

THE FIRST WEEK: PRACTICAL QUESTIONS

By JOSEPH VEALE

IN ANSWER TO the basic question of what the director should do in the first week, I imagine an experienced director would say ‘I don’t know’, or ‘I don’t know what I am going to do until after the interview’. It is part of the incomprehensible dynamic of the Exercises that the Spirit works through the prayerful relationship of the director and the exercitant. What is said or not said is in function of the relationship and what emerges in the conversation.

In practice there are three kinds of exercitant: (a) those who have met their director fairly frequently over a long period and who have been prepared by prayer and spiritual direction to begin the enclosed thirty-day retreat; this is closer to St Ignatius’s practice; (b) those who have been preparing themselves in the same way for the Exercises in daily life; (c) those whom the director meets for the first time on the evening the thirty-day retreat begins. In practice this last kind would seem to be more common. In that case the first few days of the retreat need to be given to getting to know the exercitant; to allaying feelings of apprehension and founding the possibility of trust; to establishing a prayerful atmosphere; and to discovering (as far as possible without asking questions) why he wants to make the Exercises, what he desires and is seeking, something of his situation in life, what are the pressures of his work, whether he has come to the retreat bone-wearied, whether he has been praying, how he prays, how important prayer is in his life, what he cares about, whether he has made this kind of retreat before, and who God is for him.

Fairly early in the first few days I suggest, firmly, that the retreatant begin each time of prayer as St Ignatius recommends (Exx 75), so that the time of prayer has a formal beginning; so that the body is brought into prayer; so that the perspective is right (*cómo Dios nuestro Señor me mira*, ‘how God our Lord is beholding — contemplating — me’); so that the focus is on God rather than on self; so that he begins to feel reverence before the holiness and majesty of God. I

will also try (often with limited success) to show him how to make the review of prayer, since it is essential to the dynamic of the Exercises and without it he will not begin to learn what is helpful in order to reply to, 'Well, what has been happening . . .?'

Readiness for the First Week

During these days I will try to pick up the signs that will show me whether the retreatant will be able to make the exercises of the First Week. Negative indications will be: a defective image of God (demanding tyrant or wholly indulgent Daddy), a very defective self-image; a weakened faith; a weakened sense of God that makes a true sense of sin difficult; a weakened hope that has small expectations of God's power and desire to give his gifts (Exx 5: 'to enter upon them with magnanimity'); an absence of mature relationships in his life; a pelagian tendency that may imagine the Exercises to be a technique.

I will want to encourage the retreatant to spend at least a day or two ruminating about (the term of the early Directories) or praying the Principle and Foundation; in these times probably longer than that.

For modern men, who need to discover the meaning of God's sovereignty, the Foundation cannot remain a mere consideration, lofty and luminous as it may be. It must be turned into an exercise for acquiring awareness of the absolute primacy of God. An intellectual demonstration . . . would have little effect on many of our contemporaries.¹

By this time I will be hoping that he has begun to pray, to experience something of God's goodness and love in prayer. Until that has begun to happen, I should be unwilling to go into the First Week.

The retreatant's response to the Foundation is something of a touchstone for his readiness to make the Exercises and especially for his readiness to begin the First Week. The closer he comes to the dispositions of Annotations 5 and 20, the more I will have hoped that he has discovered something of the following: (a) some growth in desire to give himself wholly to God; (b) in the light that comes from God and in the light of some previous glimpse of what interior freedom is, to have grown in the desire to be 'indifferent', to experience the freedom of the Spirit (2 Cor 3,17), to participate in the freedom of Jesus before the Father and before all other things; (c) with some realistic sense of his own capacities to be aware, in

response to St Ignatius's casual statement 'therefore it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent', that: 'I have it in my power to expand somewhat the area of my human freedom. But I cannot "make myself indifferent". Only the power of the Spirit can do that'. And, 'I do not know how to find God's particular and concrete will for me'. Finally, 'Were I to know it, I do not have the moral strength to do it'. The early Directories seem to be clear on this, that the exercitant should experience the difficulty (*Para que sintais la dificultad*) of becoming that free.² The fourth of the 'autograph' Directories and a later one³ speak of the fruit of the Foundation as resignation':

Indifference is a 'resignation'; a man places himself in the hands of his God and Lord. . . . When the whole heart does this really and in truth, it greatly disposes him for God's communication of himself, because it opens the door of the heart, so that the Lord can work great things in him.

