

THE EXERCISES

A WAY OF LIBERATION:

Social dimension

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THE CENTRAL point of the Exercises of St Ignatius lies in the 'Election' in which God chooses and guides the exercitant in the concrete circumstances of life.¹ Everything that goes before the election helps to prepare for it, just as everything that follows it anticipates in some way its being carried into effect. If God wants to guide a person, that person needs to be open to God's influence. Just as a compass needle cannot respond to the magnetic force if it is obstructed, so it is with a human person: God cannot effectively call him to the task which he wants him to do if he is already attached elsewhere.

God became man, and it is by the power of love alone that he wants to influence people. From the moment when he decided to save humanity 'from within', God was equally bound to extend his transforming action to those structures which bind a person to other people and to the universe. It is therefore to be expected that the election in the Exercises will have a social dimension. In this perspective, God not only directs the interior life of a person and his relations with others; he also influences his style of life and attitudes towards norms, values and institutions, briefly, towards people in their social — or, as it is put nowadays — in their 'societal' dimension.

The history of the Church illustrates this point well. The first Cistercians' decision not to lease their fields any longer but to work them themselves implied taking up a position about manual labour that had certain consequences. The life of poverty and brotherhood of Francis of Assisi would not have been possible if he had not himself first been set free from the bonds of privilege and the structures of power that were prevalent in medieval Italy and in

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which he was rooted by his family ties. Catherine of Siena would not have been able to carry out her mission for the Church of her age if she had not found the means of freeing herself from the restricted circle to which women of middle social position were assigned by the customs and conventions of her times.

We do not have to determine here what the influence of such choices was nor what success they had at the time. The important thing is to recognize that this 'societal' dimension is real and that the preparation for the election must therefore take it into account.

The stages of the process of liberation

At this point we must keep in mind these two facts: first, the weeks of the Exercises outline the stages of a radical process of transplantation which often takes a very long time, while the formal Exercises, for their part, constitute only certain periods of special intensity. Secondly, we must recognize that every human being lives at three levels: individual, inter-personal and 'societal'. The exercitant, therefore, ought to keep these three levels in view when he examines his conscience and makes the election. Clearly one must proceed here with the utmost care so as to respect the mysterious character of this process of transformation which still remains ineffable even if its structure is very clear.

'We have a dream': placing ourselves in a state of hope

Expectations and hope, as the dynamic forces of all movement towards salvation, clearly have a social aspect. This is evident in the bible. The promised land, peace, the absence of natural catastrophes, abundant harvests, harmony and justice are all present as vigorous images in scripture. God has used the imagery of the times and taken up the deepest aspirations of humanity. And we too should make use of the principal imaginative symbols of the exercitant and those of our own times. These symbols will be purified in what comes later in the Exercises.

What we are interested in is to allow hope to come alive. So it is essential that the 'societal' dimension be present from the start. Certainly we must appeal to a person's own interior aspirations and to those he has about his relationships with other individuals. But we also need to go further and evoke an image, a sort of 'vision' by means of which current expectations and hopes in society can be brought to life, and it is preferable that this 'vision' should come from the retreatant himself. At this point, the director could already

be asking himself the question that has many implications for the remainder of the Exercises: namely, which of the three dimensions in this particular exercitant is well developed and which less developed?

Facing the structures of sin

One or other of these three dimensions will pose a problem for the exercitant and this will vary with each individual. But in each case the 'societal' dimension will not fail to appear as a 'situation of non-salvation' or as a 'history of sin'. Hence it is possible to understand that sin has a social dimension by considering, for instance, the arms race in our contemporary world; or by looking at the plight of the palestinian refugees and seeing how, by creating structures, sin develops and has its own history. What is important here is to grasp clearly the pattern of interdependences: a politician cannot put an end to the arms race simply by 'good will', nor resolve the palestinian question simply by magnanimity. The situation itself has its own power and the response to it has an internal logic, and both seem irresistible.

