

GUIDED PRAYER IN PARISHES

By A. PATRICK PURNELL

Spiritual Exercises: adaptations

THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF ST IGNATIUS is a tool for 'preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul' (Exx 1). In the course of time the Exercises have been adapted in many different ways to meet the needs of individuals, be they relatively new in the pursuit of the spiritual life or struggling along the journey of faith for many a year; be they able to go away to a secluded place or obliged to remain in the hubbub of daily life. The Week of Guided Prayer in parishes is a comparatively recent adaptation.

Guided prayer

The aim of the Week of Guided Prayer is to offer help and support to the prayer life of people in a parish as they continue to go about their ordinary everyday lives. What is offered in such a week is the opportunity for an individual to meet a prayer guide and reflect with her/him on her/his prayer life.

The parish setting

When I refer in this article to the 'parish' I am using it in a generic sense in that guided prayer can take place in many different settings and in no way am I confining it to a parish.

The contract with prayer guide

At the heart of all the different ways in which Guided Prayer can be organized is the contract between the prayer guide and the person s/he is guiding; the latter agrees to spend time each day in personal prayer, normally about half an hour, and to see her/his prayer guide each day for about the same length of time.

Prayer and life

The subject matter for reflection between the prayer guide and the person s/he is guiding is prayer, the individual's own personal prayer

life. It is a meeting between Christians who talk to one another about their prayer; their prayer which reflects their faith lives. And at that meeting the prayer guide offers guidance, reassurance and support. Now since true prayer is rooted in life the prayer guide is more often than not drawn into a conversation with the person whom s/he is directing in which every aspect of her/his life is touched upon. Many of the people who take part in this kind of retreat begin, perhaps for the first time, to speak in depth of their own personal relationships in a spiritual setting. They open up areas in their lives in which they need healing, support and encouragement. Prayer guides are not expert counsellors; they are not trained spiritual directors; what they bring to 'guiding' is above all their own experience of the Christian life, what one might call Christian common sense, supported by some basic training.

The committed Christian

There is a very interesting description of what is expected from godparents in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. The Rite says: 'It is the responsibility of godparents to show the candidates how to practise the gospel in personal and social life, to sustain the candidates in moments of hesitancy and anxiety, to bear witness and guide the candidates' progress in the baptismal life' (R.C.I.A. Section 11). There is much in this description which applies to the prayer guide. The Rite almost takes it for granted that godparents are able to fulfil all these functions; the Rite implies that showing others how to practise the gospel in their personal and social life and so on are things which any committed Christian is expected to be able to do. Prayer guiding is, therefore, not something exceptional. However, I add a word of caution, as not everybody makes a good godparent neither does everybody make a good prayer guide.

Conversation

The prayer guide enters into conversation with the person s/he is guiding. The communal actions which bring us together as a Christian people are principally eucharist and prayer. But there is another activity that draws us together which we rarely reflect upon, and we seriously undervalue the contribution it makes to Christian living—that is, conversation. Yet different forms of (what I call for want of a better label) 'faith conversations' go on all the time: faith conversations provoked by the ordinary everyday events of life, birth, sickness, marriage, death etc; stimulated by the newspapers, the events of *Coronation Street* or *LA Law*. By a faith conversation, I mean a conversation in which we try to make

sense of all sorts of happenings which touch our daily lives from the injustice of unemployment to the disparity in what people earn, to the lack of provision of nursery facilities, to the sudden rise in prices, to the grim waiting list for a hip operation. In and out of these conversations weaves the name of God and the Church: Why doesn't God do something about it? What's the Church doing? What does the local Council think it's up to? What are the rights and wrongs of this or that situation? What does it mean to believe anyway? Trusting and despairing, quarrelling and 'making it up', going or not going to church. It is in this context that 'guiding' takes its place; prayer guiding helps to build a bridge between prayer and faith conversations. Prayer is set in the context of our lives—our lives in this world, this unjust, confused, ambiguous world. It is here we pray for the coming for God's kingdom.

