religiosity, comfortable as long as I could be unaware that I was in a cocoon, the danger of domesticating God, interpreting his word in such a way that it could reinforce the cocoon, sheltering me from the true God, from the truth of my own experience and from 'the tears of things'.

I still see this danger in myself and I see it in the Church, among the clergy, religious orders and congregations, and among the laity. There are notable and hopeful exceptions; but as a body of Christians, the Catholic Church in Britain does spend an inordinate amount of time and energy on itself and its own survival, on maintenance rather than on mission, even to its own lapsed members. Christ spoke of leaving the ninety-nine to search for the one that was lost. In the Church in Britain the proportion of Catholics who still practise their religion is less than fifty per cent, but there is no organized apostolate, as far as I know, to those who have ceased practising. In saying this, I am not, of course, saying that those who are no longer practising are lost, but many of them are hungering for spiritual help. Ecumenically, we have progressed at the theological level in the last twenty years; but at present there is little sign of any general ecumenical interest or activity. Yet the unity of Christians is Christ's will. Somehow we have cocooned ourselves against it. There are few indications of serious attempts to explain Christianity in a language which non-religious people can understand, yet Christ died for all men and his message is for all men. The Catholic response to political issues tends to be very selective — abortion and Catholic schools. Increasing unemployment, harsher immigration laws, increased expenditure on what is euphemistically called 'defence', and decreased expenditure on overseas aid, does not elicit any united response from the Catholic body.

The problem I am considering is not an inner Church problem. It is much wider than that. As a nation we have an excellent educational system, social services, national health service, communications media which penetrate almost every home. For years we have been flooded with information and analysis on housing problems, third world problems, the dangers of nuclear warfare and so on; but the problems worsen. Somehow the knowledge fails to transform the mind and heart, and so fails to result in any effective action.

The question which was at the root of the uneasiness which I experienced in giving eight-day preached retreats, is this: how does real change take place within the human mind and heart? One way is through the individually given retreat; but that, too, can be ineffective in many cases, even where there is goodwill on the part of

the retreatant and with a skilled director. The environment in which we live, our life-style, the people with whom we associate, the work we do, may influence us so strongly that there is no hope of inner change unless there is also a change in these environmental influences, either before or after the retreat.

Spiritual development is a slow and gradual process of growth in our consciousness of who we are. The child does not ask the question, the adolescent begins to ask it and may even find an answer which satisfies for a day or two, the adult begins to see the enormity of the question, is both frightened and fascinated by it, may refuse to face it and try to live in childish unawareness, or ignore the complexity of the question and seize upon some abstract explanation which suits his own way of living.

Ignatius says of the Exercises in his first annotation:

> We call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul.

Attachments which are ordinate at one stage of life may be inordinate at another, and there is an innate tendency in us to cling to our attachments. The umbilical chord is an ordinate attachment until we are born. A continuing attachment would bring death.

An infant spends much of its time in touching, tasting, and the other sense perceptions. Such activity is vital for the child, the condition of its learning; for all knowledge begins with sense perception. A child's memory is very receptive, and it can easily pick up and relish the most complicated jingles without giving a thought to their meaning. What it is told, it accepts as true without question: a necessary characteristic of the infant. The child needs affection, stability and protection, otherwise it cannot develop. All these predominant needs and activities of childhood are ordinate. If they remain the predominant needs and activities, the child remains infantile; their predominance has become inordinate. Throughout life we always need sense perception, to have our memory stored, to be able to accept the voice of authority, to have affection, stability and protection; but these are no longer our predominant needs because others have come into play.

Religion must answer these human needs of infancy which perdure throughout life. It must speak to our senses as well as to our heads

through the art, music and gesture of the liturgy. It must store our memory with its tradition, give moral and doctrinal guidance, afford a sense of stability, protect its people from danger and let them know that they are important and of great worth.

In adolescence, other activities and needs begin to predominate over the needs and activities of childhood; principally, the search for meaning and unity in experience. The adolescent begins to question in order to make sense of what he experiences, the facts with which he is presented, the statements which he formerly accepted as true. He begins to criticize, sift evidence, form theories and explanations. The explanations may be lamentable and the theories crude, but the activity is healthy and necessary for human development. We can only act as human beings if we have a reason.

