

THE EIGHT-DAY RETREAT

By LAVINIA BYRNE

LATE NINETEENTH and early twentieth century ignatian retreat manuals convey a certainty of purpose and uniformity of practice remote from the open-ended definition with which Ignatius himself begins the *Spiritual Exercises*.

We call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the Will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul.¹

For Spiritual Exercises we now find 'retreat', for the soul who would rid itself of attachments we now find 'the retreatant himself', for seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life we now find something called 'apostolic sanctity'.

The retreat is defined as:

a time of rest from study and care, but also a time of exertion and prayer . . . yet we should avoid nervous strain, not work ourselves up into an unnatural or hysteric condition, for this time is 'an extraordinary divine favour'.²

'For the last twelve months', we read 'we have been employed in working for the good of others, and this work has been mostly temporal. Now we are to work for our own good, and that work will be entirely spiritual'.³

The retreat is 'most necessary, most salutary and most desirable', its efficacy 'invincible in changing the heart and remedying every spiritual evil as has been tested by innumerable authorities, the respectability of which cannot be questioned'.⁴

Sadly, the retreatant appears less respectable:

some religious do not seem to take the retreat seriously till the third or fourth day. Their mind and heart are so engrossed with pet creatures, recreation, study, classwork, business-matters, that

they lose the first and most important part of the Retreat in Listlessness, Frivolity and Distraction.⁵

The innocence of earlier years has been lost:

the delicacy of conscience, purity of heart and mind, attention to the smallest rules, filial dread of offending God, sweet peace and joy of soul, undisturbed recollection in prayer: the state of my soul at my entrance to religion . . .⁶

Nostalgia haunts the future as well as the past, in the form of heaven — the goal of the *Contemplatio* — ‘heaven, where there will be no more danger of losing him, no more possibility of displeasing him’.⁷ In the meantime, the Eucharist acts as a substitute, the place where ‘with the help of his grace, I will love him here on earth’.⁸ Flight, rather than engagement, is proposed: ‘I ought, then, to leave both creatures and myself, in order to attach myself only to God, in whom I find, as in their source, and in an infinite degree, all perfections’,⁹ and so it follows that ‘apostolic sanctity consists in three things, viz., devotedness to the person and interests of Jesus Christ, earnestness and disinterestedness’.¹⁰

These observations can be summarized in terms of images used in a french manual of 1896:

If life is a storm, the retreat is a haven; if life is a battle, the retreat is an arsenal; if life is a desert, then the retreat is a fertile oasis; if life is lived in exile, then the retreat is an image of the distant fatherland.¹¹

The author makes the point that our understanding of what a retreat is will depend upon how we think of the rest of our life, not the other way round. No amount of ‘earnestness and disinterestedness’ can tinker with this basic equation. If the rest of life is about study and care, the retreat inevitably becomes a time of exertion and prayer; if the rest of life is dismissed as temporal, the retreat has to become spiritual. And what of the retreatant, the listless, frivolous, distracted retreatant? Whether imaged as navigator, warrior, nomad or alien the retreatant is assumed to be male and religious. The inclusive language of Ignatius’s ‘the soul itself . . .’ is lost in a welter of militaristic words about fighting and winning. ‘St Ignatius would have me enter upon the

Exercises as into a combat. I can come out victorious; but only on one condition: that I am resolved to conquer myself'.¹²

In lieu of an adequate presentation of apostolic spirituality, such manuals inevitably tail off with appendices entitled 'The Badge of Perseverance', 'Death', 'On the Spiritual Duties of the Religious' and so on. Where life and the retreat are set up in antithesis to each other the one cannot inform the other. Time after the retreat is as doomed as was time before the retreat, subject to the same judgments.

Yet the insights typified by these retreat manuals were the insights canonised by the Code of Canon Law of 1917 (Canon 595,19) which made *exercitia spiritualia* obligatory annually for all religious. This was the model of retreat, of retreatant and of apostolic spirituality which the practice of the annual retreat would build upon. In the memory of many, this model lurks as template, even nowadays.

