

# MYSTERIES IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST

By MARIAN COWAN

IN THE SECOND WEEK of the Spiritual Exercises the exercitant moves into a deep contemplation of the life of Jesus from the Incarnation to the beginning of the Passion. It is obvious that any in-depth contemplation of the whole life of Jesus would take an entire adult life-span or more. Within the time frame of the retreat, even according to Annotation 19, there must be a great amount of selectivity as to which specific parts of Jesus's life should be contemplated and which should be left to a later time. The key to the selection of the mysteries lies in (1) the purpose of the Exercises: 'the conquest of self and the regulation of one's life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment' (Exx 21); (2) the person of the retreatant: what this particular retreatant needs at this particular time, and what will best facilitate the movement of God's grace (Exx 18), and (3) the mysteries designated by Ignatius.

## (1) *The purpose of the Exercises*

Restated in terms more acceptable to the late twentieth century, the purpose of the Spiritual Exercises is to free the retreatant from attachment to any value system other than the value system of Jesus himself, releasing the power of the living God from deep within the person in such a way that this becomes the major energizing force in all decisions. This, of course, leads the retreatant directly to Jesus and the gospels, where the two-edged sword of the scriptures lays bare the contradictions operative in his/her life.

Our lives are a mixture of choices, some made under the influence of grace, some motivated by desires we have kept securely away from exposure to the light of Christ. The Exercises lead us to Christ, where, dispelling the darkness of our illusions, he sheds the light of his truth and the warmth of his love into the corners of our being, enabling us to see the real motivations underlying our behaviour. It is in the clear, bright light of God's truth that we are able to detect even the subtlest of contradictions within us,

and it is in the security of his love that we can face those contradictions fully, bringing our choices more in line with his.

The exercitant's pattern of choices has become apparent during the First Week, which has climaxed with the experience of God's overwhelming, gratuitous, personal love even within our own naked sinfulness. For many an exercitant this is the most profound moment of conversion ever to be experienced. Moved by the extraordinary power of this grace, there is a strong desire to bring all of life's patterns more and more under the influence of Jesus, and to live a new life worthy of God's love. Praying over the Call of the King reinforces this desire, giving some focus to the grace and providing a transition to the contemplation of the life of Christ.

(2) *The person of the retreatant*

A second criterion for selecting specific mysteries in the life of Christ lies in the person of the retreatant. Ignatius makes this clear in his instructions for the Second Week, advising the director to lengthen or shorten the week by adding to or subtracting from the basic mysteries suggested according to the 'profit' being experienced by the exercitant (Exx 162). It is the task of the director to match the mysteries to the retreatant.

This does not mean that the director should ignore what Ignatius presents as basic mysteries to be contemplated. But it does indicate that by the end of the First Week the director knows the retreatant well enough to add, subtract or make substitutions where warranted. Sensitive to the movement of grace in the exercitant, the director seeks only to facilitate this movement, following the lead of the Lord as expressed through the experiences of the exercitant. Expecting that the retreat will follow basically the mysteries as outlined by Ignatius, the director remains alert for clues that will indicate the need for deviation from the prescribed contemplations.

(3) *The mysteries selected by Ignatius*

There is clear reason why Ignatius chose the mysteries he did. They seem most suited for most people to achieve the purpose of the Exercises. These mysteries can be grouped to demonstrate the parallel between the life of Christ and the call to the exercitant to become a closer follower of his.

### Group I: The early life of Jesus

Beginning with the Incarnation, the retreatant contemplates the mysteries of Christ's hidden life. Step by step through the period of eager waiting for his birth, through his nativity and early years, the retreatant grows to know Jesus, Mary and Joseph well, in new and more profound ways. As with any other adult, Jesus is very much a product of his formative years, so it is very important, in order to understand him, to have some insight into his childhood-background. There is also much here for the disciple to learn about being a follower of Jesus.

*The Incarnation:* Situating within the world reality God's-taking-on-of-our-human-condition, the retreatant sees an active God moved to respond to a world in need. Questions come naturally. It is a simple step for the retreatant to ask: what is my response?

*The Nativity:* The birth of Jesus was into poverty, not into wealth or comfort. And yet he was lacking nothing absolutely necessary for the salvific life he was to lead. Can I distinguish what is absolutely necessary from what is convenient in my life? Do my conveniences really help my efforts toward furthering the Kingdom?

