

PRESENTING THE KEY MEDITATIONS

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I AM A LAY WOMAN! I am a spiritual director! My retreat centre is wherever my directees are. They are male and female; young and old; physically limited and physically well. Their experiences of life have touched across every boundary possible, ethnic, economic, denominational and vocational. This diversity in life experiences influences the perception of God held by each individual retreatant. Yet, in spite of the diversity, the common thread of all the directees lies in the fact that somewhere in their life there has been a call to 'more'. The Nineteenth Annotation provides the vehicle by which they are able to integrate this call for 'more' into their daily existence.

In writing this article, I am aware that many readers approach this subject from their unique religious vocational orientation. To these readers, the adaptations of the meditations may seem simplistic and trivial, but I must explain that I am concerned with the 'secular' life. The lives, issues, and authenticity of the lay person in today's society are not readily addressed by a spirituality that does not integrate and insert these retreatants more deeply into their own world.

Keeping in mind this uniqueness of the secular life and need for 'more', there are two options in approaching the key meditations. The first is to reiterate all the theory which has been so dynamically postulated by so many authorities. The second option is to direct the reflection to one's daily life and experiences, thereby allowing the Nineteenth Annotation to enter into and bring forth conversion based on the real world. Thus I have chosen to focus on a practical approach to the key meditations.

Principle and Foundation

In the world in which we live, there is one consistency — that of the 'mixed message'. The mixed message tells us that: 'you will not be loved unless you are beautiful, and you won't be beautiful unless you are rich; you won't be rich if you care about people and issues;

issues and people mean you won't be popular, etc.' An endless cycle of words and images subtly affect our perception of love, loving and loveableness.

The psychology of life makes us all the more aware of how life's hurts and pains destroy our self image. As a result somewhere in the secret recesses of every heart, we humans live in the fear that we are not loved by God, because we find so little within ourselves which we consider loveable. Thus in the first paragraph of the Principle and Foundation there is a call to look at a God who perhaps has never before been named by the retreatants. The images of God held by the retreatants need to be explored and reflected upon. Some of the images need to be released, others expanded.

Many people carry with them a God who is all-powerful and who is just waiting for them to make a mistake so that he can condemn them. Other people speak of God as father/mother and attach to their God the limitations in loving which they experienced from their parents. These people very much need to spend time with a God who asks them 'Who do you say that I am?' and who lovingly tells them 'You are mine'. With scripture and prayer, the focus can be slowly changed to a God of love, who is limitless in his concern about his people. It is from this experience of meeting a God who loves them that the retreatants can start to look on themselves as reflections of a loving God.

In the second part of the Principle and Foundation the retreatants consider their own creation. They explore the multitude of gifts God has placed in their hands and in their hearts. Too often the retreatants experience blockage around these gifts and are unable to focus on their own 'wonder-full-ness'. In their stance before others, themselves and God, it is easier to name what they are not rather than what they are.

There are moments within this meditation time when the retreatants need to be asked what are the things that they most like to do — or in what areas of their life do they experience the most freedom. By reflecting upon the ordinary gifts of laughter, curiosity, dance, reading, talking, and studying, they begin to manifest a uniqueness, a wholeness which reflects some of the qualities of God who is also their Creator/Father.

The use of the gifts, or even the realization of giftedness, so often has been lost in striving to maintain the morning-to-evening existence of each day. Thus a conscious effort to actualize the prayer through a review of God's working through the day brings about

new insights. Parents become conscious that just as they love their children, care for them, work for them, provide them with material and emotional supports, so too does God, as parent, love them, care for them, work for them, provide for them. Professional people stop to consider the many talents that are needed in order to practise in their field. Physically limited people begin to bring to the surface new and different senses which are operative in them. These are all manifestations of grace. There the meaning of the Principle and Foundation is grasped not so much by an analysis of the words as by the individual's daily life encounter with God.

The final part of this meditation asks the retreatants to evaluate their response level wherein they move into consideration of how they are using their gifts. Questions arise. How do they use their time, or does their time use them? How do they control their possessions, or is the opposite true? They step back and observe themselves within their daily life, evaluating their response to life in terms of the new relationship they have formed. Sometimes a re-ordering takes place; sometimes the need for flexibility becomes recognized. An example might be of a man who is very involved in professional, civic and parish activities. He becomes aware that he is not truly present in his primary capacity as a husband/father to his family. He also sees that his spiritual life is virtually non-existent due to so many extended commitments. He realizes he has to re-order his life.

Quite often questions come forth that need to be concretely and prayerfully addressed as the retreat progresses. Everyday life is seen from a new perspective. Work, trauma or tensions are met, and the Spirit moves more actively into their life-prayer.

Thus the Principle and Foundation meets retreatants where they are. It helps to clarify for them God as a God who loves; it reflects back to them that they are people created and gifted in the image of that God; it calls them to re-evaluate their response in love, by utilizing all that they have and are in light of this new focus.

