

THE RETREATANT: SELECTION AND PREPARATION

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The content of this paper are deliberately provocative. It presents rather strongly one side of a quaestio disputata. One may well object that I have been wildly idealistic, that the conditions which I propose are simply unattainable. But ideals are not so much to be attained as to be striven towards. They are not so much strictly imposed obligations as stimulating invitations. They are meant to be experienced as liberating visions rather than as inhibiting burdens. If the reader can even partially accept these premises, then I say: Tolle, lege.

ONE OF the first questions which I put to a retreatant at the opening interview of a directed retreat is, 'Have you done a directed retreat before this?' This query merely elicits background information. Whether the answer is 'Yes' or 'No', the retreat still gets under way. One of the main advantages claimed for this kind of retreat is that it enables the director to take the retreatant 'from where he or she is at'. If it is the person's fourth such experience, well and good; equally well and good, if it is the first. *Solvitur ambulando*: it is done by doing. One might, as director, find oneself involved in more pedagogy in a first retreat, in more discernment in a later retreat; but this is always a matter of emphasis. In any case one cannot foresee the development or dynamic of any particular retreat in advance. There is only one thing to do: get on with it! This has certainly been the generally accepted approach up to now. If there is any preparation of the retreatant, it takes place within the retreat itself. It is concomitant with the direction, or even part of the direction being given.

Our paper's title, however, already implicitly questions both this practice and consequently some of the presuppositions on which it was built. If we allow people to sign on for directed retreats, either in our own retreat houses or elsewhere, in the same way as they might sign on for any kind of elementary course or workshop (namely by paying a registration fee), then it would be good to look at our

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assumptions. The two most relevant ones are, first, that a directed retreat is for everyone; and, secondly, that no prior preparation is necessary.

Of course we take a somewhat different and more guarded view when it is a matter of the thirty-day retreat. Guided by the Annotations and by what we know of Ignatius's own practice, we recognize that the full, authentic and integral Spiritual Exercises¹ are *not* for everybody, and that criteria of age, personality, education and experience have to be applied. We may send out detailed application forms, ask for references, conduct screening interviews. We may even put as a condition for acceptance that the applicant have already made a shorter directed retreat at least once. These shorter retreats are supposed to show the applicant's ability to cope with the demands of the 'full' Exercises and to hold out the hope of profiting from them; but it is taken for granted that anyone can cope with the demands of an eight-day directed retreat and profit from that. Is this really so? Do we take too much for granted?

One might argue that our acceptance policies have not *de facto* been quite as open and indiscriminating as I have been insinuating. While it is rare, even if not unheard of, for anyone to be turned away, most of those who apply for directed retreats are religious, some are priests, and a few are laity with a grounding in prayer through the Charismatic Renewal, Christian Life Communities, Christian Family Movement, and so on. There may not be an overt screening process, but the kind of person who applies already fulfils certain conditions of motivation, training, experience. It is assumed that persons with *this* kind of background are automatically suitable for a directed retreat. But is even this (admittedly more nuanced) assumption valid? And what precisely do we expect from this kind of person in terms of motivation, training, experience?

At a time when directed retreats are in vogue, when in some quarters to have made one is almost a species of status symbol, there are clearly a number of dangers to beware.² At one end of the scale such a retreat may be regarded as a universal panacea for all life-situations: from rescuing one person from the brink of a vocational crisis to helping another climb the final slope of the mystical mountain.

¹ Cf Ganss, George E.: 'The Authentic Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius', in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, vol 1, no 2 (1969).

² Cf Fleming, David: 'The Danger of Faddism and the Thirty-Day Retreat', in *Review for Religious*, vol 33, no 1 (January 1974), pp 97-101; McHugh, Joseph, 'Directed Retreats: Some Technical Dangers', *ibid.*, vol 33, no 6 (November 1974), pp 1392-96.

At the other end, some religious may view it as just a good way, perhaps a novel way, of making one's compulsory annual retreat. The retreatant's expectations can thus be either too high or too low. It is bad enough if these are unrealistic; it is even worse if the person has been sent as a reluctant applicant (and maybe no expectations at all!) by an authoritarian or a panicky superior; or if the applicant turns up simply because there is no other kind of retreat available.

Perhaps at this point we might reflect more precisely on the type of person whom we do *not* consider suitable for a directed retreat; or to phrase it another way, to reflect on the major impediments to profiting from this type of spiritual experience. We can use the headings of physical, psychological and spiritual unsuitability.

