

GIVING THE EXERCISE ON HELL

Theological and pastoral considerations

By BRIAN GROGAN

Introduction

THE BRIEF given me was to bring the resources of theology to bear on the fifth exercise of the First Week in a manner which would be of help to retreat-givers who find themselves baffled by the questions: Should I give this exercise today? And if so, how can I present it in a helpful manner?

The task has taken the following shape: an indication of the practice of givers of the Exercises in regard to hell; my own approach and presuppositions; some central problems in exercitants; a brief history of the doctrine, followed by an outline of the orthodox contemporary understanding of it. Some alternative speculations are noted, after which I turn to the exercise itself and its problems, and finally give suggestions on ways in which it might fruitfully be given.¹

The article is long because the topic is so complex: to avoid unacceptable length, much matter has been relegated to the notes, and references given to enable the reader to explore alone the road which leads to and from hell.

1. The practice of retreat-givers

'I'd seldom give the exercise on hell in a short retreat, and seldom omit it in the full Exercises'.

'No, I don't give the text: it seems to be less than helpful. All I risk is some of the parables about hell, such as Dives and Lazarus or the Last Judgment in Matthew 25. I suppose I'm waiting for something to emerge in catholic thought about hell — at present it doesn't serve the function Ignatius intended. Rather, it disconcerts exercitants and calls other truths, such as the unconditional love of God for them, into question'.

'I try to identify those exercitants — and they can be hard to find — who seem to be able to take this exercise with profit. I mean persons who are well balanced and open, who have a basically sound

trust in God's love for them, who have come to a good grasp of the reality of sin and repentance, and who can hear this exercise as the warning cry of a loving Father to his son or daughter who is in danger of forgetting the relationship which alone gives meaning to his or her existence'.

Thus commented three contemporary givers of the Exercises: contrast a spokesman for a previous generation:

When a person is letting himself go from one mortal sin to another, the meditation should be directed to frighten him, waving as it were a red light in his way. . . . It is a great help to (a youth) once for all to fill him with a salutary fear of hell. Persons at that time positively enjoy this meditation, forcibly put: they will avow, 'This is the only meditation that does me any good. . . .'

Possibly there may be cases in which it is well to omit from the retreat the meditation on hell: I have not met with any.²

A final comment illuminates a dim conviction of my own. 'The exercise on hell? It's for those on the honours course! There are many levels of appreciation of the graces of the First Week, and exercitants who omit the fifth exercise certainly gain the graces through the other exercises, but my experience is that those who can take the exercise on hell enter more deeply into the mystery of their salvation and are more profoundly changed. I'm reminded of the parable of the sower; some thirty, some sixty. . . . And when you recall the history of christian spirituality, you see that none of the saints avoided this issue of hell; they were deeply affected by it. Perhaps sanctity lies that way?'

2. *My approach and presuppositions*

Some experience in supervising others in retreat-giving and in spiritual direction has shown me that the focus must be mainly on the person being supervised, rather than on the client to whom the retreat or direction is being given. The model with which supervisees may begin is that since two heads are better than one, fresh ideas on the client's problems will emerge if the supervisee can tell the supervisor what is going on in the client. But soon the focus shifts back from client to supervisee: his reactions, defences, fears, compulsions, etc., When these are faced and clarified, when distortions in his understanding are corrected, to that extent the supervisee is freed to help the client.³ Thus, while the main focus in this article is on giving the exercise on hell to retreatants, I invite the reader to ponder his own stance regarding hell. One might ask oneself: What

am I hoping for in reading this article? When did I last pray about it? Is it an operative influence in my relationship with God? Why are these very questions irritating me now?

If I never pray about hell, if it has no living space in my heart and in no significant way colours my attitude to life, then for reasons of personal integrity, I should be slow to propose it to another. I invite you, then, to undertake the same self-questioning as I was required to undertake in preparing this article. I hope the labour is suitably rewarded; it is close to the methodology of the Exercises themselves: Ignatius invited others to go through what he himself experienced.

Forced to examine my own approach, I found first in myself a reluctance to consider the question of hell: it was painful to think of the eternal loss of anyone, even of the most ruthless enemy of humanity in the past or present. William Dalton makes much of this sense of pain at another's loss as an argument for the salvation of all mankind.⁴ However that may be, it seems that today's Christian differs widely in this respect from the Christians of an early generation who could rejoice in the torment of their enemies in hell.⁵

Secondly, if reluctant to consider the loss of others, I found it nearly impossible to face the possibility of my own. Freud remarked in *Our attitude towards death*, written during the first world war, that it is impossible to imagine our own death,⁶ and this may be true in regard to our own damnation — the fifth exercise of Ignatius invites me to consider the eternal torments of others, not my own.

Thirdly, the theological problems regarding hell seemed so baffling that it felt better to me to let sleeping dogs lie. The doctrine on hell is difficult: as Lessius remarked long ago, it is one of the four most difficult truths of the catholic faith. It is also a stumbling block to many good persons whether within or outside the christian Church. And it is so out of fashion! Hans Urs von Balthasar noted in 1958 that the last serious book on hell was certainly more than half a century old,⁷ and the situation has hardly changed since then. So true is this that a score of years later the Vatican found it necessary to remind the bishops of the world of the need to keep eschatological truths in their integrity before the minds of the faithful, because of widespread doubt: the doctrine of hell is included.⁸ It is hardly evident that this exhortation had an enlivening pastoral impact: the liberal-minded continue to rejoice that yet one more myth has bitten the dust, while the more conservative take heart and comfort, but falsely, in surveys that show that many Catholics still believe in hell.⁹ A not too numerous middle sees the dilemma and feels impaled on

its horns: how can one fail to remind the faithful about hell, since it is part of the faith, but how can one broach it, since it is almost inevitably misunderstood?

