

RETREATS ON THE STREETS

By MARNIE KENNEDY

THE MOMENT IN THE LIFE OF St Ignatius that has a never-failing attraction for me is the vision of La Storta. Ignatius is making his way to Rome through the countryside with a little band of early companions. Close to a wayside shrine of Mary he is gifted with a vision. There the Father bends over the Son, who is carrying his cross, and he hears the Father say: 'I want you to take Ignatius with you'. Instead of riches, instead of a self that creates its own worth, Ignatius is invited to a way of humble discipleship and of radical identification with the values of the gospel. That invitation is for all Christians risky but compelling. I know from struggling experience that I cannot dare a response without the companionship of many other men and women who stand at the cutting edge of society, whether by choice or fate. Ten years ago, when working as a member of a Jesuit retreat team, we had just reached that important point of choice at the end of the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises. It was then that I had a powerful dream that is still alive within me. I saw a very clear image of Jesus looking straight at me and inviting me to make a leap—to come and live more closely with his favourite ones, the poor and marginalized, and to know him more intimately through real live friendship with them. I looked straight at him and answered: 'No thanks, I'd rather go to bed!' The next day I was haunted by this refusal and wept as I remembered it. Whether as a result of that dream or not, I decided to spend the ensuing sabbatical months in the Philippines and that experience pointed me in a very important direction. It was there I saw more and more Christian men and women living at the cutting edge, being a discerning, challenging and questioning presence in that oppressive society. At the same time, they were a passionately participating presence, engendering life and liberation. From then on I have struggled in a First-World context with the possibility of a 'political holiness', as Sobrino calls it,¹ where contemplation and discernment light up the way to social action. The daily call is to be contemplative in action and to move with the wisdom of discerning love.

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Into the desert of the city

So it was that in 1984 a group of trained spiritual directors (mainly women) felt called to move from the traditional retreat centres into the inner city of Sydney, Australia, where we could begin really to hear the cries of the poor. This has become known popularly as the 'Street Retreat Movement'.

The Talmud tells of a wise man versed in the love of the stars, who relates that

the paths of the firmament were as bright and clear to him as the streets in the town of Nehardea where he lived. Now if only we could say about ourselves that the streets of our city are as clear and bright to us as the paths of the firmament! For to let the hidden life of God shine out in this lowest world, the world of bodiliness, that is the greater feat of the two.²

Until recent times the word 'spirituality' rarely evoked images of crowded city streets, railway stations, court-rooms, supermarkets. Yet we know that the Neoplatonic approach to faith no longer speaks to many moderns. We need today a feet-on-the-ground spirituality which liberates God to be truly 'Word made flesh' and which acknowledges human beings to be the very language of God. Giving retreats in the less sheltered environment of the inner city allows the socio-economic and political realities to sharpen our understanding of the kind of apostolic spirituality needed today. The search begins by placing ourselves at the margins, not at the centre. Retreatants are billeted in houses to which the powerless and disadvantaged have ready access as friends.

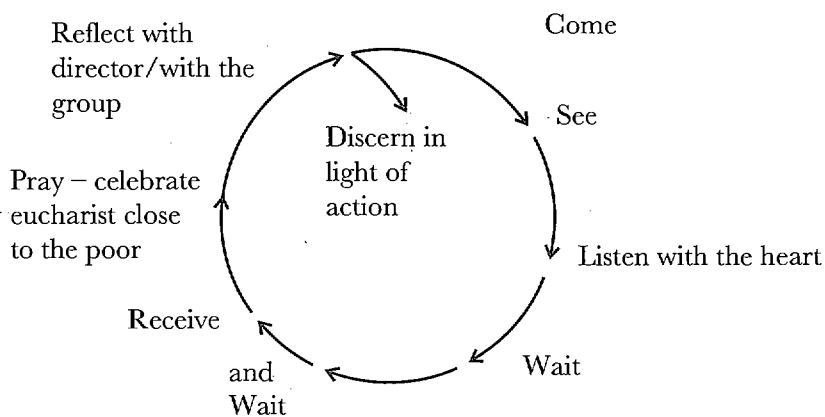
The gospel imperatives begin to speak through the daily encounters in the households and on the streets with life at the edges. The poor are always there waiting to be our evangelizers, the mirrors of our own brokenness and the face of a deeply involved and compassionate God. There we find the graced revelation of the God of liberation working where least expected. The marginalized are indeed the litmus paper showing up the true state of society. They also reveal to us the heart of God drawn irresistibly towards them in their struggles.

