

ASKING FOR THE GRACE

By LAVINIA BYRNE

OVER THE PAST twenty years many of the double dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises have been explored both in print and in the lived experience of retreat directors and retreatants alike. And so, for instance, we have rediscovered the double emphases of healing and calling which lie behind an earlier debate about the unitive and/or elective purpose of the Exercises. We have discovered the value of the closed retreat and the full Exercises given in everyday life according to Annotation 19; that is to say the central place of flexibility in Ignatius's scheme of things.

A more complicated dynamic is that which is set up when Ignatius has the one who makes the Exercises 'ask for what *I* want and desire' (Exx 48) and then proposes certain named graces. This forces me, for one, to ask further questions. Why should what is sought be named in this way when I have just been instructed to ask for what *I* want and desire? Why these graces, why not others? What is the relationship between asking for these graces and learning to discern the call of Christ? How responsible is our practice? Do retreat directors advert to the fact that regression is inevitable when more emphasis is placed on the asking than on the graces themselves? What else is there in the text to counteract the tendency to regression that is inevitable when people become petitioners? Who has power and who empowers?

I became aware of this dynamic almost by accident. At a team meeting during a thirty-day retreat I heard the annoyance in a fellow director's voice because she had been asked to go down to the corner shops at the nearest intersection to buy tobacco for one of her retreatants. The key word is 'asked'. Of course the individual retreatant in question was able to buy his own tobacco and to discern whether or not to buy tobacco. But where his times of prayer were spent in asking for graces, his direction sessions too became coloured by dependency. From asking for shame and confusion, he ended up asking for tobacco or rather for help with his shopping. A measure of transference becomes inevitable when someone is encouraged to become a petitioner. A measure of

annoyance is equally inevitable when this transference is not accepted and explored.

One useful way of exploring what is going on is, I believe, to examine where power lies and to see who empowers whom during the full Ignatian Exercises. In the fourth point of the *Contemplatio* I read Ignatius's final word on the subject:

My limited power comes from the supreme and infinite power above, and so too, justice, goodness, mercy, etc, descend from above as the rays of light descend from the sun, and as the waters flow from their fountains [237].

There are two touchstones in this text. Ignatius is clear; ultimate power lies with God and is contextualized by God's other attributes, namely justice, goodness and mercy, all of which God desires to share. But I too am powerful, even though my power is limited. By the end of the retreat therefore, the retreatant is invited to experience the glory of knowing that she or he is empowered by God. The word 'glory' appears 21 times in the text of the Exercises (125 times in the *Constitutions*); the word 'power' only twice (once in the *Constitutions*), in this text from the *Contemplatio* and in the General Examination of Conscience [Exx 32-42]. In Exx 39,2 we read, 'God our Lord is in every creature by his essence, power and presence'. This text stands in the same relationship to the beginning of the Exercises as the *Contemplatio* does to the end and contains the same wisdom. Together these two references to power, the power of God present in people, form two bases from which the journey of the Exercises may safely be begun and where it has to end.

During the course of this journey various false images of power have to be uncovered and laid aside. I would single out these amongst others: the notion that God alone is powerful, that only the retreat director is powerful and that power is bad anyway. Ignatius provides both a context and a method for this work to be done. If I detail that context here, it is so that the method can emerge more clearly. My purpose is to demonstrate how power may safely be transferred and re-appropriated during the process of the Exercises. Asking for what I want and desire is, I believe, the key to understanding this.

Evidence from the text

What are the graces for which Ignatius has the exercitant pray? In brackets beside each reference given below, the numbers represent a word count to illustrate the incidence of the word in question in the text.

Week one

1st Exercise: 'for shame (2) and confusion (3)' [46].

2nd Exercise: 'for a growing and intense sorrow (17) and tears (11) for my sins' [55].

5th Exercise: 'for a deep sense of the pain (10) which the lost suffer' [65].

Call of the King: 'the grace not to be deaf to his call, but prompt and diligent to accomplish his most holy will (6)' [91].

Week two

Incarnation: 'an intimate knowledge (11) of our Lord who has become man for me, that I may love him more and follow him more closely' [104].

Two Standards: 'a knowledge of the deceits of the rebel chief and help to guard myself against them and also to ask for a knowledge of the true life (7) exemplified in the sovereign and true commander and the grace to imitate (9) him' [139].

'grace to be received under his standard' [147].

Three classes: 'grace to choose (21) what is more for the glory of his divine Majesty and the salvation of my soul' [152].

Choice in the third time: 'I should beg God our Lord to deign to move my will and to bring to my mind what would be more for his praise (19) and glory' [180].

Week three

1st contemplation: 'sorrow (17), compassion and shame because the Lord is going to his suffering for my sins' [193].

2nd contemplation: 'sorrow with Christ in sorrow, anguish (2) with Christ in anguish, tears and deep grief (2) because of the great affliction Christ endures for me' [203].