The temptation, as I found, is to acquiesce in the eclipse of the doctrine; but this it cannot be right to do. Doctrines are to be respected, not eliminated. Christianity has an inner coherence and beauty; omit one central component and there results the fragmentation of its meaning and splendour. The work of Jesus is ultimately void of meaning and necessity if the possibility of eternal separation from God does not exist. The axial text in St John — God so loved the world, etc. (3,16) — infers that mankind would indeed be lost except for the intervention of the Son: 'The question of Christ may be resolved only in belief and eternal life or in rejection and destruction: there is no third alternative'.¹⁰ How that may be, we may not understand; but that it is so, we must believe, and by doing so we may hope to move to some limited but fruitful understanding.¹¹

It is a commonplace among retreat-givers that the First Week is the most difficult; partly the reason is that so many fundamental theological issues come into play — the primacy of God, his majesty, his rights, his plans, his will; on man's side, the reality of sin which leads to the death of the body and of the soul; man's hopelessness, left to himself, and his experience of the anger of God; his absolute need of salvation, and finally, the event that links all these truths, the merciful intervention of the Son so that we might not perish but have eternal life. Hell and damnation cannot be grasped except in an unbreakable cluster of interlocking truths, of which none is facile, but all are rich.

Attitudes required, therefore, in proceeding further regarding hell would include a willingness to undertake a fairly serious examination of a number of connected issues; a desire to respect mystery rather than to dismiss it or force it into a logical straitjacket;¹² a belief that ways can and must be found to present the mystery in a pastorally constructive manner, and finally, a readiness to pray about hell and damnation — which the present writer had long neglected to do — asking God to reveal its meaning, which, as Julian of Norwich discovered long ago, is love.¹³

3. *Central problems*

At least three central problems can be identified regarding the acceptance into one's heart of the doctrine of hell: spiritual dullness, distorted theology and anthropocentrism.

Spiritual dullness is due to sin: because of sin I am blind and deaf. The doctrines of salvation and damnation leave me limp, the two-edged sword of the Word is dulled for me (cf Heb 3,12). It is the role of the retreat to awaken me to that 'cry of wonder, accompanied by surging emotion' (Exx 60) as I pass in review the mercy of God and my own sinfulness. The 'ideal retreatant' to whom we shall refer more fully later, can become aware of the extent of his own spiritual dullness, and recognize it as the fruit of sin, through experiencing himself cold, hardly stirred, by the exercise on hell: then he will know how infected he is and what he must pray for.

Distorted theology adds to the problem of spiritual dullness. Much remedial work may be required to correct a distorted understanding of the doctrine of hell. The body of this article will, it is hoped, offer clarification which can be used in preparing the exercitant so that he has basic theological literacy before beginning — the retreat itself is *not* the time for theological refining, as is pointed out in another article in this issue.

By the problem of anthropocentrism I mean that tendency which we have to make ourselves the centre of our worlds. This tendency acts powerfully to evacuate the doctrine of hell of all meaning: all things are judged by *my* standards of what is good and right and fair. A retreatant said to me, midway through the First Week: 'I suppose I have been rather innocently doing my own thing, and I guess I should begin to let God into my life a bit more. But I can't see that God has the right to lay down all the laws. Why should he have the right to judge us?'

The problem of anthropocentrism or subjectivism, or whatever other term is used to label the reality, is not new: it is a perennial difficulty for us to let go our personal views of how things should be, in order to hear our story told from a divine perspective. C. S. Lewis remarks:

I read in a periodical the other day that the fundamental thing is how we think of God. By God Himself, it is not! How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important. Indeed, how we think of Him is of no importance except in so far as it is related to how He thinks of us.¹⁴

Many of the roots of this problem are good, but unchecked they go wild. Democracy is good, and a personal style of government in religious life is a remedy for past autocracy and harshness. Client-centred therapy is good, as is the emphasis in the Exercises on

heeding subjective feelings and reactions; so too is the shift in moral theology which takes due account of conscience ('How did you feel about what you did?'). The desire of men everywhere to become subjects of their own history, determining their own destinies, is one of the mainsprings of liberation movements. Process theology rightly questions the notion of God as the Unmoved Mover, and seeks to emphasize the role of man acting with God in the shaping of human and divine history. And so forth.

This shift to man as subject has done immense good and unblocked much frustrated human potentiality. The edge of darkness appears when the objective order is called into doubt. Examples: the over-use of the personal style of religious government can lead to a fear of commanding and of sending persons on mission: the common good can become of less account than my own: that God could have a will of his own, and that this might be more important than my preferences — this can become obscure and irrelevant to me, so that I am shocked by Paul's statement, 'Every act done in bad faith is a sin' (Rom 14,23), and I find Jesus's attitude — 'I always do what pleases him' (the Father) (Jn 8,29) to be worlds away from my own. The ignatian reverence¹⁵ (*acatamiento*), expressed in his favourite term 'the Divine Majesty' is available only to a heart that is more concerned about God than about itself.