Religion must answer this human need by showing the coherence of belief and experience, providing theories and hypotheses which help us to see the relationships and unity in all that we experience. If religion fails to do this, then it will become a compartment of life, sealed off from other areas, neither affecting nor being affected by them. Religion, if it is to answer the needs of human development, must be critical, speculative, provide philosophies and theologies.

No philosophy or theology can ever be adequate to answer the questions which arise out of the mystery of our existence. Abstract theories are two-dimensional and cannot grasp the multi-dimensional nature of our inner experience. Consciousness of this inner world becomes the predominant activity in adulthood. We are essentially creatures of action, but the environment in which we live, the people we meet, the knowledge we acquire, our successes and failures, set up conflicts within us of desires, fears, anxieties, hopes. Our own actions and reactions can take us by surprise; we grow more aware of the mystery of our being, more sceptical of simple explanations. We come to know that the explanation of all our behaviour, of the way we see and evaluate people and things, the source of our energy and our lethargy, our joy and our sorrow, lies within this inner world, although we do not know how. This inner world is fascinating, but it is also frightening.

Religion must answer this adult stage with a third element, which encourages our fascination and dispels our fears of this inner world, encouraging us to enter it through the practice of prayer, assuring us that God is in the dark and labyrinthine ways of our minds, consciousness and subconscious, that we are right in thinking that the source of all our joy and sorrow, hope and despair is in this inner self, that in

his light and with his help we can come to know the destructive and the lifegiving forces which are deep within us, recognize the inordinate attachments and find the true source of life.

In each stage of human and therefore also of spiritual development, there is an innate reluctance to move on to the next stage. Each stage, while necessary, is also dangerous. What is presented to us in infancy answers our most basic needs, allows us to be relatively passive, protected and secure. The danger is that we do not want to move out of this stage and choose to remain infantile. In our spiritual development there is the same danger. Our temptation is to remain credulous, unquestioning, docile and secure; and we are opposed to any form of criticism which could jeopardize this security. The necessary element in religion which corresponds to the needs of childhood is the institutional element, which presents religion to us in ritual, passes on the tradition, teaches with authority. The temptation of those in authority in religion is to encourage this innate danger of infantilism by discouraging criticism and questioning, emphasizing the virtues of obedience, docility and loyalty, without making it clear that obedience is to God, docility to truth, and loyalty to God as made known to us in our own conscience. Infantile assent is more in the nature of a conditioned response, ordinate in the child, inordinate in the adult, because it then stifles spiritual growth.

In the adolescent critical stage of life, the danger is that this questioning may undermine the security and protection which we enjoyed in the infancy stage. We may be led to reject the traditions and teachings which we were given in childhood, become alienated from our families and friends, and possibly lose the protection and affection which we need for human growth.

In religion, the danger is that the critical element cuts adrift from the institutional and produces rationalists rather than religious people, whose devotion to a system of philosophy or theology will take the place of their devotion to God. Such people will be suspicious of anything emotional, subjective or devotional. If the critical element is not balanced and held in tension by the other two elements, it will produce followers who are incapable of communicating with the child in themselves, or with any other child; they cut out communication with their own inner world, which is far too complex adequately to be described in abstract concepts.

In the adult, the danger is that we become so absorbed in this inner world, its mystery and power, that we reject the institutional element in life and religion, reject the traditions we have received and the

authority we once accepted; whilst we despise all abstract philosophies and theologies as totally inadequate to describe the richness of the reality we have found within.

In religion, if this inner element, the mystical element, is emphasized to the exclusion of the institutional and critical, this can lead to a rejection of formal prayer and ritual, to abandonment of doctrinal and moral teaching, and to an emotionalism which is not understood because it will not submit itself to any critical analysis. In its worst forms, the mystical element can produce wild enthusiasts, dangerous and autocratic fanatics.

