

WOMEN AND THE SECOND WEEK

By LAVINIA BYRNE

PHILIPPA IS A THIRD-YEAR theology student in one of Britain's older universities. In the divinity department her fellow undergraduates are mainly ordinands. She is unusual both because she is a Roman Catholic and a woman. For the past year she has been making the Spiritual Exercises in the Nineteenth Annotation mode. Her director is a Jesuit. She enjoyed the First Week but found the Second Week Exercises improbable at first, getting badly stuck on Ignatius' language and imagery. At Spinning Wheels, her feminist support group (recruited largely from the college's engineering department), the sisterhood berated her: 'It's your fault for accepting a man director', 'Why d'you want to put yourself through all that patriarchal rigmarole? You've only got to read this Ignatius person's Principle and Foundation to see that a faulty anthropology underpins his entire thinking. I mean to say, he's just not green. Everything created for man, can't you see that inevitably means you too? Talk about cultural imperialism! And as for that stuff about salvation, don't you know no man can save a woman? Hasn't right-on feminism taught you anything?'

She persevered with the times of prayer and then came a breakthrough which was marked by all the graces proper to the Second Week. 'An intimate knowledge of Jesus who became man for me' led her inexorably to one conclusion. Her task was clear: the only choice which lay open to her was to become a priest. Through the text of the Exercises, in the battered Puhl version she had been carting around, the call of Christ resounded down her nights and down her days. She had a vocation to the priesthood. Everything that Ignatius had held up for her consideration in prayer led inexorably to this conclusion.

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Marjorie meanwhile is a member of a prestigious, if somewhat arcane religious congregation. Now in her mid-forties, she is spending six weeks in a retreat house as part of her tertianship-cum-sabbatical. The initiation week which preceded the Spiritual Exer-

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cises gave her a chance to unwind. Her director, a woman of her own age trained in psychosynthesis, provided just what she needed to enable her to look at some really painful memories during the First Week. This she experienced as a time of considerable healing.

During the Second Week the process took a further turn. After the events of the Incarnation, which left her unmoved as she felt she already knew the storyline too well, she found herself staying with Jesus during his childhood. Together they wandered through memories of her own childhood and adolescence. His consoling presence intertwined with her tormented memories and brought further healing. She felt no sense of call, rather an extension of the graces of the First Week with the additional feeling that she now knew him so very much better and was better known by him. Her director carefully avoided certain exercises, judging that Marjorie's experience of pain and humiliation was so acute that there was no point in exhorting her to degrees of humility, or laying out battlefields where the forces of dark and light would start contending for her allegiance. Enough is enough. And in any case, the text they were using had been specially prepared for women. It emphasized the bonding and nurturing aspects of the Ignatian process.

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These brief—and apocryphal—stories lay out some of the dilemmas which face women as we approach the Exercises of the Second Week. They suggest that there are at least three major areas which must be examined if women are to make any headway in appropriating Ignatius' material. These relate to the text, our theology—and its scriptural basis—as well as our practice. Over the past twenty years much good work has been done to get us to the point where it is now possible to address straight questions both to directors and to women who make the Exercises. It has to be added too, that during this period a lot of woolly thinking and indeed practice have gone uncritiqued and I welcome this opportunity to begin to bring the insights of the women's movement into dialogue with the tradition. I should add that I am indebted to many good women who have both given and received the Exercises and whose insights I have incorporated into what follows. One who falls outside these categories cannot go unnoted: it was Teresa of Avila who reminded us all, 'I should prefer spirituality to be unaccompanied by prayer than not to be founded upon the truth. From foolish devotions may God deliver us!'

The process is sound; the text creaks

During the Second Week Ignatius enables us to identify our preferences. Through three movements he asks us to examine our deep desires, to see if our choice is to follow Jesus. The first of these is addressed dispassionately to our heads. It searches inexorably for the sources of our own personal truth and cuts right through any foolish devotions. Who are our role models? What makes us tick? What do our earthly kings or heroes of either gender teach us about ourselves and about the way in which we image Jesus and his method of working with people? The medieval mystic, Marguerite d'Oingt, displayed a keen insight into this process when she observed,

Are you not my mother and more than my mother? The mother who bore me laboured in delivering me for one day or one night, but you, my sweet and lovely Lord, laboured for me for more than thirty years. When the time approached for you to be delivered, your labour pains were so great that your holy sweat was like great drops of blood that came out from your body and fell on the earth. When the hour of your delivery came you were placed on the hard bed of the cross and so your nerves and all your veins were broken. And truly it is no surprise that your veins burst when in one day you gave birth to the whole world.

When she considers her mother's experience in childbirth she learns something of how Jesus works in her own life. Ignatius too is remembering something which helped him personally, that when his own journey first began he was inspired by the deeds of Francis and Dominic. He seeks to examine the connections between the people who inspire us and the Christ we follow. The process is unquestionably sound but the text does indeed creak, because the vocabulary seems so feudal. Yet use modern words like 'role models', get people to be honest about the women—or men—who inspire them and somehow everything slots into place.