There *is* an objective order: the Spirit of truth and of consolation has a message for the Churches about sin and justice and judgment (Jn 16,8). In the 'reality orientation' of which W. W. Meissner speaks in his *Psychological notes on the Spiritual Exercises*¹⁶ faith is asked today to play a vastly more demanding role than it was in the sixteenth century: if the problem of anthropocentrism is not faced, the retreatant will limp through the First Week. In the 'disposition days' after inviting reflection on the exercitant's image of God, it might be well to invite him to reflect on God's image of him. Then he might consider honestly whether he has any sense of need of salvation, for contemporary man does not easily see how it is that his well-being, his salvation, must be rooted in Christ. E. Schillebeeckx, in the introduction to his mammoth work *Jesus — an experiment in christology*¹⁷ describes how the religious concept of 'salvation' is whittled down in our day, and how meaningless can sound the thesis, accepted by all in the sixteenth century, that Jesus Christ is the redeemer of the world. Remedial work, through discussion, reading and prayer, may be required before the retreat, and certainly before the fifth exercise.

4. *History of the doctrine*

I offer here the sketchiest of reviews of the history of the doctrine on hell in christian tradition, in order to help situate the present discussion.

Jesus's views on hell are summarized in the various commentaries.¹⁸ He perceived in a unique manner the greatness of the Father, and how sin and evil betrayed the Father's love. His spiritual nerves were sensitive to the possible tragedy of man's eternal loss to a degree from which we are shielded by those thick layers of ignorance and rationalization which we develop to protect ourselves.¹⁹ So he preached *metanoia* with passionate urgency, and for our sakes 'became sin' and allowed the full scope of evil to engulf him, even to the abandonment by the Father on the cross, which is the final effect of sin.²⁰ He intended that thus we might be shocked into realizing what sin means to God and what its consequences are for us who commit it. The first gift of the resurrected Lord is the Holy Spirit, for the forgiveness of sin, and the resurrection itself is the Father's sign of approval of the manner of life of the Son, a life given over to the Father in unconditional obedience and surrender, the antithesis of the way of life of the first Adam. Mankind is to follow that pattern of life, and is empowered to do so by the Spirit, in order to share in the resurrection from the dead. Thus the power of sin, and of the first (physical) and the second (spiritual) death are overcome.

The apostolic Church held in tension two contrasting views of the final destiny of man. One speaks of judgment, damnation and eternal pain for part of mankind: the classical expression is the judgment in Matthew 25. The other gives strong encouragement to the hope that all people, despite their evil ways, will finally be saved: this view is given in John, e.g. 'I shall draw all men to myself' (12,32) and frequently in Paul,²¹ but most dramatically in Romans 9-11 in regard to the final salvation of the Jews. But there is no smooth transition from the fearful picture painted by the pre-resurrected Jesus to the triumphant view based on his resurrection and exaltation, for while Paul is optimistic about the outcome of human history, the author of 1 Peter believes in a division of mankind into saved and damned as does the author of Revelation.

The Middle Ages

Which view predominated in later history is clear: 'In the official theology of the West, since Augustine at the latest, unlimited hope finds itself shackled by the certitude that a certain number of people

will be damned'.²² The recently-discarded sequence for the Mass for the dead, the *Dies irae*²³ sums up an attitude regarding judgment day which has prevailed from the fifth century to our own, and is still with many of us: hell is an open possibility till the very end; many will surely be lost; Christ's victory will be only partial.

For Dante, heir of a long tradition, hell will be well populated; every sinner will be punished according to his specific crimes. So too the artists of the early and later Middle Ages delighted in portraying the Last Judgment and the division of mankind into saved and lost.²⁴

The author of the Spiritual Exercises was a man of his times: the fifth exercise may be taken as an expression of his own view, which we may summarize as follows:

There are souls in hell, some because they did not believe in the coming of Christ, others because, while believing, they did not work according to his commands. Many have been damned for one mortal sin: I deserve eternal damnation for my many sins, for I have acted so often against infinite goodness. But God in his mercy has spared me, so let me amend my life.

For a masterly christological treatment of Ignatius's approach in the Exercises, Hugo Rahner remains unsurpassed: he calls hell the 'eschatology of sin' and notes that in Exx 52, when speaking of someone going to hell for one mortal sin, Ignatius adds to the vulgate the word *forte* (perhaps).²⁵

It is instructive to compare Ignatius with Xavier: for the latter, hell was not merely a possibility but a reality for many. He warns his brethren repeatedly about the many priests and preachers who were indeed instruments for the salvation of others, yet went to hell because they attributed to themselves what was of God.²⁶ On the vexed question of the salvation of unbelievers, Xavier held that the law of nature is written in the hearts of all, and by obeying it a man can be saved; yet he believed that vast numbers of infidels were in hell through their own fault,²⁷ and this belief fired his missionary zeal.

Let Ignatius and Xavier act as spokesmen for the sixteenth century and Cardinal Newman for the nineteenth. The latter wrote his *Apologia* in 1864: opening his account of his religious opinions he states that from 1816 on (he was fifteen then):

I have given a full inward assent and belief to the doctrine of eternal punishment, as delivered by Our Lord Himself, in as true a sense as I hold that of eternal happiness; though I have tried in various ways to make that truth less terrible to the reason.²⁸

He was not an optimist about the salvation of all people.²⁹ In our own century, Joseph Rickaby will serve as a carrier for that tradition which would seem 'to speak with a very faltering voice on the victory of good over the power of evil'.³⁰ And so we come to Vatican II. But before doing so, it is consoling to note a comment of Hans Urs von Balthasar:

