

THE EXPERIENCE OF DIRECTING

By JOAN BROWN

IN THE SPRING of 1976 I went to St Beuno's jesuit retreat centre in North Wales to make the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. At that time I knew very little about the Exercises and what little knowledge I had was an impression of something severe and bleak. But that springtime, after experiencing the Exercises in the beautiful Vale of Clwyd, I grew to love them.

I left St Beuno's filled with the desire to give the Exercises. I longed to enable others to experience them and to benefit from them as I had. But as my work lay in a parish and not in a retreat house there did not seem to be much hope of my fulfilling my desire. It was Fr Ian Tomlinson (see other articles in this issue) who gave me my opportunity by suggesting that I give the Exercises according to Annotation 19 in the parish where I was working.

How do I begin? How do I approach people? Whom do I approach? How are the Exercises directed in daily life? These were only a few of the questions whirling round in my head. In vain I looked for books, courses, lectures, only to realize that very few people were involved in giving the Exercises in daily life in 1979. Fr Ian gave me some help with the actual text of the Exercises, then armed with a brand new copy of Puhl, my own thirty day retreat house experience, a bible and a big act of faith, I began giving the Exercises in the midst of daily life in the only way I knew, finding my way little by little. Occasionally I made a telephone call to Fr Ian or met him on King's Cross station, London, when I needed advice or clarification of some point in the Exercises.

My first exercitants came from a scripture group with whom I had been meeting weekly for about a year. After hearing me describe the Exercises some of the group expressed a desire to make them. All were people fairly well known to me who wanted to deepen their spiritual lives and who already had some experience of prayer and the scriptures.

Making the Exercises in daily life takes time, in fact months, and therefore it is important for the director to know would-be

exercitants fairly well before agreeing to direct them, if only for the most basic reason of knowing whether you can relate to each other.

Although I know my people fairly well I do not rush them straight into the Exercises, but spend a considerable amount of time in preparation. The length of time spent in preparation varies from person to person according to their needs. I cannot emphasize enough the benefits to be gained from giving sufficient time to the preparation. By this I do not mean solving every problem people have before they come to the Exercises, but helping them to dispose themselves for the Exercises; to become aware of themselves and their relationships with God and with others; to see the link between what they believe and the way they live; helping them to find their way around the bible; introducing them to different methods of prayer and to prayer postures; giving guidelines on how to make a review of prayer and how to keep a prayer journal; familiarizing them with some of the vocabulary they will meet in the course of the Exercises; explaining what is meant by ignatian meditation and contemplation, and explaining how to make a colloquy; how to prepare and use points for prayer; how to make an examen. Perhaps I should add here that my experience of giving the Exercises in daily life is mostly with lay people, and perhaps with religious this type of preparation would not be necessary. During the preparatory stage I ask people to spend ten to fifteen minutes daily in prayer. This helps them to establish a prayer routine and does not overburden them. I begin by giving them passages from scripture which guide them in praying their own faith history (see separate article) and help them to get in touch with their basic desires. At first life is one big distraction for the exercitant, but gradually prayer and life unify, life begins to feed prayer and ceases to be a distraction. I introduce the awareness examen point by point until the whole is built up and finally come to the First Principle and Foundation.

Of the various ways I have tried of introducing the First Principle and Foundation, the most meaningful and helpful has been to guide people in the writing of their own Principle and Foundation before giving them the ignatian text. Their writing is guided by the use of certain passages of scripture for prayer. In this way people come to the text of the Principle and Foundation with an understanding heart. Thus the impact is not lost in the struggle to understand the wording. I spend quite a lot of time on it with people because I feel it is the gateway to the Exercises or the point of focus. The exercitant's

response to praying it is the touchstone for his readiness to make the Exercises and particularly his entry into the First Week.

Although at times fearful of my response, people are nevertheless astoundingly honest when expressing their reactions to the text. 'Sister, even though you might say I cannot go on with the Exercises when I tell you how I feel, I must tell you. I know what the Principle and Foundation is saying to me, but I know I do not live that way, I would like to. It is a wonderful way to be, but I do not think I am capable of it'. Such a response is not uncommon. At this stage some decide not to continue the Exercises, whilst others, aware of their weakness and failures, move into the First Week with their hearts set on God.

Before a person enters the First Week I read through the Additional Directions with him and together we try to come to an understanding of the essence and of how it applies in his life. Meaningful equivalents for sections 85 and 86 are not difficult to find for a person making the Exercises in the midst of daily life. It is a long commitment requiring a great deal of self discipline and austerity, and therefore I leave the use of any other form of penance entirely to the discretion and generosity of each person.