*The Presentation in the Temple:* It is the simple people with eyes of faith who recognize Jesus and embrace him. Am I simple enough, uncluttered enough, to recognize him, too?

*The obedience of the Child Jesus to his parents:* Quietly back in Nazareth, Jesus grows in wisdom, age and grace, seemingly an ordinary, good son. He provided for his mother, probably as a skilled labourer (a carpenter), after Joseph's death. Ignatius intends this, and the following contemplation, to be preparation for looking at one's choice of a state of life. What does the life of a real Christian in the world demand?

*Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple:* Jesus becomes involved with the officials of the Church and lets his parents begin their return trip without him. Ignatius uses this mystery to exemplify the religious vocation or church vocation. What is God asking of this retreatant?

### Group II: The vocational discernment of Jesus

The grace to be prayed for during the Second Week is an intimate knowledge and love of Jesus, as well as a closer following

of him. The three days of contemplation just completed have witnessed some growth in intimate knowledge and love, but the desire to be a close follower of Jesus needs to become more specified. At this point it is likely still to be only a rather vague but strong desire.

Here in the retreat Ignatius interjects a day of meditation on the value system of the world and the value system of Christ (The Two Standards) to help the exercitant toward this specification. How does this particular retreatant experience the attraction of the world and the attraction of Jesus? What happens when the attraction of Christ's value system becomes concrete (Three Classes of Persons)? How closely allied to Christ does this person really want to be (Three Degrees of Humility, to be considered from the fifth day on)?

Resuming the contemplation of the life of Christ on the fifth day, the exercitant enters with Jesus into his vocational discernment.

*The baptism of Jesus:* Leaving the comfort and security of home, Jesus seeks his cousin at the Jordan for light on his future. Here he has a major faith experience ('You are my beloved son') which provides grist for his discernment. The retreatant also gets in touch with a faith experience from her/his own life, perhaps the conversion experience of the First Week.

*The temptation in the desert:* Jesus withdraws into a desert place to discern what being 'Beloved Son' of God must mean lived out in concrete terms of daily life. The retreatant observes him doing battle with the spirit of evil, confronting the value system of the world ('If you are the Son of God . . .'). For the retreatant the question becomes: if I am a true child of God and follower of Christ, what does this mean in my life—concretely?

### Group III: The active life of Jesus

The only clarity which the exercitant witnesses Jesus receiving from his time in the desert is what his life is *not* to be, and that seems to be enough for him. Deeper than any choice of a state of life for this retreatant is the radical option to live out the value system of Christ, no matter what the state of life. So the next few days are spent in the galilean hills with Jesus as he begins to build the community of justice, love and peace. There is now that special interaction between Jesus and his followers, as well as the interaction between Jesus and the people in power, notably the

officials of the Church. The final few mysteries chosen for the exercitant by Ignatius are powerful in two ways: they teach the would-be disciple what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and they point toward one of the consequences of living according to his value system—the passion and death.

*The vocation of the apostles:* In the selection of his intimate followers, Jesus brings together some very unlikely people, a microcosm of the future Church. The retreatant looks for the common denominator among them and finds it to be a simple, open willingness to be formed into disciples and apostles. To be a disciple also, I must let go of my preformed ideas and be open to be re-formed by Christ.

*The sermon on the mount:* The eight beatitudes are a summary of the ideal followers of Jesus. The beatitudes are spelled out more fully in all of Matthew 5-6-7. This sermon, Jesus's inaugural address to his Church, is filled with challenge and paradox, the simple explication of radical discipleship. The retreatant questions self in the light of these no-uncertain terms of discipleship.

*Walking on the water:* Jesus's many needs are at play here: the need to be compassionate (feeding the five thousand), the need to be alone, to rest, to pray, to return to his disciples. Also paramount in this mystery is the apostle's need to follow Christ completely, even to the risk of walking on water. The retreatant probably has some 'walking on the waters' to do, if not now then later, and needs to realize with Peter what it is that will make one sink.

*Jesus preaches in the Temple:* By this time it is downright dangerous for Jesus to be seen around the temple precincts, but he appears there every day to teach the crowds. These very crowds are his security. The retreatant reflects on the daily risking of life that goes with preaching the Good News, especially once the Good News begins to take hold in the marketplace.