... it is significant that, from the Middle Ages up to the modern epoch, a whole series of women saints have silently protested against this masculine theology (the certitude of damnation for some), and, being strong in their heartfelt boldness and having a direct access to the mystery of salvation, they have expressed a boundless hope. . . . But the theology of women has never been taken seriously nor integrated by the establishment.³¹

Vatican II

Vatican II is silent about hell: it expresses optimism about the salvation of mankind. There is in *The Church in the modern world* a sense of corporate destiny, a belief that Christ's victory will be total, so that at the end, God will be all in all.³² Some will blame what they term 'this over-optimism' on Teilhard de Chardin, but this is unfair both to the Council, as the commentaries show,³³ and to Teilhard who at the close of the *Milieu divin* affirms his belief in the existence of hell, on the word of God, as a structural element in the universe. Whether or not it be inhabited, he will not ask. Rather, its possibility adds urgency to life.³⁴

Whence this new-found optimism in the Catholic Church regarding the salvation of all? It was inspired by a growing appreciation of the interdependence of mankind: a global perspective gives rise to a sense of common destiny. But if we are in solidarity, it must be towards a glorious consummation of world history, else the work of creation and redemption is a cosmic failure. In Vatican II the Church identified herself as never before with the world: she is a sign of salvation to all. All men can be saved, even outside the Church: not only the history of the Church but the history of the world is 'salvation history' in the sense that God works his saving plans in all times and places and events.³⁵

Another factor powerfully influencing the Church in her optimism was the discovery of truer principles of interpretation of eschatological statements than she had to hand before. This is a vast topic;³⁶ for our purposes it will suffice to note two such principles. First, eschatological statements are to be interpreted symbolically rather than literally — the language refers to realities which cannot be adequately expressed.

Thus 'God as judge will condemn the sinner to everlasting torments, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' contains a set of images which are not to be taken literally but as referring to the reality of the alienation of a man, by free choice, from him who alone could give meaning to his life.

Secondly, the statements of Jesus, taken by earlier generations as indications of future eschatological realities, are better seen as dramatic warnings than as 'advance coverage'. Thus 'the goats *will* go away to eternal punishment' can be understood as a warning cry from him who in all he said and did, including his threats and his anger, intended our salvation.³⁷ In the light of such new understanding, it was possible to look again at the dogma of hell: the magisterium had proceeded, as always, more soberly and cautiously than the preacher, and though it would have been easy to do so, the Church had never defined that hell is populated, and so had instinctively avoided taking literally Jesus's statements regarding a final division of mankind into saved and lost.³⁸ She did, however, condemn *apokatastasis*, the theory attributed to Origen according to which even the damned will finally be saved.³⁹

There also emerged, in time for the Council, studies on the resurrection of Christ such as F. X. Durrwell's. The passion of the Lord had long eclipsed his resurrection; now the victory of Christ over evil began to assume its rightful place in the mind of the Church. The emphasis in the scriptures on the salvation of *all* came into focus. And so the Council's hope (it is not a statement of *certainly*) is firmly grounded, and it invites us to an energetic involvement in the community of mankind so that at the end there may indeed be a final community of love, from which none are excluded.

Has the Church changed her mind about hell? Not an easy question: she has always adhered to the doctrine in its essence, but her interpretation of its consequences had modified through the centuries. The sober pronouncements of the magisterium were compensated for by the exuberant imaginings of theologians and preachers and artists, and these were not without basis in the New Testament, literally interpreted. Over-kill is the bane of eschatology: theologians and preachers are perhaps humbler now in depicting the life to come, and the Church explicitly invites this attitude.⁴⁰

5. *The contemporary catholic view*

What, the reader may wearily ask, is acceptable catholic teaching about hell? Let us turn to K. Rahner's *Concise theological dictionary*:

The dogma on hell means that human life is threatened by the real possibility of eternal shipwreck, because man freely disposes of himself and can therefore freely refuse himself to God. Jesus directly states this possibility when he warns of the consequences of arbitrary and obstinate self-closure (lack of love, on which we shall be judged) in imagery which was current at that time. He proclaims the seriousness of one's present situation and the significance of human history, whose fruits are taken as man's own work, thus rejecting all trivializing and all superficial views of the relationship between man and God. . . . Whether and how far man does in fact avail himself of his power to reject God, revelation does not inform us, nor has the magisterium made any pronouncement on the question. Such information, indeed, would be inconsistent with the purpose of the doctrine of hell, which is not to provide abstract data or to satisfy our curiosity but to bring us to our senses and to conversion. Without seeing how they can be reconciled, we must confess the two doctrines: the omnipotence of God who wills all men to be saved, and the possibility of eternal perdition.⁴¹

Some comments: The position stated above — that hell has the reality of possibility but not necessarily that of actuality — avoids the stumbling block caused by supposing that God has created hell and torment for man, using for the purpose all the imagination and ingenuity which he demonstrates in the making of this present world.⁴² If hell were to become an actuality for any man, God need do no more than preserve in existence a man who had refused for ever what he and all are made for, that is, the Father giving eternal life and joy to man through Christ. When you do not have what you are made for, and can never have it, and it is your own deliberate choice and you know it to be such; when you are not ready for divine friendship, and are out of harmony with all being, and the time for change is past, you are then in that state of alienation and totally frustrated existence which is termed hell.

6. *Problems and alternatives*

The doctrine as proposed in the preceding section is inimical in a number of ways to the anthropocentric stance outlined earlier, and it is well for the guide to be aware of the problems and the evasions which in all good faith and 'possibly sincere pride'⁴³ the retreatant may attempt.

