

# THE CONTEMPLATION TO ATTAIN DIVINE LOVE

By OLGA WARNKE

This conversation was recorded in an interview by Lavinia Byrne IBVM of our editorial staff, on a recent visit to Olga Warnke at Loretto College, Toronto. The *Contemplatio* is to be found in paragraphs 230–237 of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

*Olga:* I would like to look at the *Contemplatio* as it is written to start with. I know the question that is asked so frequently is ‘Does this belong at the end of the Exercises?’, ‘Where does it belong?’ It has been suggested almost anywhere in the Exercises. Personally I feel it was intended at the end. I know you can pray it at any time in your life. For years it was the Examen for me, so that it is a prayer for daily life, but I think Ignatius put it at the end of the Exercises and at the end of the Fourth Week or in the Fourth Week deliberately. I think it fits there and as I speak of it that may become clear.

The first point in Ignatius’s Introductory Note is that ‘love should manifest itself in deeds rather than in words’. I was terribly struck by a Japanese sister who was here for some years. One day she told me, ‘A Japanese person would never say to another “I love you”’. I asked ‘Why not?’ and she said ‘Oh, it would not be right. If the way you acted did not show me that you loved me it would be insulting to say “I love you”’. I think there is a very profound truth in that. We cold North Americans need to say ‘I love you’ but, just as much as the Japanese, unless our actions show our love our words are insults. Now when Ignatius places this at the beginning of the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love, as he calls it, it seems to me that he is talking to someone who has meditated not only on personal sin, sinfulness, but has been shown by the grace of God such great love. The great love of God shown through the Incarnation, through the public life of Jesus, through his suffering, death and Resurrection is shown in deeds rather than words. In fact, Jesus never says ‘I love you’. Ignatius

has the text here so that the retreatant at the end of the Exercises would read that sentence with a much deeper understanding than a person who has not made the Exercises.

Then the second point that 'love consists in a mutual sharing of goods' I have always found very striking. The one who has knowledge shares it with the one who does not and that is the mark of a friend. When I know something I must tell it to my friend. And God does not keep secrets. He is constantly revealing himself, constantly revealing to us. It strikes me as being peculiarly Ignatian that this comes first and then the other things that are listed. But it is a sharing that goes on in love; love cannot be without sharing. Now again, placed at the end of the Exercises, one is certainly prepared to see more deeply than at the beginning.

The first prelude gives me a vision of myself standing in the presence of God our Lord and his angels and saints who intercede for me. The Exercises have opened the retreatant up, it seems to me, in union with Christ, to a care for the whole world. Note that in this prelude I am standing before all these people who are interested and who are interceding for me. There is a sense of being loved not only by God himself but by the whole heavenly court, by all those who have ever loved and served God. So I am being placed right where I would expect to be at the end of the Fourth Week—or somewhere during the Fourth Week—in the profound sense of love that is not only now but is eternal.

The second prelude I translate something like this: 'this will be to ask for an interior sensitivity to the many blessings I receive'. Knowledge, yes, to be sensitive to the gifts which you are giving me, that 'filled with gratitude for all' . . . That struck me as being peculiarly Ignatian in its psychology. We ask not only to recognize the gifts of God but we ask for the grace of gratitude because we can receive gifts and not be grateful. And so I pray for gratitude because without it I would never be moved to love and serve the Divine Majesty; I would just pass him by. People talk about the circularity of the Exercises and for me it is right there in that word 'gratitude'. The circularity of the Principle and Foundation and this text is in gratitude, because for Ignatius sin in the early meditations is ingratitude and so, once again, this contemplation is suitable at the close of the Exercises. My life is to be lived in gratitude not ingratitude, gratitude that leads me to service of the Lord.

The other thing that has always struck me in this contemplation is that we move from gratitude into love and that again is very realistic. My proper attitude before God is that of one to whom all has been given and therefore I need the gift of gratitude. My place before God is signified in that word 'gratitude'.

Then the points, just to touch them swiftly. The first point—'all the gifts', implies just looking at the gifts themselves and they touch absolutely everything right up to 'the Lord desires to give himself to me'. So there is nothing that he wants to hold back, he gives the whole thing and of course that calls forth on my side a desire to give the whole thing. What has haunted me this last year is the relationship between the *Contemplatio* and Mary Ward's *Vision of the just soul*. I pondered for a long time on her justice—this has been with me for years and years and I had never felt content with any commentaries on justice—and even this one does not completely satisfy me but it comes very close. Since all is gift, justice will require that I be ready to give all, and that is how I see the justice of which Mary Ward speaks. At least it is one aspect of it that I find deeply satisfying.

