

# THE LINK BETWEEN PRAYER AND LIFE

By KATHLEEN O'SULLIVAN

**I** CAME BY CHANCE upon 'the Spiritual Exercises in daily life' (which I am going to abbreviate as EDL). A typing error in the parish bulletin was the immediate cause. I thought that the meeting I was scheduled to hold concerned the laity's personal responsibility for promoting 'religious' vocations, but the bulletin read 'christian' instead of 'religious'. With no script, no blue-print to hand out to people to 'do', I had only two ideas: the importance of 'being' before 'doing'; and the importance of taking personal responsibility for one's own christian living. The camp was soon divided: those who tried to conceal their anger, frustration or confusion and those who shared, though dimly, a vision. The second group was looking to me for some help.

For three weeks I experienced a semi-darkness. Then in the course of giving a retreat to religious sisters in Norfolk it hit me. Annotation 19 was saying something to me about future work with the laity. At the time I was not familiar with the work of the Jesuits, Frs Giuliani, Cusson and Veltri on the Spiritual Exercises in daily life.<sup>1</sup> I simply saw a need in the parish. I decided to respond to that need and to trust the Spirit to lead me in this work.

Very soon I discovered that neither training nor prior team-work experience in the enclosed retreat setting fully prepared me for the new world that opened up through EDL, a world that teemed with the vibrancy and colour of life lived often amid chaos. Coupled with this I found among the laity a longing and a thirst to know a God who was not distant, who made sense of their strivings, who knew them personally, who was for them as they were in their own situation and whom they really wanted to follow. Their recognition and articulation of this only came later. It soon became obvious to me that I had a lot to learn from the laity, if, as God's instrument, I was to help them 'find God in all things'. And from the start that was my goal — that out of prayer and through the ordinary everyday things God could be among his people and they with him. Since then my main experience in directing the EDL has been with

the laity, twenty married people, one single person, three religious; five men, nineteen women, two anglicans all between the mid-thirties and sixty in age. The references to 'laity' that follow apply to this small number. Despite the obvious limitations to such an experience it may have something to contribute at this time.

I propose, therefore, to tell you first about the candidates; then about preparation for EDL; how integration between prayer and life deepens during the experience; how this integration generates its own need for group-support and apostolic service, and finally, something about the guide.

### *Candidates*

As I said, I found among the candidates a thirst for a God who could be close. The actual integration of prayer and life was not at first obvious, but the desire and the searching seemed to indicate great openness. They are ordinary christian people with families, who hold jobs, are active in the parish, have their fair share of personal, marital and financial problems and who hunger for God. Most of them, quite unfamiliar with the bible, had never prayed with scripture and their prayer was mainly vocal. My gradual discovery in a few of an easy familiarity with God as a friend in time of need, who understood, was encouraging. With others a poor self-image tended to keep God, as well as people, at a safe distance from the 'real' person, lest discovery result in rejection. Their desire and longing, greater even than their basic fear of risk, opened them ultimately to God. There were some, however, for whom the pressures of life were too great and they withdrew at the beginning or at a later date.

Many fears beset them. What of their spiritual unworthiness to make the Spiritual Exercises? Would they be able to explain about their fear of God and the guilt of sin that oppressed them? Would they want to talk to a religious sister about their marital situation? Would they have to reveal the jealousies, the anger, the frustrations of their lives and their feeling of being of no account? Would they make the grade or have to admit failure once again? Would this new venture cause division in the family or was it they who were running away from the family? Would they become odd or strange or ostracized by participating in what was obviously going to be a new experience, involving both conversion of heart and consequent changed behaviour? (Rom 12,1). Did they want to be changed? What would that do to their relationship with other people? There

were so many fears, some of which surfaced early on, though many had to wait until trust developed between us.

On the positive side there was an awareness of their spiritual undernourishment which prevented their making sense of life or of a growing interior movement of desire. This proffered opportunity of EDL seemed to bring feelings like these nearer the surface. Prayer-groups, they found, had usually helped, but did not go far enough to penetrate and affect their life-situation. A healthy envy of their 'better-informed' children sparked off a still more healthy indignation with the Church. Even a 'good' sunday homily was sparse diet and some sundays provided a black fast! The way was open to remind them that *they* were the Church, not second-class citizens, and that from now on they must take personal responsibility for the quality of their lives and the quality of their following of Christ. Responses from the candidates are revealing:<sup>2</sup>

I've always known that religion could never stop at church on Sunday. It had to spill over into life. This seems to be what I'm looking for.