Examples: Is the goal of my being determined by me or by God? Must my choices be according to his will, and if so, why? Where is my freedom? Granting that God is beyond manipulation or exploita-

tion — though I work hard to 'bring God to what I desire' in many of my choices⁴⁴ — cannot God and I simply 'live and let live' in peaceful co-existence? Is my situation truly hopeless and bankrupt without God? Men devise satisfactory modes of existence here below with little reference to God: why cannot this be so hereafter? Surely we cannot lose infinite joy through finite choices badly made, but made in ignorance? All choices are reversible nowadays — marriage, priesthood, etc. — so why be so sure that the state in which I find myself at death is non-reversible? Or, if God is good, surely he brings my life to a close only when my orientation is good? And so forth.

Not only are there serious problems which arise spontaneously from our own subjectivity, but there are well-argued alternatives proposed by theologians. The Vatican letter already cited is deeply concerned about speculations which call eschatological truths into question and thereby weaken the faith of the Church. The question of course arises: how shall one determine the truth? All I intend to do here is to comment briefly, and critically, on some positions which seem inadequately to respect the real possibility of hell, that is, its possibility from a human point of view — we do not have access to the divine point of view, except in so far as it is given us in revelation, through scripture, tradition and the teaching of the Church.

Annihilation proposes that those found unworthy to enter eternal life are simply wiped out: they cease to exist, and therefore hell does not exist, in actuality nor possibility. The theory has its attractiveness, and is mentioned sympathetically by John Shea in *What a modern Catholic believes about heaven and hell*.⁴⁵ Arguments against it include the view that on this account, it is the blessed who suffer in eternity, lamenting the fate of those they loved who no longer exist. More seriously, it denies the teaching of the Church.

Universalism says that since God is pure and omnipotent love, he must save all people. Hell is not a real possibility: history *must* end in the salvation of all: let us then cease to provoke fear by speaking of the possibility of eternal loss. W. Dalton seems to tend to this view, as do J. A. T. Robinson and many others.⁴⁶ Their arguments help to highlight the saving work of God in Christ, his victory over sin and evil in the resurrection, etc., but if it is true that God *will* save all people, hell ceases to exist as a possibility.

Final option proposes that only in the moment of death can we choose or reject God definitively. There must be this last chance, since prior to death our knowing and willing are concerned with finite things: in death we see God face to face, and our wills can

then, and then only, fully choose for or against him. L. Boros elaborates this theory well and his arguments are suasive to many.⁴⁷ The theory, however, has no basis in revelation and trivializes all present choices. Hell as possibility becomes devoid of meaning, for who would not choose God in the end?

Process theology by its general approach tends to question the priority of God's plans and decisions over man's. In the limit case, man defines his own meaning over against God: the victory of Jesus over evil loses its meaning, and God, in so far as his love is rejected, becomes the unfulfilled one — presumably eternally so.⁴⁸ Given its questionable starting points, it is not surprising that process theology comes to conclusions more awry than the imbalances it seeks to correct.

7. *Giving the fifth exercise*

The exercise on hell is for the robust, or, dare I say, ideal retreatant: one who verifies Anns. 5 and 20, in that he comes with great openness and desire for God. Basic trust, such as founds a healthy self-image, is present. For this exercitant, the disposition days will have gone well, the Principle and Foundation will have been acknowledged. He will have touched on, without evasion or flinching, the concrete possibility of eternal loss of others (Exx 48,50,52), and will have immersed himself in the colloquy with Jesus on the cross. He identifies easily with the sinners in the gospels, and realizes his utter helplessness without a Saviour.

Experience seems to show that for less robust persons the fifth exercise is unhelpful, basically because it calls into serious doubt the unconditional love of God for them, instead of reinforcing it, which is the whole point: such persons cannot take the exercise seriously, or if they do, they cannot place it within the context of divine mercy, and there follow despair, misery, fear which paralyse rather than liberate. Many good but damaged persons come to make the Exercises: for them the giver must be able to scale down the full Exercises to their capacity — intelligent flexibility is understood by Ignatius to be essential in the giver.

There is perhaps a third class of exercitant to be considered: the robust but insensitive person who finds it hard to see the point of the First Week. For him, the shock of the fifth exercise may be very salutary, just as texts such as Ezekiel 16 can be; but it is not to be given while a person is in desolation, though it may *lead* to temporary desolation, and here the guide needs nerve and sensitivity. 'The

grace (of a sense of abandonment) will only be given between two joys . . . within . . . an all-embracing experience of christian joy. . . . Within the fiery darkness . . . there gleams a light. . .'.⁴⁹

The grace sought and the colloquy indicate the goal of the exercise; the points are means. There is a progression from the second prelude to the colloquy: the prelude speaks of asking for a deep sense of pain of the damned (Ignatius does not use the term 'lost'), so that if I forget the love of the eternal Lord (shown on the cross), fear of eternal punishment may aid me to avoid sinning. The colloquy infers that the exercise has led to grateful wonder due to a profound realization of God's mercy, etc. The exercise must end thus: fear of punishment remains, but it is transcended, enveloped in gratitude and hope for the future, and on this alone can the exercitant go on to the Second Week.