(a) *Physical unsuitability*

A directed retreat is hard work. It can be a tiring, sometimes even a gruelling experience. A person who is weak, enervated, listless through ill-health, is in no condition to undertake such a retreat. A practical rule of thumb is that if the would-be retreatant cannot do a full day's work in the ordinary life-situation, such a person is scarcely suitable for a directed retreat: one who would have to be nursed along rather than directed. Physical pain in itself, so long as it is not too severe, need not be a barrier, but the use of pain-killing or sedating drugs can make the discernment of spirits rather difficult. (How distinguish the quiet of spiritual consolation from a drug-induced calm?)

(b) *Psychological unsuitability*

Psychological illness or disturbance is a second disqualification. The neurotic, the psychotic, the compulsively scrupulous should not be accepted. The retreat director, who is neither psychologist nor psychiatrist (except sometimes coincidentally), is not trained to deal with these conditions, and can do more harm than good by dabbling or guesswork. Besides, the austere solitude of a directed retreat experience is often the worst environment for psychologically ill or disturbed persons. It can aggravate rather than relieve unhealthy tendencies; and the director may not realize or understand what is happening, still less be able to cope effectively. Then at the end there is the problem of re-entry. This is a difficult enough process for reasonably balanced people to handle successfully, but for the disturbed it can be overwhelming.

One of the problems, of course, in using the criterion of psychological unsuitability is that we are speaking about states which are relative. Which of us is not somewhat neurotic? Which of us would claim to be fully balanced? Which of us is always in touch with our feelings? Yet I think that experienced directors will recognize that there is a border-line, however fuzzy it may be, and that persons from beyond that line are not suitable retreatants.

(c) *Spiritual unsuitability*

The criterion of spiritual unsuitability is the most contentious. One is wary of being regarded as an elitist, especially in spiritual matters; and yet St Ignatius makes distinctions between those who should be given only the Exercises of the First Week and those who may be led further. When in annotation eighteen he speaks not only of 'one with little natural ability or of little physical strength', but also of 'one who wishes no further help than some instruction and the attainment of a certain degree of peace of soul' and 'one from whom little fruit is to be expected', he is including spiritual along with other criteria in his assessment.

It might be suggested that such a person who is weak spiritually and with little real desire for growth could be given a directed retreat confined to the material for the First Week. But my reading of this annotation is that Ignatius would not give such a person these Exercises in the form of what we now know as a directed retreat. This does not envisage the kind of *instruction* that Ignatius has in mind. For example:

Let each of the Commandments be explained to them, and also the Capital Sins, the use of the five senses, the precepts of the Church and the Works of Mercy.³

The person who can make an eight-day directed retreat on the First Week is a rare phenomenon indeed. I am inclined to think that any directed retreat, no matter what the prayer-material being used, is for persons 'desirous of making as much progress as possible', as Ignatius says, in his twentieth annotation, of those to be admitted to the full and integral Spiritual Exercises. Not only should the person of whom the eighteenth annotation speaks be excluded, but all those who have

³ Exx 18.

never been taught to pray personally, or who have not prayed personally (and consistently) for a long time.

Summing up the above and putting the matter positively, the applicant for a directed retreat should be selected on the grounds of reasonably sound physical and psychological health, combined with an already developed prayer-life and a strong desire of further growth.

I believe that at this point our reflections would be helped by posing some questions which situate the directed retreat in a wider context. Can such a retreat be separated from the process of ongoing spiritual direction? Can the directed retreat mark the beginning of that process, or should it be deferred to the advanced stage? By a non-discriminating acceptance of applicants, I feel that we have, in fact, already separated the retreat from ongoing direction, or at best hoped that the retreat experience would be the start of such a process. It must be admitted that this hope has often been fulfilled, and it is a great joy to encounter a retreatant who, having tasted spiritual direction for the first time in the retreat situation, is now ready to receive regular direction for the future.

But is this the ideal, or should the aim be to have the directed retreat as a kind of peak experience situated in an ongoing process? When our title speaks of preparation of the retreatant, does this mean in practice spiritual direction over a period of time? I am suggesting a positive answer to these two questions, and on that premise I want further to ask: Can we say, as spiritual directors, to what point we want to bring a person before encouraging him or her to make a directed retreat?

One way of approaching this is to reflect on what is expected of a retreatant within the retreat itself, and to see how the person can be enabled to meet these expectations. Here, spiritual direction leading up to a directed retreat can be looked on as an apprenticeship, a preparatory, experiential school of prayer and discernment. I would suggest that there are five abilities which the person must possess to make a profitable directed retreat. As noted above, they are often acquired or developed during such a retreat itself; but we are now considering whether they might more ideally be presupposed and therefore developed before such an undertaking.