If we take responsibility for our christian living and let Christ into our lives at this level, then inevitably that's going to change the way we look at social structures.

I feared division in the family, but now it seems that I have to take my own responsibility for being a better wife, mother and neighbour. That will cost!

### *Preparation period*

I have learnt the hard way the importance of the preparation period. Abundance of time is one of the strengths of EDL and in the beginning I did not appreciate that sufficiently. My conclusion now is that the most fruitful result from EDL depends to a large extent on the wise use of time at this stage, leaving the Spirit free to move at the pace of the individual.

I see this period as (i) a time of discovery, (ii) a time of instruction, (iii) and a time of experience.

#### *(i) A time of discovery*

At this time I want to learn who these people are and what their life-situation is. How do they relate in the home, to others and to God? What are their fears and deepest desires? What potential do

they seem to have to cope with fears and to realize desires? What is moving them to make EDL at this particular time? How, where and for how long do they pray? Do they, in any way, integrate prayer into life? In ordinary life are they reflective? Do they have an outward thrust to life or are they caught up in themselves?

Some discoveries came to light either in the group-meetings when I first presented EDL or at preparation group-meetings. During preparation time I became sharply aware of an essential difference between EDL and the enclosed retreat. EDL is made in the concrete events of daily living. It is in the ordinary, everyday reality of life and not apart from it that Christ is sought and met. That life, as I discovered, can be chaotic, is certainly eventful and often unexpected. Children get sick, jobs are lost, accidents and deaths occur, neighbours need urgent help, emergencies arise and nerves get strained. It is learning to meet and live with Christ in the midst of all this that is so important to the laity. EDL is then a means, particularly well geared to those living in the market-place, to help them become rooted in prayer and rooted in life. And it works! A mother who was over-anxious about her son was on medication. In the course of the retreat she learned to trust God, to trust her son and to do without her medication! A man who became redundant maintained his confidence in God and his commitment to EDL. Remaining cheerful and helpful at home, he applied for numerous jobs and after a long time got one. Both he and his wife agreed that without EDL it would have been a most difficult experience, but they had found Christ in the situation and that made all the difference. I find that it is this learning to live with Christ in the details of one's life that makes EDL such a grace for our turbulent times.

*(ii) A time of instruction*

Here my goal was threefold: to lay a foundation of basic christian truths, to teach candidates how to listen and to respond to God in prayer, and finally, to instruct them specifically about EDL.

In the course of the instruction my own learning continued! I tended to forget that the laity have not had the same opportunities to grow in the knowledge of the faith as we religious have. In the beginning, therefore, I moved too quickly. I failed to realize that some people, through embarrassment, would not ask questions, fearing that they alone were ill-informed. I presented some basic truths as:

All is gift from God;  
Christ is present in each gift, now, in your life  
to convert and save you, in love,  
and to invite you to join with him in saving others.

I know now that I should spend weeks on the first two lines alone. This whole concept of 'gift' and of Christ's presence in the gift is the very basis of the integration of prayer and life, which is the outstanding feature of EDL.

There is also the question of language. I learned that the language I use in instruction sounds in candidates' ears like 'church' or 'religious' language. When I draw on a life-experience to clarify a point I use 'conversational' speech. One man said with relief: 'Now I can understand you'. Since that episode I am very careful about my language!

Teaching people how to pray, how to listen and respond to God, takes time. I have learnt to use an important principle: *move from the familiar to the new*. So in all my instruction I begin with an experience in life and then move to the prayer dimension. I help them to observe and to reflect on how they listen to others in the group, and to extend that to home. They soon discover that they do not listen, so they do not hear, or they listen merely to words but not to what lies under the words. They do not let words, actions, gestures, or silence 'speak' to them. Their own behaviour can speak to them if they can but listen. Gradually they experience how one can listen and hear without words being spoken. It is exciting to try out new listening skills, and to discover the difference it makes when one listens with the heart.

Now when they turn to God in prayer or in life, they are more at ease and more alert to the variety of ways in which he can speak to them. The scripture passages which I find useful at this time are those which speak of God's love, how he carries his people, guarding us 'as the apple of his eye', telling us we are precious and that he loves us. Through scripture the God of love, whom they long to know, comes right into their lives, speaking his love to them. They hear because they want to listen, and it is a great experience for them. The psalms, too, help people to get in touch with emotions and at this stage the guide can pick up data that reveal not only where the person is with God but something, too, about his or her emotional life.

