

CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT APPROACHES TO THE FIRST WEEK

By LINDA MARY EVANS

THERE ARE MANY ROADS TO BRIGHTON', a psychotherapist friend of mine maintains. It is not only the route that can vary, but the kind of vehicle you are in and the road conditions at the time. So it is with the First Week of the Exercises. Their intention is to bring the retreatant to the point of realization of her own sin and of her utter dependence in creaturehood on the God who forgives. There are countless ways of helping a person to arrive at this point and no one person's journey will be the same as another's. In the end, anyway, it is grace that brings about the revelation of whatever truth we grasp.

One could start with texts on the love and tenderness of God, or launch into scriptures on sin using the First Exercise, or plunge straight into the First Principle and Foundation. It surely must depend on the kind of retreatant one has, but the inescapable facts are that she is a creature, a sinner whom God loves and to whom he offers forgiveness. Whichever tradition one comes from, there is no changing those basic truths.

It has been my general observation that evangelicals have a tendency to begin with talk of sin and human vileness and the need for salvation, whereas the Catholics I have met seem to start more from truths about God's goodness in creation and his love—an approach I have always found more helpful. Yet we find in the very first Exercise of the First Week a rather gloomy meditation on the soul imprisoned in a corruptible body, in exile, cast out to live among the brute beasts. This imagery hardly has what you might call a contemporary ring about it and needs quite a bit of interpreting and modernizing before it begins to mean what John English suggests it means, namely, our helplessness in the face of our own sin.¹

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When I did the Exercises, my director, who knew me well, had the sense to steer clear of it and, looking back, I think he was wise to sit light to the Ignatian text as a whole. I say this not because of my religious tradition, which happens to be Protestant, but because it took account of the sort of person I am.

For the first day of the First Week, then, I was given scriptures about the love, tenderness, closeness and power of God my Creator (Psalms 121,63,84,139). But what makes me feel that, in one sense, it really does not matter which approach the director takes in the First Week is that wherever God's love and purity meet human sin, there is bound to be discomfort, resistance and conflict. This must be so whatever theological background the retreatant has, though personality or religious tradition may well influence the kind of conflicts and resistance caused. In my case, for instance, praying over texts which had formerly given me great comfort, this time only brought up feelings of fear and anger towards God with a suddenness and intensity that surprised me. The verse: 'You hem me in behind and before, you have laid your hand upon me',² brought a violent reaction. For the first time, really, I felt God to be overpowering, crowding me, not letting me breathe. I found myself wanting to reject his closeness and did in fact shout at him to go away at one point and get off my back. At other moments in the same day I was able to open my door to the Lord and invite him to come in and make himself at home.

What was clearly revealed in those first days was my ambivalence towards God and his love for me. This was a real shock. My fear expressed itself in a dream at the very beginning of the retreat. In it, I was deluged by an enormous tidal wave. Apart from the obvious associations with biblical imagery of the waters of chaos with their primeval monsters and the story of the Flood, it was fascinating to notice that at mass that day, the priest spoke in his homily about 'a tide in the affairs of men' and about it being a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. This seemed to provide a necessary antidote to my sometimes casual, even cosy approach to God the big cuddly teddy bear.

Another piece of synchronicity was the arrival of a card from a staff member who had helped out on an earlier part of the course. It was a card sending good wishes to all embarking on the Thirty Days, so was pinned to the notice board for all to see: a picture of Noah's ark floating serenely on the Flood.

The lady in question had given us input about Jung and his ideas about the human person, in particular the importance of integrating our shadow or hidden side. In my case she was speaking to the converted, and three years of four times weekly Jungian analysis subsequent to the retreat further confirmed the wisdom and truth in Jung's approach.

It matters little, then, in my view, whether the retreatant is Catholic or Protestant, theologically clued-up or ignorant. When he or she comes face to face with God in that First Week in silence and serious prayer the persona is cracked open and the shadowlands begin to be revealed.

For myself, it was an over-emphasis on love, joy and peace in my Christian life that needed to be balanced by my being confronted with my own hatred, sadness and turmoil within. In another person's case, it could be that low self-esteem, over-consciousness of imperfection and depression would need to be balanced by a discovery of her own worth in God's sight and her capacity to delight and take joy in his love and forgiveness.

Someone, for example, whose prayer life had been characterized, in the main, by a feeling of the absence of God, a sense of abandonment, might, through the First Week texts, come to realize God's closeness and his offer of an intimate relationship of love. Wherever a person is in her personal development, her particular circumstances or her spiritual state, that is precisely where God meets her through the living word of scripture.

In my own experience, this process of balancing the opposites went on rather painfully and tumultuously throughout the First Week. At one level I felt I did live according to the First Principle and Foundation. At another, I got in touch with a deep rebelliousness in my spirit: 'Why should I kowtow to this God? I'd prefer to run my own life, thank you'.

