

# REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF MAKING AND GIVING THE EXERCISES

By SUSAN ANDERSON

**E**VEN AFTER THREE YEARS I still look back with a sense of wonder that I, as a Mennonite lay person, found myself doing the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.

In April of 1987 I had just completed a Masters programme in social work. For several years before returning to school, I had been working for Family and Children's Services (a child welfare agency). Now I wondered what I was called to do next . . .

I had met a priest recently who, in one of our talks, had suggested I should do the Forty Day Institute. Further questioning elicited the information that the Institute included a thirty-day silent retreat doing the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. I wondered how well a Mennonite would fit in, but thought the *rest* would do me good, and perhaps I might have the time to think and pray about where God wanted me to go next—and of course there were numerous unread books, unwritten letters etc. to catch up on. Imagine my surprise when I received a letter telling me to bring only my bible and a notebook, and perhaps some hobby material. The letter also stated I would be praying for five one hour periods a day. Five hours! What, I wondered, could you do for five hours. What had I gotten myself into! Well, what I had gotten myself into was a life-changing experience which is still impacting my life in every area.

There are increasing numbers of non-Roman Catholics\* who are doing the Spiritual Exercises. Although many are from Anglican or Episcopalian background, there are a growing number who, like myself, are part of the Reformed tradition. I have been asked

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\*Since there are several denominations who are 'Catholic', I have used 'Roman Catholic' as appropriate.

in this article to look at appropriate and inappropriate adaptations of the spirit and text of the Spiritual Exercises for the person of the Reformed tradition. This task is made more difficult in that theology and practice within the Reformed tradition range from quite liberal to very conservative. As well, the Exercises themselves force a dialogue between contemporary Christian thought and that of medieval thinking.

I am not an expert on the Exercises. Although I have continued to grow through short courses and reading, I recognize that many who read this article will know much more than I do. What I hope to offer is some insight into the differences in perception, especially of the more conservative element of the Reformed tradition. Many of the issues discussed will also apply to Roman Catholics, so perhaps some of the adaptations will be helpful to them as well.

Much of the material in the article comes from my reflections on my experience. However, I thought it too good an opportunity to depend upon my views alone. I therefore designed a questionnaire and shared it with a small sample group. Although it could hardly be considered a valid research tool, it did broaden my information base, confirming and/or stretching my views.

As well as the usual information about name, denomination, translations used etc., I asked people to comment upon how some aspects of the Exercises had affected their experience. Included were medieval imagery, language, triple colloquy, contemplation as a prayer method, non-scripture contemplation, Roman Catholic theology, and the experience of the retreat atmosphere (e.g. silence, daily Eucharist, working with a spiritual director). People were also asked to comment on the overall impact of the Spiritual Exercises in their ongoing spiritual life and whether they were presently directing the Exercises in some form (e.g. eight day retreats, Annotation 19, Institutes).

In reviewing both my experience and the information received, two things became very clear. The first is that any person from a non-Roman Catholic tradition who does the Exercises is going to be a fairly flexible and open-minded individual to begin with. This is particularly true of the person from a more conservative stream of the Reformed tradition e.g. Baptist, Mennonite, Pentecostal etc. The second is that the importance of the spiritual director in an individual's experience of the Exercises cannot be over-emphasized.

The early history of many of the denominations of the Reformed tradition includes a struggle, often bloody and bitter, against the

Roman Church and aspects of its theology. However much has been done in recent years to effect reconciliation and establish mutual respect, old historical remembrances and biases die hard. Anyone from these traditions not open-minded and flexible would be unlikely to participate in any Roman Catholic retreat and/or have little contact with a Roman Catholic retreat centre.

There could be a number of factors involved in enabling a person to have this necessary openness. One evident in many is an intense desire to deepen their relationship with God. Another which came to light in the small sample group was that of a mixed Church background. Others could include curiosity, personality, previous life experience, positive contact with Roman Catholics and Roman Catholic institutions, an adult conversion experience and the ability to reflect upon the meaning of a wide variety of human experience.

Regardless of the factors which enable a person to come to the Exercises, the spiritual director needs to be aware that the directee may have come without the support and understanding of some of the key people in the directee's life. In my own case, for example, I refrained from telling some people exactly what I was doing. This did not stop me from wondering how they would see some of the very 'Catholic' things I was doing. Early or late in the retreat it may be necessary to help a retreatant to resolve some of his/her feelings so that they do not become a block to the experience of the Exercises.

Often, since doing the Exercises, I have smiled at some memory of a session with my spiritual director—sometimes that smile has been tinged with embarrassment as I recall some issue which loomed larger than life. In reviewing the questionnaires, I found that without exception people listed their spiritual director as one of the important positives of the experience. Since most of us in the survey had Roman Catholic directors, it says something about the quality of these directors and their ability to be both sensitive and flexible.

Directing someone from the Reformed tradition will require sensitivity in areas not affecting Roman Catholics. The number of retreatants from the Reformed tradition attending a Thirty Day retreat or an Institute is likely to be small and probably from more than one denomination. It is therefore more difficult to feel fully a part of the retreat community. I know I felt my difference keenly because I was the only non-Roman Catholic in the fifty people who formed our community. I was also the only lay person.