In the remainder of this paper I shall apply this analysis to the giving of retreats. Real change takes place within the human heart through our coming to know our inner selves in the light of God's goodness. We are afraid to do this, and have many and devious defence systems to protect ourselves against truth. 'The heart is more devious than any other thing, perverse, too: who can pierce its secrets?' (Jer 17, 9). What method of retreat-giving is the more likely to help us to enter our inner selves and to uncover our deviousness?

A preached retreat, of its nature, must be an exercise of the institutional element of religion. It may include a greater or lesser emphasis on the critical element, depending on the audience, and an encouragement to move into the 'mystical'. The preached retreat is instructional, even if the material offered is designed not to fill with knowledge, but to offer a more intimate understanding of the truth. It has its place in spiritual development for beginners. Repeated annually throughout life, it becomes burdensome for those who are developing spiritually; and it may encourage those who are not, to remain where they are. For those who are going through a predominantly critical stage in their spiritual development, a preached retreat can be agony as they sit in enforced silence listening to statements which they want to question or can no longer accept. When the mind is in turmoil, it is difficult to pray.

For those who have not allowed themselves to enter the critical, questioning stage in religious development, a preached retreat annually will not be particularly burdensome, because they are habitually passive in religious matters and have not searched to find a coherence in their own lives between what they experience and what they believe. They still tend to over-emphasize God's transcendence in their prayer and thinking, and to neglect his immanence. God is their all, but he is not in all. They will make clear distinctions in their thinking and in their behaviour between the sacred and the secular,

the natural and the supernatural. In private prayer they will strive for a prayer which is without images, thought or feeling; and the blankness they experience they can attribute to the dark night of the soul. Their preference will be for prayer in common, liturgical celebration, set forms, even mantras. In their spiritual development they will move from the institutional to the mystical stage, avoiding the critical. Their religious lives will reflect their prayer: it will be sealed off from ordinary life. The word does not become flesh.

The most helpful form of retreat for those who are developing spiritually is the individually directed. The third stage in human development I have called the mature stage; but 'mature' is a very relative word. It means that stage in life when the needs and activities of infancy and adolescence are no longer predominant, and when we become increasingly aware of our own inner life and its complexities. It is not mature in the sense that we have arrived at our inner destination and are now fully integrated. The mature person is more aware than the child or the adolescent of his own ignorance, of the inadequacy of his own mind to grasp, explain and understand what he experiences. A fourth-century writer describes the state well: 'Blessed is he who has reached the state of utter ignorance; his is the kingdom of heaven'; but in his ignorance he knows that this mysterious inner world is the source of his life, of his freedom and enslavement. He now understands better the meaning of Christ's teaching that it is not what goes into a man from the outside which causes uncleanness.

In this inner world, each of us is unique; no one else can experience it as I experience it. It is hard to communicate it even to ourselves, because language is always inadequate; yet unless we do try to formulate the experience in words, we cannot interpret what is happening. The temptation is always to ignore what is happening, pretend that it is not there, anaesthetise ourselves in some way. Drink or drugs are one way, but there are many other less physically harmful ways: intense business with work or hobbies, any form of distraction which will keep the inner demons at bay. But the words of Horace, the roman poet, remain true: *Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret*: 'if you drive out nature with a pitchfork, she will soon find a way back'.

Inner transformation takes place when we enter this inner world, allow what is within our consciousness and subconscious to surface by putting ourselves in the presence of the God of all goodness who has given himself to us in Christ, entered our darkness, and overcome all the destructive powers within and around us.

In the second annotation to the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius writes:

> Let him (the giver of the Exercises) adhere to the points and add only a short or summary explanation. Now this produces greater spiritual relish and fruit than if one giving the Exercises had explained and developed the meaning at great length. For it is not much knowledge which fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth.

The process, then, is to introduce a topic for prayer as briefly as possible and then let the retreatant discover for himself. Too lengthy an explanation can be an obstacle to this inner discovery. There is a natural tendency in us to shirk the inner journey; and lengthy explanations by a retreat-giver can provide us with a convenient escape, as we follow the contortions of his thought and so avoid ourselves.