As I was pondering the second point, 'God present in all of this', the incarnational view of the whole universe, the sacramental view of everything, I perceived it, in a sense, as Ignatius's way of looking at the world. For him life became a looking at the world as the Trinity does and so, looking at the world as the Trinity does, he sees Christ present everywhere. Again, as I pondered the *Just soul* I found myself thinking of Mary Ward's words, 'freedom from all that could make one adhere to things of earth'. There is then great reverence in the face of everything, rather than any greedy selfish clinging, because of the sacramentality of everything. This, for me, is another way of approaching Mary Ward's 'equanimity' in accepting everything.

Then the third point: 'God at work labouring for me in everything'. The word 'labouring' recalls the word Ignatius uses in connection with the Passion. And so while people sometimes write about this contemplation as though it departed from Ignatius's usual concentration on Christ, I do not think it does depart from it at all, I think Christ is there constantly. The presence of the second point is Christ's presence, and here it is Christ too who is labouring for me. So that takes me to the second freedom of Mary Ward, 'freedom for all good works', God who works for me. I am certainly called to offer him all, and what is happening, through

the great humility of God, is that I am invited into love not just thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is the way. Yet, when face to face with that love of Christ who has humbled himself to be like us in everything, there is a sense in which love is the right word.

And then finally the fourth point which goes beyond the gifts and looks at the Giver. So Ignatius is here contemplating the hidden God and one cannot but recall the experience at the River Cardoner here and his great vision of everything flowing from the Trinity. And again I come to Mary Ward and her *Vision of the just soul* and the third freedom she suggests—the freedom to refer all to God. And yes, ‘Take and receive’ is a petition which is very wonderful. As a young person I wanted so much to give all to God and I soon found I could not give all, I had to let him take. I think I realized that when I was pondering the Passion one time, because it was in keeping with what my own interior spirit was going through and the realization that in the traditional Way of the Cross, Jesus is carrying that cross, Jesus falls, Jesus gets up, Jesus keeps going, he finally gets to the ninth station, that of the third fall and he does not get up. He has given, given, given and then they take, they strip, they nail, they raise. And it was as I watched that that I realized, yes, I cannot give, I have to let him take. And so the ‘Take and receive’ makes very profound sense. I am bringing it back to the Christo-centric life of Ignatius. It is exactly the stance of Jesus before the Father and it is the stance of one who is placed with Jesus to serve.

Now in the giving of the Exercises I think that, over the years, I have practically always begun giving the *Contemplatio* as one exercise on the first day of the Fourth Week because it has a sense of pulling the whole of the Exercises together, directing me out of the Exercises and continuing my life afterwards in the light of them. Now that briefly is how I see the *Contemplatio*.

*Lavinia:* What strikes me while you are talking is that it is by looking at the text and one’s own experience of praying it that one receives certain insights. Yet a number of people when they hold a text in their hand fall in to a kind of fundamentalism saying, ‘this is what it says, therefore I have got to do it like that’. Here at least, however, there are no instructions. Ignatius gives no instructions for the giving of the *Contemplatio*. So that the kind of freedom you have been describing, whereby you feel able to present this exercise from the beginning of the Fourth Week, is very much in keeping with the spirit of the text.

*Olga:* I think it is. I know I feel that as I pick up that text. There is a freedom about it and Ignatius himself I find rather delightful. When he gets to the fourth point, he says 'etc. etc.' It is as though he himself were saying, 'let it open for me'; this does not end with a full stop. I have read commentaries, of course, over the years and I was reading Giles Cusson lately. I like his commentary and I stand with most of what he says. I stand also with Michael Buckley. Those are the two contemporaries that have perhaps said the most to me over the years. You know they do review the scholarship.

*Lavinia:* Do you have the impression that you, coming to this text as a woman and coming to it as a Mary Ward person, are able to add something to it, if I can use a word like that?

*Olga:* I feel that coming to it as a Mary Ward person is significant. And I come to it both as a Mary Ward person and as a woman of course. I come to everything as a woman and I have pondered Mary Ward for many a year, but the last two years very particularly. Her *Vision of the just soul*, which she refers to also as a vision of a 'soul wholly God's', strikes me as being what Ignatius is talking about in the *Contemplatio*. It is a soul wholly God's or desiring to be wholly God's, a soul that has been given that desire.

*Lavinia:* And also her experience was so definitely that which you envisage by looking at the word 'take'. Every time she had the beginnings of an insight or a vision, her experience was that this was taken from her and that she was led even more deeply into a further vision.