When Jesus looked on the poor, he recognized, in the same horizontal line of vision, the face of the Father. He received them gratefully as the Father's gift to him. Never is the uniqueness of the power of Jesus over human power so highlighted as in the defiant stance he took when confronting those who would soon bring about his death. With his arms around the poor he said in effect: 'We are indestructible!'³

Spiritual direction that does not take up the social context of our lives and which does not put people in touch with the fragmentation going on

in society runs the risk of evasion and compromise. If retreats are about discernment and the unmasking of illusion, then it would seem impossible to discern what is going on in our own lives and in society if the real victims are not part of the process. This has challenged us to 'retreat' into the less secure and more broken parts of our city as a place of prayer and reflection. We strongly believed that we would find God's presence there in the desert of the city and we have not been disappointed!

Retreatants, who frequently come from the helping professions, can be at a loss when invited to spend the hours just being present to the human reality without trying to analyse or search for immediate answers. The Street Retreat dynamic is simple but profound, beginning with the invitation to 'Come and see'.



Each aspect of this dynamic is important. The 'Word made flesh' is thus heard not so much from the pages of scripture but from the living context of life—the hesitant figure outside the pawn shop; the anxious migrant scanning the work opportunities in the Employment Office; the new-born child creating a centre of warm admirers; the homeless group of Aboriginal people celebrating with the shared flask of wine in the park under the ancient Moreton Bay fig tree.

Miracle of mindfulness

The Buddhist practice of 'mindfulness'⁴ has helped retreatants open wider to the wonder of human existence moment by moment. Awareness of this sort is the opposite of violence, for it calls for reverence and respect for everything that lives. To walk the streets with ever sharpening awareness of the present moment, of our interconnectedness with the whole planet, slowly unlocks a sense of communion with all living beings. The personalist philosophy of western culture is still a strong influence in spirituality and it will take a long time to develop a new

mind-set that is corporate, interdependent and yet respectful of the uniqueness of each individual. That is why we have tried to respect the unique journey of each retreatant by offering personal spiritual direction but to link it also with the journey of the group. Each evening the group (no more than about twelve) gathers for a liturgy where we break open the experiences of the day and share a simple meal together. We have not found this detrimental to a strong silence of heart which is encouraged throughout the retreat. In taking a relatively small group of retreatants, the directors are also able to spend part of the day on the streets and in this way to journey more closely with the group. Simplicity has been a keynote of the experiences, with only one full meal in the evening and a 'snack' while on the streets during the day. We have had a strong desire to cut down the financial costs, which are escalating in the larger retreat centres, and thus make opportunities available to many more people, especially lay men and women.

School of waiting

For many retreatants the initial experience on the streets is a restless impatience or a dark feeling of alienation. This is a call to the 'school of waiting', a concept which is difficult for us to grasp culturally.

Instant knowledge, instant gratification, instant success are the messages of the media. However, waiting is of the essence of creatureliness and is the characteristic of genuine prayer, for it helps to purify the heart of impatience and consumer addiction. Waiting is in itself a deep place of revelation and leads to the unmasking of illusion, prejudice and fear.

Our desert times then will be marked by the prayer of simple waiting, empty-handed, open to the moving of the Spirit . . . Our prayer will be largely wordless, a vigilant state of abiding, of seeking, in peace and dark faith, to discern the signs of God's activity, yet prepared to wait without sign.⁵

Slowly but surely, the retreatants begin to let go of various controls and to feel more at home in these places where humanity struggles in such undisguised ways, weeps, dances, laughs. The broken-down alcoholic beside me on the park bench mirrors my own reality—vulnerability and compulsion but hidden under the mask of respectability. The child dancing on the pavement and the tiny plant pushing through the cracks in the concrete remind me that life is always renewing itself and that there is a fountain of hope in the human heart. Joy, humour and celebration thread their way through the pain and poignancy of the street experiences and prayer springs authentically from this stance of humble presence to the human reality.

Quietly but powerfully I start to hear the Scriptures in the plural. They are full of an urgent God who wants not religious goings-on, not spiritual trips, but an active defending of his favourites, the weak and the wounded. So I find myself praying differently in solidarity through silence with the people of Jesus, before the Father.⁶

Solidarity and friendship with the poor

Even a week spent in this attitude of total mindfulness of the present moment and of surrender offers a deepening insight into the meaning of human solidarity—the greatest antidote to individualism, stereotyping, prejudice and racism. Acceptance of others who are different means entering into solidarity with them and conceiving a love for them. The love in question is a genuine love for concrete human beings whom we come to know by name. ‘Without friendship, without lovingness, without tenderness—there is no genuine deed of solidarity.’⁷