SETTING THE SCENE

The struggle to believe

We live in the midst of a very large number of people who are trying to lead genuine Christian lives. For these people, who are struggling to live authentic lives without opting out of society, there are many questions: How can one engage in the 'cut and thrust' of everyday life in a competitive, consumer society while living and remaining true to the demands and challenges of the gospel? What are these demands exactly? What is the freedom of the gospel? How can one see three-quarters of that same society enjoying its benefits while the other quarter remains de-skilled, powerless and marginalized? What are the criteria that will help one make appropriate choices about life and life-style, about relationships and possessions? How does one hold on to one's personal integrity and one's desire and need for community while living in what is in fact such a complex and individualistic society?

The spiritual life

It is this striving, day by day, to believe and this continuing attempt to act out the truth which constitutes for spiritual writers the 'spiritual life'. We use life-shaped metaphors to describe what is happening within us: we speak of growth, the long slow growth towards Christian maturity, of being pruned, of dying in order to live. Or we speak of our pilgrimage, of our stumbling journey, beginning with God's gracious acceptance of us, towards becoming 'fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself' (Eph 4: 13). We are called to live a life of discipleship, rooted in the gospel and in its transforming power. Therefore, our spiritual lives are characterized by our endeavour to follow Christ, to have that mind which is in

Christ Jesus and to be motivated by his mission, that is, to be one with the community of disciples in bringing to reality the reign of God here in the midst of humanity, that reign which encompasses Jesus' vision of earth's people living together in peace, truth, justice and love, sharing what they have with one another. We are, indeed, called to lead a life in this world that is, in a true sense, a worldly life. The way to God lies directly through the world. There is no salvation outside the world!

The will of God

Ignatius speaks of the Exercises as a way of 'finding the will of God in the disposition of our life'. It is not God's will that we should fit in to some predetermined plan mapped out by an intransigent Architect; nor that we should make choices in accord with some foreordained divine decree. We are invited to join God in working out a common project for the building up of the kingdom of God which touches every aspect of our life in society, its political, social, economic and religious aspects. God makes the future with us, working through and with us in the only way in which God can work, the way of love. God is love. What God is, God does. God's will is God's living, loving presence in our world made effective through what we do. The personal and social transformation of ourselves and the world in which we live belong together and it is totally false and unbiblical to suggest that they can be separated. God's will and purpose, as revealed in Christ, is not only the transformation of our personal lives and relationships but also the renewal and transformation of society. The healing and transformation of our own personal woundedness is bound up with the healing and transformation of the woundedness of the human community, its structures and institutions which hold our social existence together. In struggling for personal healing and holiness, we are brought face to face with a society much of whose dynamism is governed by a success ethic and controlled by privilege and wealth, a society subject to racial prejudice and class distinctions, a society which only recently has begun to take ecological issues seriously and one that is blinkered regarding its own cultural deficiencies. In turn this society—this nation—is bound to that part of the developed world whose affluence is irretrievably linked to structures of mass exploitation.

The personal and the communal

Prayer guiding takes place within a community which is part of this society, this nation. The healing and transformation of humanity, the coming of the reign of God, is not going to be brought about by isolated individuals beaver- ing away by themselves but by the community.

Therefore an essential element of prayer guiding is the communal dimension. People come together. People become aware of other people who like themselves have aspirations for the coming of God's reign. Together they enter this time of prayer. Prayer is both intensely personal and communal. We come to understand our need for one another; we need each other to be 'body', 'Body of Christ'.

Ecumenical character

I believe profoundly that the Week of Guided Prayer is a God-given instrument of Christian unity. We've been praying earnestly and, some of us, passionately for years for unity. What do we believe about prayer? Is it ever answered? The question which frequently exercises my mind is, how will we recognize that our prayer for Christian unity has been answered? Will we feel unity has been achieved and we can stop praying for it when our Christian leaders sit down at a table and solemnly sign some declaration of intent? I believe that our prayer for unity has been answered and is being answered in many significant areas. What we need to do now is to worship and act together out of that oneness. We can do this in the Week of Guided Prayer. It is the ideal opportunity for all the churches in the locality to come together in prayer. It may take some organizing but how worth while the experience is! I feel sure, therefore, that these Weeks of Guided Prayer must be ecumenical. It is an extraordinarily enriching experience.

PRAYING IN AN UNJUST WORLD

A world of prayer

Prayer! Here I would like to use a many-stranded approach to the subject in which some strands may appear somewhat contradictory to one another. For a start, one of the strangest things about humanity and the hideous mess it manages to make of the world which it inhabits is that more people pray than do not. More people pray than can read and write.