Although every effort possible was made to make me feel welcome, it was sometimes hard not to feel excluded by the understandings and practices shared by my fellow retreatants.

Communion is often an issue for both the Roman Catholic system and the Reformed tradition retreatant. Since the Eucharist forms such an important part of the daily experience of community life during a retreat, it can also be a daily reminder of differences and in some places exclusion. I was fortunate in that I was given the option of receiving Communion. I understand there are retreat centres where this is not permitted—and I am certain that some of the Roman Catholics who were part of my retreat community had their reservations as well. However I received much positive feedback at the end of the retreat as we all recognized how much our sharing in the Eucharist had enriched our sense of oneness in our faith walk. I am certain that in those centres where non-Roman Catholics are not able to receive Communion, there is prior notification. But I wonder if any retreatant would be able to judge adequately the impact of this over the thirty or forty days of a retreat before experiencing it.

After the Roman Catholics have made their decision about Communion, the individual retreatant must make his/her decision. The issues are the same—the conflict being one of reconciling theology with the desire to be as fully a part of community as possible. The choice will never be made lightly. Some will decide to receive Communion and some will decide not to. However, making the personal decision not to receive will have a very different feel from the sense of exclusion which may be caused by no choice. The issues around inclusion will vary from one retreatant to another. Certainly any non-Roman Catholic doing the Exercises recognizes the need to be flexible and adaptable. Perhaps the greatest gift in inviting people of the Reformed tradition to participate in the Spiritual Exercises is the opportunity for both groups to experience the richness of the other. Bridges built on these new understandings will influence all future contacts. Without doubt my present freedom in relationship with Roman Catholics was greatly influenced by my experience during the Exercises. Roman Catholics also tell me of the impact I had on both their experience of the Exercises and their understanding of those of the Reformed tradition.

Since completing the Spiritual Exercises I have attempted to introduce contemplation as a method of prayer to a number of

groups, including my own denomination and those of other Reformed traditions. Clearly non-scripture contemplation was most difficult for people, especially in the more conservative groups—many distrusting any unfamiliar forms of prayer not directly based on scripture. This may also be a problem for someone doing the Exercises—especially in the first week.

I have found it helpful to emphasize the role of imagination in more familiar forms of prayer. Since many associate imagination with 'let's pretend' it is important to point out *God's* use of our imagination. For example, one cannot ask God for direction about a future event and/or receive that direction without using the imagination, because it is that faculty of the mind which allows us to plan ahead.

One of the foundation stones of the Reformed tradition is the Word of God. The degree of literalness assigned to scripture will vary from person to person, affected by the conservative or liberal nature of his/her denomination and personal theology. Those who feel scripture is inspired by God (2 Tim 3,16.17) and not to be tampered with lightly, will appreciate the literalness of the medieval view of scripture as expressed in the Exercises. They will also appreciate the fact that the Exercises are based on the life of Jesus and the biblical drama of redemption.

Contemplation based on scripture will be fairly comfortable *because* it is scripture based. However there will be one or two who may be uncomfortable because contemplation goes beyond what is specifically recorded in scripture. It may be helpful initially to assign scripture passages where much of the detail is recorded. The directee could be encouraged to allow the story to unfold and at least to allow themselves to be present as observers. The colloquy would be a time of discussing with God what took place and its significance in the life experience of the directee.

Whether the directee is struggling with scriptural or non-scriptural contemplation, a director can emphasize the importance of a directee's prayer for the presence of the Spirit of truth and for the grace of confidence and trust to believe that God will be in truth part of the contemplation. This, in combination with the respectful exploration of a retreatant's doubts and the necessary space to resolve them, would empower most to make themselves available for God's gift of contemplation.

A director with a less literal view of scripture should perhaps be cautious about referring to stories in scripture as myth, e.g. the

Genesis story of creation. Inclusive language in reference to God may also be a sensitive issue since many of the conservative view feel that God has been referred to in male terms throughout scripture and therefore *should* be seen as having a male image.

Of course, those of a more liberal turn may have difficulty with the literalness of the medieval view of scripture and will certainly have difficulty with God being seen in strictly male images. I feel less qualified to comment as much in this area because this is a growing edge in my own life.

However, I do understand that the language and images used in the Exercises—especially the militaristic and paternal images—are a problem for many people. The Mennonite Church, for example, has a very strong commitment to non-military resolution of conflict, so the Two Standards exercise needed to be reframed by my director to something which kept the intent of the exercise but was not so military in nature.

I must say that with the exception of Mary, Ignatius has a less than complimentary view of women. More than those who are feminist in perspective would find the image of women expressed in the Exercises offensive. Perhaps the language cannot be changed but we can provide within the retreat community an atmosphere which expresses a respect for women and their value in our society. At the very least, firm attempts should be made by all to use inclusive language during liturgies. As well, contemplations which show the view Jesus had of women might be important, especially to those women whose self-image has been damaged in ways that block intimacy with God. All of this may help to provide a more positive counterbalance to the overt and covert undervaluing many women experience in other parts of their lives.

