

# REPORT ON SPIRITUAL EXERCISES CONFERENCE

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THREE GENERAL areas of interest were apparent in the minds of those who attended the conference, and a report on the formal feedback sessions, where individuals either spoke to the papers or met in small or plenary groups, can perhaps most usefully reflect these areas rather than re-state the content of the papers. These areas of interest were in flexibility and the text, especially where ignatian spirituality is being made more available to the laity in 19th annotation retreats; in the ecumenical dimension of retreat work; and in the link-up we perceive nowadays between the matter of the First Week and justice and peace.

## *Flexibility and the text*

The validity of the 'method' of the Exercises for everyone lies both in respecting the text on the one hand, and in the director's shaping it to the exercitants' experience and need on the other. An examination of the text therefore clarifies Ignatius's intentions, as it presents his answer to the question 'how?' of spiritual exercises. The order of the meditations of the First Week is there to provide a safeguard against the director and the retreatant dictating the direction of the Exercises. They enable both people to respect 'process', the work of God. The images and symbols Ignatius uses are largely scriptural, some may be distasteful to the modern eye but the principle is operative here as elsewhere in the Exercises: whatever tends to intellectual speculation is inappropriate, whatever precipitates movement by appealing to any affective response is appropriate. Indeed where there is no personal image or picture the exercitant has a problem. He will be unable to get into contact with the meaning of his experience, and will remain at the level of event or storyline. Certainly Ignatius's examples are of specific images, they point in a sense to archetypes, but the exercitant is free to search the bedrock of his own experience for comparable keys. We are reminded by Jung that 'the psychological machine which transforms energy is the symbol'.

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The work of the director in enabling the dynamic of the First Week to be experienced involves allowing the retreatant adequate time, and certain issues can best be examined from this viewpoint. There are directives which we cannot ignore: that knowledge of sin is a grace repeatedly to be asked for; that Ignatius proposes a repetition of material which produced desolation. It can be argued that levels of self-knowledge and unconsciousness are always discovered progressively, within time, and that therefore, in a sense, one never receives the complete grace of the First Week. Another point would be that what we call 'healing of memories' is usually done in a community or group context. Therefore the thirty-day retreat and long hours of silence are less appropriate to the process of letting go, of owning *and* healing — not merely owning. Nevertheless the mercy of God is restorative, and this clearly is Ignatius's intention. Therefore healing is a valid consequence but not a valid objective of the Exercises of the First Week, because the method of healing is psycho-dynamic, even while it draws upon spirituality. The moment of transition when knowledge of sin becomes knowledge of God's mercy is promoted both when sin and mercy are not trivialized by being rushed at, and where the difference is exposed between sinfulness and guilt. Where guilt is ignored it erodes, while guilt taken out and looked at can be converted into responsibility. It is tempting to look at sin in its immediate consistency rather than in terms of cause and effect, but Ignatius presents material that is cosmic before personal, objective before subjective. He admits an order.

What is implied is a free fidelity to the text and to the individual, and this likewise ensures an element of tension characteristic of Ignatius. We speak easily enough of the dynamic of the Exercises, acknowledging they have a form and that herein lies their strength. An instance would be that the first exercise of the First Week precipitates the third. However, whether all five exercises should therefore be given every day for five days in the long retreat or spread out remains a question, and matters of experience and temperament are clearly operative. The meditation on hell, especially in the eight-day retreat also raises questions of discretion. Directors, made chary by their own experience, may fight shy of what to exercitants is a necessary exercise and one that echoes their own knowledge of despair, desolation and isolation. It may furnish a spiritual reality in terms of which to interpret their own experience.

In no area is this fidelity and discretion more critical than in that

of handling consolation and desolation. If it is clear to the exercitants that the director is not sitting in moral judgment, then when speaking of prayer they will own to both. The categories of consolation and desolation, even where they are described otherwise, as encouragement and discouragement for instance, still make sense today. So too does the notion of deception, taking feelings for the truth, going with them into spirals of guilt, rather than staying with them as Ignatius recommends, in order to realize their potential for growth. The experienced director knows quite well that there is a possibility of artificially precipitating consolation, while the inexperienced director, ignoring Ignatius's directive, might be tempted to do just that. Desolation, unlike depression, is a God-related state rather than a centring on self, and an exercitant may safely be encouraged to use it. A real loss of faith on the other hand is marked by an attitude of no longer caring at all; experience no longer demands interpretation. To be in touch with these feelings of consolation and desolation and to promote them, preparation in the form of 'disposition days' may profitably be used before a thirty-day retreat, and a variety of exercises in a 19th annotation retreat. The examen might likewise be centred on fidelity to the additions and on the use of time not spent in prayer, and this in turn may increase sensitivity and familiarity with the whole process of 'consciousness examen' and of reviewing prayer time. In a sense they constitute a 'repetition' of everyday life.