Discovering dependences in the life of each person

When the exercitant has meditated on the fact of social interdependence by way of an explicit example which affects him as a victim rather than as the responsible party, he can then go on to discover his own lack of freedom with regard to the norms, values, systems and goals of society. One way of doing this would be to question the exercitant about how he acts in the different areas of his life and about the quality and intensity of his relations with his surroundings. But if this method is to be profitable, it demands that the exercitant's social awareness be already well developed, especially if (during the Exercises) he is not in a position to benefit from the help of a group.

To achieve a more profound result, the exercitant might be invited to take as his starting point a concrete difficulty or conflict in his life so as to discover that he is under the influence of different value-systems that are related to his social milieu. For example, after some years of marriage, questions of food or cleanliness repeatedly become occasions for argument. The husband or wife is offended by the other's behaviour without being able to question his or her own norms.

Every society has minorities whose behaviour in some area of life differs from that of the majority: vegetarians, nudists, hippies,

nomads, communists, right-wing extremists. . . . It is common at present to see young people as being engaged in trying to create a subculture directed expressly against certain values of the dominant adult generation. Such groups are threatening for those who belong to the majority.

It is hardly necessary to review all minorities in the course of the Exercises for the exercitant to have the experience of feeling threatened. But one may very well lead him to a grasp of his own social independence by asking him to place before himself the group whose values are particularly relevant to his present circumstances. It might be, for example, the hippies, when it is a question of poverty and security; or nudists in matters which concern his relations with his own body and his sexuality. This obviously does not mean to say that he has to replace his previous values with those of the corresponding minority. But this exercise may open up very important pathways that lead to greater freedom.

Whatever the means used — posing questions, personal conflicts, confrontation by a minority — the reaction might be aggressiveness, anxiety, rejection, enthusiasm or simple approval. It may be that there is no emotional reaction at all. This would mean either that equilibrium and freedom are already attained in that particular area, or that the area is not yet 'ready', that is to say, it is not yet accessible to the exercitant and cannot be used in the Exercises.

We have to work, then, with the reactions that actually appear, and the first step is to allow them to appear. In themselves they are not wrong and bad; they would become so if they could not be accepted. The crucial value of this phase lies in being authentic.

The director's attitude and behaviour are important for the success of this stage. He has to be sufficiently free himself and sufficiently relaxed for emotional reactions, of whatever kind or direction, not to disturb his affection or his fundamental positive attitude towards the exercitant. In certain circumstances, when the exercitant experiences difficulty in admitting his own feelings, it can be of decisive importance for him to see that his sentiments and his actions do not affect in a negative way his relationship with his director.

Family and small group: a role between the individual and society

Only then can one enter the second stage which is to examine the origin of the exercitant's response. This means that his history has to be looked at from this particular angle. For example, why do

extreme right-wing tendencies trouble someone more than those of the extreme left, or vice versa? Which persons in the life-history of the exercitant have shown the same reactions? Was there such a person in his home? When we ask these questions, again we find that the basic group, which is normally a person's own family and his family milieu, is the principal mediator of social values. These values are often deeply anchored because they have been liberally absorbed with the mother's milk. Neatness and cleanliness, tenderness, sexuality, order, security, propriety, all these areas are given a value at a very early age. The immediate family thus has a decisive influence on the formation of behaviour. And that is also true for the values which only begin to appear later in life such as law and order, work and leisure. Here again many influences go back to earliest childhood and they operate in the adult in ways that are clearly analogous to those influences which modelled the behaviour and habits of the small child.

At this point two remarks are in order. First, dependence in itself is not an evil. In fact it is necessary to pass through the stages of dependence on others in order to become fully human. Secondly, the discovery of the social dimension in the course of growth only comes about through the agency of particular persons. Gradually, as a person grows, parents are relegated to the background. They give way to others who take up their role: teachers, popular celebrities, group-leaders, priests, companions. This separation from parents should take place during the adolescent years (13-17).