*Olga:* Right. She would never have seen that on her own and she certainly was stripped of what she held very dear, but the basic that was given her was to desire only what God willed, which again is the basic prayer of the 'Take and receive': 'Yes, let me be faithful to your will'.

*Lavinia:* The process would seem to be the one you have described in terms of the word gratitude and so about complete openness?

*Olga:* That feels very right because gratitude does not attribute anything to oneself. Gratitude implies a humility. If I am too proud to receive or to acknowledge what I have received then I am certainly not open, not free. And so this prayer for gratitude I find basic, elementary.

This is an aside and it is an amusing one. I was a very young teacher when this happened to me. I was barely twenty and I was teaching high-school girls. I saw one morning that something was

amusing the whole class that they were not telling me. It was an English class and at the end of it the ringleader could not stand it any longer and she came up to me with a little slip of paper about an inch and a half wide and three inches long. They had been at a party the night before and a priest who was a handwriting expert was present. She had shown him one of her essays on which I had written a comment and he read my writing. They were giggling and laughing and just finding it hilarious that he said that I was 'determined to the point of stubbornness'. This I had known about myself for years, of course, so that it did not affect me at all. They gave me the little slip and he had just written single words on it—there were about sixteen words. The one that struck me (as I say, I was barely twenty and I could not believe when I first read it) was 'inclined to be ungrateful'. I have found myself over the years grateful for that young girl who had taken my writing to the priest in question because I have prayed ever since for gratitude. And that is why I recognize the significance of the word. So that when you ask me 'does the fact that I am a woman enter into this?', the fact that I am *me* does enter into this.

*Lavinia:* In looking at this text with you in some detail I am becoming aware that it includes the experience of everybody.

*Olga:* Yes, it does, it does. From the simplest to the most complex life or the most sophisticated, because there is no life that is not gifted and there is no life that is not called to the service and glory of God. But there is no life without gratitude.

*Lavinia:* I am reminded of the gospel text which always sounds so ambiguous: 'to the one who has, more will be given'.

*Olga:* 'And from the one who does not have, it will be taken away'. It is a strange text and I have been pondering it this week because we have had it in the readings. Coming to the *Contemplatio*, I think there is something there, because for a person who does not see the gifts of God, the experience is the same as not having them. For a person who sees them, there are countless gifts; one can never see the end of these gifts. So I think there is a real connection between the two.

*Lavinia:* There are so many words Ignatius uses in the *Contemplatio* that are about abundance of life, about a life that is richer and enhanced, and the God who is working and labouring, as you have said, is the God who is Giver. Lots of connections there. Something strikes me about God who works and labours. The French word for 'to plough' is *labourer* and there is something here

about God who is constantly at work making the world. But there is also the play on words of 'the woman in labour'. When I suggested that the text is one that includes the experience of everybody I was thinking that the God who is imaged here is a God who is imaged both as male and female.

*Olga:* Absolutely.

*Lavinia:* More than anywhere else in the text of the Exercises?

*Olga:* I think maybe that is right. Because we were so fastened on the person of Christ earlier I would like to give more thought to that however, because Ignatius constantly turns to the Trinity in the colloquies of the other contemplations, and I know that in making the Exercises myself I was aware of the maleness and the femaleness of God. But that word *labourer* does suggest the woman in labour and himself in labour. I like your reference to the *labourer*; it is very significant too because it is what he must do with us and certainly what was done to Christ. I cannot think of the word *labourer* in connection with Christ without thinking of the scourging, the whole Passion.

*Lavinia:* To return to something you have said about the person who is aware and has the sensitivity of the second prelude being a person who makes the exercise with great fruit. Are there any signs of readiness that you might be watching for in a retreatant?

*Olga:* Readiness to make this exercise. Yes, in a sense the readiness for this exercise is any time, but the best time I would say is when they come through the Resurrection. I have been dealing with people in on-going direction and I have seen quite a number who come out of the experience of the long retreat and come back to speak of it. As they continue coming for interviews I have had experience of quite a number who did not get beyond the Third Week. I am not sure that they knew they had not got beyond the Third Week but they had not been able to enter at all into the joy of the Resurrection. For them the *Contemplatio* would not have the fullness that it could have for a person who had entered into the joy of the Resurrection. But I have seen people stay in that Third Week for a year, two years, before coming into the Resurrection so it is not a matter of time it is a matter of when the grace is given.

*Lavinia:* I wonder if there is any comment you would make on the graces of this exercise for the director?

