

# FAITH HISTORY

By JOAN BROWN

**I**N RECENT years it has become quite common for retreat directors to ask retreatants to spend some preparatory time reflecting on their life history from the point of view of faith, in order to increase their awareness of how God has been acting in their own personal journey. This is certainly true of a number of retreat houses which specialize in the full thirty day Spiritual Exercises and it has also proved of great use in preparing people for the 'Exercises in daily life'. When I was asked to describe, for this *Supplement*, how I approached the question I was tempted to write: please see *Choosing life* by John English for 'faith history'.<sup>1</sup> I cannot add anything to his adequate text, except to say that I agree with it! How valuable an experience and what an excellent starting point is a faith autobiography for anyone desiring a prolonged prayer experience. It is also invaluable for the person preparing to make the 'Spiritual Exercises in daily life'.

As I mention in my other article on my experience of directing the Exercises in daily life, I normally begin the preparatory stage of the experience by asking people to spend ten or fifteen minutes daily in prayer with passages from scripture to help them to pray their own faith history. Apart from anything else it helps me to know the exercitant better before launching into the Exercises proper. From the retreatants' point of view the faith history helps to dispose them for the Exercises by helping them to get in touch with their basic desires, by gradually unifying prayer and life, and by becoming more aware of themselves and their relationships with God and others. I stress the importance of keeping a journal during this time, recording any feelings which may emerge. This, of course, relates closely to the need to give retreatants general guidelines on how to make a review of prayer as a preparation for the Exercises proper. It is important to introduce the retreatant to the sense that it is feelings and reactions which are the important things in reflecting on faith history or prayer in general; that is, the feelings and reactions which occurred *during* the prayer rather than the ideas or rationalizations which occur to me when I reflect later.

It is vital that the retreatant does not lose sight of the fact that the

'remembering' is done within a *faith context*. Otherwise it could be reduced to a therapeutic or psychological activity. Remembering one's life *with God*, aware of his presence in every event and detail of life up to the present moment, is the grace desired. Because the desire is to *remember* my life with God, the very activity of remembering should be done in a prayer context. This means beginning in the way I would normally do in a period of prayer — not least with an explicit centring of self in the presence of God, by asking God for the grace which I seek. I then go *with him* into my memories rather than alone.

The retreatant, aware that he or she is in the presence of God, contemplates the events of his or her personal history, seeking how the Trinity has been involved in life. How the Lord has called and how he or she has responded to the callings. Retreatants identify what images they have of God and self and how these images influence the way in which they respond to God. We all have images and images are necessary, but none of them is perfect nor anywhere near complete. The preparation period, of course, is not the time to solve every problem people have before they come to the Exercises! But at least the realization of what images they work with can help them to distinguish those which are creative and those which are destructive.

In *Orientalism*, vol 1, John Veltri has a very helpful section called 'remembering God's presence in my life history' which is a good guide for a retreatant.<sup>2</sup> Veltri suggests four stages to the exercise. First, I remember the exterior events of my life and my reactions to them, and Veltri suggests various headings in order to help people to trigger their memory. And as I remember these events, 'I try to notice all the gifts that I have received'. Secondly, I try to notice, with God's help, *how* God has been present in my life. Sometimes experiences of God's presence (or absence) are very definite, at other times more subtle. Thirdly, Veltri invites me to notice how God has been *constantly* present — that is, not merely in separated moments, but also continuously. Finally, I am invited to become aware of the way in which God touches my unique personality in a unique way; speaking to me through my personality, gifts and character. To underline that this is a *prayer* exercise Veltri emphasizes that throughout I shall be expressing my feelings to God.

Exercises 18 and 19 in *Sādhana: a way to God* by Anthony de Mello<sup>3</sup> are also very beneficial and adopt a less structured approach than Veltri. They are entitled, respectively, 'The joyful mysteries of your

life' and 'The sorrowful mysteries'. In the first, de Mello suggests that I return to a scene in which I felt deeply loved, or deep joy. He suggests that I use 'fantasy' to recreate the scene once again. Then I should 'savour' the experience. Finally, I can seek and find the presence of God in the scene. The 'sorrowful mysteries' proceed in much the same way, but of course in moments of pain or grief or bitterness it is much more difficult to sense the presence of God. De Mello suggests that one method of overcoming this is to imagine that God is *in* the scene. What is he doing? I am invited to speak to him and to listen to him.