At this stage of growth more than in preceding ones value-systems play a large part. If the growth is healthy, the significance of persons becomes relativized. Their importance is as carriers or representatives of ideas rather than as individuals with their own intrinsic values. It is a sign that independence and autonomy are in progress in an adolescent when he wants to take up his own stance before the world. If, however, the parents' affection, which lies at the foundation of life, was too feeble or showed too little respect for the individuality of the growing human being to the extent that the strength of the 'I' has not been able to develop adequately, the young person will look for another dependence among, for example, gang-leaders, teachers or through prematurely intimate emotional ties with persons of the opposite sex. But as it is inadmissible that these relationships should seem to constitute a new dependence, they have to be covered up and the adolescent appeals instead to broad ideas and larger interests.

It is at this point that the link with ideologies in the proper and dangerous sense of the word is to be found. And it is here that many of our left-wing students' associations, many marriages of minors and many radical groups originate.

It is therefore essential to consider very attentively each individual case to see to what extent dependence and counter-dependence are intermingled. It could be that the freedom that a person displays *vis-à-vis* the social norms of the majority is nothing more than the inverse expression of a greater lack of freedom *vis-à-vis* a particular minority. For example, the freedom that a person shows towards the values of his family may be simply nothing more than the reflection of a strong dependence upon certain other primary groups. True freedom does not draw its vitality from the fact of being *against* something; it is rather an opening towards reality and its values whose determining influence is accepted. It is understandable from this why the primary objective in this process has to be liberation and not an immediate substitution of 'right' norms for those which can now be established as false. 'Right' norms and values are those which are fitting for a human being considered as a creature. The crucial obstacle, which explains why a person is ready to follow false norms, is a lack of independence, which may spring either from one's own anxieties and need or from other persons and social groups. When the effort to be free from prejudices succeeds, nothing prevents us any longer from seeing the true relationships between things. We even become willing to fight for a way of thinking that is just, free from prejudice and always ready to recognize a reality that is ever new.

Accepting truth, a step towards freedom

This second stage, in which a person looks at his or her own history, is already a first step on the way of liberation. This is what happens, for example, to the father of a family who discovers in the course of a retreat why he reacts so negatively to the long hair and beard of his student son: he would like to see the son fulfil the dream, the ideal, which occupied *him* at that age, the ideal of the energetic, correct and happy young man.

In the protected atmosphere which envelops his conversation with his director, the exercitant may conjure up this change of direction, or try it out at least as a possibility. After all, no one is chasing him to pin him to the wall and exploit his weakness. By looking at this possibility, he may discover the truth of it and accept it, at least in an

experimental fashion. In this context, the loving attitude of the director is important. The exercitant will not be able to re-discover the lowly road of authentic actions unless the one who goes along with him does not condemn him, even unconsciously.

The conversation between the director and the exercitant reveals still more. Once detached from the long hair and beard of his son, on which it was fixed, the father's attention is free to discover other things: that his son takes care of an old woman who has no one to look after her, for example. Suddenly the father perceives that 'modern youth does have ideals'. He realizes that, as regards social behaviour, his son's generation has a conception of values that is widely accepted and that has left its mark on his son perhaps in spite of the contrary influence of his family.

Experience of redemption crucial for liberation

The decisive step in the process of liberation, however, has not yet been taken. After all, a man is not set free simply by recognizing that he lacks freedom and by glimpsing different possible remedies. Liberation consists in finding a value which I accept in such a way that by free choice I can take up a position in relation to all other values. In this perspective, liberation as redemption demands the experience that God, the Lord of my life, loves me and sustains me in spite of everything. I experience that when the sight of Jesus dying on the cross and rising from among the dead arouses in me a movement of love which captivates me. I cannot describe in full here how that happens. But I wish to show that the societal dimension is present here, too.