(a) *To pray affectively*

This is the foundation on which the retreat experience is built. 'It is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the felt

understanding (*sentir*) and tasting of things interiorly'.⁴ What is being sought here is the involvement of the whole person in prayer: body, feelings, mind. The person who prays is an enfleshed spirit, and the flesh must pray as well as the spirit; the flesh must experience God as well as the spirit. Without affective prayer there can be no experience of consolation and desolation as understood by Ignatius,⁵ no contrasting movements of the spirits.⁶ Even rudimentary discernment becomes very difficult. At best one is operating within the third time for making an election,⁷ at worst within a situation where the director is constantly wondering, 'what is real?'

Often there is a psychological basis to the problem: the person is simply not in touch with his or her affectivity on any level. Self-awareness is minimal. There are no satisfying human relationships. The approach to life is cerebral, possibly interested but basically detached; the person adopts the role of observer. There is a muted, sometimes reluctant acceptance of reality rather than a passionate involvement in it. Survival is more important than engagement. Or possibly a commitment to work is mistaken for a commitment to life, while in reality it is an escape from life. There are many varieties of this problem.

There are also people whose affectivity is quite normal and healthy in life in general, but whose prayer-life has remained arid and stunted. These are often the victims of faulty religious training, of a distorted image of God, of a stoical spirituality, of false presuppositions such as that in prayer 'feelings do not count'. They have not got beyond the reflective stage in prayer, which is in some cases better described as preparation for prayer. Putting it in the monastic terminology of the *lectio divina*, they read and meditate, but have not moved on to prayer and contemplation.⁸ They have got stuck at the 'half-way house'. These people remain Marthas even in prayer, and the notion of a Mary-like affective relationship with the human Christ is totally outside their comprehension (because outside their experience).⁹ They have to learn to 'let go', to adopt the contemplative attitude to God and to Jesus, to sit still and just be with him, to allow him to lure them into the desert and speak to their heart.¹⁰ They must allow themselves to be loved.

⁴ Exx 2.

⁵ Cf Exx 316, 317.

⁶ Cf Exx 176.

⁷ Cf Exx 177.

⁸ Cf Guigo II, *Scala Claustralium*, english translation in *The Way*, 5 (October 1965), pp 333-42. Cf also E. Colledge and J. Walsh, *The Ladder of Monks* (New York, 1978/London, 1979).

⁹ Cf Lk 10, 38-42.

¹⁰ Cf Hos 2, 16 (14).

(b) *To reflect on experience*

This takes the person a stage further. Not only is there felt experience (praying affectively), but there is the added ability of reflecting on it, and so of personally appropriating this experience of the Lord, of integrating it into one's awareness of continuing growth in prayer and in relationship with God. Such an ability is not to be presupposed in everyone: obviously the very young do not possess it, sometimes defective education does not foster it even when it is latent, and some personality types seem to possess it in a rather low degree. *Experientia docet*. Not always! There are those who never learn from experience because of some block, some inability, either innate or conditioned, to appropriate through reflection the varied happenings of life. Their experience remains a constant flux, which never forms any coherent patterns or reveals any underlying plan. We are speaking, therefore, of an ability which is proper to mature persons, who have succeeded in transferring this reflective and insight-giving capacity from life in general to their prayer in particular.

(c) *To articulate experience*

This is not a completely separate operation from 'reflecting on experience'. It is given a different heading because of the need to communicate with one's director. Reflecting on experience can be seen as articulating to *oneself*, as part of the process of understanding and ordering one's experience. To move from there to articulating to another presupposes the ability to establish a relationship of trust with the other person, and a steady conviction that such communication is worthwhile. Sometimes at the end of a directed retreat, a director can feel that the retreatant never really grasped the point of the daily interview. Instead of articulating experience, the person was coming to be told what to do, reporting on beautiful or purposeful thoughts, to give the weary director paraphrase accounts of incidents much better described in the gospels: anything except an accurate report of what was really happening in the prayer.

(d) *To discern*

This is the crowning ability which evolves from and makes use of all that has gone before: affective prayer, reflection on that experience, and the articulation of it. The reflection and articulation begin by being merely descriptive and end by being interpretative: and this is discernment. It is important to stress that discernment is essentially

the task of the retreatant, not of the director. Certainly it is a co-operative effort, and the director may play a greater or lesser part in it, depending on the experience and skill of the retreatant. But the director remains always a facilitator, enabling the retreatant to sort out the identity and movements of the spirits, to take more and more responsibility for the interpretation of the prayer-experience, and for any decision or election that may emerge from it.