The freedom envisaged by Ignatius would give another pattern altogether. An annual retreat is not mentioned in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. Where the thirty-day retreat experience is to be repeated at the end of the first two years of probation, what is proposed is that the novice should 'make some of the former Exercises, or some others' (*Constitutions* 98).¹³ The 1599 Directory gives as 'Advice to one finishing the Exercises' some 'pious and spiritual practices' namely: daily meditation, the examen, regular confession and communion, spiritual direction, good books and company, and the practice of humility, patience and charity — all methods, as it were, of 'seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life'.¹⁴ By these methods the thirty-day retreat experience can continue to inform daily living.

Nevertheless the tendency to institutionalize what we hold in esteem prevailed and the sixth General Congregation of 1608 introduced the practice of annual spiritual exercises: 'each year all should devote themselves to the Spiritual Exercises for eight or ten continuous days'.¹⁵ By 1615 this understanding was made even more explicit, 'care should be taken that the annual Spiritual Exercises . . . should be made exactly by all . . . and that the proportion and method should be preserved which are customary in the integral Exercises'.¹⁶ Both in matter and manner the spirit had become letter, the inspiration law.

Texts such as these extracts from early General Congregations

were made generally available in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as part of the movement which saw a return to the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*. This movement was experienced by religious and increasingly by lay people through thirty-day retreats, retreats in everyday life and regular spiritual direction. The great question of the 1980s builds upon that of the 1970s. Instead of asking 'what constitutes the authentic Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius?' we now ask 'what constitutes an authentic retreat experience?' For where the texts are taken seriously, we are committed to the freedom Ignatius sought when he wrote of '*every method of preparing and disposing the soul*', '*some of the former Exercises or some others*'.

For ignatian people the full Spiritual Exercises will remain the paradigm. But how do pre-Exercises, non-Exercises and post-Exercises people pray? What retreat experiences may they validly seek?

The remainder of this article lists some possible ways of making a retreat. The reader may feel attracted by some, put off by others. I believe these feelings to be important, part of the dynamic by which *the* retreat becomes *my* retreat, or even *our* retreat. In the past such feelings were often denied; today they are valued as part of a personal response. In the past the retreat was of obligation; today, increasingly, it is chosen. People of different ages, personality type, religious persuasion and spiritual tradition will necessarily choose different retreats. It is hoped that the selection which follows may inform their choice.

The presentation is deliberately a random one. I have, after all, suggested that in the past certain assumptions carried too much weight. So, for instance, the retreatant was type-cast, the retreat a monolith and the rest of life a 'failed retreat'. Likewise the ignatian Exercises and the various ways — inauthentic and authentic — in which they were presented down the ages had an extraordinary influence, but also provided too uniform a model, even where those who gave them did not necessarily intend this.

Present-day practice must also submit to questioning. Does the directed retreat enjoy too much prestige? Why is there a general 'down' on 'preached retreats'? What should be done to prevent retreats from becoming a luxury to be enjoyed only by religious, or by those in employment? What can be done to help people over a fear of the unknown where this is acting as a block to their *choosing* a retreat? What group experiences validly constitute a

retreat and reduce an otherwise extravagant use of directors? This random selection in no way attempts to answer such questions. It merely records a climate in which, increasingly, they can usefully be asked.

Various forms of individual direction or guidance are offered by ignatian directors who seek to present not a digest of the Exercises but ways of praying with scripture to accompany the journey and process of individual retreatants. There are no addresses, instead there are personal meetings between director and dirigé in which the retreatant takes the lead. Such meetings, which happen once a day, keep up the low-key but helpful stimulation by which the individual can make best use of time which is his or hers by right. Certain ignatian themes which will inevitably be present are an emphasis upon freedom and hence increasing flexibility in the workings of the retreat to model such freedom; Christ- or gospel-centred spirituality and hence an apostolic imperative in any discernment or decision making; and a desire to integrate so that God may be sought and found in all things both within and without the retreat.