The points: One must not try to defend the literal interpretation of the points: there is dogmatic support neither for the idea that hell is populated nor that its pains are as described. As in the parables (and most of Jesus's warnings about hell are in parable), the details add life and colour, and thus engage inner and outer senses and lead the person inward to the heart of the mystery. We perhaps dismiss Ignatius's points too quickly as 'obsolete', however: one of my revered colleagues has impressed on me the dramatic and brilliant use which Ignatius makes of the senses in applying them to the *absence* of God. This has to be done through pictures of what is in fact emptiness, nothingness, evil as defined by the scholastic — *carentia boni debiti*, the absence of a good which should be there. The colloquy with Christ on the Cross takes on new meaning when I hear others blaspheme him who died to save us: his pain and theirs causes pain in me.

There grows an all-embracing sensibility and sensitivity to sin: the whole person recoils against evil seen both in itself and in its effects, just as in the Second Week the application of the senses brings us to a deep harmony with the divinity and its effects.⁵⁰

The meditation, or rather, contemplation, is to be made soberly; its conclusion should be peace as against trembling over what God might do to me. I am reconciled: I have life and hope.

Other approaches: Always presuming that the guide knows the retreatant to be 'robust':

(i) 'Ask God to leave you for an hour. Imagine you hear him say: "I know you not", and that he says it only because you have already said it to him by your denying the gospel'.

(ii) 'You already know something of desolation, that downward spiral into futility and darkness: you know from within what life without God is like; pointless, futile, frustrating. Stay with the prodigal son in his far country, and imagine that situation as permanent and hopeless'.

(iii) Literature uses the concept of hell extensively, to refer to the extremes of human suffering, whether born out of a sense of alienation, as in Sartre, or caused by others, as in Solzhenitsyn.⁵¹ A passage from one or other might be helpful, or better still, the exercitant may get in touch with personal experiences which for him were 'sheer hell' and then build the second prelude and the colloquy around them. The daily TV news provides endless examples of the desecration of man by man in a godless world.

(iv) The experience of death may serve: a retreatant who has basic theological literacy may have grasped the fundamental judaeo-christian insight that death is the consequence of sin, in that it expresses eternally that inner self-distancing by the sinner from him who is Life. It is the sentence of doom which man calls upon himself. As E. Schillebeeckx puts it:

The empty existence of the dead is as it were the wearied-of-life, forced inactivity of a man strung up by his own hand on the gibbet of sin, a besotted sleep without hope of a fresh dawn. *Mors aeterna*, in other words, a genuine hell. Thus death is the manifestation in a sinful man of God's majesty and holiness and at the same time a *mysterium iniquitatis* of diabolical and human sinfulness.⁵²

(v) Another approach, and perhaps the best, is christological. It is the engagement of the inner senses and affectivity on Jesus as he faces the prospect of man uttering his last defiant 'No!' to the offer of divine mercy which he himself incarnates. The goal of the Exercises is the transformation of our affectivity: by nature we prefer riches, honour, comfort, doing our own will, sexual gratification, etc., to their opposites;⁵³ how then will stronger attachments of a better kind come to master these 'inordinate attachments'? Perhaps by entry into the mind and heart, the frustrations and sadness of the Lord, in his public life and centrally in the crucifixion, our affectivity may be converted, and the disaster of sin be recognized. This is simply an extension of the colloquy with Christ on the Cross, with the emphasis on Jesus's inner experiences in being rejected. The exercitant will be able to refer to his own emotions when rejected by someone he loved and risked much for, and whom he could have

helped had he been allowed, e.g., a social worker's frustration in coming with help to a lonely old lady, who bars the door and chooses to die in misery and isolation rather than acknowledge her need of help and risk a relationship of dependence.

(vi) The anger of God is a powerful theme. 'The believer must approach the mystery of God's anger if he will rightly approach God's love'.⁵⁴ In St John 3,36 we are told that the anger of God stays on him who refuses to believe in the Son. The interpretation of Martini and Mollat⁵⁵ is as follows: refusal of belief in the Son is a despising of God and His love: the effect in man is disintegration, chaos, disfigurement. In God the effect is anger at the profanation and ruin of man who is his temple — 'the temple of God is holy, and that temple you are' (1 Cor 3,17): He is now shut out from that holy place which is his own, and an idol is set up in his place. The exercitant may be invited to allow himself to experience this anger of the God who loves him; immersion in this anger and dismay of God may startle him into an awareness of what he means to God.

(vii) John Veltri stresses that the exercise is to centre on the Lord's kindness: the exercitant is being saved now from the possibility of eternal death, from the extension and eternalization of his own disorders, one of which he is invited to ponder.⁵⁶

Conclusion

'I think hell's a fable', said Faust long ago; and so do many Christians today. But Mephistopheles's reply also echoes in our hearts: 'Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind', for in our century men have busied themselves in creating hells for their fellow men, and are now toying with the destruction of the planet itself. The solidarity of mankind for good or ill is being borne in on us and brings both fear and hope: the solidarity of mankind in the risen and victorious Christ gives us christian hope, which is unshakable because it is rooted in Eternal Love. That love is totally serious and also wise: God has only one thing in mind for us, our salvation. Hell is the warning cry of a loving Father who knows that it is better for us to have the edge of fear now than to be lost forever. We live in hope for ourselves and for all mankind; that hope lies in God and not in us: the experience of being suspended above the earth catches the point. In flying we depend totally on what holds us up, while we also experience the abyss below.⁵⁷ We want to be saved not individually but in the company of all our brothers and sisters, and so we pray for all men, and that prayer is effective. And while we work, even unto

death, for the conversion of men's hearts and the transformation of the distorting structures of the world, we speak of hell because we are told to: we are stewards of the Word and servants of the mysteries of God.