Week four

1st contemplation: 'the grace to be glad and rejoice intensely because of the great joy (10) and the glory of Christ our Lord' [221].

Contemplatio: 'an intimate knowledge of the many blessings (3) received, that filled with gratitude for all, I may in all things love and serve the Divine Majesty' [233].

What emerges is that the full range of human feelings is covered here. The retreatant is asked to pray both for negative and for positive feelings and to experience both. Nevertheless, Ignatius is cautious. He names fewer negative feelings than positive ones and names them in very specific contexts.

In the first exercise of the First Week, for instance, he has the exercitant ask for 'shame and confusion'. I owe to someone else¹ the insight that he does not have one ask either for guilt or for forgiveness. To ask to feel guilty is sick, for guilt is self-justifying and always seeks to have the last word. Forgiveness, meanwhile, is to be presupposed, for the work of our redemption is already done. The First Week exercises are aimed at helping the exercitant move away from guilt to an experience of contrition; shame and confusion are a means only insofar as they enable the retreatant to experience that he or she is known and loved by God as he or she is. God's angel in this work may well be the retreat director whose task it becomes to accompany the retreatant in the journey of remembering. At this point the director is being empowered both by God and by the retreatant who is handing him or herself over as his or her defences are dropped. The director, 'as a balance at rest' [15,6], in effect presents her or himself as someone who is not feeling shame and confusion and therefore as someone who is more in control. How is this to be used responsibly? What grace should the one who gives the Exercises be asking for in order to hold the balance at rest?

The first week grace for the director would appear to be the grace of compassion. In this sense the one who gives the Exercises has iconic status. The first week temptation for the director could well be to begin to manipulate; to attempt to make the retreatant feel certain things in order to provoke a response that is deemed appropriate or to use the language of guilt. During the First Week I believe Ignatius to be working out of two main considerations. And this is the double dynamic to which I have alluded. Firstly he is conscious that each exercitant arrives at the experience of making the Exercises with his or her *own* rules for the discernment of spirits. It is highly likely that these will read as follows:

1. To feel good is to be good.
2. To feel bad is to be bad.

His pedagogy during the First Week is bent on undermining these assumptions. Therefore he names very specific graces and would have both the one who gives and the one who makes the Exercises notice where they lead. He takes a risk here, the risk that people will get it wrong—directors as much as retreatants. Directors will resist an authentic search for negative feelings either because they cannot face the pain of watching someone cry or to speed up the process. This serves only to provoke a sense of sin based in fear rather than in love. Likewise, because retreatants

are not being allowed to revisit the truth of their own past, they cannot learn its lessons. For,

Part of God's commitment to humanity is to remember also the sins and betrayals of his people. God remembers human sin not to punish or avenge it, but to heal the brokenness that lies at the root of it. Unless human beings are enabled to remember, grieve for and repent their sins they can never be made whole and free from guilt. What we forget we are condemned to repeat.²

Anita Brookner hints at the same insight: 'Once a thing is done it can never be undone, it can only be forgotten . . . The truth lies in remembering'.³

For this reason Ignatius does all in his power to make the remembering safe. He uses the mechanism of projection to enable those who make the Exercises to name what is most hideous and fearful for them. The sin of the angels, of the first parents and of some unknown person condemned to hell for a single mortal sin are safely 'out there' and so form a safe context in which the action of remembering can be begun. Only then does the focus change and is attention to be centred on the individual retreatant's own experience and personal sin. In this way even the most negative of feelings can safely be stirred, both in order to be healed and, more importantly, to be used. For beyond the healing lies the possibility of openness to a call. The director who backs off from the one will be inhibiting the other. In either case a true understanding of Ignatius's own 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits' will not be developed. Why is this important?

Diagrammatically I believe his first week Rules may be represented as follows:

Consolation
[The Call of Christ]

Good feelings

Bad feelings

Desolation
[The voice of the evil spirit]

Only when an individual retreatant is allowed to have her or his own good and bad feelings will she or he begin to learn that good feelings may lead either to consolation or to desolation and

bad feelings equally may lead to either. This learning has to be done experientially if it is to have any value at all because the retreatants' own rules for discerning have been in operation for many more years than they are likely to remember. They can be reversed only by the blinding revelation of Exx 60, the shout of joy as consolation is experienced in the midst of pain.

Ours is a culture that resists pain, ours is a culture that does not let people mourn or weep, ours is a culture that does not allow people to say they have failed or done wrong. The retreat director is as contaminated with these values as anyone else. Yet I believe that where we follow Ignatius's prescription and see it in context, we may safely invite people to pray for the graces of the First Week. The reason why it is both safe and important to do this is because these graces have their place within the process whereby the exercitant is both healed and called, the process whereby she or he becomes a discerning person. Ignatius's intention is to empower people even if in the process they temporarily transfer power to the one who gives the Exercises. I find this illustrated in the rather zany little example he gives in the *Directory* transcribed by Polanco.