The third part of the instruction specifically prepares them for

EDL. I will refer only to 'reflection' and to 'consciousness examen' as it has come to be called in recent years. Using their own life-experience, without referring to the term 'movement' I find that people are exceptionally good at getting in touch with what is going on within them. They understand well how they feel, deep within them, when a disturbing letter arrives, when anger at betrayal burns, when hopes are dashed, when heaviness or darkness oppresses them, when they are untrue to their convictions. They also know when these feelings 'fit' and are worthy and when they are not of God but of self. Reflection on their life-experience is a good start for reflection on prayer.

With 'consciousness examen' I try to present it as a prayer-experience, a love relationship with God, thus trying to counteract the unhelpful memories of examination of conscience which still linger among these candidates. So we looked at a young married couple deeply in love. Together they review their day, rejoicing in the harmony that prevailed. They are filled with gratitude and love and a desire to help one another when that is needed. When a cloud darkens the horizon they look with regret at it and see how and why it happened. Because of their love they resolve it will not recur. The laity find it easy to make the transference from the young couple to our experience of our relationship, as sinners, to God. One couple, for whom this consciousness examen is an instrument of great growth, sometimes make it together, especially if there has been a misunderstanding.

*(iii) A time of experience*

This is the time when candidates learn how to integrate reflection on prayer with life-experience. They learn how prayer is tested in the market-place of life. They experience how often a prayer that was sweet and easy turns into a resistance and a struggle in the circumstances of life. This is only a beginning but it is enough to show what commitment to EDL will entail. It is at this time that sometimes candidates withdraw.

In this long preparation period perhaps my most important discovery was how many candidates, burdened with an unhelpful theology of sin, carried a burden of guilt from childhood. They felt that sin prevented God from loving them. Yet in them persisted the belief and hope that there must be another way, if only they knew it. One retreatant expressed her fear and longing in a way I found most moving:

I was afraid of God. I was afraid I was lost. . . . How I wanted him! I needed him because I had discovered that without him everything in my life is meaningless, just like dry dust sprinkling through my fingers. How I hoped Sister would accept me. I just looked at her and longed to be helped along that road that I didn't know but just felt was my gateway to God and salvation.

At the end of the EDL experience this same person was able to say:

I love life and I enjoy it better now than ever. I like to laugh a lot and I've discovered in some situations that God has a great sense of humour! That tickles me, especially when I remember how afraid of him I was. I didn't know him at all then. Now I want to share with others how much he loves us sinners.

### *Integration deepens through EDL*

To illustrate how EDL deepens the link between prayer and life I will refer to the Principle and Foundation, the First Week, the renewal of life, (an election is not yet part of my experience in EDL) and the *Contemplatio ad amorem*.

I find the Principle and Foundation very important in the EDL experience. If the candidate has had sufficient time in preparation to discover God's love and presence in all the gifts of her life, then she approaches the opening paragraphs on love and gift with a sense of recognition. Since sin can be seen as abuse of gift, displacing God, retreatants have less fear in looking at the reality of sin. In preparation time 'gift' had become identified with God's presence of love, so now in the power of that love they are freed to look at the reality of their lives. Their experience of 'struggle' in the integration of prayer and life helps them to look at the lack of balance 'before created gifts' and to desire to do something about it.

During the actual retreat I noted how often retreatants were led by the Spirit to return to the Principle and Foundation to pin-point or illuminate an experience. Thus I find the Principle and Foundation becoming in a special way a principle of linking and integrating what could be fragmented or disintegrated in EDL on account of the length of time involved and the intervals between interviews.

### *The First Week*

I had many misgivings on how to present the First Week. I needed to build on the trust and love relationship that was growing between the retreatants and Christ. I wanted to avoid a return to the unhelp-

ful attitude to sin which had focused on self. Finally I decided to present the First Week as a love-experience, centring on the love of Jesus Christ on the cross, on his loving mercy and on gratitude for the gift of mercy. I presented sin as an abuse and a rejection of love through an abuse of the gifts of love. The focus was always to be kept on Christ, but only too easily it tended to slip back, in a negative way, to self. I usually gave an adaptation of the text, without scripture, but always set it in this context of 'love given, love refused'. I think that this emphasis on love opened them up to a new discovery of sinfulness and social sin. Through the eyes of love they began to look at their human relationships and to see that their sin was not private but affected and burdened the lives of others. I think it was here too that conversion began in a desire to love Christ who had loved so well.