The length of time spent in the First Week depends on the individual, where he is in the spiritual life and the amount of time he is able to give daily or weekly to prayer. However, just as there is a time limit in the thirty day structure so I have a time expectation in daily life. Otherwise some of us would never move out of the First Week. The time scale is adapted to daily life, but not the Exercises. If the exercitant is able to give one hour daily to the Exercises then he will make one exercise each day for five days. He may also have time each day for the preparation and written review, if not he will need extra days for this and may adopt a seven day pattern. Another pattern might be: Day 1, Preparation. Day 2, Prayer. Day 3, Review (written). Either pattern would continue until the five First Week exercises had been completed.

I give the exercitants the actual text of the First Week material, but find it is not advisable to go into too much detail before they experience it. Everyone has a different capacity, coming to the Exercises with his or her own life experience. As such I do not want to force or limit. It seems more fruitful to give the exercitants the text rather than overload them with scripture. No matter how well chosen the scripture passages are, some people initially seem unable to reflect upon the 'I' element stressed in the ignatian text, thus

losing sight of the exercise. When preparing the First Week material with the exercitant I stress the importance of the preparatory prayer, the grace desired and the colloquy, emphasizing that the points are the means to the colloquy. If the exercitant returns having found the material baffling and meaningless, then I give a more detailed explanation and perhaps additional scripture for prayer until he becomes more aware of the grace desired. During the First Week I give the exercitant opportunity for extra sessions or for telephone contact. No one has so far availed themselves of this offer. I am usually the one calling for help, ringing either Fr Ian Tomlinson or Fr Gerry Hughes at St Beuno's in my anxiety for the exercitant.

At the end of the First Week we have a few days of repose and I ask the exercitant to pray the Call of the King before they see me again. During the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks, the exercitant follows the pattern established in the First Week, with the two contemplations replacing the meditations. The approach to these weeks is simplified if the exercitant has been introduced to ignatian contemplation during the time of preparation. The length of time spent in these weeks depends on the exercitant and his time-scale, the Exercises remaining unchanged.

With the meditations on the Two Standards and the Three Classes of Men, the instruction (Exx 148) can easily be adapted to the circumstances of the exercitant, and it may even be possible for him to give a whole day to the Exercises at this stage. Again I give the actual text of the Exercises. Before the exercitant enters the second half of the Second Week another repose week is given, and at the end of the Third Week a 'tomb day'. If for any other reason there are breaks or interruptions in the Exercises, I give additional scripture passages appropriate for the stage the exercitant has reached. When the person is free he simply picks up again where he left off. Experience has shown that interruptions do not seem to affect the flow of the Exercises in daily life.

When making and directing the Exercises in the midst of daily living one really needs to be prepared for anything. Life does not stop. It does not even slow down. If tensions and pressures build up, the whole thing becomes self-defeating. Therefore it is necessary to be flexible with time and structure — not with the Exercises.

I usually see the exercitant for an hour each week, sometimes less. At these interviews it is important to be explicit, brief and simple. A person may come after an exacting day's work or full of anxiety about the children. The minds of people making the Exercises in

daily life are not disengaged as are those in a retreat house. Additionally a week's material is shared with the director and the following week's material is prepared. After the session it is straight back into the stress of life. There can be a time lapse of anything up to twenty-four hours before the material is used, during which time anything may have happened and certainly a great deal has. Only a third of what has been said at the interview is likely to be retained. I always give a person time to take notes and give them a photo-copy of the exercise they need or they use Fleming's or Corbishley's version of the Exercises. I always see exercitants individually, even when a married couple are making the Exercises simultaneously.

I never cease to be amazed and filled with wonder at the generosity of those who undertake to make the Exercises in the midst of daily life. The effect of the Exercises undertaken in this way is self-evident. When the retreat takes place in the circumstances of a person's daily life, a deep sensitivity develops, and an awareness that God is intimately involved in his life. As one copes with the ups and downs of life in union with Christ, the Spirit speaks through the circumstances of day-to-day living. Life and prayer become integrated. When one is in constant touch with reality little room is left for self-deception or for forgetting the sort of person one is. The Exercises, although challenging in a retreat house, become a double-edged sword when lived and made simultaneously. A new vision of life is opened up. A new insight into the glorious destiny of all. This is the challenge of life lived in union with Christ our Lord. Whatever the dynamic of the Exercises, time does not diminish it. Isolation does not seem to be necessary for it if the desire is from the heart. It works in the most difficult and unlikely situations, freeing the person to become truly alive in Christ.