The prestige enjoyed by the Exercises should not, however, blind us to other ways. We make retreats for a variety of reasons: to stimulate affectivity, to integrate the senses, to feed the mind, to arouse a sense of christian community. Each of these is an element in the journey Godwards, the journey inwards. And so the carmelite tradition, for instance, can speak to these and other needs. The hallmark of carmelite spirituality is prayer; the best known guides Teresa and John. Where Discalced Carmelites treat these as founders, the original Carmelites see them as part of a much wider tradition which goes back to the early part of the thirteenth century and stresses the importance of community and liturgical prayer. In this sense, retreat prayer can be experienced in a variety of contexts by someone making a retreat in a carmelite house. Insofar as carmelite spirituality is permeated by the idea of the presence of God in daily life, and the tradition itself is eclectic, anything which works for the individual will be valued as he or she listens to God and waits on him. For this reason, the previous prayer experience of the retreatant is only one element to be taken into account. However, given such openness on the part of both retreatant and director, the ultimate aim of a carmelite retreat would be towards harmony: harmony with God, with creation and

with oneself. This integration is what John of the Cross envisaged when he wrote of 'transformation in Christ'.

A combination of the different workshops offered by the Inigo Centre both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere could be used for an eight-day retreat. At present these workshops use Ignatius's autobiography, the journalling techniques of Ira Progoff, the awareness exercises of Anthony de Mello and the insights of liberation spirituality. Any two could be combined for an eight-day session. They are given to groups rather than individuals, in the understanding that what is being presented is not a private religious experience, but personal growth in the presence of some manifestation of community. These are not charismatic groups, but there again, they are not non-charismatic. They are not T-groups. Sharing is only in order where chosen; much work is done in silence.

Inigo. The autobiography of Ignatius is retold on cassette in the first person by William Hewett S.J., the director of Inigo Enterprises, and interspersed with songs. Inigo's story is recounted with a double purpose. Firstly, the Spiritual Exercises themselves emerged from the quality of contact Ignatius had with his own experience. This, if you like, is the text before the text; the raw material out of which he developed his Exercises. In this sense Inigo gives a version of the Exercises we cannot intellectualize. It speaks to our memory as well as our understanding and will, uncovering the *imago Dei* within. And so Inigo's story puts us in contact with our own story. In this sense it is archetypal, like the story of Mary Ward which Fr Hewett tells and uses in *A world to tell* (narrated by Judi Dench). The principle and foundation of childhood formation lead, through the discovery of God's goodness and our own imperfection, to that call heard in good times and bad, until we live solely out of his resurrection power. This is the wider canvas; there are also those everyday moments in which we seek and find God, seek and find his will. Inigo's story gives us more than a straight narrative, it provides us with signposts and landmarks so that we can re-member our own experience creatively. Ira Progoff's Intensive Journal Workshop envisages a similar use of the past. Rather than memorizing, accumulating a rote of past experience, we begin to use this experience and, through twilight imagery, both own it and find healing. A Russian Jew, Progoff works out of Dialogue House, New York, and keeps a

firm control over the use of his material. This is because the system he has developed forms a composite whole, to be given in two twelve-hour units each spread over a couple of days. The workshop has been used successfully with believers and non-believers alike and, in combination with *Inigo*, provides an extremely useful presentation of the ignatian Exercises both for those with no formal experience of them and for those who feel totally over-exposed to them after years of preached annual retreats. The psychological understanding behind Progoff journalling is jungian; its purpose is that growth into individuation characteristic of the jungian process.

Another less linear form of growth is that envisaged by the awareness exercises of the indian Jesuit, Anthony de Mello. His personal journey has led him to use material from the tradition of his own people and notably from buddhist sources to revitalise our perception of certain ignatian practices. A misunderstanding of the east would lead us to imagine that these exercises are about relaxation — the believer's equivalent of T.M. — whereas in fact they are about heightened awareness and sensitivity to the fabric of our present. The ignatian examen, or application of the senses, or sensitivity to what de Caussade call the 'sacrament of the present moment' work out of a similar understanding and can all be deepened by the practice of awareness exercises. These aim at integration, particularly integration of the senses, an enhanced living in the present.

Concern with the present can also take the form of social awareness or awareness of the essentially social nature of christian spirituality. A retreat on these lines takes what Ignatius has to say in the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* about the social nature of sin, of the call to work out an understanding of the Incarnation as intervention, the kingdom as God's reign, poverty and humiliation as signs of his power, and sets this material beside certain insights of the liberation spirituality emerging from Latin America. These are presented in a variety of centres as a valid development of the retreat experience, as are Progoff journalling and de Mello and other awareness exercises.