With regard to the meditation on hell I took as the text people's own life-experience of alienation, loneliness, rejection, self-love, anger, absence of love, desolation or whatever of that nature had surfaced in the interview. I encouraged them to expand the personal to a general experience, and then to imagine that for them there was no longer a loving, merciful Saviour on the cross.

#### *Comments on the First Week experience*

It was difficult, but I don't want ever to forget it. That was when I learned how he really loves me, a sinner.

Before this I couldn't bear to look at myself as a sinner, because I thought Christ could not love me. Now it is different. He loves me because I'm a sinner and I'm lost without him.

#### *Renewal of life*

It took the extended time and the authentication of prayer in life to help me discover that renewal of life is a stone-upon-stone effect, built by the Spirit. From the first faint stirring until the end this grace evolves, is deepened and expands until it is revealed as the unique 'word of renewal' spoken by the Spirit to each individual heart. It is like a rivulet, which struggles with opposing forces in its path and increases until it issues, at last, as a life-giving stream. When EDL was over I traced with some retreatants this line of renewal from the initial grace, through seemingly disjointed prayer and life experiences, to its culmination in the renewal of way of life.

To discover the area of renewal I find that the reflection period after prayer is of prime importance. To avoid the trap of getting



caught up in a lot of 'ideas' it helps to sit quietly with Christ. It is of little importance that 'good' thoughts get lost! That is a good experience of 'letting go and letting God'. Something will surface. Stay with it until it ripens. It helps in discovering the area of renewal to invite the Spirit to indicate how best to integrate this grace into one's life. There the struggle to authenticate the prayer in life points to the need for and the area of renewal.

To come to a decision about renewal can be difficult. To bring life and prayer into harmony, even for one day, is a struggle, but renewal concerns a way of life, a change that will cost. It seems to me that if the area of relationships with God or people is not good, then I think renewal centres there. If, on the other hand, relationships are reasonably good, renewal seems to move to the area of service.

One example of renewal in the area of relationships was a great struggle. After much side-stepping the issue eventually surfaced: energies and emotions that should be engaged among the living were centred in the dead. Once the decision to act was made there was no turning back, but it was a gradual breaking of ties. Bit by bit and with great heartbreak, precious tokens were destroyed. The honesty and courage required could only have been the gift of the Spirit.

Another example of renewal was in the area of service. Early in EDL a woman decided to take a sabbatical leave from the Samaritan work which meant a lot to her. She hoped that by giving all to EDL she would have more to bring back to her Samaritan work. Her 'word of renewal' was unmistakable. She was to leave herself available to whatever service opened for her. This was confirmed repeatedly by events. Her group of co-retreatants called her as their leader, used her gifts freely, and now she is preparing to become a retreat guide.

### *Contemplatio ad amorem*

Here we reach the birth of the new life that was embryonic in the Principle and Foundation. As in all normal gestation experiences, so in the process of EDL there is pain and strength, joy and sorrow in this gradual, healthy development of new life. There can be no undue hastening without harming. The Spirit works slowly all through the process, integrating God's gift of prayer with the unique gift of life of each person. When the dynamic of EDL is free to establish its rhythm in a heart that is simple, generous and surrendered, then its power becomes apparent. A retreatant had

been praying the *Contemplatio* for a few weeks and integrating it into her life. I still recall the power and the effect of the words she spoke to me at the end:

I walked up the town this morning, the same town, the same streets. I met the same people, did the same things. I saw the same trees and felt the same kind of breeze . . . but it wasn't the same, it was different . . . the very same, but different . . . how very different. . . .

Thus her prayer, her *contemplatio*, integrated into her life, became a 'recognizing the place for the first time'.

*Integration generates a need for a support-group and apostolic service*

Not all retreatants reached this level of surrender during EDL. There were many advances and regressions but the commitment held. For the majority a seed was sown, but its blossoming required something additional, as they themselves discovered. There was unanimous recognition of their need for further instruction and for a support-group, if they were to remain faithful to their renewal and share with others what they had received. This they felt called to do. There was much pain involved in growing into a group and eventually two people discovered, rightly I think, that it did not fit their lives.