(e) *To sustain solitude*

The more directed retreats I give, the more I am convinced that the single most significant element in such retreats is the solitude. It is truly a desert experience in the double biblical meaning of that symbol: desert as the privileged meeting-place between God and his people or between God and an individual; desert as the dwelling-place of demons and evil spirits, and the place where a person joins combat with them.¹¹ The director's main function is to accompany the retreatant into this desert or solitude, to be the companion in the lonely ordeal of coming face to face with the living God, while allowing the retreatant to become the battleground of opposing spirits. Not everybody can sustain that meeting or that conflict, or the solitude in which they take place. Nobody should enter this desert imprudently or presumptuously, without hearing a call or without having strong motivation. These requirements pose what is perhaps the strongest argument in favour of demanding genuine preparation for a directed retreat.

If one grants that these are five key abilities necessary to make a profitable directed retreat, what remains to be asked is how a person is to prepare for and be helped in preparing for such an experience. Let us again put our reflections under a number of headings.

(a) *Prayer*

It is obvious that since the directed retreat is basically a prayer experience, the most fundamental part of any preparation is prayer itself. The more accustomed I am to sustained personal prayer each day, the more capable I am of being real with the Lord; the more areas of my life that are brought under the judgment of the word, the more I am growing in consciousness of my own weakness and God's power and strength; the more the desire for the desert-experience

¹¹ Cf O'Leary, Brian: 'Good and Evil Spirits', in *The Way*, 15 (July 1975), pp 174-82.

grows, the readier I shall be for it. Liturgical celebration alone is not enough, spiritual reading alone is not enough: the prayer must be personal and deep, so that at least the person has begun to face up existentially to questions such as 'Who is God for me? Who is Jesus for me?'

(b) *Spiritual direction*

Such prayer can best be fostered in the formative experience of receiving spiritual direction. It is through this that a person can be helped to learn and grow in the ability to pray affectively, to reflect on experience, to articulate experience, to discern, to sustain solitude — and to guide one's life by means of, and as a result of, one's prayer. This admittedly presupposes an understanding of spiritual direction which may not be easily recognized by those who, in novitiate or seminary days, have had unfortunate or inadequate experiences of direction. But much progress has been made in the teaching and practice of spiritual direction over recent years. There has been a move away from regarding it as a problem-centred activity to seeing it as person-centred and growth-centred.¹²

Spiritual direction, as I understand it, is focused primarily on the prayer-life of the directee, not as divorced from the rest of that person's experience, relationships and work, but as being a privileged life-focus in which all the strands of a person's consciousness are brought together and presented to the Lord in their naked truth for judgment, for healing, for benediction. The director's presence (even in absence) facilitates this encounter of the directee with the Lord, and in the regular one-to-one meetings the experience is articulated, clarified, and interpreted as need be. This relationship with the spiritual director is a genuine apprenticeship for the later relationship with the retreat director (whether or not that person is one and the same).

(c) *Consciousness examen*

For many people the examen in its renewed form, which owes so much to George Aschenbrenner's seminal article in 1972,¹³ is the link-forging moment between formal prayer and the rest of life.

¹² Cf Schneiders, Sandra: 'The Contemporary Ministry of Spiritual Direction', in *Chicago Studies* (Spring 1976), pp 119-35.

¹³ Cf Aschenbrenner, George: 'Consciousness Examen', in *Review for Religious*, vol 31, no 1 (January 1972), pp 14-21.

This is a point which the author himself makes in a striking paragraph:

Examen without regular contemplation is futile. A failure at regular contemplation emaciates the beautifully rich experience of responsible ordering to which the contemplative is continually invited by the Lord. It is true, on the other hand, that contemplation without regular examen becomes compartmentalized and superficial and stunted in a person's life. The time of formal prayer can become a very sacrosanct period in a person's day, but so isolated from the rest of his life that he is not prayerful (finding God in all things) at that level where he really lives. The examen gives our daily contemplative experience of God real bite into all our daily living; it is an important means to finding God in everything and not just in the time of formal prayer.¹⁴

This combination of formal prayer and examen brings a sense of totality or wholeness to a person's life. An integration gradually takes place which brings about an awareness, a sensitivity, a *sentir* of God and the things of God. Clearly the examen can be very much part of the preparation for a directed retreat, though given the difficulties which people seem to encounter with its practice, one may have to wait a fairly long time before a person really grasps its essence, understands its presuppositions (experientially), and feels fully at ease in praying it.