In the fourth annotation, Ignatius warns that some are slower than others in attaining what is sought. Once a retreatant begins to discover for himself, he will know when he is ready to move on. To rush him, or force him through set exercises at a prescribed pace, is to interfere with the whole process of inner understanding. That is why I think that giving a set talk each day to a group of retreatants, even although they are also interviewed individually, is a radically different process from seeing them individually and having no talk to the group, so that each may go at his own pace. Those retreatants who may tend to be stuck in the institutional stage will not be helped by a directed retreat in which there are prescribed scripture passages for each day for all. They may be only too glad to move on quickly from topic to topic. I think it is this danger which Ignatius has in mind when he writes in the eleventh annotation:

> While the exercitant is engaged in the first week of the Exercises, it will be helpful if he knows nothing of what is to be done in the second week. Rather, let him labour to attain what he is seeking in the first week, as if he hoped to find no good in the second.

Those whose spiritual development is still predominantly in the critical stage will almost certainly find something in the daily talk to argue about with themselves or with the director, so that the daily talks will be an obstacle to prayer for them. Those who are not stuck in the institutional critical stage would do well to absent

themselves from the talks altogether. It is also very difficult to see how a retreat which includes one talk per day to the whole group, providing prayer material for the day, can be in accordance with the eighteenth annotation:

> The Spiritual Exercises must be adapted to the conditions of the one who is to engage on them: that is, to his age, education and talent. Thus exercises that he could not easily bear, or from which he would deprive no profit, should not be given to one with little natural ability or of little physical strength. Similarly, each one should be given those exercises that would be more helpful and profitable according to his willingness to dispose himself for them.

The most common obstacle to spiritual development is a fear which is not conscious, but which effectively blocks our ability to pray, our familiarity with God and our freedom in action. As the fear is not conscious, it will take time to surface. Until it does surface, Christ's yoke becomes more difficult and his burden heavier. Symptoms of this fear are sometimes indicated by a retreatant who remains in a state of constant euphoria and for whom every prayer-experience is 'beautiful'. Other indications may be prayer which is imageless, thoughtless, in a retreatant who finds human relations difficult and has never known friendship. When these symptoms show themselves, then certain scripture passages and gospel contemplations are more likely to draw the fears into consciousness than others; this often happens in repetitions, when, in the first attempt to pray the passage, the retreatant was unable to get anything out of it. In a directed retreat which offers all retreatants the same subject matter each day, unconscious fears, if they exist, are less likely to surface.

More important than the selection of apt scripture passages is the retreat-giver's ability to face his own fears. If he is not doing so, his fear will be communicated unconsciously to the other person, thus steering the retreatant away from those areas of experience which the director cannot cope with himself. This can happen without his being conscious of what he is doing. For example, he can be very forceful and vehement in the advice he gives, hurry on the retreatant to another contemplation, take refuge in funny anecdotes, and so on. If the one who is giving the Exercises finds himself repeating the same texts and saying the same things to each retreatant, then he cannot be listening to them — possibly because he is afraid to do so.

Another common obstacle to spiritual growth is our inability to forgive. This can be so deep as to be beyond our consciousness; yet

it still has a stifling effect on our spiritual growth. 'He who is forgiven little, loves little'; and also, presumably, forgives little. If I am not conscious of having been forgiven, I am not free to forgive or to take risks. I therefore have to protect myself, assure myself and be assured. Like fear, this inability to forgive acts as a restrictive block within us, and exhortations to a more generous following of Christ simply act as an additional burden. This awareness of our need to forgive may take a long time to surface.

False notions of spirituality generally, and of the meaning of God's will in particular, can also stunt our spiritual growth. If God's will is thought of as a blue-print, extrinsic to my inner desires, then my innermost self will never consent to it. It will remain buried, while I consent with another 'holy' self, which is not true, not rooted in the depths of me. I can justify myself in this with odd snatches of spiritual reading about the death of the self and of all desires, and so on. I assume a holy and devout *persona* during the time of retreat and of prayer, but it will not last. If we have false notions of God's will and our consent is not deep-rooted, this will show itself in the nature of the consolation and desolation we experience. Desolation will feel real enough; but consolation will not have that feeling of reality and genuineness. It will feel false, we shall be afraid of its disappearing too quickly; nor will it change our attitudes or actions once the retreat is over.