*Olga:* Yes. I suppose that in my first experience of giving the Exercises which was some sixteen years ago, I was very, very

moved to gratitude myself in the face of retreatants receiving their answer to that second prelude. They spoke of their growing sensitivity to the gifts of God and as I listened to them I found my own sensitivity growing. That is certainly one grace. And I suppose it was in giving the exercise to others that I saw the value for myself of the *Contemplatio* as an Examen and certainly watching others as they entered into the 'Take and receive', I wanted to renew it myself.

*Lavinia*: Another source of grace might be that, with the kind of experience you have, you have seen the immense variety of ways in which people can make this exercise.

*Olga*: Yes. The greater depth, the lesser depth. Well, it depends upon their experience of life in general, their experience in their prayer, the depth of their prayer, the graces given. Certainly the whole heavenly court of the first prelude is reflected in the whole earthly spectrum of those making the retreat. One becomes extremely aware of the variety of gifts given. We know that, but to become more deeply aware of it is one of the graces of giving this exercise.

*Lavinia*: And to my mind the text makes room for every way of praying as well, that somebody who has discovered imaginative contemplation in a big way during the retreat has a wonderful opening if this is the representation of place. And similarly someone whose way of praying is very imageless also has room and the necessary space.

*Olga*: I think it touches everybody. People who pray very well in nature immediately think of all the gifts of nature. The people who are aware of their own gifts, their personal gifts, the gifts with which they can labour, that comes through. Yes, it touches those with imagination; it touches those with a far more intellectual approach; it touches all. It touches those who are rocked into silence before God. There can be a very busy intellectual approach, or an extremely silent one. For me, this is the prayer of open hands *par excellence* because all is gift. I am totally poor and he not only has a right to everything but he is giving me the grace to desire that he exercise that right. I translated from the French a commentary on the Magnificat and one of the lines in it is 'He lets me be poor before him'. I find that prayer right here.

*Lavinia*: I am wondering now if there is anything else about actually giving this exercise that would be helpful for you to share; anything



in the way of 'dos and don'ts'. One of the reasons we want this piece from you is because you are an experienced director.

*Olga:* The giving of it. I have done it a variety of ways depending on the person and I am not certain whether I have properly analyzed why I do what I do so that I can verbalize it. I do know that I often break it in four points and give one point each day. Now there are some retreatants who I realize go right through to the fourth point, and I let them be because that is where they are at. But for others I talk about the way we receive things, things that are given us. For instance, I can receive through the mail for advertisement's sake a pen that is very useful to me, but the person who sent it has no regard for me at all. Nonetheless it is a gift and it is useful. I am glad I got it. The person might telephone a department store and over the phone, select the gift, have it wrapped and have it delivered to someone. Or the person might go and with great deliberateness search for the gift that they know would suit their friend and bring it. Human gift, in a sense, is investing yourself in the gift you give your friend. You knit them a cardigan in their favourite colours because you know them. I talk about that because it helps them to get into not only the first point—the gifts—but the presentness of the Giver and then the work of the Giver before looking at him who has given all. But I do use that natural analogy when presenting it. Yes, as you ask me that question, there are people who are not ready for this contemplation to be made in its fullness but just to begin making it and to begin praying for gratitude and sensitivity—that inner sensitivity to the gifts of God. Interior sensitivity is terribly important and I do talk a good deal about that. The need is to pray for gratitude; and you have learnt why I realize it—because of my experience from the analysis of my handwriting as a young woman. It was a real gift in my life.

*Lavinia:* I am terribly aware as we're speaking of that lovely line in Hopkins 'I feel thy finger and find thee'.

*Olga:* I found myself thinking about Hopkins even as I was pondering the *Contemplatio* again to get ready for you, because so much of Hopkins is straight out of this and there is so much of Teilhard de Chardin, particularly his *Milieu divin* that gets right into this. But in the giving of it one has to be sensitive to the amount of gratitude that a person is capable of; the sensitivity that this person has to gifts. The individual person's self-image enters

into it very largely. There should be some crack in the low self-esteem of people who have no self-worth by the end of the Exercises. One of the remarks on low self-esteem that I found most helpful is in Gerald May's *Care of mind; care of spirit* where he points out that low self-esteem is not the end of the line, because even that I can give over to God and I can live with it if I cannot shake it. If I cannot be freed from it I can at least hold it on open hands before the Lord. And it seems to me that the *Contemplatio* is adapted to bringing people at least to hold their poor self-image on open hands before God.

*Lavinia*: So that it is not just an exercise for people who are very aware of themselves as gifted and growing?