(d) *The nineteenth annotation*

A person who is praying with daily consistency, making the examen, and receiving regular spiritual direction is not far from the experience of doing a retreat according to this annotation. It is a method of making the Spiritual Exercises, adapted to 'one who is educated or talented, but engaged in public affairs or necessary business': in other words, a person who would be acceptable for a thirty-day ignatian retreat, but who cannot afford the luxury of that much total solitude. The Spiritual Exercises are then spaced over a period from approximately eight months to a year, while the person continues his or her ordinary life and work.

We cannot here deal at any length with this kind of retreat, except to point out that it too requires a long period of preparation, including spiritual direction. It would be imprudent and irresponsible for a director to accept anybody for such a retreat without knowing the person within a spiritual direction relationship for at least six

¹⁴ *Art. cit.*, p 16.

months. So while a nineteenth annotation retreat would be an excellent preparation for a short directed retreat (with total solitude), it might be argued that it is even more demanding, due to the length of time involved and the pressure of integrating the retreat dynamic with everyday life. What can be very effective is to make a directed retreat about half-way through or in the final stages of a nineteenth annotation retreat.

(e) *Guided retreat*

More obviously, I suppose, the guided retreat is a preparation, apprenticeship or stepping-stone to a directed retreat. By 'guided' I envisage a retreat where there are one or more talks to a group each day, but where personal guidance in prayer is available through a daily or less frequent interview with the director. Such a structure can have many of the elements of the directed retreat (silence, three, four or five hours of prayer, one-to-one relationship with the director), but it is less intimidating and less demanding. The talk(s) tend to mitigate the solitude, because another person's ideas are flowing into one's consciousness, and there is also a more overt sense of togetherness with the group.

The retreatant's prayer too tends to be coloured by the director's talks rather than springing more immediately from the individual's inner experience itself. Furthermore, the interviews are usually shorter, sometimes not even daily: which weakens the dynamic of the relationship between director and retreatant. Apart from considering the guided retreat as a pedagogical stepping-stone to something else, it is quite possible that for some people such an experience is in itself more suitable than the starker, more rigorous, more uncompromising directed retreat.

(f) *Experience of injustice*

While to a superficial observer a directed retreat may seem the most individualistic and almost anti-communitarian type of prayer experience, this need not and indeed ought not be so. What is profoundly personal is not automatically individualistic. The retreatant remains part of the Christian community even when entering the desert, and in a real sense comes closer to the heart of that community. That is why the concerns of that community become increasingly the retreatant's concerns. The contemporary Church calls Christians to radical conscientization and commitment to the struggle for justice.

A document which courageously answers this call, and whose insights can be appropriated by all believers, is that entitled 'Our Mission Today', produced by the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. In it we read:

The task of the Society is the service of faith; the promotion of justice is an essential condition of this service, because man's reconciliation with his fellow men follows from his reconciliation with God.¹⁵

The intrinsic link between faith and justice is by no means easy to tease out and understand. It is certainly beyond the vision of the armchair theologian, or of any person comfortably insulated against the harsh realities of our world. As the jesuit authors of the above document admit:

We are too often isolated and devoid of real contact with unbelief and the hard consequences of injustice and oppression. We are in danger of not hearing the Gospel cry which comes from the men and women of our time. A more definitive presence among them will be a decisive test of our apostolic faith, hope and charity. Are we prepared . . . to witness to the Gospel in difficult situations, where our faith and our hope will be tried by unbelief and injustice?¹⁶

I am suggesting that some experience of the misery and helplessness of the poor, the oppressed, those on the fringes of society, is necessary in order to be able to read and be touched by the gospel message today. Those Christians who work among the poor witness to the fact that it is the poor who teach them how to understand and pray the Gospels. So it has become (maybe it always was, although we did not explicitly recognize it) an essential precondition for prayer, and, therefore, for a directed retreat, to have had some such experience. If we pray merely out of a narrow, bourgeois, middle-class experience of life, the gospel message can remain bland, inoffensive, and falsely comforting. It can reinforce our preconceived set of respectable values rather than challenging and possibly undermining them. The spirituality that results can be, in the worst sense, conservative, tribal and partisan; it may even be the spirituality of the oppressors.

¹⁵ 'Our Mission Today', par 2, *Decrees of the 32nd General Congregation S.J.* English translation in *Supplement to The Way*, nos 29/30 (Spring 1977), p 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, par 35; Eng trans. *ibid.*, p 28.