

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

By PETER CORNWELL

AFTER TWELVE YEARS OF PONDERING I knew that I had finally to decide whether to become a Roman Catholic or to remain an Anglican. The decision in the mind had really been made. I was reasonably clear that Catholic unity was the centre of Christianity. Here was a community which moved through space and time with a proven ability to assimilate what was good in a variety of cultures yet; with a rock-like element which continued to witness to the nonconformity of Christ, well-equipped to prevent it from being assimilated to the world. It was a community which took seriously the fact and necessity of development in Christian thinking and practice and which had the apparatus to discriminate between true development and distortion. It was a community which, with its perpetual critique of nationalism and sectarianism, provided the only means I could see of bringing together into a real unity Christians of many races and cultures.

But now I was to discover the gulf which lies between such intellectual assent and deciding to do anything. One can live for a remarkably long time plodding along making the best of life as it really is yet with mind and imagination elsewhere. In many ways this path was wholly congenial to me. I am not a great 'doer' and share with my late mother an extreme distaste for making decisions. Like her I would rather not make any move until God has shouted clear instructions down the chimney. I have a high doctrine of staying put and hoping that most decisions will be made for me. 'Never do today what may be unnecessary tomorrow.' Although such a doctrine has its issues, it is not wholly admirable as my wife would testify when it comes to domestic matters, like choosing wallpaper or deciding whether a tree in the garden should be chopped down.

I am a 'roots' sort of person sharing something of Newman's nostalgic love of places and objects of his past. How easily he could be moved to tears by the sight of the old family home or the old blue cloak given him by his faithful Neapolitan servant in Palermo. So when going on holiday, I am happiest returning to the security of some place where I have been before. Such binding affection

certainly applied to my Anglican roots. This is not just a love for those values of liberality, moderation and tolerance but for a particular Christian ethos. As I have written elsewhere¹ Churches are 'complex packages' not only of beliefs and devotions, but of customs, manners and little ways of doing things, so that adherence to our communities involves as much affection for such things as it does the assent of intellects. If I did not have much affection for the Thirty-nine Articles, my heart was captured, and continues to be, by memories of the *Te Deum* sung at Morning Prayer and that distinctive smell of old churches, a blend of furniture polish, old hassocks and decaying volumes of *Hymns ancient and modern*. The toughness of such bands of love perhaps explains how it is quite one thing to conclude that Anglicanism as a church system lacks coherence and completeness, but quite another to abandon such a package which has carried us to faith. If integrity required that I should go where the argument seemed to lead, it was equally integrity which would not allow me the gift of my Anglican past. It was through this funny, loveable, maddening community that I had been led to Christ.

These roots which bound me to my past were very much alive. Although I was losing faith in Anglicanism as a system, I never lost faith in its ability to carry the gospel. While I might become increasingly ill at ease in the official Anglicanism of synods and clerical meetings where one tripped over that system, I never lost faith in the efficacy of the sacraments I celebrated in St Mary's or in my pastoral duties. But the mind—or was it the imagination?—seemed to have floated away to another place and this created an increasingly impossible tension. Of course I knew some who seemed able to minister as priests in the Church of England but who had quite explicitly given their hearts to Rome, but for me that way seemed impossible. Being a closet R.C. looked like play-acting but was I not, in my indecision, coming perilously close to this? On the one hand there were these wild ideas which occupied too much of my mind, while on the other side the solid reality of the pastoral round. Was I not being captured by mere notions, slipping gradually into a dream world?

For a decision to be made, existing responsibilities had to be weighed and motives proved. I did not live in isolation but bound up in the bundle of life with others. I had responsibilities—first toward my wife and children. What would any movement of mine do to their faith let alone to the family budget? Then I had pastoral

responsibilities in my parish and to those I had tried to counsel. Would their faith be set back or did that consideration reveal a rather nannyish attitude to them, evidence that I had not done much to free them for Christian maturity? But what of friends, especially those who were in positions of responsibility in the Church of England? Any move of mine would not make life easier for them. And, if all those considerations were not awful enough, what about the tangled web of my motives? Of course there was such a thing as 'mid-life crisis' and I knew I was a prime target for it. Of course there was the deadly lure of dramatic self-advertising. Of course there was 'ministerial burn-out' which was why I took a six-month sabbatical before deciding anything. Of course the grass is always greener from the other side of the fence but when munched much the same as any old grass. The even distribution of ecclesiastical sin is a prime form of ecumenical 'sharing'.

People outside this situation are always kindly producing bright 'new' considerations which one has in fact been grinding and chewing over for months. Issues of responsibility and motivation are our daily bitter diet. How wonderful it would be if one could only wake from this nightmare and return to those good old days of being a contented Anglican. And the process goes on for such a long time because now and again one wakes to such a false dawn—a few days, a few weeks of uninterrupted contentment in that station of life to which God has called you. But then you round the bend whistling cheerfully, and the demon niggles is leering at you again.