When someone makes the Exercises, he should always be asked what he wants to eat and this should be given to him even if he asks for a chicken or for hardly anything at all, as he feels fitting. In this way, when he has finished the midday meal he should say to the person who clears the plates or to whoever served his meal just what he wants for the evening meal; and likewise after supper he should say what he wants to have the next day. Because he (Ignatius) considered that this is one of the things that helps most.⁴

In this way the retreatant is kept in touch with his or her own ability to make choices and decisions. I find it significant that this text applies specifically to the First Week when the power to choose is most in jeopardy. The matter of choice may be trivial but I am reminded of the honesty of one of the retreatants who featured in the B.B.C. television film, *The retreat*. He commented that there were moments when all he did was sit on his bed and think about the next meal. Choice at table is important because in so many other areas the exercise of freedom has been removed and decision-making apparently transferred to the director.

Because this transference is almost bound to take place, I am interested in the way in which Ignatius then goes on to ensure that power is given back to the one who makes the Exercises during the course of the rest of the retreat. The graces outlined above as proper to the remaining weeks continue to balance

negative and positive feelings. Nevertheless while this experiential work of learning that these are not the same as desolation and consolation is being continued, his basic intention becomes clearer and clearer. He holds before director and retreatant alike the insight that what is really being prayed for is an 'intimate knowledge of our Lord who has become man for me, that I may love him more and follow him more closely'. A closer following means making choices, hence the importance of learning how to discern God's will.

The word angel appears 27 times in the Exercises. Yet these angels or spirits are only to be identified so that Christ may be known and that the exercitant may learn that God's will is not like Russian roulette. God's will does not lie in one course of action over and above another. We do not swing an empty barrel crazily about our heads in the hopes that the will of God may blow our minds. God's will, God's power, lies within. It is the power dimly spotted in the General Examination of Conscience and learnt gently until it becomes the way of proceeding of the *Contemplatio*. I owe this understanding to such an unlikely source: the Rules for Thinking with the Church. Here Ignatius points out: 'Likewise we ought not to speak of grace at such length and with such emphasis that the poison of doing away with liberty is engendered' [Exx 369,17]. Speaking of grace, naming the graces for which the retreatant might pray and the making of Christian choices or full exercise of liberty are not so much contrasted as held in balance. They need each other.

Ignatius does not use the word 'poison' lightly. It appears only once in the text of the *Exercises* and once in the *Constitutions*. His word *veneno* is better translated by the English word venom as this is more weighty. In *Constitutions* [465], which deals with the inadvisability of studying certain books, we find, 'it rarely occurs that some poison is not mixed into what comes forth from a heart full of it'. Poison is the product of a heart that is not indifferent, a heart that is not free. It is toxic because it comes from within and its influence can be deadly. Therefore the director must speak of grace, must encourage the retreatant to ask for certain graces, but only in a way that promotes liberty, that is to say a way that enables the exercitant to become a discerning person.

From this insight I discover something further which has application to other questions raised by the Exercises. As a student of modern languages in the sixties, I learnt various ways of looking at literary texts. The professor who most profoundly influenced my grasp of textual analysis taught me French twelfth-century literature. He was rigorous in applying principles that were both

scientific and artistic. He taught me about counting words to gain access into the mind of an author; he taught me to notice the incidence of certain phrases so that I should observe the way in which the meaning of words is shaded by their context. It has taken me far too long to realize that what I was being taught in one discipline has useful applications in others too, that the curious fundamentalism which comes from our veneration for so august a text as that of the *Spiritual Exercises* can only be counteracted by reading or knowing them as a whole. In this way whatever Ignatius says in one context can be informed by what he is saying in others and his purpose become clearer to our twentieth-century eyes and practice.

NOTES

¹ Sr Anne Harvey S.C. in conversation at Ignatius College, Guelph.

² Angela Tilby: 'Human tragedy and its redemption' in *The Times*, January 26, 1985.

³ Anita Brookner: *Look at me*, (Triad Grafton Books, 1982), p 5.

⁴ *Texte autographe des Exercices Spirituels et documents contemporains (1526-1615)*, (Desclée de Brouwer, Bellarmin, 1986) p 234, (My own translation.)

I have used the *Spiritual exercises* in Louis J. Puhl S. J.'s translation throughout, (Loyola University Press, Chicago, 1951). A more helpful index is provided by Ignace de Loyola: *Texte autographe des Exercices Spirituels et documents contemporains (1526-1615)* (Desclée de Brouwer, Bellarmin, Paris, 1985) and also by *Palabras de los Ejercicios*, (C.I.S., Rome, 1975). I have also used *Index de l'Examen General et des Constitutions*, (C.I.S., Rome, 1973).