All this has something to do with readiness to begin the First Week. I believe that in the coming years the director of the enclosed thirty-day Exercises will have much to learn from the guide of the Exercises in daily life; indeed the latter may (in practice if not in principle) become the paradigm of our direction of the Exercises. Father Maurice Giuliani, in his *The Exercises in daily life* says:

From this point of view, certain moments are more characteristic of the retreat (in daily life). For example, the moment when, after several weeks of the Exercises, a real attitude of 'indifference' shows that the retreatant is ready to enter into the mystery of mercy and salvation. . . . A distance develops between being and action, between the fundamental desire of his heart and the manifold desires which swarm around, to the point of paralysing him; between the vital attachment he feels for people and the invitation to break with all love that is possessive. Some sort of order begins to emerge among his feelings; superficial movements of sensitivity die down and give way to movements that the person sees to have another origin . . . that, at the very heart of everyday living, a power is leading the person's consciousness, making him pass from selfishness to the gift of self . . . in the sense, so to speak, that his daily life is 'ruled' by Another. . . . Is this what we call 'indifference'? I think so. In the Exercises in daily life, this is a threshold, the very threshold which marks the beginning of the experience of the Exercises.⁴

Entering the First Week

A director knows that he cannot contrive or bring about these insights or dispositions. And since he cannot, he should not try. All the director can do is to propose or to urge or to suggest those dispositions that open us to receiving the gifts of the Spirit; to be alert to signs of such dispositions that may as yet be obscure to the exercitant himself, to clarify them, it may be to suggest that he return to them in prayer and to point the way forward. He prays for him. He tries to discern and to help the exercitant to discern what is happening. He may certainly encourage him to be grateful for what he has been given and encourage him to be confident that it is a favourable disposition for the rest of the Exercises.

The more the exercitant desires to have the dispositions of Annotation 5 and the more he has entered into interior silence and has really begun to pray, the more I should expect him to begin to be moved towards a sense of his sinfulness. The other side of the Principle and Foundation is a sense that I am not free, that I cling to many things whether they are God's will for me or not, that my capacity to love is imprisoned in a thousand ways. Before moving into the meditations of the First Week, I should be waiting for some sign that the exercitant was being moved in that direction. If the Exercises seem to be less effective than we might hope, it may be that exercitants are moved prematurely into the First Week, that the Spirit has not been given time to prepare them or to dispose them.

Of course, if in praying the Foundation an exercitant were clearly and markedly moved in an unexpectedly different direction, or moved to remain in consolation in an attitude of adoration or worship or surrender to the goodness of God, then a good director would not interfere (Annotation 15).

Father William A. Barry in a well-known article says:

We have taken a stance of *not* leading retreatants through the Exercises. . . . We try . . . to help the retreatant to pray spontaneously, to enjoy this kind of prayer, and to find his own way and content. . . . The stance we take means that we do not introduce the 'first week' ideas after a certain period of time. Rather we let the dynamic of prayer and of God's dealing with the person to do the 'introducing'. What does this mean? We have found that many of our retreatants are led into what might be called a 'first week experience' once they get deep enough into the kind of prayer described . . . the retreatant begins to experience a sense of alienation, of impotence, of desolation. . . . He feels himself unworthy of God.⁵

Ideally it is the exercitant who discerns and decides when he should move into the First Week exercises, as into any further stage of the Exercises. It is for this reason among many that the Exercises in daily life are beginning to look like a privileged way, since there is plenty of time in which to allow an insight or a grace to go deeper before moving ahead. Father Giuliani is insistent that it is the exercitant who must decide when it is time to go forward.⁶

The director's own understanding

Among the things I keep in mind in presenting the First Week are:

- (a) The grace of the First Week is a grace of profound consolation.
- (b) St Ignatius's way of putting it is given in Annotation 4: 'contrition, sorrow and tears for sin'.