The societal dimension of the death of Jesus is clear. Refusing all compromise, he was driven into a corner by influential groups — Sadducees, Pharisees, the roman administration — and rendered harmless. He was executed publicly. By reflecting on his own lack of freedom, the exercitant may come to identify himself with those who contributed to the condemnation of Jesus by their lack of independence: the ordinary people who lost interest in Jesus when it became clear that he could do nothing more for them; and the disciples disappointed by Jesus's calm passivity. All the same, Jesus loves me, come what may. And it is through being faithful to that love that he consents to be betrayed, condemned, denied and crucified. The resurrection shows the disciples clearly that this was not a disaster but a vital exigency of love and that this love is ultimately victorious.

The societal dimension of the resurrection

The societal dimension of the resurrection is less obvious than that of the crucifixion of Jesus. The Risen One in fact appeared as a living person only to his disciples; everyone else meets him only in the word preached by the disciples. For those who believe that proclamation it is clear that Jesus is Lord; that is to say, not only is the redemption offered to each individual as a private person but it also touches the whole world and its structures.

The New Testament explains this fact by using the apocalyptic notion of the resurrection from the dead. Since in the end we draw our words from what we have seen and experienced, and since there is no exact analogy to Jesus's resurrection in the previous history of salvation, we can understand the difficulty of finding a perfectly adequate terminology.

The apocalyptic idea draws attention to the end of the world: the entire world will first of all perish in order to be reborn, and justice will be restored. But 'Jesus is already risen'. This sentence means that in Jesus this transformation has already become real. The New Testament uses various formulae to express this fact: for example, it is already the end time; the powers of darkness are already vanquished; justice is already restored; the Kingdom has arrived. Although nothing has changed in the world's structures, still the new world, the new creation, new society are already real in Christ. Jesus, the unique one, the risen one, wields a decisive sway. Two 'worlds' intermingle. This is the reality that St Paul constantly tries to grasp in his letters and to express in a comprehensible language.

I will try to describe the sequence of experiences which the exercitant has gone through when he reaches this crest on the path of liberation. The heart of the experience, as I have mentioned earlier without elaboration, consists in this: the exercitant discovers that he is loved without reason, precisely as someone who has come to recognize that he is unworthy of love. This discovery brings him peace, freedom and joy.

Previously he was aware only of his own lack of freedom. He experienced the injustice of social structures for which he was partially responsible through his dependence on them and through the forces to which he was subject. It was as though he were in prison. He sighed for freedom but found no way of escape. The experience of redemption of which I wrote above brings a deliverance that is both individual and total. The exercitant experiences the Redeemer's victory over all social power. He discovers what the

disciples discovered at Easter. Even if this experience does not have the same intensity, and even if it is of a different quality, it nonetheless contains the same elements. He whom the authorities rejected turns again towards those who hope in him. The hope that they place in him, as one who brings redemption to the whole world without excluding the societal dimension, proves justified: the word and teachings of the Christ are truth.

The call to labour with the Lord

The Exercises, however, lead us even further. When, from the depths of myself, I have crossed the boundary of this world — 'this age', as Paul calls it; John says simply 'the world' — and I have reached the world of Christ, I am invited to co-operate in Christ's lordship over the new world. The societal dimension is therefore present from the start of the Exercises. In fact, in the meditation on the 'Call of Christ', it comes out so clearly that the exercitant is in danger of forgetting that the struggle does not only take place outside himself and that the decisive battlefield remains within himself, as it was before. The more the exercitant opens himself to the call of Christ, however, the less danger there is of obliterating the socio-economic dimensions of this call and of denying one's responsibility towards them.

The experience of companionship with Christ victorious comes at the point of resignation ('In any case I can do nothing by myself') and of despair in face of the more-than-human task to which the exercitant is called. Then heroism becomes the new danger that threatens the individual 'under the appearance of good'. A commitment even at the cost of one's life is part of the following of Christ. But if the exercitant were to forget that he is only a co-operator, he could centre this commitment unconsciously on himself and either be discouraged in the face of failure or proud in the event of success.

