

# WHAT SORT OF PEOPLE DO THE EXERCISES FOSTER?

By GRAHAM CHADWICK

**I**GNATIUS DESCRIBES SPIRITUAL EXERCISES as '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' (Annotation 1). I take that last phrase to mean integration of personality, what Jung would call individuation.

People who do the Exercises would include those who make a Thirty-day retreat, a retreat in daily life, or an individually-guided retreat, in which the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius is the model and in which they experience something of their dynamic.

*What sort of people do the Exercises?*

All sorts! They now come from a greater variety of backgrounds than perhaps at any other time. For example, those attending our spirituality workshops at Llys Fasi, many of whom have done the full Exercises, while others have made individually-guided retreats, have been Anglicans high and low, Baptists, Catholics, Church of Scotland, Methodists, Quakers, URC; doctors, dentists, social workers, teachers, housewives, Religious, clergy, a farmer, potter, art designer, professional musicians, a sociologist, bookkeeper, surveyor, writer, town and country planning officer, secretary, TV producer, clinical psychologists, psychotherapists, counsellors, a speech therapist, a careers officer and many others.

Such a list of occupations might suggest that the Exercises demand a certain degree of academic attainment but whether people are able to benefit from the Exercises depends not on their academic ability but on their openness to God and their ongoing desire to find meaning in their lives.

Someone who at first might have been thought an unlikely exercitant was a person with learning difficulties. During a week of guided prayer in a L'Arche community, George, as we will call him, was accompanied by an expert in sign language. Unknown to anyone, he had learned sign language when he was in a Dr Barnado Home. He had suffered us fools

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

gladly who could not understand his language but was now delighted to be able to communicate with the person walking alongside him. During that week George came alive in a new way, coming to terms, for example, with the death of his mother. One of the delightful exchanges that took place was when he was asked 'Who loves you, George, and who do you love?' He mentioned his mother. The L'Arche assistant who accompanies him asked him where his mum was now. 'In the pub with Jesus' came the reply, a marvellous description of heaven.

Those who do the Exercises can be described not only according to their occupational and denominational backgrounds but in terms of their desires and feelings. Some are searching for further meaning in their life. Others are frustrated with what they consider a shallow, mediocre form of Christianity. For example, a woman, housewife and mother of five, says that she was first attracted to God through the idea of the kingdom which

I naively thought the Church was all about. What I discovered was some truth surrounded by a lot of superstition and cocked-up theology. Doing the Exercises, which was a liberation for me, got me back on track, back to the Kingdom stuff. I realised that building the Kingdom and building the Church are often in opposition to one another. So at the end of doing the Exercises I felt reaffirmed in myself and realised that becoming a Christian did not involve growing out of the Peace Movement stuff and what some people thought of as my other little quirks.

A retired headmaster came to the Exercises out of confusion and what he felt was rejection by his local church. He had thought that having retired he might be usefully engaged in doing something in the church he attended. But apart from helping with the 'Xmas Fayre' and selling raffle tickets he was unoccupied. As he said, 'The collar-bar is strong in these parts'. He was smitten with double vision and spent weeks in hospital in darkness, unable to read. That was followed by months of partial sightedness which meant long hours of thinking, remembering, meditating, looking for meaning and direction. Then he did the Exercises and came to the Llys Fasi workshop. This led to reorientation, redirection, new beginnings, joy, surprise, from double vision/no vision, to a new ability to focus, from darkness to glimpses of light and a return to roots.

His doing the Exercises was a coming home for someone who had been brought up in a Welsh Independent tradition, fortunately, as he said, liberal and non-Calvinistic. Bible reading was taken for granted

and the expounding of biblical theology in the splendid dramatic oratory of that long-ago era was something that stayed in his memory. He found it good to come to the Exercises and relish Ignatius' concentration on the Bible. *Lectio divina* and imaginative contemplation of gospel scenes appealed enormously. So did the emphasis on the humanity of Christ. The emphasis in the Exercises of human beings fully alive appealed to him, as did the idea of detachment/'indifference' rather than rejecting any part of creation. Finding God in everything, even in the darkness and desolation, was very real to him.

All this led him to want to share his experience with others and to accompany them on their journey and to leading days of prayer and taking part in weeks of guided prayer. He is now much more aware too of world problems.