(c) What is customarily called the *id quod volo*, asking for what I desire, focusing on a particular grace to be begged for and desired in prayer and throughout the day, is essential to the dynamic of the Exercises.

(d) The terms 'shame and confusion' can easily be misunderstood by a contemporary exercitant. I see no such problem with 'a growing and intense sorrow'.

(e) It is better that the exercitant come to his own expression of the grace to be desired. Time is not wasted if he can come truthfully to answer the question 'What do I really want?'

(f) The terms in which St Ignatius proposes the Colloquy indicate the kind of grace he hopes will be given: to be deeply moved *de arriba* to wonder and gratitude before the mercy and goodness of God.

(g) The director will expect the path to the consolation of the First Week to be an experience of desolation.

(h) He will not want, through mistaken kindness or because of his own discomfort, to try to move the exercitant prematurely away from it.

(i) Desolation is a turning in on oneself, a being imprisoned in isolation from others, from the world, from oneself, from God. The director will be alert to sense if such a state is in danger of taking hold, of becoming a settled and barren self-preoccupation. Then he will try gently to shift the exercitant's focus from self to Christ.

(j) 'Only God speaks well of God'. Only God speaks well of sin. Only God can reveal my sin to me. Apart from the light and presence of God my unworthy behaviour may remain only a sense of pervading guilt at breaking laws, of acting unethically, of betraying

my self-respect and undermining my self-esteem. (We need a new word to help us to distinguish between guilt and guilt). For many, nowadays, much prayer in the presence of God's goodness may be needed to liberate an exercitant from such substitutes for a realization of what his sinfulness really is. The grace of the First Week is a liberation from *ersatz* guilt.

(k) The grace of the First Week is a new knowledge of God. I do not see how we can come to know God without a deep sense of our sinfulness and our absolute need for salvation. The closer a soul is drawn to God the more it will experience layer beyond layer of self, of the false self. In the continuing experience of finding God in all things, the further discovery of unexpected sinfulness can become, in the light of the First Week grace, a joyful means of entering into a deeper knowledge of God.

(l) The grace of the First Week leads to a realistic facing up to the reality of oneself. It undermines our sinful need of self-justification. It places us naked and unprotected before the goodness and the love of God.

The director will want to have a clear grasp of his own understanding of the dynamic of the Exercises. The more he has this, the more he will be free to sit easily to the letter of the Exercises. And the more he will be free to use the text unaccommodated, if that is what will help the exercitant more. The dynamic of the First Week is understood by grasping the movement from the *id quod volo* to the colloquy. The points in between in the text are of secondary importance. The parts of the First Week that I should tend to look on as essential are: (a) the second preludes; (b) the colloquy before Christ on the Cross; (c) the triple colloquy; (d) the additions that recommend a sober environment and interior climate, a calm urgency of desire; (e) the repetitions; (f) Exx 46: the prayer before every hour of prayer for the grace of the Principle and Foundation.

The first exercise

Should one use the three points or not? I do not know. A director has to ask himself whether these points will help or hinder this exercitant, whether they will help him to find the fruit of 'shame and confusion' and open him to an intimate and personal speaking with Christ on the Cross. Scripture passages will be more helpful to some. The Ignatian principle should always prevail: have a contemplative grasp of the end and be flexible in your use of the means. The points are means.

There are some parts of the text that it may be helpful to keep in mind. St Ignatius does not at first ask the exercitant to look at his own sin or sins. He first presents him with the pervading contagion of sin in the world. The exercitant meditates first on sin 'out there' as it were. It would not be unignatian to have the exercitant recall to his memory and imagination the effects of sin in the world as he has experienced and observed them. This would, besides, be in keeping with the dynamic of the First Week, which looks towards the contemplation of the Incarnation. In these days one would want the exercitant to be livingly aware of evil in his contemporary world, lest his sense of sin be individualistic, or lest the angels and Adam and Eve be too detached from the reality of his experience. There is a sufficient hint of this in 'and the great corruption which came upon the human race' (Exx 51). We are more and more likely to meet with two types of exercitant: those who, for whatever reason, are anaesthetized to the sin in human structures; and those who are deeply moved by injustice but imperfectly aware of it as sin. Of course those exercitants who are deeply moved by injustice and feel their powerlessness are already disposed for the prayer of the First Week.