How to pray

Jesus never taught methods of prayer. The disciples once asked him: 'Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples'. He answered: 'When you pray, say this . . .' (Lk 11:1-2). He didn't teach them 'how' to pray. Jesus took it for granted that they knew 'how' to pray; what he was anxious about was the content of their prayer and its form. As far as its form was concerned they were to approach God as they would approach their own 'Abba'. As for content, Jesus seemed, on the one hand, to be

pretty open-ended: 'Ask, and you will receive'. Anything that you ask? Well, not quite, because, on the other hand, Jesus pinned them down as to what should really concern them. The Our Father offered them a series of model requests: may God's name be holy, may God's kingdom come, may God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, give us daily bread, forgive our debts as we forgive others their debts and do not put us to the test. Clearly these 'model' requests focus the field of our asking. And the problem is that we do not really want any of these things, apart, perhaps, from making holy God's name and getting our daily bread (the former being seemingly harmless and the latter in our own interest). The implications of the other requests (to discover that all prayer is about the kingdom) are too shattering for us to want them really seriously. Therefore, the implication is that teaching prayer is more about learning 'what' we are to ask for than learning the 'how' we are to ask for it.

Seeking and finding God's will

We need, therefore, to keep in mind what Ignatius wrote about the aim of the Spiritual Exercises: ' . . . we call spiritual exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul' (Exx 1). The ultimate aim of all prayer is 'thy will be done', and that will is done in working to bring about the kingdom. Ignatius believed that when we discover our true selves, we discover where God is leading us, and it is when we discover what we really want, we discover our true selves. In making us in the divine image and likeness, God implants within us desires for God. When we acknowledge those desires and make them our own, we discover God. When we act on those desires, we are doing God's will. We work for the coming of the kingdom.

Honour one's way of prayer

The people who come on Weeks of Guided Prayer are undoubtedly people who pray. I believe, therefore, that the first step in helping people in their prayer life is to take them where they are and help them recognize and honour their own prayer. 'Pray as you can, not as you can't', so the adage goes. Only when people come to understand their own way of praying, may one propose other 'ways' of prayer because only then can a person either go along with what is proposed as a new way of praying because it fits in to where s/he is, or reject it because it is not for her/him and, at the same time, feel comfortable in saying 'no' to it. That does not mean we should never propose other ways of praying

and never encourage people to try these alternative ways. This we should do! The Parish Week of Guided Prayer is an ideal opportunity to do just that. What we have to remember is the need to be extremely sensitive in the way we treat people's prayer lives.

'Where are you at home with yourself?'

I therefore tend, more and more, to go back to the gospels and listen to what Jesus has to say about prayer. He says: 'But when you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you' (Mt 6:6). Everybody has a secret place where s/he is her/himself. Where are you most 'at home' with yourself? Climbing a wooded hill? Sitting looking at the sea? In your kitchen? Sitting watching the world go by? Listening quietly to some music? Sitting quietly in a darkened church? Wherever it is, that is your secret place, it is there you find the Father. It seems to me very important for us to be in touch with that experience of being 'at home' with ourselves because out of that place comes prayer to the Father. I think Jesus is saying something about prayer becoming part of ourselves, part of the rhythm of our lives. It is precisely in this context that teachers of prayer offer us 'stillness' exercises and 'breathing' techniques, in order to move us away from the babble and unrest we find within ourselves so that we can really be ourselves and begin to meditate and contemplate quietly on what exactly we need. What do we need to do the will of God? To bring about the kingdom?

What we are to pray for

'What shall I pray for?' Jesus indicates where the answer to this question is to be found: 'In your prayers do not babble as the gentiles do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard. Do not be like them; your Father knows what you need before you ask him' (Mt 6:7-8). Don't hurl words at God! Don't go on and on at God, multiplying requests with the hope of getting one that God will answer. You do not know what you should ask for? You're not sure? The Father knows! Then ask the Father to reveal your needs to you!