So what does this mean? The next vignette afforded by the text of the Exercises shows the three divine Persons in relationship and conversation. They are seen exercising discernment and choice. Ours is the first generation which has enjoyed access to a visual representation of what drew their attention to human concerns. Ours is the first generation which has seen images of the earth from space; we can visualize the trajectory which brings an angel to the room where Mary stands at the interface of the divine/human encounter. Hers too is a moment of choice.

And so also may ours be as, in a third movement, we elect to follow Jesus through the events of his birth and ministry. Through all the rhetoric about Standards and Degrees and Ducats, Ignatius is insistent. Seek to know what you really want—and then apply yourself to it.

I believe this process to be enormously liberating for women, so liberating in fact that I am wary of the attempts that have been made to soften the force of the text over recent years. I concede that there are Marjories, women who have been so damaged by bad experiences that the opportunity to continue the Second Week in First Week mode, that is to say as a deepening experience of healing, may be deemed essential. What I would hate to see would be any reluctance to allow women to experience the Second Week as a time of choice, particularly if the director were suddenly to start making connections and see that the ultimate choice by Jesus of an individual might be for priesthood. After all, Ignatius gave the Exercises to the high flyers; he used them to draw men towards the loftiest of ideals, the greater glory of God and towards the Society of Jesus. The Philipphas of this world deserve the very best.

If the text requires interpretation, let this be done in the manner Ignatius suggests, by comment and illumination, not by trying to make it say something he could not have meant. Let it be culture-bound, time-bound. This is the only way to keep it relative and real. This is the only way to avoid using it to colonize the experience of an age and culture which he neither knew nor could have known. This helps us all keep a sense of proportion; it makes concessions to his genius while yet retaining our ability to have access to our own. Ignatius understood that a sense of call will emerge in the apostolic individual or group when their own story and that of the gospels are brought into conversation with each other. Not all these calls will be to priesthood, but we must never circumscribe them in the light of what is presently possible.

Our theology

Philippa's support group, the feminist sisterhood, have got a point. Anyone making the Exercises has certain understandings about relationships—those we enjoy with nature, those we enjoy with each other and those we enjoy with God. At its most moderate the theological claim would have to be that women sin by having a poor self-image, men through pride. At its most extreme the claim would be that men give women a poor self-image, that the best thing women

can do is create an alternative society independently of men and that women alone can save each other from men. Moreover the argument then goes that there is such a thing as women's nature as opposed to men's nature—and you do not have to be a feminist to fall into some pretty naïve thinking about the 'nature of women' and what it is natural for women to do . . .

From this impasse we have help in the unlikely form of Gregory Nazianzen. He wrote of Jesus: 'What he has not assumed he has not healed'. The context was Apollinarianism. Apollinarius believed that the human mind of Jesus had been replaced by the divine mind, so that this was a controversy about the full humanity of Jesus—meaning the integration of the fulness of humanity into the divine purpose. Analogously we have to be careful when we start talking about man's nature and woman's nature because this suggests that Jesus only redeemed man's nature. Certain threads in Christian feminism actually take this analysis to its logical conclusion. They say that Jesus took man's nature and redeemed it because women's nature did not stand in need of redemption.

No wonder Teresa of Avila was so cautious: 'Learning is a great thing, for it teaches those of us who have little knowledge, and gives us light, so that, when we are faced with the truth of holy scripture, we act as we should'.

'The truth of holy scripture'

Our theology is likely to be backed up by a selective reading of the scriptures. The Second Week Exercises offer both the director and the one making the Exercises a refreshing opportunity to explore those texts from the bible which do not often make their way into lectionaries and breviaries. I turn to Catherine Booth at this point. In her address entitled *Female ministry*, the Mother of the Salvation Army was adamant:

Thank God the day is dawning with respect to this subject. Women are studying and investigating for themselves. They are claiming to be recognized as responsible beings, answerable to God for their convictions of duty; and, urged by the divine Spirit, they are overstepping those unscriptural barriers which the Church has so long reared against its performance.

Contemporary biblical scholarship has freed up our access to the scriptures. It has made us take a long, hard look at some of the barriers reared against the performance of women by those who have

used the texts selectively and to their own purposes. Again though, I see no merit in re-writing the bible just as I see no merit in re-writing the Exercises, but I see enormous merit in reading the bible with a more user-friendly eye.

As a woman, what do I find? First a range of images and metaphors which remind me that both God and I are portrayed to each other through a range of mirrors and lenses. God the divine eagle soars, where I, imaged as the holy city of Jerusalem, find myself watered from within. The tradition's preferred metaphors for God are the safe ones, the tradition's preferred repertoire for me cast me either as Eve or the Magdalen. Either underpins a theology which finds all my weak points; neither brings me into the presence of a Messiah whom I can anoint on the head because I recognize him and he knows me. Yet a diligent reading of the scriptures reveals a plethora of new names for us both.