However, for all that, St Ignatius does move towards consideration of one's own sins. This he does by a series of comparisons: 'When I compare the one sin . . . with the many sins I have committed . . . for one sin, and the number of times I have deserved . . . because of my numerous sins'. His stress here is on frequency, as much as to say that the multitude and frequency of my sins, whether venial or mortal, ought to be a painful reminder of my heedlessness and ingratitude. We cannot grasp our solidarity in grace if we do not see our solidarity in sin. It is our antidote to the professional hazard of phariseism.

He wants to help the exercitant to begin to realize the intrinsic 'gravity and malice of sin against our Creator and Lord'. Many exercitants may need much time to seek to be given a sense of this, given that our contemporary climate gives us many reasons for justifying ourselves in our own eyes (and hopefully in God's eyes) and for diluting our responsibility. It is a mode of thinking that can coexist with a need to cling to a sense of one's worthlessness. And, note, the colloquy with Christ on the Cross is indispensable.

Should one use the first prelude, 'a composition, seeing the place'? Or how might one use it? How might one suggest it be used? For all our fastidiousness about possible dualism or about a dis-

ordered sense of evil in the world, it seems to me that the images St Ignatius uses are scriptural. It may help some exercitants greatly to stay with, to steep themselves in, some of the scriptural images of imprisonment, of unfreedom, of constriction, of exile, of alienation, of the absence of light, of blindness, of falsity and untruth, of the felt absence of God, of hopelessness, of the weight of sin and its oppression. 'And a great famine arose . . . and he began to be in want. . . . And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything'.

The second Exercise

(a) The first prelude. It may be helpful to gloss St Thomas to the effect that God is offended by our sins only in so far as they hurt ourselves and each other. *Non enim Deus a nobis offenditur, nisi ex eo quod contra nostrum bonum agimus.*⁷

(b) The second prelude. Since the grace asked for here is foundational to the gospel ('Repent and believe . . .'), there is no need to apologize for or to transpose the words here into another idiom. However, it is good not to present the second preludes too rigidly or absolutely. It may help some exercitants more to suggest that they beg for a sense of God's eagerness to forgive, or for a sense of their need of the compassion of Christ. There are some who may need to spend much time in praying the parable of the two sons (Lk 15) before making the second exercise.

(c) The 'points'. The *first: el proceso de los pecados*; the modern exercitant, now possibly becoming rapidly obsolete, will need to be told that this is not an examination of conscience in preparation for a general confession. One of the earliest Directories stresses this: 'To arouse sorrow, it does not help so much to go into details, but rather to picture the overall view of their gravity'.⁸ At the same time St Ignatius would not be content with vagueness but would want us to be concrete and specific. The *third* and *fourth*: they are not for those who would depress themselves into a state of disordered self-abasement. The director needs to be alert to shift the focus from a barren self-preoccupation. Should we allow our contemporary nervousness at words like 'the corruption and loathsomeness of my body' to force us to be silent about these points? Clearly if such imagery will be an obstacle rather than a help to being open to the grace of 'growing and intense sorrow', or will prevent the exercitant from entering into a colloquy 'extolling the mercy of God our Lord . . . giving thanks to him that up to this very moment he has granted

me life', then it should not be suggested. But perhaps many exercitants are tougher than we think. It seems to me that a sense of sin is likely to remain superficial and, in these times too privatized, if we are too squeamish to accept that as a sinner I am a 'source of corruption and contagion'. The *fourth* point is an invitation to contemplate God, to turn the focus firmly to him, his wisdom, his power, his justice and his goodness. Together with the fifth point it is a repetition of the Principle and Foundation. The point of affective insight that St Ignatius seems to hope for here is something like: 'It could have been otherwise. It ought in all justice to have been otherwise. If the roots of the capital sins in me have not taken control, that is not due to me but to Christ. I am loved. I am alive. And I am free'. The director knows that he is impotent to accomplish that. It is not his work.