There are moments of sheer frozen immobility in which you imagine that you cannot really change even if you wanted to. There is nothing really new under the sun. All we can do is to go out, circle around, and come back where we started. And there are those who boost this fatalism by saying that in these 'ecumenical days' there should be no such thing as changing from one Church to another. Everyone should just stay put and wait on Church leaders to bring us all to our senses and to corporate unity. No Anglican should become a Catholic, no Methodist an Anglican and, presumably, no Moslem a Christian, no atheist a theist. But go on down that line and even your sturdiest 'roots' person begins to stir a little uneasily, for something funny has happened to rationality, individual freedom and responsibility. If I must treasure my roots and at least come to terms with them, can the pilgrim

make progress rooted to the spot? If I am irrevocably a chip off the old block, am I not something more than that, a unique person who must seize that liberty with which Christ has set me free to become what only I can become? Does my continued passionate prayer for Christian unity really get me off the hook of personal decision?

I have gone on at some length exploring this gulf between notional assent and action because it is little understood by those who stand on the touchlines. A moment has to come when luxuriating or agonizing in indecision must stop, for this period prolonged saps zest for engagement in the present moment. It was at this stage that an understanding Anglican friend suggested that I should do the Ignatian Exercises. The key task of reconciling God-given roots in the past with his call to go forward in the present had to be undertaken. To do this, motives and responsibilities had to go on being proved, but the Exercises would provide me with a point of reference, a two-fold objectivity to lift me out of the mire of subjectivity in which I was wallowing and into which unaided I could sink. My director would bring an outside judgement to bear and would do this as the minister of the Christ before whom alone the decision could be made.

In some ways I was unenthusiastic about the suggestion. I was not accustomed to a personally directed retreat and have always rather coveted luxuriating in the freedom of total silence. I did however see that this was not the time for more lonely brooding. I needed the help of another disciple. Nor had I warmed much in the past to what I had imagined was Ignatian spirituality. The highly visual nature of the discursive meditations presented in the Exercises caused me some difficulties. Under the influence of biblical criticism these simple gospel scenes had lost some of their simplicity. They are in fact packed with theological motifs. The trouble was that my mind is all too easily lured by theological bait and is soon off thinking and debating with itself about such things. What ought to be an address to God became instead a thinking about God. I have needed to take off beyond ideas and pictures to edge towards the mystery which was not a product of my thinking or imagining. However here I had underestimated Ignatius whose concern is to place the individual, as a whole person, before God. To make that decision I had to do so as one in whom reason, imagination and senses were united. I could not do so as a solitary brain box or a bundle of alluring nostalgic memories. Ignatius

certainly does not fall into the trap of anti-intellectual spirituality. 'We must make use of the acts of the intellect in reasoning and the acts of the will in manifesting our love.'² It is part of asceticism 'to make our sensual nature obey reason'.³ In the eleventh of the Rules for Thinking with the Church, it is notable that Ignatius particularly commends the 'modern' i.e. scholastic, theologians because 'they define and state clearly, according to the needs of our times, the doctrines that are necessary for eternal salvation'.⁴

Yet we are whole persons, not disembodied minds, those who see, hear, smell and touch as well as think. Ignatius' spirituality does not ignore our sensual nature. Being encouraged to act as a whole person in doing the Exercises, even to the extent of employing moods in the weather, using the sight of my imagination and my senses,⁵ had the effect of bringing together my torn-apart imagination and mind, and bearing me as a more whole person to that simple central point, the incarnate, crucified and living Christ. Interestingly enough, this rediscovery of the visual and tangible within prayer coincided with my discovery of the rosary as a method of prayer. I had found out that when my mind was in a particularly over-active state, the focus on the images of the mysteries, with the mantra-like 'Hail Marys' helped me also to move from thinking about to praying to.

What I discovered with a new clarity was that the heart of my election was the wholly evangelical business of my conversion. The decision was not just about ecclesiastical allegiance, it was about allegiance to Christ. The Two Standards are set up—one that of the chief of all the enemy 'in the vast plain about Babylon seated on a great throne'—the other that of the Christ 'standing in a lowly plain about the region of Jerusalem'.⁶ Everything narrowed to this point and so everything became very simple and serious. The decision which I inescapably had to make about ecclesiastical allegiance could only be made as part and parcel of this fundamental option. Instead of being boxed in by an almost obsessive niggles which at times seemed absurdly trivial, everything was placed in the context of that which was undoubtedly important, the slow process of my conversion to Christ.

