

REFLECTIONS ON THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

By OSCAR ROMERO

I AM GRATEFUL for this opportunity to express my view of the Exercises of St Ignatius, which I have esteemed so much during my life.¹ I am only sorry that I do not have here the tools to give adequate answers and that we have so little time during this meeting of bishops at Puebla. However, with all good will I will try to reply.

1 *In your opinion, what role should the Spiritual Exercises play today in Latin America?*

In view of the subject of this general assembly of latin american bishops, 'Evangelization in Latin America's present and future', it is significant that the Exercises are an effective means of evangelization. I would say that they are a very appropriate tool. I think that is the chief role that they can play at present: an evangelization that is thoroughly systematic, deep, and embracing of the whole person who feels drawn by a special call of God. We all experience that call when we endeavour to make the Exercises well.

In this sense, the result of a good ignatian retreat in Latin America should be a response to what Latin America most needs: new human beings. Medellín [the latin american bishops' general assembly at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968] said that it will be hard to have new structures if we do not also have new persons. The role of the Exercises ought to be, as it has always been, renewal of the person, giving Latin America the new persons who can be the best instruments for the change that our Latin America needs.

2 *What should be the characteristics of the theology in which the Exercises take form today?*

I think that the theology of the Exercises should be a christocentric and ecclesiological theology. In these times, it should also include an adequate anthropology.

A christocentric theology will require the Exercises to interpret christology from our latin american perspective, so as to make us

feel, in the eternal Christ's humanity, the griefs and anxieties and hopes of Latin Americans. In its ecclesiology, the theology of the Exercises today should provide an opportunity to make present a continuation of Christ in our history, in our latin american situation as lived in history by members of the Church, Christ's mystical body. It would be a Church understood not only as the *magisterium*, but as a people, a people who put their hope in the Church, a people who are themselves the Church and are Christ, who has become flesh in a latin american Church of the poor, oppressed, and suffering. Such should be the ecclesiology. St Ignatius's 'to be of one mind with the Church' would be 'to be of one mind with the Church incarnated in this people who stand in need of liberation'.

I also mentioned an anthropology. The theology of the Exercises should view humankind as the image of God, with God, naturally, as centre. The theocentrism that St Ignatius teaches us in the Exercises would be seen from the human angle, and in the human person we would see the image of God. Thus we would translate 'for the greater glory of God' as 'human beings who are God's glory in so far as they realize themselves, free themselves, and develop themselves'.

3 *At the present time what would be the criterion for judging whether a retreat is made well or badly?*

Retreats should measure their effectiveness by the renewal that they bring about in each person. It would not be sufficient for people to feel renewed only in their individual piety, forgiven their personal sins, and with the good feeling of a tranquil conscience. They must move from an individualistic piety to a communitarian piety, to a social awareness coming out of piety and experience of God. Of course, those who make the Exercises well in Latin America must indeed feel the joy of having their sins forgiven and of being children of God. But besides that personal, individual joy they must not be content unless they convey that treasure to others and raise up all their brothers and sisters. They must move from an individual piety to a piety of 'social radiation'. Retreats that only make the retreatants feel contented are not producing adequate results. Today, in Latin America, more than personal satisfaction is demanded.

This is very important, since there are many, thanks be to God,

who make retreats in Latin America. In El Salvador, for example, every Holy Week the marian Sodalists organize retreats. My fear, though, is that they remain on the level of individualistic piety, since I have not seen many effects of a social nature. I would measure the effectiveness or the ineffectiveness of retreats by the degree to which the people who come out of these profound reflections are really the sort that Latin America needs: new persons able to organize new structures according to their capacities.

4 *What requirements would you demand of priests who give retreats today in Latin America?*

I would say that the most suitable priests for giving the Exercises in Latin America are those who have the deepest knowledge of the charisms of St Ignatius found in the Exercises. But they must also have knowledge of the local Church where they work, of the reality of life in their own Churches. A retreat detached from that reality would still be good, but would not be so effective and would not produce the sort of Christians that Latin America needs, and particularly what each local situation calls for. I would demand that a retreat-giver be one who knows, through experience, the charisms of the Exercises but who also feels himself a part of the diocese, the parish, and the community to which the retreatants belong. A practical recommendation would be to ask that retreat-directors be involved in some community of the diocese where they work.

5 *Can retreatants properly seek God's will for their lives in the Exercises if they do not endeavour to know the sociopolitical conditions of Latin America and the third world, as well as their structural and circumstantial causes, and if they do not commit themselves, according to their own charisms, to structural change? Why?*

I think that ideal retreatants, those who will seek God's will in their lives, are those who know the sociopolitical and economic setting in which their lives are lived. In our latin american circumstances, that environment is such a complex reality that it is not enough to proceed with good will. A good preparation for a retreat would be to have at least some idea about the real situation in which one must live one's life, some idea about the situation's structural and circumstantial causes. One cannot be separated from one's environment. Everyone is influenced by those causes,

by those circumstances, and must also be committed to changing those structures. If what retreatants seek is God's will in their lives, we can be sure that God will use each human life to redeem, to realize his design of salvation in the world. A life not committed to God's design in history would not be a vocation properly understood. I think it is indispensable that retreatants, seeking God's will, know the environment in which God has placed them. That is why I have also given the reason for my reply. Human life cannot develop, cannot realize itself, except in the environment where God has placed it. The tree must bear fruit where God has planted it.

6 *From what you know of St Ignatius, if he were living now in Latin America and were giving retreats and had written the Exercises here and now, with what theological substance would he present them?*

I will try to give a reply. It is a bit risky to try to enter the mind of St Ignatius and to interpret it for our times, but he himself, who became a saint through the experience of the Exercises, advocated great adaptability. So I think we can give an answer.