The third and fourth exercises

This is not the place to expand upon the crucial importance of 'repetition' in the Exercises. Whether one presents the ignatian points or equivalent passages from scripture for meditation is of secondary importance. The petitions of the *triple colloquy* are indispensable. The words may need some exegesis. There should be a sense of calm urgency about the asking.

In the dynamic of the Exercises St Ignatius is looking ahead towards the degree of freedom of the Spirit that is a prerequisite for finding God's will. Any act of discernment requires that I be aware of my particular disorder, my ill-ordered affectivity, my bias (Exx 21: *sin determinarse por afección alguna que desordenada sea*) so that I may constantly take it into account in practical judgment and decision.

What is being sought here is an interior knowledge (*para que sienta interno conocimiento*). Where he introduces 'the mediators' it is an indication that what we are desiring is not something acquired by willing and thinking, or rather by simply willing and thinking, but a knowledge which is given and is the work of the Spirit. What is being asked for is a sense at a deep level of the particular sinfulness that is at the root of my sins. St Ignatius would not be content with a vague and generalized sense of sinfulness, but would want us to be particular and concrete. But the grace is sought and desired in the confidence expressed by Julian of Norwich:

He, in his courtesy, limits the amount we see, for it is so vile and horrible that we could not bear to see it as it is. In his mercy our

Lord shows us our sin and our weakness by the kindly light of himself.

Without this repeated prayer it is hard to see how we can give any genuine or effective meaning to St Ignatius's doctrine of self-abnegation.

The conjunction of 'the disorder of my actions' and 'a knowledge of the world' may find some affinity with a contemporary theology of sin that sees man as structuring his world by his choices and being made by the world he structures.

The fifth exercise

If an exercitant has been experiencing great dryness or desolation, I should not feel compelled to suggest this exercise. If he has experienced something of the consolation of compunction, I should certainly ask him to pray the colloquy of thanksgiving 'that up to this very moment he has always shown himself so loving and merciful to me'. A director might legitimately add 'and that he will continue always to save me by his mercy'. If he has had experience of real desolation and is willing to recall the taste of it, he will know what the possibility of separating himself from God is like. That, together with the authority of the Lord's words, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? . . . I have never known you' (Mt 7,21-23) and 'I do not know where you come from' (Lk 13,25-27), together with the parable of the judgment in Matthew 25, may be sufficient as a preparation for the colloquy.

If we are too nervous about presenting this fifth exercise, it is no harm to look at St Ignatius's robust theology in the final statement of the Exercises (Exx 370).

All the colloquies of the First Week open to a realization of mercy and love and goodness, to a sense of the gift of life, to the opportunity that remains to serve God, to release, relief and freedom, to gratitude and praise.

The question is whether in the context of the first exercise or here, with St Ignatius's fiery imagery, I should refuse to be drawn into theological argumentation.

All five exercises on one day

The text nowhere says that the massive First Week programme is to be repeated day after day. The second of the autograph Directories is clear: 'Father does not think that the exercises of the First Week

should be given him all together. He never did so, but gave them one at a time, until all five were given.⁹ If an exercitant is subjected to an introduction to all five exercises at one sitting, the result for most exercitants would be clutter. Clutter, a sense of being oppressed with too much matter, is to be avoided at all costs. Rather than that it is better to simplify and to omit.

One assumes that the exercitant will spend some days at least on the First Week. Of course, if the grace is given without the apparatus of preludes and points, then there is no point in giving them; if the end is given, the means become unnecessary.

When the time has come to move forward from the Principle and Foundation, I should give the first exercise or its scriptural equivalent. If an exercitant has entered into prayer, that is quite enough material for one day's prayer. The second exercise can be given on the following day. I would want the exercitant to begin to make the repetitions and to pray the triple colloquy as soon as possible. Only then would I perhaps suggest spending a day going through the five, or four exercises in succession. By that time they will tend, in any case, to be repetitions. But I see no especial virtue in doing all five exercises on one day in the order given. The contemplative shape of each day in the Second Week is quite another matter.

The First Week — how long?

Another question to which there is no simple answer is, 'How long should the First Week last?' The director will be watching for a marked experience of the First Week consolation. As soon as that is present he will know that it is possible to move forward.