What else do I find? Dorothy L. Sayers, the novelist, wrote compellingly of Jesus the friend of women:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never known a man like this man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised, who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature.

When I read the gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus this is what I find. Moreover as I pray with the choices of the Second Week Exercises, I find myself called to follow this Jesus in his preaching, healing and teaching ministries and I find myself drawn into companionship with the women who accompany him on the way. I join the apostles as apostle. Ignatius is clear. In his instructions for the method of prayer which introduces those making the retreat to the application of the senses, he is concerned to demonstrate that the senses of Mary and Jesus become somehow interchangeable. The

women who surround Jesus have iconic status; they too are a way in to understanding what being sent in the divine name is all about.

What else do I find? A third category of texts focusses my attention on the missing characters of scripture. Imaginative contemplation, the preferred method of praying in the Second Week, puts these characters right in the centre of the picture. In the words of the early Fathers, 'the wise man finds, weeping in a manger, him whom he sought for shining in the stars'. The wise woman meanwhile does not have to go off following stars to make the same journey. She retains the sense of the numinous, of the transcendent. She is not an earth mother, sitting possessively over the pot while the menfolk are off hearing angels on the mountain side. As our imaginations catch glimmers of her through the gospel texts, and indeed through the pages of the Hebrew scriptures, the testimony of women becomes clearer. Just as Mary bore the Word into the world, so another Mary assists at the re-birth of the risen Christ by telling him forth into the world. These women repay our attention.

They remind us too of stories we know really but read or pray inattentively. For instance, in Luke 15, we read three stories about loss. The lost sheep is sought out by God the loving Shepherd; the lost boy is sought out by God the loving Father. But what about the lost coin? What about the centrepiece to these two stories? What about God the housewife who rips out the furniture, attacks the nooks and crannies with her broom, who lovingly places the lost coin in her purse so that it becomes part of the divine economy, part of her dearest treasure—and then goes and lashes out the whole lot on a party to celebrate our finding? All too often this story is passed over, as are the incidental references that remind us Jesus the carpenter had spent time in ordinary people's homes mending this and that; that he was accustomed to asking women for a cup of water and watching us make bread. That he was accustomed to calling us, inviting us to make choices, opening up possibilities for us, seeing ways forward that would not entrap us in role.

Our practice

Philippa's Jesuit director is a deliberately shady figure. I left him pondering what to do with her and her vocation, driven both by anxiety and a sense of shame. After all it is not his fault that her enthusiasm and Ignatius' text have led her to this point. It is not his fault that the fulness of baptismal dignity fails to cash out in her case. Marjorie's director meanwhile has exercised more authority in the

way she has used the Second Week texts. Or do I mean censorship? Which is the better director? Who is making the more Ignatian retreat?

Our practice does matter. And the best and wisest retreat directors are well aware of this. So how are we to use the insights of present-day scholarship to advantage while yet respecting the starting point of individual retreatants? How comfortable would you feel directing an out-and-out feminist? How comfortable would you feel being directed by one?

If the Second Week Exercises have preferences and choice at their very core, then they provide a fitting context for grappling with these questions. The retreatant is being asked to consider her deep desires. Many a woman's deep desires are buried so deep as to be almost totally concealed from any form of access at all, either on her own part or that of the director. For years she will have been asked to put other people and their preferences first. Indeed she may belong to a spiritual tradition which has invited her—in one form or another—to pray, 'we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts'. Equally, unwise directors may not have taken the time to consider their own devices and desires, so that these get projected unhelpfully and irresponsibly onto the retreatant.

Then of course there is the political agenda. The socially-conscious retreat director will know that the agenda of the poor helped Jesus make choices. Indeed the question of one of these poor, the Syro-Phoenician woman, actually turned his whole ministry around by drawing his attention to the plight of those who were not the 'children of Israel', and so to the needs of the pagan world. How is the director to use this information responsibly, especially if she is consumed with zeal for women as God's present-day poor? The agenda of committed feminism is enormous. How are we to use it responsibly?

Finally there remain a plethora of questions concerning language. During the Second Week, how is God to be named? Who are the Divine Persons who listen to their own deep desires and send Jesus into the world? May I close with a plea for eloquence? It is possible to use inclusive language without making a meal of it. It is possible to speak and write eloquently of God and of each other without turning human discourse on its head. The director who, 'like a balance at rest', uses simple, straightforward language when talking about God and the divine purpose and activity in our world will, I believe, free the retreatant to go and do likewise. This, happily, is Philippa's experience.

NOTE

All the quotations in this article are taken from *The hidden tradition: women's spiritual writings rediscovered*, edited by Lavinia Byrne (London, SPCK, 1991). See pp 21, 31-2, 41, 44-5.

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