NOTES

¹ I am indebted to many colleagues for their help in the preparation of this article.

² Rickaby, J.: *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola*, Spanish and English with a continuous commentary (London, 1915), p 43. He belonged to the generation of retreat-givers whose approach to hell is immortalized in Joyce's *Portrait*.

³ Barry, W. A. and Connolly, W. J.: *The practice of spiritual direction* (New York, 1982), ch 11, 'Supervision in Spiritual Direction'.

⁴ Dalton, W.: *Salvation and damnation*, n. 41, in Theology Today Series (Dublin, 1977); 'The Wages of Sin', *The Way* (July 1975), pp 193-201.

⁵ For example, Tertullian: 'How shall I admire, how laugh, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs groaning in the lower abyss of darkness; so many magistrates, liquefying in fiercer flames than they ever kindled against the Christians, so many sage philosophers blushing in red-hot fires with their dilated pupils'. Quoted by J. Shea in *What a modern Catholic believes about heaven and hell* (Chicago, 1972), p 72.

⁶ Freud, S.: *Complete psychological works* (London, 1953-74), vol 14, pp 289-302.

⁷ von Balthasar, H. U.: *The God question and modern man* (New York, 1958), p 120.

⁸ 'Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology', *Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* (Vatican City, 1979), n. 7.

⁹ Cf for example the recent poll of U.S. Catholics: 86% of those interviewed said they believe in hell. They name Hitler, Stalin, Judas, as already there, and believe Idi Amin, Hugh Hefner and Richard Nixon will arrive there. 60% said that the existence of hell did not affect their moral decisions. The trivializing of hell is complete in our times.

¹⁰ B. Vawter, commenting on this verse in *Jerome biblical commentary* (New Jersey, 1968); 63, 71. It may be argued that all has been changed by the resurrection of Christ, that Jesus did not speak of hell after this event, and that eternal loss is thus no longer possible. That the early Church thought otherwise is the evidence of the New Testament.

¹¹ Cf Lonergan, B. J.: *Method in theology* (London, 1971), ch 12, 'Doctrines'.

¹² von Balthasar, H. U.: 'We are not therefore called upon to bring hell and the love of God into logical and systematic harmony, or to make it credible', *Love alone: The way of revelation* (London, 1968), p 78.

¹³ Cf *Showings*, ed. Colledge, E. and Walsh, J.: *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York, 1978), pp 233, 342.

¹⁴ *The weight of glory* (Grand Rapids, 1965), p 10.

¹⁵ O'Neill, C. E.: 'Acatamiento — Ignatian reverence in history and contemporary culture', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, 8/1 (January 1976).

¹⁶ 'In the meditations on sin, hell . . . an implicit value system is presented for reflection. The christian soul must face the stark realities of its spiritual existence, which constitute the framework within which the consequences of its failure to adapt to the demands of the christian moral code are realized. It is necessary, therefore, for the ego to achieve through faith a certain reality-orientation . . . to the spiritual world. The value system is reflected in God's revealed attitudes towards sin, in the terrible consequences of sin in itself, and as a turning against God', *Notes*, p 20.

¹⁷ Schillebeeckx, E.: *Jesus — An experiment in christology* (London, 1979), pp 19-26.

¹⁸ Cf Stanley, D. M. and Brown, R. E.: 'New Testament Eschatology', *Jerome biblical commentary* 68: 62-92.

¹⁹ Cf Haughton, R.: *The passionate God* (London, 1981), pp 148-49.

²⁰ For interpretations of Christ's descent into hell cf von Balthasar, H. U.: '*Plus loin que la mort*'; Maas, W.: '*Jusqu'ou est descendu le Fils*'; Sanchez-Caro, J. M.: '*Le Mystère d'une Absence*', in *Communio* 6 (January/February 1981), pp 2-34.

In the *von Balthasar Reader* (Edinburgh 1982), von Balthasar suggests that the descent of the Son into abandonment and loneliness is deeper than that to which the sinner can attain. 'Even what we call "hell" is, although it is the place of desolation, always still a Christological place', p 422.

²¹ Tit 2,11; 1 Cor 10,33. 15,28; 1 Tim 4,10, etc.

²² von Balthasar, H. U.: 'The timeliness of Lisieux' *Carmelite Studies: Spiritual Direction* (Washington, 1980), p 117.

²³ The origins of the *Dies irae* can be traced to the writings of the sixth-century Irish monks, Colum Cille and Columbanus. The individualism of the sequence is disturbing today. In the early centuries the communal dimension of salvation predominated, with Christ's parousia as its pivotal point; the eternal fate of the individual was viewed in an ecclesial context. The Middle Ages brought a shift from the communal to the individual aspect: the focus was set on the moment of death on which hinged man's eternal destiny, and on individual punishment in purgatory; the social events of the parousia and the resurrection became appendages. Vatican II, as we shall see, tries to restore the true perspective. Cf Neuner-Dupuis: *The christian faith* (Dublin, 1976), ch 23. For purgatory as a social event, see Grogan, B.: 'Purgatory', *Faith today*, n 44 (Dominican Publications, Dublin, 1978).

²⁴ See for example Mâle, E.: *The gothic image* (New York, 1958), ch 6.

²⁵ Rahner, H.: *Ignatius the theologian* (London, 1968), p 90 and footnote 54.

²⁶ Cf Schurhammer, G.: *Francis Xavier*, vol 4 (Jesuit Historical Institute, 1982), pp 87, 539.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 506, 289, 446, 235 and footnote 101.