Why, then, should he delay at all? For two reasons: (a) So long as he is experiencing consolation, he is finding God and God is enlightening and strengthening him. 'Where I find what I desire, there I will rest, without anxiety to go forward until I am satisfied' (Exx 76). (b) To remain a few days longer praying the prayer of the First Week will confirm and deepen the grace. I should expect, however, that with many exercitants the strong experience of consolations will begin to fade. The beginning of a certain distaste or dryness or weariness would be a good sign that it is time to move on.

Naturally the somewhat artificial arrangement of an imminent repose day should not determine how long the exercitant remains in any of the weeks. But supposing that the exercitant, as far as one can judge, is not entering into the experience of the First Week and is not experiencing consolation, should one keep him there day after day

for nine or ten or eleven days or more, until he is moved to sorrow and tears? I take it that most experienced directors would say 'no'. It may be that he has been entering sincerely into the prayer of the First Week and is, one may confidently hope, being given the grace he needs at the moment and may be given a deep experience of conversion and contrition during the Third Week. Or this may be the time to judge that the exercitant should not make the Exercises. Perhaps he would be more helped by spending the remainder of the month simply praying and being helped by daily spiritual direction.

St Ignatius makes it clear that he would suspend the Exercises sometimes at the end of the First Week. The reason he gives is what he calls 'obstinacy'.

For all those who are not yet resigned into the hands of God our Lord so that he can act on them . . . but who enter with certain plans and intentions, it is very fitting that all diligence be used in order that they be freed from such an attitude; because it is a moth that infests . . . and prevents them knowing the truth.

He who is known to be very obstinate in this way should not be encouraged to make the Exercises until he has become more mature. Nevertheless, after one who is thus obstinate has entered upon the exercises, it is necessary to try to help him. . . . If he has remained very obstinate for the First Week, it seems to me that I would not go forward with him.¹⁰

In an eight-day retreat

If someone has already made the full Exercises, then an eight-day retreat may often take the form of repetitions of some exercises, if that is what the exercitant wants or needs. If he is unfamiliar with the Exercises, then I see no value in trying to concertina the full Exercises into eight days. A director with a sense of the dynamic of the Exercises will be moved by that and will be able to sit more lightly to the letter of the text. There is a different dynamic in eight days, but I should find it hard to try to articulate that.

I believe that there is no one who cannot profit from prayer that seeks greater purification and conversion. We all continue to be sinners. Many priests and religious need the prayer of contrition and first conversion. The whole of an eight-day retreat may often be equivalently the First Week of the Exercises. That does not mean that a director says so. Nor does it mean that he does not suggest matter from the gospel accounts of the infancy and ministry of Jesus, of the passion and resurrection. It is obvious that what specifies the

four weeks is not the points or the matter for meditation, but the grace needed and sought.

It is better in any retreat that the exercitant himself should discern and express the grace he needs. But a retreat would not be ignatian in the absence of that clarifying and focusing of desire.

If a person asks to make the Exercises and knows what he is asking, then in a thirty-day retreat I feel an obligation to stay as close to the dynamism of the Exercises, and even to the text, as the leading of the Spirit allows. In the absence of any marked leading in a different direction I tend to trust St Ignatius's spiritual genius. But in a shorter form of 'some exercises' I tend to try to follow where the exercitant seems to be led rather than force him to jump through a series of jesuit hoops.

NOTES

¹ See Louis Beirnaert: *Awareness of God and of sin in the Spiritual Exercises*.

² *MHSJ* 76, doc 4, p 420.

³ *MHSJ* 76, doc 10, p 148.

⁴ In *Progressio*, Supplement nos 18-19, November 1981, pp 36, 14.

⁵ See 'The experience of the First and Second Weeks of the Spiritual Exercises', in *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises*, ed. David Fleming (St Louis, 1981), pp 96ff.

⁶ Guilian, *op. cit.*, especially chapters II and VIII.

⁷ Aquinas, St Thomas: *Contra Gentiles*, III, c. 122.

⁸ *MHSJ* 76, doc 3, p 86.

⁹ *MHSJ* 76, doc 2, p 80.

¹⁰ *MHSJ* 76, doc 4, pp 416, 418.