There is a firm commitment to a weekly meeting. The increasing depth of the faith-sharing reveals the growing trust among the members of this support-group as well as the deepening relationship with Christ in their daily life. There is a willingness to recognize individual strengths for service and to use them. In my absence this support-group maintained itself and undertook the support of retreatants who had just completed EDL. They had previously assisted me in addressing candidates for EDL and the desire for apostolic service had never left them. Some see that their service at the moment must be in the home; others wish to help people to pray, and a few are ready to be trained as retreat guides. I am convinced that EDL requires this protracted time and support-group if the seed that was sown is to have a chance to come to full flower.

*The guide*

The guide's role in EDL is, as I see it, to help each person, in the whole reality of his being and in his particular life-situation, to listen to and be led by the Spirit of God. We have seen a little of the complexities of life that are involved in EDL. It is well to recognize

that both retreatant and guide come to each interview out of the turmoil and demands of life. Therefore, in addition to the usual training in the Spiritual Exercises and in spiritual direction, a guide is greatly helped, I find, by a training in the skills and in the process of human development. The guide needs too to be in touch with the complexities and processes that are peculiar to herself. She comes to know that, while ensuring availability to retreatants, time and space are very necessary to maintain her own human and spiritual growth. Directing a retreatant in EDL, I find, can be more demanding than an enclosed retreat experience. Travel in all weathers can be involved; supportive colleagues may not be locally situated; the weekly interval between interviews can provide time for the build-up of high tensions; the extension of the time period for EDL can create a 'trapped' feeling; availability for retreatants can make havoc of a definite time-table.

A demanding and a challenging apostolate! For me the most creative and liberating part of EDL has been letting the process challenge my own integration of prayer and life, or challenge what I call 'living the Exercises'. Concretely this means experiencing myself, as a loved sinner, following Christ in my life-situation, on mission always in the power of the Spirit to the glory of the Father. But integration of that into life is another thing!

What I experience in the interviews, however, keeps prodding me. I am abashed at the faith, humility, courage and generosity of the laity. I am filled with wonder at the way the God of compassion provides in profusion for the hungry and the thirsty who have 'no money to buy' (Isai 55,1). Experiencing this living God in the market-place, where it is messy but alive, robust but involved, sinful but yearning, has swept away accumulated cobwebs from my rheumy, protected, religious eyes. The market-place is open, unprotected, dangerous, depending on one's concept of salvation; but I have found from the breath of it the courage to look squarely at and to question my own 'life-giving' prayer, and to reflect on 'life-giving' structures in our ecclesial and religious communal life. I look at the Church. I look at religious life. Undoubtedly two blessed gifts of God. Yet I look in vain for the abundance of life, the christian joy, the selfless love that witness to the presence of Christ in, with and between us. As Church, as a religious, I must take my own share of responsibility. I — along with others perhaps — have allowed myself to be so shut off from the real market-place that the saving pungent smell of humanity does not assail my nostrils, but allows me to

shelter, comfortably, in the antiseptic quality of my life. For me Christ bled, that I might learn how to live and love. Calvary is messy, but messiness redeemed as in the First Week. Through EDL Calvary makes me uncomfortable with my integration of prayer and life in the face of problems of justice, peace and poverty today. The discomfort helps me, however, to be more at one with my friends in the market-place who have given me insight and life. My growing hope is that, with others who have let their lives be questioned by EDL, we may be led to the wisdom of knowing how to change the world through action that is prayer.

I close with a quotation from Gilles Cusson,<sup>3</sup> an extract from the words of a person who made the Exercises in daily life, referring to the guide. It made me pause in order to grapple with the upsurge of fear until I recalled in whose hands we are held in our frailty.

The person who allows another to live the experience of the 'Exercises in daily life' ought to be *naked, faithful and true*. (These are the qualities of the white horse of the Apocalypse. . . .) *Naked*, so that he may *welcome and live with the entire experience* of the other person; *faithful*, to listen to the Spirit, which breathes through both of them, in the spiration and the silence of love . . . *true*, too.

You know, if I had felt you were simply a scholar or an experimenter alone, I would not have *lived* the Exercises in my entire being. It is because I felt you were *with me, with him*, that I could pulsate with the *life* of Jesus.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Guilian, Maurice: *Progressio*, Supplement 18-19 (November, 1981).

Veltri, J.: *Orientations*, vols 1 and 2.

Cusson, Gilles: *Pédagogie de l'expérience spirituelle personnelle* (Bible et exercices spirituels, coll. 'Essais pour notre temps').

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from retreatants are with the required permissions.

<sup>3</sup> Cusson, Gilles: *The Spiritual Exercises in everyday life* (Program to adapt the Spiritual Exercises, Jersey City), p 5.