The foreword of the *Rite of reception of baptized Christians into full communion with the Catholic Church* makes it quite clear that the word 'conversion' should not be used of this transition in itself. 'The term "convert" properly refers to one who comes from unbelief to Christian belief.'⁷ This distinction, as the foreword makes clear,

is absolutely central to the ecclesiology of Vatican II and so to the foundation of Catholic ecumenism. It is however sadly blurred in Catholic parlance and in some uses of the RCIA programme. My real journey was thus about my being drawn deeper into the unsearchable riches of Christ. But of course this fundamental option is not some disembodied thing which floats above the inescapable lesser decisions which each one of us must make. Ignatius will not let us soar above all these particularities. As Karl Rahner puts it: 'The Spiritual Exercises are nothing but an election or choice; the choice of the means and the concrete way in which Christianity can become a living reality in us'.⁹ Ignatius takes us to the heart of things, confronts us with the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord. 'Make your choice for Christ,' he says, 'but make that choice as one who has to decide about this job or that, about whether to marry this woman or not—yes even about your membership of the Christian community.' By doing things this way, seeing these lesser decisions related to the greater, the former are put in context, mapped on our life's journey. Nothing of the practicality of weighing responsibilities or probing motivation is lost. Indeed Ignatius explicitly encourages us to list and weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of our proposed course of action.¹⁰ Rationality is not swept away in a rush into some dreamy mysticism. Deciding for Christ is all about thoughtfully taking a few practical steps along the road which opens up before us.

The focusing on Christ not only gives a sense of proportion and direction, it purges away all elements of a Pelagian 'it's all up to me—I'm on my own in this' attitude, which is the constant temptation of the too-earnest and agonizing seeker. The Christ on whom I focus is the one who travels before me and with me. This evangelical Christ-centredness of the Exercises I found eased me into a certain light-heartedness. I could laugh a little with God at the absurdity of all my faithless huffing and puffing. This I guess was a touch of that 'true happiness and spiritual joy', 'the peace, tranquillity and quiet' of which Ignatius writes in the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits.¹¹

Doing the Exercises was an experience of rediscovering my freedom and responsibility as a human being. I was not a prisoner of my past. I could genuinely take a step forward and yet do this without a rejection of that past. As well as confronting us with the Christ who stands before us and summons into the future, Ignatius has a wonderful sense of our being held in the creative providential

hands of God. He who calls us forward is the same who has watched over us and brought us to this point. 'It is necessary to keep as my aim the end for which I am created, that is, the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul.'¹² I am a unique child of God; so to see what I must become I need to study what he has already made me. If I am to step into the future. I must do so as one who claims his past. So 'I will ponder with great affection how much God our Lord has done for me and how much he has given me'.¹³

This does not mean that there is a smooth passage from past to future. Development encompasses not just a slow even unfolding but violent ruptures and painful changes. The human being cannot grow out of immature dependence to become him or herself without leaving the family home. Abrahamic home-leaving is a necessary part of the pilgrim's journey, for this cannot by-pass the shadow of the Cross. During the Exercises I can honestly say that awareness of and gratitude for my Anglican roots intensified, and yet I was haunted by those hard mysterious gospel words: 'Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it'.¹⁴

There is no way along this road which can avoid risk. When I come to die, I have the possibility of making of my dying something more than a passive fading out. Instead of life being taken away from me, I can embrace that life with thankfulness and trustingly hand it back to him. 'Father into thy hands I commend my spirit.' That is the positive dying of a free person. It is that action for which we have to be rehearsing in this life—to gather up our past and commend it to God, to hand back to him not what is valueless, but what is most treasured. That is the little dying which can alone bring resurrection. Precisely because I could see 'how God works and labours for me', how 'all blessings and gifts descended from above', I had to be prepared to say: 'Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will, all that I have and possess. Thou hast given all to me. To thee, O Lord, I return it'.¹⁵

I continue to draw upon this experience of the Ignatian Exercises in my life now as a Roman Catholic priest. Convictions I have always had about the particularity, the uniqueness of every pilgrim's journey, have been reinforced. What can the pastor do but try to help this pilgrim before him to discover the distinctive contours of his or her journey? This of course applies across the

whole area of spiritual counsel, but it has a particular importance in trying to help those ill at ease in their Christian communities.

The fact has to be faced that there are a remarkable number of Christians who, for one reason or another, no longer feel at home in their Churches. The communities in which they have been rooted and through which they have received faith have changed. In the process of spring-cleaning and switching of furniture it seems as if family treasures have been lost. Many lost souls can no longer feel at ease in the newly tidied parlour. Should they now move out and seek a new home or should they rather uncomfortably stay put? I am convinced that ecumenism does not blunt the edge of personal freedom and responsibility in this matter. I am equally convinced that it is as whole real persons that these things have to be weighed and considered. There are some who feel called to bear the pain of this homelessness within the re-arranged home, quietly working to reclaim lost treasures. There are pastors held by a sense of responsibility for their flocks or by domestic commitments which simply cannot be abandoned. There are others who will not let go of their present ecclesial nurse through a genuine and understandable fear of finding something worse. All these are honourable people whose integrity and courage are often greater than those of us who feel called to move. I have come to believe that we must, in our present muddled situation, be prepared both to support those who are called to exercise their freedom to step forward and to support those who bear their witness where they are. Moreover I believe that both the leavers and the stayers have distinctive ecumenical ministries to exercise.