*Olga*: That is right. It is an exercise particularly for those who are not aware, because it is an exercise which through prayer does open one to sensitivity to the gifts of God. And again that 'Take and receive'—well, some find it frightening. Nonetheless when they have pondered and contemplated Christ as they have through the Exercises, their image of God may not have moved as far as they would have hoped, yet they have an image of a God who is ready to give himself for them and therefore, even though I am afraid in saying the 'Take and receive', yet I can pray for the confidence to let him do it because of what I have seen in prayer. To take people who have not made the Exercises and give them that prayer can be a very frightening experience and it can be read in a completely negative way.

*Lavinia*: So that it just seems foolish and threatening?

*Olga*: Yes; and therefore safe only when one has contemplated the exceeding lavishness of God in face of complete ingratitude on my part, in face of my own sinfulness—and yet he does this for me. Not even our rejection of him on the cross could keep him back from this. He returns in resurrection. And not to say 'where were you when I needed you on Friday night?' but to say 'peace' as though we need the comforting, not he. That is a staggering part of it and that is why I think this exercise is suited at the end of the Fourth Week, because this is a God to whom we have done everything and he comes back in love. He comes back to comfort, to console us, not to be feared in our saying of the 'Take and receive'. He will be with us through the worst and through the best.

*Lavinia*: A little earlier you described something which will be familiar to people: those individuals who are, as it were, 'in the

Third Week', even though they have come through all of the Exercises. I am wondering about the person who is still 'in the First Week', to what extent can such a person make this exercise with advantage.

*Olga:* I think the making of this exercise could bring a person much closer to the dispositions that are normally present for the grace of the First Week. Because it is a praying to recognize the gift of God, a praying to be sensitive to that gift. The grace of the First Week as I see it, is a simultaneous realization of God's merciful love and my sin at the same time. God has a delightful sense of humour. Praying to be aware of the gifts of God does open one to the grace of the First Week. One can see oneself as having broken the commandments, as having been, well, let me say the word 'a rotter', of having fallen below my expectations of myself. One can have all those experiences without an experience of sin. It is only when I see this as touching my relationship with him who loves me that I know it is sin and so I can know sorrow, I can love more. I think that once again gratitude and a recognition of the gifts of God can dispose one for the grace of the First Week.

*Lavinia:* The other thing I am aware that we have not necessarily talked about is the title: 'Contemplation to Attain the Love of God' and maybe that is the kind of love which is in question.

*Olga:* Reaching God's love and an understanding of his love.

*Lavinia:* I know that it is a pardoning love of God.

*Olga:* Oh, it is a pardoning love of God. Where God's love touches us, it is a merciful pardoning love—that is right. I have often thought of it as 'a contemplation wholly directed to love'. Simply a *contemplatio ad amorem*. I know it is *ad obtinendum*, about attaining love, but in some way, somehow, coming in contact with that love of God for me in a much deeper, profounder sense. It is a bringing together of the whole experience of the Exercises even while I have just said it can certainly help dispose one for the grace of the First Week. In other words while I am saying that it can be prayed by anyone, anytime, anywhere, I still think that its proper place is the Fourth Week.

I know I am not content yet with what I have seen in the title. I know I am going to think about that, reflect on it much more, put it on my back-burner and see what comes, because in the *ad obtinendum* there is a prayer somehow to be so open, so free, that I can let his love really touch me.

*Lavinia:* So it is not an image of striving?

*Olga:* No, it is not an image of striving for me. It is a contemplation to begin with and I often think of the French *contempler*, to, as it were, gaze long and lovingly at. And here what I begin to do is gaze—long and lovingly—at what he has given me, at himself present here, as he is working for me and as he draws me deeper to himself, redeemed through all the gifts, and the greatest gift of all is the gift of himself. So it is not a striving word, it is a praying word, a contemplative word.

*Lavinia:* And as you say, the exercise in effect ends with the word 'etc'.

*Olga:* It occurs twice in the last point. Ignatius himself is speechless before him 'from whom all blessings flow'. I am sure this contemplation is going to change for me over the years both as I watch others praying it and in praying it myself, because it has changed very, very much in my own recollections. I first made the Exercises in 1929 and then it was a kind of welcome return to normalcy because so much of the Exercises had been an examination of conscience. To go back to looking at the goodness of God all round me was a real gift! I did not see it in those days as flowing out of the Exercises so much as a gift at the end.

*Lavinia:* A reward for having endured!

*Olga:* Isn't that funny. I never thought of it 'as having endured'. But the giving of the Exercises did change for the better long ago.

*Lavinia:* And you are confident that there is going to be more change?

*Olga:* Oh yes. I learnt long ago.

*Lavinia:* I find that very reassuring and would like, in any case, to thank you Olga for your reflections here.

*Olga:* I have just given you what has been in my mind and in my prayer. I know I could not really write what I wanted as I honestly have not been free enough to do it. Someday I may.