*The non-roman catholic retreatant*

The increasing number of non-Roman Catholics and especially Anglicans who undertake individually guided retreats raises further questions. If what has been said about flexibility and adaptation has any validity at all, then clearly it has applications in this area. Moreover, it should be said immediately that problems with the theology of the exercises are not the prerogative of the non-roman catholic retreatant. Two general points about the theology of the exercises could be made here. The first has to do with intellectual speculation. There is an analogy between exercitants of whatever persuasion who arrive with certain theological perspectives or difficulties, and directors who have difficulties with the text. The retreat is not the time for resolving general theological difficulties. Indeed these may remain. However, the practice and experience of the Exercises may dispel what is merely fear and prejudice. Arguably the process of spiritual reflection as intimated in the fourth exercise

of the First Week enables us to look at truths in their architectonic interrelation. That is to say, I may discover the relativity of my particular grasp of the truth.

The second point is the question 'how christological are the exercises of the First Week?' Certain non-Roman Catholics of an evangelical temperament need to be assured that, in the dynamic of the Exercises, Christ is present from the very start. It therefore becomes paramount to identify the good spirit as the spirit of Jesus and to ensure a selection of texts that is christocentric, enabling the retreatant to see sin as Jesus sees it.

Modern retreatants of every christian persuasion come to the Exercises with a much greater variety of theology or even with less theological certainty than in Ignatius's day and this clearly raises new problems. Those with experience of giving the Exercises to non-Roman Catholics find it a very fruitful development which raises far fewer difficulties than people may suppose.

### *Structural sin*

Sin is bred into the very structures of our society in so far as these are man-made, incarnations of sinful human nature. Structural sin is an issue that will increasingly present itself in the retreat situation because of the present day realization that faith and justice are related and that this relationship has to touch our spiritualities unless these are to be abstracted. It is worth admitting that while structural sin or unjust structures no doubt existed in the sixteenth century (after all the activity of the *conquistadores* had a moral content), to claim that Ignatius saw cosmic sin in precisely these terms would be naïve. The dynamic of the text of the First Week exercises does, however, admit such an interpretation. As a result the director's task in today's world has to do with expanding consciousness on two fronts. First, it is necessary to put his or her own house and mental furniture in order. This is what is implied by the clumsy phrase 'self-conscientization'. Moreover, to avoid either analysing abstract injustice or preaching one's own ideology, constant re-education and input by exposure to other people's pain are essential, because we know from the Two Standards that our following of Christ can be manipulated by Satan. It becomes important to observe the forces operative in ourselves as directors — that by housing and educational policy we live isolated from suffering, that by and large we are employed, that we fear the changes concomitant with awareness and our fears are of meaninglessness and of a drop in

our own standard of living. Each of us can say, 'I am a beneficiary of these unjust structures'. An awakening to structural sin leaves most of us with a feeling of powerlessness and this too must be faced.

Secondly, an important question remains: how does one help retreatants appropriate values which are held to be important without manipulation? It cannot be a prerequisite for the Spiritual Exercises that the retreatant be 'socially mature', whatever that might mean. For exercitants the aim of these exercises of the First Week is to mature their understanding of sin. Their perspective aims at responsibility for the future rather than at guilt for the past. In this way 'I-consciousness' becomes 'we-consciousness', because men and women dominated by guilt cannot experience other modes of thought. Confusion is not enough either, but rather an experienced need of interdependence and of personal powerlessness for the refusal to be bitter and despair is not useless but leads to identification with the oppressed. This powerlessness can become a commitment to awareness when it is coupled with responsibility. When it is coupled with guilt the combination is lethal and any action engendered equally injurious. No action can safely be undertaken in answer to the question of the crucified Christ, the one who says 'why are you persecuting me?' until it is responsibility that has cast out guilt.

Such concrete commitment obviates anxiety or empty sentiment. It tends to the next realization, that of a social understanding of salvation. Growth and progress in human awareness are signs of this salvation to the whole human race; the grace of the First Week, the sense of being a sinner and loved by God, the knowledge that in Christ God enters into evil, owns, embraces and forgives it, becomes salvific to the full extent that my self stretches into relationships, my life is touched by and touches structures.