Such love is born very often when we sit beside the powerless ones, listening with reverence to their stories, registering their pain and joy in our own hearts. Picture the small group of retreatants sitting at the kitchen table of an inner city community, listening to the gentle voice of Robert Beale, Aboriginal artist and victim of white oppression. He tells of the hell he endured during ten years in an adult prison from the age of thirteen, of the trauma of being taken earlier from his parents to be brought up in a white institution to accelerate the government’s policy of ‘assimilation’. In his imagination he keeps returning in middle age to the memory of the poor hut by the river where he was secure in the love of family and tribe. From human encounters like this many people receive the grace and energy to start taking a political stand with the Aboriginal people in fighting for their rights to land, to education and to the dignity of self-determination. It is an energy flowing from growing friendship, not ideology. Gradually, the meaning of social sin emerges and the illusions of rituals of reconciliation without justice are seen for what they are—deceptive evasions. Over the years we have deeply valued this opportunity to be in touch with Aboriginal spirituality, even in the heart of the city. In a meeting with Artie, a Wiradjuri tribal elder, we glimpse things very close to the heart of an Aboriginal person who is still consciously in touch with his culture—a fifty thousand-year ‘Dreaming’!

There is a certain awe as he speaks of an ancient Aboriginal saying, spoken first in his tribal tongue and then translated into ‘The Spirit is watching over us’. Artie constantly ponders the mystery and meaning of this saying, handed down across the centuries long before the coming of white people or ‘Gubbas’. He speaks strongly about respect for persons being the basis of love. ‘We are the children of the earth’, he says, and his

heart pours out a radiant appreciation of the gift of creation: the sun, the rain, trees, fish, yams, edible fruit. Tribal areas are referred to by naming the principal river running through that territory and his tribal identity springs from the life-giving waters. Retreatants have so often said that such encounters of wonder, joy and surprising wisdom provide a powerful way of breaking stereotypes and opening a path of friendship which they are keen to pursue beyond the time of retreat. As Thomas Berry claims:

Today, we have a wonderful resource in the indigenous peoples of the world who now are assuming a leadership role in human affairs . . . One of the first things we learn from these people is that the universe is a community of subjects, not a collection of objects. If we do not hear the voices of the trees, the birds, the animals, the fish, the mountains and the rivers, then we are in trouble. I think that is one of the most important things that we are learning from the tribal people of the world.⁸

Thirty-day retreat

After a year of giving shorter Street Retreats we began to notice that the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius was emerging in an organic way. This led to a decision in 1985 to run an annual five to six-week programme, which included the full Thirty-day retreat plus a final period of communal reflection. This has now been given seven times to groups of men and women from varied walks of life and from different church affiliations. It has proved to be a most challenging, creative and integrating experience. We spend the first ten days in the inner city according to the pattern already explained and the remaining weeks in a rural solitude. The first experimental phase provides a way of expanding and enriching the Principle and Foundation to embody the strong new insights of theologians and ecologists like Thomas Berry. The spirit of the final *Contemplatio* needs to imbue the whole process of the Exercises. In his dialogue with Berry, the Jesuit Thomas Clarke makes this observation:

I think . . . of Augustine, using what was a stoic distinction between what we are called to enjoy and what we are called to use (*frui*:enjoy; *uti*:use). Basically, he said we enjoy God and we use things. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) in his famous Principle and Foundation perhaps was greatly influenced by this stoic, Augustinian, *frui-uti* distinction between persons and things. I would suggest with Tom Berry and others that we can no longer use that kind of distinction between person and thing. We have to get into the habit of seeing the other citizens of the cosmic community as subjects endowed with dignity. I think the

extension of the notion of rights, from human rights to the rights of all the earth's citizens is very valid.⁹

As the First Week progresses longer periods are spent in prayer to deal with a growing awareness of the human dilemma. The meaning of personal and social sin comes home strongly from the oppression and exploitation seen and felt on the streets (prostitution, drug addiction, alcoholism, sexism, racism, misuse of nature). Simple but creative liturgy, often celebrated in an inner-city parish close to the poor, has helped to open hearts to share the real weight of social sin in our culture, in our world. The colloquy with Jesus on the cross, highlighted by Ignatius, becomes a spontaneous part of the retreatants' response as they experience human powerlessness, vulnerability and utter need of God.

Social dimension of the Exercises

A short time before the first Street Retreat in 1984, Bishop Claver SJ from the Philippines reflected with a group of spiritual directors in Sydney, Australia. He spoke from his own lived reality of the importance of communal experiences of sin and grace and of the need to name the demons of our own culture. I know now from experience that the Spiritual Exercises have a social dimension to be explored more fully as a way to communal as well as personal conversion. In his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*¹⁰ John Paul II outlines three zones of conversion for contemporary Christians—personal conversion, interpersonal conversion and structural conversion. While formation processes and traditional retreat patterns may have attended to the dynamics of personal and interpersonal conversion, little has been done to integrate structural conversion into the process.