²⁸ *Apologia*, part 3 (London, 1959), pp 99-100.

²⁹ Cf Rickaby, J.: *Index to the works of J. H. Newman* (London, 1914), s.v. The Few and the Many; Hell; Salvation.

³⁰ Dalton, W.: 'The Wages of Sin', *The Way* (July 1975), p 193.

³¹ von Balthasar, H. U.: 'The timeliness of Lisieux', p 117. There were exceptions!

³² Vatican II: *The Church in the modern world*, nn 12-32.

³³ For example, Vorgrimler, H., ed.: *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol 5 (New York, 1969).

³⁴ *Milieu divin* (London, 1964), pp 146-49.

³⁵ E. Schillebeeckx's third volume (after *Jesus and Christ*) will explore this theme.

³⁶ Cf Rahner, K.: 'The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions' *Theological investigations* 4 (London, 1966), pp 322-54; *Salvation and damnation*, ch. 3; Simpson, M.: *Death and eternal life*, n 42, in *Theology Today Series* (Cork, 1971), ch 5.

³⁷ The parables are not intended as previews or 'trailers' of future events.

³⁸ For the dogmatic statements of the magisterium on hell, cf Denzinger, 31st ed., nn 16, 40, 211, 429, 464, 531, 714. It is found both in Creeds and Councils.

³⁹ Cf *Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche* s.v. *apokatastasis*.

⁴⁰ Cf Vatican Letter on Eschatology already cited.

⁴¹ Rahner, K.: *Concise theological dictionary* (London, 1965), pp 210-02.

⁴² Fire is not part of the dogma on hell, though the contrary view has had powerful advocates, including Thomas Aquinas; cf Michel, A.: 'Feu de l'enfer', *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, vol 5. Yet a being in total disharmony with the universe would suffer in every way.

⁴³ 'A man who in his possibly sincere pride cannot acknowledge the fact of his own sinfulness, a man who abolishes the awareness of sin from human experience, cannot see any sense in death', Schillebeeckx, E.: 'The Death of a Christian', in *Vatican II: A struggle of minds* (Dublin, 1963), p 68.

⁴⁴ Exx 169.

⁴⁵ Shea, J.: *op. cit.*, pp 73-74; Simpson, M.: *op. cit.*, p 80; Dalton, W.: *Salvation and damnation*, index, s.v. Annihilation.

⁴⁶ Dalton, W.: *op. cit.*, allows hell to be at most an 'abstract possibility' on p 82. In 'The wages of sin' he sympathizes with 'the christian instinct of many believers, particularly thoughtful and sensitive young persons, who want to live their christian faith to the full. For many of these, the older understanding of hell, even in its mitigated form, is a non-doctrine. This is not necessarily a watering-down of the severe demands of revelation. It could well be a consequence of discovering the gospel as unconditional good news, the basis of celebration and joy even in the murk of human pain and sinfulness'. *The Way* (July 1975), p 200.

⁴⁷ *The mystery of death* (London, 1965); Gleason, R. W.: *The world to come* (New York, 1958); Schoonenberg, P.: *Man and sin* (Notre Dame Press, 1965); Nowell, R.: *What a modern Catholic believes about death* (Chicago, 1972), etc. The theory is heavily criticized by various scholars, such as E. Schillebeeckx in *The death of a Christian*, pp 78- 82. K. Rahner has often been wrongly mentioned as a proponent of the final option theory; cf for instance, Segundo, J. L.: *Grace and the human condition* (Dublin, 1980), p 168.

⁴⁸ 'The ultimate dimension of the glory of God lies in that activity which creates, in the end, its own passion; in that working, which in the end, destines itself to waiting. . . . The most glorious activity of God is that he gives to that which he makes power of meaning — power to mean something to himself, power to be the subject over against himself as the object. . . . In loving (He) exposes himself to be the object no less than the subject of that which happens in the world . . .'. Vanstone, W. H.: *The stature of waiting* (London, 1982), pp 99-100. The victory of Jesus over evil, so strongly affirmed in the New Testament, has lost its meaning. For a more comprehensive view of the glory of God, cf H. U. von Balthasar's seven-volume study, *The glory of the Lord* (Edinburgh, 1982, and the following years).

⁴⁹ von Balthasar, H. U.: *Engagement with God* (London, 1975), p 96.

⁵⁰ For the summary of the application of the senses in christian tradition and in Ignatius, cf von Balthasar, H. U.: *The glory of the Lord*, vol 1 (Edinburgh, 1982), pp 365-80.

⁵¹ Treatments of hell in contemporary literature can be found in von Balthasar, H. U.: *The God question*, pp 119-42, and in *Communio* 6 (January/February 1981), pp 56-62.

⁵² *The Death of a Christian*, p 69.

⁵³ For a helpful account of the transformation of affectivity through the Exercises, cf Kiely, B.: 'Consolation, desolation, and the changing of symbols', in *The Spiritual Exercises in present-day application* (CIS, Rome, 1982), pp 123-56.

⁵⁴ *Dictionary of biblical theology*, ed. Leon-Dufour, X. (London, 1973), s.v., Wrath.

⁵⁵ Martin, C. M.: *The Ignatian exercises in the light of St John*, eng. tr. Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand (India, 1981), pp 41-45.

⁵⁶ Veltri, J.: *Orientalisms II* (Guelph, 1981), pp 80-82.

⁵⁷ The image is H. U. von Balthasar's in *Love alone: the way of revelation*, p 78.