The Kingdom

As the retreatants move out of the experience of the First Week, the Kingdom meditation stuns them with an invitation to follow the Lord. Since some people have difficulty relating to a medieval image of king and kingdom, this might be the moment to ask the retreatant to recall those who have been prophets in their own personal history. Prophets are those who have been visible channels of grace

by virtue of their response to God. Each person's prophet is different. The prophet's similarity is that he or she has already evoked within the retreatants' hearts a vision beyond themselves. The prophet, or the king, then can lead them into the fulness of the call of Jesus the Universal King. The retreatant's memory activates the meditation images.

Another aspect of this meditation challenges the retreatants to move into the kingdom itself. The retreatants' experience of the present-day kingdom is usually limited to their daily environment. It can be quite beneficial to have them move physically by foot, bus, or car across the boundaries of their life experiences to areas which are not familiar to them. The locations visited must be varied, including sections of the city where housing is dilapidated and people live in the streets; ethnic areas where new immigrants are settling and hoping to become a part of a new heritage; the blue collar section and the middle class neighbourhoods; the commercial and government buildings; the wealthy sections; and finally the rural areas.

This journey into the kingdom invites the retreatants to move beyond their own orbit and to touch subtly the immensities of Christ's kingdom and its need to be his. The retreatants' response is one of awe at being invited by Jesus to participate with him in bringing his life to his world. The challenge and the call are not ethereal but rather very real and mundane.

The Two Standards

The retreatants have actively entered into the public life of Christ. They have become familiar with the movements of the Spirit in their prayer. Thus in the meditation of the Two Standards, they are prepared to meet the values of Satan and those of Jesus. The application of this meditation is sometimes made more clear by the use of an analogy.

One of the most helpful examples that I have used is the experience people have when they are preparing to purchase a home or a car. In making these choices, they test drive the vehicle or inspect the home, looking for its defects. Rattles, cracks, crevices are noted when moving into a long-term commitment. In this same way lay people have to examine closely the quality, durability and service factor of what they will purchase, or become part of.

To the lay person this analogy is equally sensible as it applies in the spiritual realm. They have to make a choice of the 'vehicle' they want or 'the place' they want to be. They need to look at the defects

in themselves, the cracks in their world, and the moments in their prayer which can bring about erosion or destruction to that 'vehicle' or to that 'place' they are called to be.

The relating of this meditation to a practical, sensible focus unleashes a spiritual power. Whatever they become part of has to serve their purpose. If they are familiar with the drawbacks as well as the advantages, they put themselves in a better position to make a wiser decision.

An alternative approach to this meditation is to ask the retreatants to use the temptation in the desert as their scripture base and to take it a step further by rewriting the temptations as if Jesus were being tempted today. Sometimes the director can help to deepen this experience for the retreatants by asking them to take those temptations and to see how they might be rewritten for themselves.

Finally, the retreatants whom I have directed have always been stunned by the effect of spending 'focused' time reviewing media techniques, television commercials and magazine advertisements. This has been a very effective way of seeing in a detached manner the ways of the world in comparison with their experience of a loving Christ.

Three Classes of Men

The Meditation on the Three Classes of Men invites the retreatants to open their hands in order to be fully responsive to Jesus's call in their retreat decision. An example might be of a woman who has realized the problem of hunger in the world. She realizes as she prays that there is hunger in the world. It concerns and upsets her. But the problem is so overwhelming that she does not know what to do, so she continues to pray for the people. As her prayer continues, she sees that hunger is very evident in her own community. She had not been aware of that until now. She has heard rumours that the parish might be opening a soup kitchen. She decides that she will wait to see what the parish does. As her prayer moves, she realizes that hunger issues cannot wait. She must ask what God wants her to do now. She is surprised by a personal invitation from a person in a nearby city asking if she will cook for the poor one day a month and involve others from her area in doing the same. She says 'yes'. She is open both to the problem and to a way in which she can respond within her given talents and abilities.

This meditation takes on more meaning when the retreatants touch an almost 'universal' experience, that of being asked to take on an important project or to chair a special committee. Friends and

colleagues all promise support and assistance, but the moment of truth comes when phone calls are made. The chairperson has a specific need. The first person called reiterates that he or she is supportive, but is involved in so many things that he or she cannot be of assistance right now. Perhaps another time? A second telephone call is made. This person says 'Of course, I love you and will help you. I've already planned to stuff envelopes for you'. This person did not ask how he or she could be a resource. Rather this person evaluated the situation, prejudged the need and responded according to what he/she wanted to do, not what had to be done. Mothers appreciate this example. A child comes in and says 'I'm going to help you with dinner. What can I do?' The child is then asked to set the table. The child responds, 'But I wanted to make dessert'. Dessert is usually already made and the table never gets set. How often people come before God with their programme already totally planned for his creation! The third telephone call is made. This person answers 'I've been waiting for your call — What do you need? I'll do whatever you ask'. The chairperson is grateful and perhaps overwhelmed by the generosity of such a response.