The triple colloquy was identified by many as a problem. Most directors resolve this difficulty by suggesting the directee pray only with Jesus and the Father, or substitute the Holy Spirit for the colloquy with Mary. The feminist perspective may make other adaptations necessary and useful.

My own feeling is that while praying to saints is very likely going to be unacceptable to someone of the Reformed tradition, spending some time meditating on Mary's role in the life of Jesus and their obvious intimacy may be helpful for directees—especially women. If Roman Catholics have been accused of making too much of Mary, we may be convicted of making too little of her.

Part of the teaching I received in the Reformed tradition was that a person prayed through Jesus to the Father—not to Jesus personally. This would make doing the colloquy difficult for some people. Although most directees would find praying directly with Jesus a very enriching experience, a director might need to be sensitive to the directee to whom prayer with God the Father is the only acceptable prayer.

Whether of a conservative or liberal strain, many directees of the Reformed tradition will have a problem with some aspects of Roman Catholic theology. Often the problem can be dealt with by omitting a practice, e.g. not taking Communion or not including Mary in the triple colloquy. Again directees are usually quite flexible and either alone or with the help of their director can reframe an exercise or an image so that it is better understood in the light of their own experience. For example, I found it helpful to use images from C. S Lewis's *The great divorce*<sup>1</sup> when doing the contemplation on hell. Remembering Lewis's description of the various people (in the same book<sup>2</sup>) helped me to see the possibility of damnation caused by a single character fault.

My experience of Roman Catholic theology in the Exercises also helped me to develop a better understanding and appreciation for some of it. The works versus faith controversy of Reformation days was weighed against the obvious emphasis on faith expressed by Ignatius in the Spiritual Exercises. The obvious faith commitment of Roman Catholics participating in the Exercises and their sincerity in reception of Communion and the sacrament of Reconciliation helped dispel old myths about cheap grace. Perhaps agreement is not the issue—understanding and respect is.

I do know that it is seeing Roman Catholics participate in a healthy, sincere way which makes the idea of certain sacraments acceptable to non-Roman Catholics. In some areas it may be helpful to a retreatant for a director to anticipate an adaptation of a Roman Catholic practice or sacrament. For example, in my own experience, the first week left me with the question of confession. The week was particularly difficult for me and I think I would have profited from some way to symbolize and express what had happened. Although I knew that Roman Catholics had access to the sacrament of Reconciliation, I did not know whether this would have been available to me as a non-Roman Catholic. I do not know whether I would have had the courage to have done it, if available, but the possibility was never discussed.

In my own practice of spiritual direction I have often encouraged directees to write down what they wish to deal with and in a small service of reconciliation express to God their desire for forgiveness. I then share with them God's promise of forgiveness as recorded in 1 Jn 1,9.10 and together we burn and bury the piece of paper. Having both experienced and witnessed this procedure, I can testify to the powerful way God has used this in helping directees to let go of past sin. Another adaptation which might be helpful for some of the Reformed tradition would be to include some contemplation about Pentecost during the Fourth Week. A number of the Reformed tradition are also charismatic, so the Holy Spirit is very significant. As well, it would recognize the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering us for our return to the larger community.

Perhaps a final issue . . . Puhl<sup>3</sup> was the preferred translation of the *Spiritual Exercises* used at Guelph when I did the Exercises. I do not have the expertise to compare the merits of one translation with another. However, I personally am impressed with the translation done by Elisabeth Meier Tetlow.<sup>4</sup> It appears to me that in Tetlow,<sup>5</sup> military images and language have been modified, while still respecting the spirit and intent of the Exercises. As well, the way in which inclusive language has been used largely eliminates the negative view of women—something which frees both men and women to participate more fully in the Exercises.

Reading over the questionnaire responses confirmed my own observation that a modern translation can be very helpful for someone of the Reformed tradition. There are so many extra things for a non-Roman Catholic to learn while doing the Exercises that anything that makes the spirit or intent of the Exercises clearer would be very welcome.

People of the Reformed tradition, like their Roman Catholic counterparts, are deeply affected by the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius. Whether done in a retreat setting as I did them, or as Annotation 19, the experience is a powerful one. Decisions are made, greater intimacy with God developed, a more intense desire to pray is established. The fruit of prayer which expresses our relationship with God is conversion and many of us find ourselves wanting to be more fully God's. Having become loved sinners who really know we are loved, we are also able to extend a mutual respect which builds a bridge between Roman Catholic and Reformed. Similarities are recognized and differences no longer separate. Whatever the combination of adaptation and flexibility which

facilitates all of this happening, it is, in the end, a work of God—as are we.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lewis, C. S.: *The great divorce: a dream* (Collins Fontana Books, 1946).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Puhl, Louis J., S.J.: *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (Loyola University Press, Chicago, 1951).

<sup>4</sup> Tetlow, Elisabeth Meier: *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola: a new translation* (The College Theology Society: University Press of America, Lanham, Maryland, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*