Another form of liberation altogether is that which we experience when we work in a unfamiliar medium: clay, dough, paint all offer the possibility of contact with realities we sometimes ignore, and provide a double focus for growth. Firstly, there is that growth

in self-knowledge that comes from experimenting, from seeking further harmony between hand and eye, and learning out of the experience of failure. As one participant in a prayer and painting retreat put it, 'This very failure embodies an element of truth about myself and about the transcendent loveliness of God's creation'. Truth at first hand 'through actual experience' is 'unhindered by the halting, sometimes devious use of words' when we paint, or throw pots, or make bread. A retreat director writes, 'because they are liberated in one area (in this instance painting), they are similarly freed in prayer'. Hence the second major possibility of growth: 'we learn to look and in looking to perceive something deeper about the greatness of God and about the value of man's part in God's world'. Self-knowledge is only an element within our perception of God and non-verbal forms of expression can renew the way we see him as well as our world.

The use of music also gives access to areas of experience and expression which are ordinarily concealed from us. Retreats which use this access to altered states of consciousness have been used very successfully in the United States and are increasingly available elsewhere. The idea of being 'individually guided' through a retreat has a special significance here, because the director or guide remains with the dirigé or traveller during the sessions. Each session lasts about one and a half hours. After some initial sharing and relaxation, the participant is invited to listen to music (specially prepared by the Institute of Consciousness and Music, Port Townsend, WA 98368), and reflect back any images, feelings or physical sensations that emerge. After the sessions there is time to reflect upon the experience, share insights and ponder. Trust is the key, for the level of trust the traveller has in her/himself and the degree of trust the traveller places in the guide, significantly affect the experience. Both have to trust the process as a valid spiritual pathway to freedom, fuller life and union with God. The idea is not simply to expose people to new levels of self-awareness, but rather to integrate the inner and outer life and so to open up the realm of religious experience.

As forms of expression which rely upon the use of music, movement and dance are increasingly being used within a retreat context because, once again, they aim at and achieve integration and harmony and destroy false distinctions between what is sacred and what is profane. The same is true of T'ai Chi which, while

not done to music, nevertheless reconciles opposite poles of energy: the *yin* and the *yang*, the male and female within each individual.

My intention in this brief presentation has not been to imply any hierarchy of forms. Nevertheless, experienced retreat directors avert to the fact that we live in cycles and move gradually into 'auto-direction'. It follows that a desert or *Poustinia*-type retreat might eventually interfere least and offer most. But there again, where 'auto-direction' is matched by 'auto-retreat giving' the possibilities become limitless and might, with the Spirit guiding, lead anywhere.

NOTES

¹ *Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* trans L.Puhl (Chicago, 1951).

² Gabriel, Henry: *An eight days' retreat for religious* (London, 1914) p 3.

³ Wolferstan, Bertram: *An eight days' retreat* (London, 1928), p 9.

⁴ Curtis, John: *The way of spiritual perfection in the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola* (Dublin, 1882), p 3.

⁵ Gabriel, *op. cit.*, p 9.

⁶ Curtis, *op. cit.*, p 2.

⁷ Gabriel, *op. cit.*, p 362.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 357.

⁹ *Manresa: or the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, for general use* (London, 1881), p 240.

¹⁰ Wolferstan, *op. cit.*, p 301.

¹¹ Mercier, Victor: *Manuel des Exercices de S. Ignace* (Poitiers, 1896), p 73.

¹² Wolferstan, *op. cit.*, p 11.

¹³ *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* trans. George F. Ganss (St Louis, 1970), p 106.

¹⁴ *Directory to the Spiritual Exercises* (London, 1925), p 162.

¹⁵ Decree 29 of General Congregation VI, 1608 (Inst SJ, 11,302).

¹⁶ General Congregation VII, 1615 (Inst SJ, 11,236). These two references are given in 'The authentic Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: some facts of history and terminology basic to their functional efficacy today' *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, vol 1 no 2, November 1969.

¹⁷ The material that follows has been gathered from a variety of sources. I am grateful to Joseph Chalmers O.Carm., William Hewett S.J., Michael Ivens S.J., Moira McCartan S.U.S.C., Canon Charles Shells and the editors for their reflections on the eight-day retreat.