*The raising of Lazarus:* Knowing how perilous it would be to appear in Bethany, since it is no longer safe to be seen openly, Jesus must go to his friends. It is the very act of raising Lazarus from death that caps the climax as far as the church officials are concerned. Jesus has signed his own death warrant with this act of love. The retreatant faces the implications of engaging in even the most loving acts, once the indignation of the persons in power is aroused and their position is threatened.

*Palm Sunday:* Humbly, and with tongue in cheek, Jesus mounts the ass for the ride into the Holy City to claim it for his own. The true import of this act is lost upon the threatened religious leaders, those who could expound so eloquently on the prophetic actions that fill the Old Testament. The retreatant, however, does not miss the point.

Such are the mysteries in the life of Christ that Ignatius suggests are basic to the purpose of the Exercises. There are three places where I find myself inclined to modify this pattern. In the first group of contemplations I often include Mary's visit to Elizabeth, especially if the exercitant is a woman. In the third group I include the anointing at Bethany, mainly because this mystery includes a woman meeting the needs of Jesus when all others present were seemingly unaware that he even had needs. To make way for this contemplation I am inclined to omit Jesus preaching in the temple, because it reinforces the 'doing' aspect of the follower of Christ, and that is quite evident already from the other mysteries Ignatius includes. In the vocation of the apostles I make note of the women who also walked with Jesus and ministered to him.

There is a difference in thinking in terms of the retreat according to Annotation 19 and according to Annotation 20, if one is modifying the basic contemplations as outlined by Ignatius. Not only is there a time factor which is different, but there is also the fact of the retreatant's daily life events which influence the director's choice.

The question has been raised about allowing the retreatant to make her/his own selection from the gospels. This question touches off a score of others: How many selections from the gospels are we talking about? Is the retreatant really making the Exercises or just a directed retreat? Is the retreatant able to put her/himself into the hands of the director? Is the retreatant in touch with self enough to know how to select? Is the director able to follow the lead of the Spirit through the directee? Is the director able to adapt the Exercises according to the directives of Ignatius? Does the director want to abdicate responsibility? Why 're-invent the wheel' when Ignatius had already done such a good job for us? Are the mysteries presented by Ignatius the only way to go?

For an individual retreatant to choose a specific mystery now and again, in consultation with the director, is not without merit, especially during an Annotation 19 retreat. Most of the time,

however, at least in my experience, the retreatant not only expects the director to do the selecting of the matter to be prayed about, but is grateful for the guidance the director gives.

One is not a retreat director long before encountering the situation in which the retreatant has misunderstood the words of the director and has used a different part of scripture than that recommended. Almost without fail this turns out to be a time of grace. Such an experience puts things into perspective and points out that God is really doing the directing anyway.

### *Conclusion*

What happens in the contemplation of Jesus's life? The retreatant gains insight into Jesus; this much is obvious. But the retreatant also has new insights into self. What is her/his spontaneous reaction as a mystery unfolds? What accounts for this reaction? Can she/he enter into the reliving of this moment in Jesus's life, or is there a reluctance to do so? Why? What happens when the retreatant does enter in? What is seen? heard? felt? What is the interaction between the retreatant and the persons being contemplated?

The retreatant also grows in intimate love of Jesus. It is not just the attractive human personality of Jesus, but his transparency through which the love of God is manifest that moves the heart in loving response. When the unthreatened person comes to know Jesus in this intimate way, there are no barriers to love.

Coming face to face with God in contemplation day after day has a profound effect not only on the mind in intimate knowledge and the heart in intimate love, but also on the behaviour in intimate following, in radical discipleship. We are told many times in scripture that 'You cannot see the face of God and live'. This is so true. The light of his countenance enlightens us so that we cannot continue to live a mediocre or half-hearted discipleship. When the eyes of God in Jesus engage ours, we do indeed die. We die to those values that belong to our worldliness. We die to our fears. We die to our foolish needs. We die to our hesitations. It is thus that we are gradually turned into radical followers of Christ.

Ignatius starts us on the path of contemplation. But even he says this is just a beginning, an introduction to what must become a part of our everyday discipleship (Exx 162). 'Who am I, O God, that you have led me as far as this? Yet in your eyes, O God, this is still not far enough; you make your promises extend into the distant future' (1 Chr 17, 16-17).