For many Christians the word 'salvation' is more appropriately thought of as the entrance of God into the individual heart or into our personal relationships. It is rare that salvation is spoken of as the action of a relational God into the transformation of the structures and systems of the world. This is so even though the scriptures present God's word as historical and communally oriented, a word that calls a community into being and challenges it to convert when its communal love for the poor falters.¹¹

As a team we struggle to develop this threefold conversion dynamic through the 'street process', through our spiritual direction, use of scripture, liturgical celebration and group reflection. It seems that much

more emphasis on this threefold aspect is needed in the existing programmes of training for spiritual directors. By spending the First Week of the Exercises in the streets, it is possible to sharpen awareness of the social dimension of the gospel and to carry it over into the remaining weeks spent in deeper silence in a rural solitude. The communal dimension grows through the liturgy and other creative ways of presenting the Two Standards and some of the mysteries of the life of Jesus lived out in today's world, such as Jesus in exile (the refugee reality), Jesus tortured and in prison (the passion today). Mary becomes a strong presence during the whole retreat and the triple colloquy, so valued by Ignatius, offers a powerful form of prayer personally and communally.

A week or more of theological reflection after the retreat has helped to integrate the whole experience and has led to personal and communal decisions for action. On a recently completed Thirty-day retreat there were a number of religious and lay people working on the margins—with AIDS sufferers, with alcoholics, with Aboriginal people. The need is certainly great at present within the churches for a spirituality to sustain and affirm those living and working on the margins of society. Our present resources as a team are fragile and very provisional, but we have a dream of developing further this inner city centre of spirituality in order that many more people will have opportunities to make friends with the poor and to meet in and through them the God of compassion and liberation.

Feminist perspectives

Since we are mostly women on the team, we have also been concerned to free the Spiritual Exercises from any oppressive aspects with regard to women. This calls for emphasis on the process rather than on the text; for creative and imaginative ways of nurturing the feminine in the wider sense; for developing a strong prayer of the heart and of desire. As retreatants spend time in the streets they see clearly that women are much more than men the victims of physical violence, sexual exploitation, social inequality and legal vulnerability.

One must begin to acknowledge that in many ethical contexts women's healing from sin calls for a different assessment of their relation to the commandments than men, and a different conception of examination of conscience, repentance, forgiveness and conversion.¹²

If human beings are the language of God, then simple daily experiences continually reflected upon can keep on freeing us from enslaving images. This is how one woman deepened a fresh image of God as she watched an Asian woman nursing a baby on the steps of a city building.

God is like an Asian mother
 nursing her tiny dark baby
 in the shade on the north side
 of the library, sitting on the
 ground.
 She doesn't speak English.
 It doesn't matter
 I am a nursing mother
 We are one.
 She is not ashamed of nurturing
 I need nurturing and
 I am also one who nurtures others
 Blessed be the Name of God.¹³

There is a whole re-imagining needed too of a Jesus 'who empowers women and inspires them with confidence to cast their lot into a mission carried out by a discipleship of equals'.¹⁴

It seems highly likely that the Jew who walked the dusty roads of Samaria and who dared ask for a drink of water from an unnamed, marginalized woman by the well, would be completely at ease with the retreat on the streets. There was an urgent need in his human heart to go to that public place, drink from the well of life and invite us to share the mystery day after day.

Let your literal figures shine
 With pure transparency.
 Not in opaque but limpid wells
 Lie truth and mystery.
 And universal meanings spring
 From what the proud pass by.
 Only the simplest forms can hold
 A vast complexity.¹⁵

NOTES

¹ Sobrino, J.: *Spirituality of liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p 80.

² Buber, M.: *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p 50.

³ From a homily given by Fr Ted Kennedy (1990) at an inner city church where street retreatants often gather for eucharist.

⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh: *The miracle of mindfulness* (Boston: Beacon Press, revised edition 1987).

⁵ Leech, K.: *True God* (London: Sheldon Press, 1985), p 158.

⁶ Extract from a letter written by a friend working among the poor (1988).

⁷ G. Gutierrez, quoted by Jon Sobrino in *Spirituality of liberation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p 63.

⁸ Thomas Berry CP with Thomas Clarke SJ: *Befriending the earth* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications), p 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 57.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (December 30th, 1987).

¹¹ Couturier, D.B. OFM Cap.: 'Structural conversion and religious formation' in *Review for religious* (May-June 1991), p 21.

¹² Rosenblatt, Marie-Eloise: 'Women and the Exercises: sin, standards and New Testament texts', *The Way Supplement* 70 (Spring 1991), p 21.

¹³ Fischer, K.: *Women at the well: feminist perspectives on spiritual direction* (SPCK, 1989), p 67.

¹⁴ Rosenblatt, Marie-Eloise: 'Women and the Exercises', *The Way Supplement* 70 (Spring 1991), p 23.

¹⁵ McAuley, James: 'An art of poetry' in *Collected poems* (Angus and Robertson, 1978), p 71.