Regarding the theological substance, I think I have already pointed it out: a christocentric substance, but a christology incarnated in the reality of Latin America. A theology looked at from our situation would propose the Christ whom St Ignatius wants to engrave deeply on the retreatant's heart: the eternal Christ, true God and true man, but as man taking on the condition of Latin America and making us feel the poverty, the oppression, the abandonment, and all the wretchedness of Latin Americans.

There is also an ecclesiological substance: 'to be of one mind with the Church'. St Ignatius would present it today as a Church that the Holy Spirit is stirring up in our people, in our communities, a Church that means not only the teaching of the *magisterium*, fidelity to the pope, but also service to this people and the discernment of the signs of the times in the light of the gospel.

Also, there is an anthropological substance. St Ignatius, so practical in his considerations about God, about eternity, about Christ, would ask us, as an evident sign, to serve people, defending their rights and defending respect for God's image. We would see, through the Exercises, that human persons are truly God's glory on earth.

7 *What retreatants would St Ignatius prefer to have today?*

In our times, St Ignatius would give preference to those who can influence communities more: community leaders, pastoral workers. In our pastoral work in Latin America we desire to create grass-roots church communities led by the lay people themselves, who become genuine apostles of the laity. I think that today St Ignatius would look for those persons in the grass-roots church communities who are real witnesses of Christianity. Such persons are an example for us bishops and priests. How much holiness there would be in Latin America with persons, lay people or priests, formed in the school of the Exercises!

8 *From what you know of the Exercises of St Ignatius, do you think that they can contribute something to the times in which we are living in Latin America? If so, what, and under what conditions?*

In answering this question, I recall what Paul VI left us in his invaluable testament, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, when he asked what was the Church's contribution to the liberation of the present world. Among other things, he said, it is to provide christian liberators. And discussing what these liberators provided by the Church must be like, he said they must be people with a deep sense of faith, people with a great mission of love, and people who base their experience on the Church's social teaching (*Evangelii nuntiandi* 38). I think that this is what the Exercises could give us today: those people whom Paul VI offered to today's movements for justice, people who know how to join to all those concerns for liberation, the true liberation that the Church offers — the inspiration of faith, the mission of love, and the Church's social teaching. This is what the Exercises can contribute today. It is what our peoples most need: liberators who do not make liberation consist only in material things, but who embody all the liberating concerns of Christianity's integral liberation. Integral liberation begins with freedom from sin and ascends to the progress that consists in being God's children, to holiness, to the transcendence of eternity. We need messengers of that integral liberation who can give to earthly liberation movements their true horizon, their true power, their originality and their highest achievement.

9 *What elements do you think the Exercises can provide for discerning a political commitment in Latin America?*

The Exercises have always seemed to me to be a wonderful

school of discernment. This is another reason why they seem to me to be of great value nowadays. Today discernment is needed in undertaking political commitments. The first point to understand is that not everyone has a vocation to political activity. If the Exercises serve for selecting a state of life for each person, they can also serve wonderfully, with their wise methods of discernment, for testing if one has or has not a vocation to political activism. With the illumination furnished by the Exercises, under the light of eternity and seeking what God wants in their lives, people can make the proper political options. When people have understood their political vocation and know that God is asking them to follow a vocation as his will, they must be very subtle in their political choices and capable of facing all the temptations to which politics is subject in the world. I think that those who hear that call to political activism, and want to follow it as saints, can discern in the school of the Exercises what God asks of them and what they can give. I am sure that when, with the light of the Exercises, they try to make their whole lives a service to the common good for God's glory, their lives will achieve complete fulfilment in their political commitment.

May the Lord grant that these thoughts may serve in some small way so that this great heritage left by St Ignatius to the Jesuits may continue to unfold its treasures for our peoples of Latin America, and that they may be able to give the response that God inspired in that marvellous method of spirituality which is the Spiritual Exercises.²

NOTES

¹ James Brockman, S. J. provides the following note:

Oscar A. Romero was Archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador, from 1977 to March 24, 1980, when he was assassinated while saying mass. His three years as Archbishop were marked by unwavering calls for social justice, for peace, and for respect for human life and dignity. His sermons and his actions revealed a profound awareness of a transcendent God, as well as a wholehearted devotion to the Church, God's people. As a pastor, he laid down his life for that people. Since his death his word and example have become known far beyond the bounds of his own land.

Archbishop Romero made the complete, month-long Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola in the mid-1950s, when he was a priest in his late 30s. When he became a bishop in 1970, he chose as his episcopal motto a phrase from the Exercises *sentir con la iglesia* — 'to be of one mind with the Church'.

During the 1979 conference of Latin American bishops at Puebla, Mexico, Jose Magaña, S.J., asked various participants and observers their views of the Spiritual Exercises and their value for present-day Latin America. Each one interviewed was allowed to correct

and revise the transcript of his remarks, which were published in the book *Ejercicios espirituales, en, desde y para America Latina*, (Torreón, Mexico, 1980). The foregoing is the interview with Archbishop Romero. I have translated it with the permission of Orbis Books (Maryknoll, N. Y.), which has the english translation rights to Fr Magaña's book.

² The translator of this interview, James Brockman S.J., is a member of the jesuit community at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio. He is the author of *Oscar Romero, bishop and martyr* (London, 1982), published in the United States as *The word remains: a life of Oscar Romero* (New York, 1982). He has also edited *The Church is all of you: thoughts of Archbishop Romero* (Minneapolis, 1984).