Praying on texts about the beauty of creation, something I had always found it easy to appreciate and worship God for, brought up, this time, an opposite awareness of the ugliness of flies, the pointlessness of lemmings committing mass suicide and all the suffering in the world. In my rebelliousness, I used these negative ruminations to distance me from God and get some space for myself. What I came to realize later was that such an adolescent outburst was probably a necessary counter-balance or moving on from my previously rather childish, unquestioning relationship with God. Like Adam and Eve's sin, it became almost a prerequisite

to that separation which adulthood thinks it needs and imagines it can maintain even in the face of its God.

Another element I think worth mentioning in the experience of the First Week of the Exercises is the unrelenting exposure of the retreatant to the presence of God. Humankind cannot bear too much reality and on a silent retreat, in long periods of prayer, reality has a way of impinging with some force. Human beings, from whatever religious tradition, will naturally seek ways of avoiding it or at least staving it off for a while and protecting themselves against it. When facing death, for instance, we take refuge in denial, anger, bargaining, depression and only finally, if at all, come to acceptance. So it is in the confrontation with our own essential nature in the First Week of the Exercises. We may try to deny our sinfulness and project it on to God. He becomes the 'baddie', the one who has goofed by making flies and lemmings who self-destruct. We may rage at God, which distracts us from looking squarely at our own sin and disorder and their grave consequences. But if the director can help the retreatant to stay with the negativity, as mine did, and simply notice what is happening, the basic truth of the creature's sin met by the Creator's love will emerge.

It is interesting from my point of view as a psychotherapist that the way people react to the offer of God's love in a personal relationship is likely to be very similar to their response to human offers of love. For example, I felt the need to push God away for fear of being overwhelmed and, at the time, this would have been true about my way of handling human relationships which got too close for comfort. In realizing the disorder in our relationship with God, a window is opened onto the disorder in our other ways of relating. This is all part of our coming to terms with who we really are before God and becoming aware of our lack of wholeness and need of God's healing.

Dreams help in this process and on day three of the First Week I dreamed about manure making things grow. This seemed to be an indication that all the muck I was experiencing was eventually going to get me somewhere. The muck continued for quite a while before the fruit came.

By day five of the First Week, I knew in my head that I was a sinner, but at this stage was still experiencing God as a persecutor and sadist who was busy setting booby traps for people, especially me. It was all very worrying. At mass that day the homily reminded

us that we had been bidden to pray for confusion, the letting go of certainties and securities. I began to see that maybe the growth was coming precisely out of the untidiness and mess I felt within. The director was very important at this point in keeping me steady and helping me to see things in a different light. He explained, for example, that in any relationship, after what may be a harmonious and positive beginning, one realizes one has projected onto the other a reality that is not there. One finds that the other is beyond it and thus the other becomes more truly other.

The First Week, then, is a time for discovering false images of God and allowing them to be smashed. I became aware of an image I had carried around since childhood. It was a machine at the fair which contained an elephant. A sixpence inserted in the slot sent the elephant into a cave and when it emerged at the other end, a small package had landed on its back and got deposited down a chute into one's waiting hands. I was always disappointed with the contents (usually cheap cufflinks!) and I came to realize that deep down somewhere I had harboured the thought of God as a dispenser of goodies and got angry if he failed to come up with what I wanted. Earlier that day I had formed an image of God as a huge foot, like the one in 'Monty Python's Flying Circus'. It had the disconcerting habit of plonking down on people, squashing them relentlessly and making a rude noise as it did so. This was further reinforced by a dream about an elephant stamping on people in its path with great powerful feet. Neither image bore much resemblance to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by day six of the First Week, my director felt the need to point this out.

There is, I believe, a place for simple teaching in spiritual direction. My director asked me whether I really believed God was oppressive and went round squashing people. He said that this certainly was not the God of the scriptures, and my sin at that moment was in thinking that God was like this. He said I needed to repudiate it as a lie.

Becoming aware of the distorted images of God we labour under enables us to reject them and find more appropriate ways of picturing and relating to the God of the scriptures, the God and Father of Jesus. The distortions will be different for different people and, as in my case, even contradictory. Exposing them is the first step, and this leads on to growing beyond them and so being free

to commit oneself to the true and living God rather than some idol of our own creation.

It is interesting to me that although I had never been brought up to believe in an oppressive, tyrannical God, that was precisely the image which emerged in the First Week of the Exercises. This suggests to me that we make God very much in our own image. It is *I* who can be oppressive and seek to dominate others and these are the qualities I project onto God. Also, whatever religious teaching one has consciously taken on board, a deep encounter with God such as happens on a thirty-day retreat, reveals layer upon layer of unconscious material which has been lurking rather unhealthily in our shadow side. The First Week gives it a chance to emerge in a safe way and be acknowledged and (hopefully) integrated, though the skill of the director is of the essence here.