Let me just take this up in relation to the 'leavers'. On becoming a Roman Catholic one receives a very genuine welcome. Catholics are delighted that you have 'come home'. Is this in fact true? Have we 'come home', do we feel 'at home'? In a sense we do for, without being blind to those parts of this household of faith which clearly still need a bit of spring-cleaning or have become a bit grubby again, there is a sense of feeling that this is where we belong. That is why I continue to be happy where I am, feeling a greater freedom in faith than I did as an Anglican. This is something to do with the liberty which comes from the security of knowing boundaries. You cannot be free to play football unless you know where the touchline is and who the referee is. However, and this is what cradle Catholics cannot quite grasp, I am not at home in Catholic unity as they are at home, nor can I ever be.

The experience of the Catholic 'home' enjoyed by the incomer will necessarily be different, not better or worse, than that of old-timers. So it is important that the latter do not grab us and try to envelop us in a sort of cradle Catholic 'culture'. We are different, and ought to be different for we ought to be those who bear into Catholic unity our 'culture' as Anglicans, Quakers, Methodists or whatever. If Catholic unity is the city with open gates, eager to assimilate the gifts of God from whatever quarter they come, then those who have made the change have a positive Catholic duty to go on affirming their roots and making sure nothing is lost. We ought to be an Anglican, Quaker, Methodist presence within Catholic unity. Only in this way can those outside this unity become convinced that its embrace does not smother the gifts and values which they treasure. Only in this way can Roman Catholics, whose understanding of their separated brothers and sisters is often somewhat superficial, have their eyes opened to the varied gifts of Christ which they should be coveting. I am afraid that those who try to take up this positive task are thought, by those who have narrowed Catholicism to the sectarian predilections of their minds, not to be 'real' Catholics. Without being arrogant or presuming to stand in judgement on others' experience of Catholicism, we the 'changers' have to be a little obstinate in claiming our Christian liberty.

The experience of making my decision in the context of the Ignatian Exercises has finally alerted me to the spirituality of our ecumenical pilgrimage. Perhaps the search for unity has reached the stage when our minds are in fact convinced that this is the step which as Christian communities we must take, but we hesitate as we face the gulf between this assent to the will of Christ and deciding to act. As Ignatius would teach, we have to make this decision as whole communities—that is, as communities which not only engage in the necessary task of theological pondering but are complex bundles of life engaging imaginations and affections. We are communities which see, hear, smell, taste and touch as well as think. The bits and pieces of our selves can only be brought together, the mind, senses and imagination reconciled, as we look to the centre, to Christ, and pray, not just for unity, but for that advance into holiness which is the deepening of our conversion. Here all those issues of our identity as Anglicans or Catholics can be faced, the big doctrinal things and the little things of smells and funny practices which yet so strongly tug at our hearts and in fact

keep us in place. We can uninhibitedly reclaim all these with gratitude. That is the precious insight of our 'conservative' brothers and sisters. But then we must be radical in claiming our liberty to move forward into the future. There are yet more of the unsearchable riches of Christ to be discovered. This is the point where as communities we have to face what those of us as individuals have tried to face, the fact that there is no smooth passage, no quiet evolution into the future God offers. There has to be the risk, the trusting handing of treasures back to God in the conviction that there is no saving of life except by giving it away. The Cross must be placed at the centre of our ecumenism. It is no denigration of theological enquiry or of the need for doctrinal agreement to affirm that beyond this comes the point when, as communities, we have to lay aside the pens which dot 'i's and cross 't's and say 'Take, Lord, and receive all our liberty, our memory, our understanding and our entire will, all that we have and possess. Thou hast given all to us. To thee, O Lord, we return it.'

NOTES

¹ *On the river's edge* (DLT, 1988), Chapter Two.

² Exx 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁵ E.g. *ibid.*, 66-70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 140-146.

⁷ *Rite of reception of baptized Christians into full communion with the Catholic Church* (CTS, 1974), p 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 7-8.

⁹ Rahner, Karl: *Spiritual Exercises* (Sheed and Ward, 1976 ed), p 11.

¹⁰ Exx 181.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 329, 333.

¹² *Ibid.*, 179.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁴ Mark 8,35.

¹⁵ Exx 234.