Quite often God is calling retreatants to entirely new vistas of experience. But the retreatants are caught in one or all three places, trying to respond with openness to the many possibilities of an unknown question. What is it that you want me to do? By placing the Three Classes of Men within the context of people's common experience, it is easier for people to understand the serious need of the person in charge, as well as seeing their own way of responding to the different calls made to them. In this experience they see their own reservations, their own agendas and their own blocks to a freely given invitation from God to serve his people.

The Three Degrees of Humility

The Three Degrees of Humility is definitively a call to deepen one's interior movements toward perfection. For the laity in today's society that humility comes to fruition in their lifestyles. The first degree of humility calls them to evaluate how Christ's life is being concretized in their day. It is enough to be a good Catholic/Christian attending weekly liturgy and participating in parish activities? The second degree of humility goes deeper into the way one lives out the gospel message. The retreatants may begin to focus on simplification of their lifestyle as well as reviewing their stewardship in areas such as peace, poverty, and the responsible use of resources. Their

response may even run counter to their socio-cultural *mores*, creating divisions between friends and families. The third degree is the call to the fulness of Christ. This involves not only the deepening of the interior stance but a lived out fulness which is carefully discerned. Humility deals with the 'givens' of their personal life as it is initiated by the call of Christ.

Thus, as a result of this meditation, women begin evaluating the criteria in their purchasing choices; parents realize that their commitment to their children goes beyond P.T.A. issues to more global ones; professional people begin to take positions which involve them in greater service towards society. The Three Degrees of Humility become real because society sees such values differently and calls them disgraceful. Retreatants learn about the desire for poverty, insults and worthlessness for Christ, not only in theory but in practice. Their poverty may become both actual and spiritual as they let go of their possessions, good name and status.

This meditation causes the retreatants to grapple very seriously with their lifestyle and the laws of love, peace, and justice. Humility becomes unified by the retreatants facing their external existence and bringing it into harmony with their interior source. This becomes truth.

The Fourth Week and the Contemplation

Then comes the movement into the paschal mystery: the passion, death and resurrection. It seems that retreatants are always touching a death of some type, experiencing hurts, pains, change. Learning that death is a very real part of life and meeting it are not easy. But death is not a permanent condition. Resurrection comes bringing new life, a meaning to hope and much mystery. As the retreatants meet the risen Jesus of the gospel passages, they are also meeting a mysterious, elusive Jesus now alive in people and events.

A woman burdened with a problem and no one to talk to finds a friend dropping in for coffee. The friend does no more than listen, then leaves. The woman feels relieved and her burden is lighter; Jesus has come to her in this friend listening and having a cup of coffee.

Attentiveness to the moment seems to occur. There is a sense of great awe around ordinary happenings. There is a seeking and finding of Jesus alive now. Sometimes there is fear, as with the apostles, that Jesus will leave them too at the ascension. (My sense of this fear is that the retreat is coming to an end — how will they travel down the untravelled road without the structure of the retreat?).

It is at this point that the Contemplation seems most fitting, as it speaks to them of love. Their experience of love has changed from those first moments of the Principle and Foundation, when God was not a clear image, their gifts were gently held, and the openness to God was more of the intellect than the heart. They now know love as it is freely given to them in creation, relationships, moments, in Jesus, in all things. As they weave the gifts of love together the tapestry of God's love becomes quite brilliant. Their experience of love becomes merged. The clarity they normally have gets lost in the 'love'. Retreatants find the experience of love very difficult to express; often words and experiences are indescribable because they are a unity, a completeness, a fullness and they are a part yet in a total absorption. The fears of the retreat ending have dissolved in this process and they are able to move gracefully into the Fifth Week.

Symbols

The retreatants often express a need to keep the retreat experience alive. They may during the Fourth Week prayer look for or create a sign or a symbol of the retreat experience. This symbol may reflect a particular grace received or a decision made. The symbol is unique to their experience. Upon recalling the symbol, they are enabled to revisit their graced moments and once again draw from them.

Conclusion

The Nineteenth Annotation is a most powerful instrument of grace. The magnificence of it is based on its adaptability. Each person directing the Nineteenth Annotation has to have a deep grasp of the interior flow, but also those directing the Exercises need to be constantly moving, growing, learning from the contemporary world in which they live.

It is precisely from the exposure to the lives of the working person, the student, the doctor, the deacon, the wife/mother that the adaptability takes shape. And as we direct we must be flexible enough and creative enough to let the retreat in daily life mesh with life; Spirit with actuality. We cannot force actuality to conform with our concept of grace.

It seems reasonable then to say that directors must constantly integrate themselves into society, so that they may fully tap all the resources available to make the Exercises understandable or translatable to these times. We need to feel free enough to speak of the spiritual in terms of the real, so that people may understand (intellect) and feel (heart) their own spirituality.