Love persuades in poverty

When we are concerned with the societal dimension of the following of Christ, the key word is poverty: in the first place spiritual poverty as a dependence upon the redemptive and strengthening power of Christ, and then exterior material poverty as a way of testifying that the aim is not to dominate or compel but to invite and attract.

It is only when my own vulnerability is visible to others that they can believe that I am at the service, not of my own power, but of

love. In this sense, poverty contains the risk that one will be misused; or, to express the same thing in another way, we do not live well until we live all three dimensions of human experience (individual, interpersonal, societal) as an integrated unity.

When his relationship with Jesus Christ the Risen One remains fully alive, the exercitant is able to engage himself in a course of action even if he is not certain of succeeding. His relationship with Jesus gives him a joy and a peace that failure and persecution do not disturb but rather increase. From that time on, patience and non-violence are possible. The victory in its totality has already been won. The peace that the exercitant experiences interiorly is itself a manifestation of this victory. He is thus capable of waiting till the fruits of his witness are ripe. This waiting is not inactive; it is a question of allowing others, in love, to enjoy autonomy. Once he is in this state, the exercitant is ready for the Election.

The societal dimension of the Election

The choice which the exercitant makes at this point involves the whole of his person and manifests the integration of the three dimensions of human existence. Not only is this choice free of dependence and attachments, it also helps to shape the societal dimension in the way that Christ intends. This is true in varying degrees, depending upon the nature of the object of the election.

Let us take as an example a man's decision to marry. As this is a question of his relationship with another person, one might argue that that is a purely personal matter. But it is clear that far more is involved, from the fact that the decision is taken at the end of the Second Week of the Exercises. It is Christ who chooses this man to be united with this woman and thereby to live the redemption and witness to it. Jesus chooses them to share in making his kingdom present and real. The decision that leads one person to commit himself to another person possesses a character of witness which reaches out to other people. The 'yes' of a man and his future wife already implies a responsibility towards many people. Even if decisions about their lifestyle, the management of their married life, the number of children they hope to have and their education have not yet been taken, they are nonetheless all present in prospect.

On the other hand, the decision to join a political party touches the societal aspect of human life directly. But in order to be authentic, this decision too must be rooted in a personal relationship with Christ. An individual who is called to follow this way should

feel that it is by siding with the interests of the community in order to establish just social structures that he must live out his relationship with Christ.

There are, therefore, some decisions that are directly political and social because of the areas of life involved in them. But in addition, every decision has at one and the same time both an individual and personal aspect and a societal and public one. That is what Ignatius expresses when he sets the entire creation as the backdrop for the prayer of self-commitment (Exx 98) that precedes and concludes each election. When I act as a single individual, I act in the presence of all.

This point becomes very clear in time of persecution. My decision to pray and to introduce someone else to prayer — actions which in my view are surely personal and individual — could lead to my being excluded from all professional promotion. According to the New Testament, our life here is fundamentally a time of persecution. Our western mentality, with its broad concept of tolerance (which has grown under the influence of Christianity) and its deep respect for the private lives of individuals, does not help us to recognize the societal dimension in each one of our actions. From a historical viewpoint, the destinies of our nations are at stake if we do not learn to take seriously our societal responsibility in all that we do, without neglecting the other two dimensions.

The dynamic of the Exercises centres upon a close sharing in the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. In our present perspective, this means that the disciple is also called to live a paradox: it is precisely the failure of the effort to change the world by love that opens up the crucial vista which leads to redemption. Insofar as a person accepts his incapacity in the face of the power of society, he discovers in the experience of failure that he is implicated in the societal dimension of life. His contribution then lies in suffering and enduring. Because he thus accepts his suffering to the end, the presence in him of the Risen One will shine out with a splendour that cannot remain hidden and which announces that the new era, the new age, has already begun.