Meditation and contemplation

Spiritual writers tell us that scripture is the food of prayer. In Weeks of Guided Prayer special emphasis is placed on meditating on and contemplating the scriptures. One can say that meditation is about trying to understand scripture as it touches upon our lives by turning the

words over and over again in our minds, while asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten us. What do these words say to us? What bearing do they have upon our lives? Contemplation is allowing ourselves to be drawn into the scriptures through the imagination. We make ourselves present to a scriptural scene by means of our imagination: we feel we are there alongside Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus, for example, in the stable-cave of Bethlehem. There we try to take it all in: we hear what they say, we see what they do, we feel what is happening . . . we become completely involved, while what we are seeking is to know the Lord, to love the Lord more deeply and to follow him more closely.

Distractions

Many people get worried that their prayer is spoiled by the way their mind wanders off on to other things. They accuse themselves of having had distractions. They begin with good intentions, read the scripture passage, pray for the gift of prayer, ask for what they want and start imagining the gospel scene. Then they begin to think of other things, no matter how hard they try, they see themselves in the supermarket, they remember a conversation they had with a friend, a row with one of their children. What they have to come to realize is that all these events of everyday life are at the heart of their prayer. Having prayed for the gift of prayer, they are receiving the gift of prayer. Prayer does not remove us from the earthly things of everyday life; much more likely prayer plunges us into the ordinary realities of life. We need to look gently at what is happening within us: what is God saying to us in the supermarket; where was God is that row with my daughter? Then having allowed ourselves to be involved in those incidents, we turn again gently back to the scripture. And if it happens again and again, don't panic! Having 'distractions' in the real sense, more often than not, is being absorbed in self-indulgent fantasies, false illusory imagining.

PRACTICALITIES

Handbook

I do not intend to spend a great deal of time in this article discussing the practicalities of staging Guided Prayer. Suffice it to say that Guided Prayer, in whatever community it takes place, begins and ends with a community meeting. The initial meeting sets the scene: calms fears, emphasizes the communal nature of the experience, gives some guidance on prayer and ends with the 'nuts and bolts' of prayer guiding. The concluding meeting gives an opportunity to those who have taken part to reflect on the experience they have had and share that experience

with others. This sharing is very important because it can act as an incentive to the participants as to how they want to go forward. 'What are we now going to do?'

The practical details of how to run and organize Guided Prayer are set out clearly and admirably in *A week of guided prayer: a handbook for coordinators* by Isabel Gregory and Mary Rose Fitzsimmons HHS.¹

Training prayer guides

The relationship between the prayer guide and the persons coming for guiding is sensitive and delicate. Hence there do exist training programmes for prayer guides. In this article, I can do little more than touch upon the importance and the purpose of this training. It is given in order to ensure that prayer guides know something about the nature of the ministry in which they are getting themselves involved. They learn how to work out of their own understanding and experience of prayer and, perhaps, above all, how to recognize and know their limitations. Prayer guides always work under an experienced spiritual director who acts as their supervisor. One of the things they have to learn is how to use their supervisor properly.

Qualities of prayer guides

A prayer guide is above all a person who obviously shows her/his love for others; who meets and accepts the other where s/he is in her/his journey of faith; who is a keen and quiet listener; who does not pass judgements on what s/he hears; in whom a person can confide her/his struggles and who will accompany that person in her/his search for the truth; who helps a person make sense of her/his life; who does not attempt to solve people's problems for them but is with them as they struggle themselves to find a way forward; who helps them find a vision and a future for themselves; who is really interested in their progress and, finally, perhaps, who will question and challenge them sensitively.

Conclusion

Prayer guiding is a relatively new phenomenon. Alongside its development there is a growing interest in spirituality. There are quite a number of places now which offer training in spirituality and, in consequence, there is a growing body of skilled women and men anxious to be of service in this field of prayer guiding and spiritual direction. As a result there are more and more places offering Weeks of Guided Prayer. This would seem to be the work of the Spirit! We are at the beginning of new apostolic ventures. What we have to guard against is a spirituality

which is personally self-centred and individualistic. There is a real danger that 'prayer weeks' could be used to create 'holy huddles' and not communities whose *raison d'être* is the kingdom of God. I believe we can steer away from this danger only by ensuring that we root our prayer in justice. We have to remember always that true spirituality is kingdom-centred and that all prayer is kingdom prayer.

NOTE

¹ The handbook *A week of guided prayer* may be obtained from Sister Mary Rose Fitzsimmons HHS, 'Melrose', 60 St Mary's Road, Huyton, LIVERPOOL L36 5ST (price: £4.00 + postage and packing).