Unless I come to desire God's will in the roots of my being, I cannot be wholehearted in prayer and action. That is why Ignatius emphasizes desire so much in the Exercises. 'Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created'. This statement of the 'Principle and Foundation' runs through the Exercises: 'I should ask for what I desire'. 'Thou has created us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it rests in thee', as Augustine wrote at the beginning of his *Confessions*. If we could find what we really desire in the depth of ourselves, we would have discovered God's will. Then we would genuinely desire to be dead to our false, superficial selves. It may take a retreatant a long time to discover this truth (for example, by many repetitions of the contemplation of Christ asking John's disciples, 'what do you want?' Jn 1, 35-39). Once discovered, this truth gives great inner freedom and confidence in the presence of Christ dwelling and working in our inner being. There is, obviously, a better chance of coming to this truth in an individually given retreat, in which the retreatant is allowed to go at his own pace.

After the phrase 'I should ask for what I desire', Ignatius goes on: 'Here it will be to pray for ——'. Do I pray for what I desire, or for what I should desire, and is there not a contradiction in praying for what I *should* desire? In working with teams of retreat-givers, and at conferences on the Exercises, the question is often asked, 'How do you know when someone is ready to move on in the Exercises?'; and the answer is given equally often: 'have they received the grace of the week or the day?' I am unhappy with this answer. If I am told often enough and strongly enough that 'this is what you should desire', my devious soul can get it, but by means of a kind of transference; and my real self is not in touch with the desire. I find that most retreatants, new to the Exercises, if told to pray for what they desire, and asked afterwards what they did pray for, have, in fact, prayed for those things which the text of the Exercises says they should desire.

The greatest and most common obstacle to spiritual development is a deep-rooted self-distrust, which can often masquerade as humility. Spiritual language is full of ambiguity. There is a sense in which it is true that we should distrust ourselves; but it is also true that a basic distrust in ourselves must necessarily include distrust in God, who can only communicate himself through our listening selves. If I am to find God in all things, I must find him within my own self, within its darkness as well as in its light. The most radical ecumenism is ecumenism within our own psyche. It is only in so far as we are able to accept ourselves that we are able to accept others.

If there is a basic self-distrust, then we cannot recognize consolation when it comes. If it does come, then the distrusting self immediately suspects it, disregards it, and so effectively cuts off communication with God.

To return to some of the questions asked at the beginning of this paper: why is ecumenism so dead in most areas of Britain? why are we a Catholic Church more concerned with her own inner Church affairs than with the world she is meant to serve? why is she so negligent of her own lapsed members, so lacking in missionary zeal, so incapable of speaking to the unbeliever in a language he can begin to understand? The root of the problem lies within our own inner self, which is unwilling to confront and communicate with the questioning, fearful, doubting, anxious, diffident, unbelieving part of itself. Until we become willing, inner transformation cannot take place. I have tried to show the limits and possibilities in various forms of retreat giving, concluding that the form of retreat most likely to bring about this inner change is the individually given retreat,

presented strictly according to Ignatius's annotations, and therefore excluding any talk to the retreatants as a group, in which the same prayer material is given to all for each day.[1]

[1] In April of last year, eighteen Jesuits and six religious women engaged in retreat work met at St Beuno's, to discuss the future of the house as a Centre of Jesuit Spirituality. The first session was on the ambiguity of the term 'directed retreat'; and examples were cited of a bewildering variety of spiritual activities which are currently being advertised as 'directed retreats'. It soon became clear that there was also ambiguity in the use of the term among those who were present at the meeting. Most understood it to mean a retreat in which there was opportunity for individual direction, but the retreat giver would talk to the retreatants as a group each day and provide them with scripture passages, and other material for the prayer of that day. For others, a directed retreat must be conducted individually without any talk being given to the whole group. We realized that a full discussion of this topic would take up the whole of our two-day meeting and decided to hold a later conference on the directed retreat. It was then discovered that the Irish Province Jesuits had decided to hold a conference on the same subject. When England and Ireland agree independently, the hand of God is obviously there.

The papers published here, with the exception of those by Frs Gendron and Cantwell, are the substance of talks given at the joint english/irish conference, held in January of this year. *Ed.*