It is fascinating to speculate that although I had never been taught directly about a God of wrath and dominance, my Nonconformist roots were drenched with such imagery. It may well have been the case that the Exercises tapped into what one might almost call the collective unconscious in this area and brought the distortion to light. In both the Catholic and Protestant traditions, I would have thought, there are ample deposits for forming false and unhelpful images of God. Whatever theology one brings to the First Week, the exploration and exposure of sin's true nature will shed light on whatever has provided a supportive structure for our wrong-doing and wrong-thinking; then it can begin to be dismantled.

Right up to the sixth day of the First Week I struggled with the negative in my experience of God, in particular, unanswered prayers and the suffering of those I care about. Although I could by this stage affirm the goodness of God and his freedom to do what he liked with his own creation, of which I had finally come to accept I was a part, it was still a rather intellectual affirmation. I was unable to muster up a lot of feeling. It was rather an act of blind faith, nudged along by my director. He had said, finally, (and was it through sheer exhaustion I ask myself) that there is an 'even though' element in faith as well as a 'because'. Part of the maturing of faith, he said, was the ability to accept the 'even though' about God. So, near the end of the First Week, that is what I decided to do.

It was only on day seven that I did the exercise of recalling all the sins in my life and considering the disorder in my actions and

in the world. This is a fairly straightforward, if painful task, but the timing is all-important. Had I been asked to do it earlier in the week, I might not have been able to confront my sin as honestly because I would still have been busy denying my own defects and heaping them on to God. Careful discernment, then, is necessary on the part of the director with regard to timing.

To a liberal Protestant with little inkling of the distinction between mortal and venial sins, and still less grasp of the reality of hell as a theological concept, Ignatius' first and fifth Exercises are not all that helpful.

The important thing seems to be not to regard the text of the Exercises as a strait-jacket or a series of hurdles to be got over. A more flexible approach takes account of where the retreatant is, both personally and theologically. Having said that, one does hope to have reached a certain point by the end of the First Week, namely, the realization of sin and one's dependence on God's goodness, love and forgiveness. But it has to be a genuine arrival at this point and not one engineered or faked to suit the director. Achieving it is a gift of grace and so cannot be demanded or forced. Ignatius' advice about penance may help.

After what I can only call one hell of a week, I found that fasting for twenty-four hours as I entered the eighth day of the retreat did seem to dispose me to receive the grace I sought. I began to experience a genuine sorrow for my sins and a real appreciation of God's goodness and mercy. On the last day of my First Week, then, feelings of contrition, thankfulness and joy flowed and tears were shed in welcome release. I ended the week feeling in a good and right place with God, flattened yet raised up by him. There is something very powerful about fasting. Whichever tradition one comes from, I think it worth suggesting, particularly when the retreatant feels blocked or bogged down along the way. Fasting seems to release whatever is knotted or bound up and in some mysterious way seems to enable God to draw very close in ministering to the soul.

One other factor in deciding how to approach the First Week must be the extent to which the retreatant is willing to 'tell it like it is' in her meeting with the director. An exercitant who has come with certain fixed ideas of what is expected or what 'should' happen, could end up going through the external rituals of contrition and repentance while remaining untouched within. This is particularly a danger, I would have thought, in the case of the 'good' Catholic,

the 'good' religious or even the 'good' evangelical, someone who has always kept the rules and used all the religious jargon about sin, judgement and salvation. The wonderful thing about a real relationship with the living God is the element of perpetual surprise and freshness. A discerning use of scripture on the part of the director as well as a careful attention to the movement of spirits in the First Week should enable a clear distinction between what is genuine and what is false to be made.

Surviving the First Week and being willing to go on can take all a person's courage and endurance but it is not something that can be side-stepped. The gospel requires a response of repentance and the acceptance of God's love before there can be any further growth in the spiritual life. The First Week, then, has to be lived and prayed through before one can move on.

The best advice I can think of giving to any director embarking on the Exercises is to trust in the power of the gospel to touch the retreatant in the precise and particular way she needs. This will relieve anxiety about the exercitant's religious background and tradition, for scripture can speak for itself and each person's experience of it will be unique. The approach to the First Week Exercises will be dictated by the individual's needs rather than by any more abstract criteria.

I did survive the First Week and went on to survive the whole retreat, thanks to the sheer grace of God and the patience and wisdom of my director. The other thirty-four people on the course also survived, most of them having very different directors from my own. This suggests to me that it is God who is finally in charge and that his Spirit blows where it will. That can only be a cause for relief and rejoicing.

NOTES

¹ English, John: *Spiritual freedom* (Loyola House, Guelph, Ontario, 1986), p 71.

² Ps 139,5.