It is worth emphasizing that I would not expect a person preparing for the Exercises to enter into his or her faith history at great depth at this stage, to heal every memory, remove all guilt, but to be aware of what is present in his or her life and to be able to identify needs.

It is worth quoting the remarks of one retreatant at some length at this point:

Before I started the Nineteenth Annotation, I spent a week writing my faith history. I spent quite a lot of time on it, and tried to be perfectly honest in it. Frankly, when I had finished, I found it a very depressing document — full of doubts, mistrust and guilt. However, my director was able to be much more optimistic about it when I discussed it with her. She was also able to see the areas where my greatest weaknesses lay, which must have influenced the way she directed. More to the point, I was able to realize my most vulnerable areas and this helped me while I was doing the Exercises. I feel the faith history helped my director and me to gear my carrying out of the Exercises to my particular needs.

Beginning with the faith history grounds the Exercises in the personal life of the exercitant. It builds the foundations or sketches out the ground plan for something which recurs again and again within the process of the Exercises proper. In this preparation the retreatant can begin to see the pattern of his or her life as a whole — both the graces received and the refusals. To have this total picture at the very start prevents the retreatant from seeing one aspect of life in isolation from the others. Thus, when the time comes to consider sin, it becomes a process of focusing on a part of the whole, already established, in order to go deeper, rather than an experience of becoming bogged down in sinfulness without a wider context. This same process of focusing on one aspect of life in order to go deeper applies equally to other stages of the Exercises.

Without providing a comprehensive list of references from the Exercises it is possible to illustrate my point with some examples from the First Week. At the end of the first exercise (Exx 53) we are invited to place ourselves at the foot of the cross and to ask: 'What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?' In the second exercise the basic material for reflection is 'the *record* of my sins' (Exx 56) and this will already have been touched upon in the context of my life as a whole through the faith history. The very structure of this first point of the exercise closely follows the pattern suggested in the faith history: a review of life. This 'record of my sins' ought to be seen in a wider context. Thus, the fifth point (Exx 60) is a 'cry of wonder . . . as I pass in review all creatures'. My review of sins is to find its balance in a review of the goodness of God in my life. In the third exercise, which is a repetition of the previous two (Exx 62-63), the colloquies suggest that the retreatant should ask for the grace of a deep knowledge of his or her sins, an understanding of the disorder of personal actions and a knowledge of the world. Put in terms of faith history, it is vital to have a sense of how I have been trapped and drawn into sin, and to have an abhorrence of all that prevents the Trinity from moving into my humanity. Thus, the exercitant is really praying for a deepening of the kind of self-knowledge, in this case in a context of sinfulness, to which he or she has already been introduced in the faith history.

In the exercises of the succeeding Weeks the exercitant is constantly requested to reflect upon self: 'Then I will reflect on myself . . .' 'I will reflect upon what I see . . . hear . . . touch . . . taste . . .' until finally all the reflections and rememberings are drawn together in the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love. Here the exercitant ponders with great affection how much God our Lord does for him or her, how much he gives and how much more the Lord desires to give. The retreatant then reflects upon self and in response to God's sharing of his total being is moved to share his or her total personhood with God: 'Take Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. . . .' The Exercises end with 'Then I will reflect on myself as has been said'. Here the faith history, begun in the stages preparatory to the Exercises, has flowered. May it then go on to bear fruit.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> English, John: *Choosing life* (New York, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Veltri, John: *Orientations*, vol 1 (Guelph, Ontario, 1979), pp 71-73.

<sup>3</sup> de Mello, Anthony: *Sādhana: a way to God* (Gujarat/St Louis, 1979), pp 65-69.