In his Eighteenth Annotation Ignatius provides for people who will not make the full Exercises but whose need is 'some instruction and the attainment of a certain degree of peace of soul'. What some need is to stay the whole time with the consideration of God's love, faithfulness and mercy, or to attend to their need for healing or their image of God or of themselves. They may get no further than that on a particular occasion. Gerard Hughes has said that we must never despise the giving of the Exercises to someone whose focus of attention is on their need for inner healing, for this is the most effective promotion of justice and peace. God may lead them on to active justice and peace work. That is up to God. The retreat-giver is aware that God was there before the retreat and will be there for the person afterwards. God knows what the person needs at any particular time. Some people heavily involved in justice and peace issues come to the Exercises to find justice and peace within themselves. Peace can be pursued violently!

*What sort of people do the Exercises produce?*

All sorts! It is not the purpose of the Exercises to produce people of any particular kind but people who, acknowledging that they exist for the glory of God ('the glory of God is a human being fully alive'), attempt to direct their lives to the praise, reverence and service of God and, doing so, become more and more integrated in themselves, people who can reflect on their experience in the light of the gospel and are open towards others.

The purpose of the Exercises, as expressed by Ignatius, is to give freedom to choose God's will, to be so attached to what God wants that they can be detached or, in other words, be appropriately attached to everything else, for example, material possessions, other people's opinion of them and their own opinions.

Many people, through the Exercises, become more ecumenically-minded as their vision of God's purposes is increased. The unity of the Church is furthered as we get outside the narrow confines of our own denomination and contemplate God's action in the whole of creation and in one another. This is so especially when retreats and weeks of guided prayer are made ecumenically.

People for whom activity is foremost may be led to stand back and question the motive of their activity. Is it for their own justification to themselves, others or God? Contemplating the rhythm of Jesus' life, e.g. as described in Mark 1, they will seek a balance in their own and see the need for setting aside time for reflection and prayer. On the other hand, contemplating the life of Jesus, others will be led to action, realizing that the purpose of contemplating gospel scenes is not an end in itself but so to become a contemporary of Jesus that we become aware of and absorb his values and attitudes that we may live them out in our own everyday lives with Jesus as our contemporary.

An Anglican priest has shared with me his own journey and the effect it has had on his parish. His Ignatian journey through individually guided retreats and doing the full Exercises in daily life helped him re-evaluate his ministry, slow down and seek with greater integrity to connect with the gospel and its implications amongst the pressures of parish life. His parish consisted for the most part of affluent, entrepreneurial people mixed with the more traditional, respectable middle class rooted in self-achievement, control, emotional distancing, often covering inadequacy, shame, bewilderment in change, fear of loss of power, status, security etc.

He shared with the parish what the Exercises had meant to him. He told them that, through the previous year, he had been engaged in a long prayer journey, being guided through the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. 'This involves', he explained,

depths and delights, the pain and rewards of personal honesty, consolations and desolations, as the capacity grows to know God more as he is through recognising him in his gifts in creation, in Jesus Christ, in others and in oneself. Only he unlocks the heart from 'lesser gods', the hunger for success, security, status or power or the illusion of pain-free living.

He told them that he had been slowing down to be with God on behalf of them all and to reveal that there is another way to discover resources in Christ and to resist the destructive pressures of modern living. Through all this he had found strength to explore the kind of church needed in the nineties, the strategy needed in ministry, the kind of worship, prayer and

guidance that can release people from stress and the barrenness of busy lives that leave God out. 'The answer', he said,

is not more church or christian activities but a deep quality of shared relationship with God that enables us to be open, receptive, hospitable to others as we discover that God is open, receptive and graciously hospitable to us.

Results in the parish included

- increased giving to charities for disabled and homeless people;
- more of the congregation were linked with centres for the homeless and otherwise disadvantaged;
- more were conscious of Third World needs;
- someone was sent to Uganda as part of a team, taking a container of clothing, medical and school equipment and other essentials;
- the congregation more easily acknowledged mistakes and their own failure, tolerated differences and owned their doubts;
- they were learning to be more openly human, accepting and honest.

He says that he is trying not to collude with the culture and 'this is where the Ignatian input is sustaining in my experience'.

A Baptist minister would have described himself ten years ago as an activist. Getting results was what mattered. That was, he suggests, perhaps an outworking of his career in commerce. Over the last ten years he has felt drawn to spending more time with God alone. This has been far from an end in itself but has led to a sense of God calling him to a specific course of action. He found himself concerned less with his own performance and more with discerning what God wanted.

In his first individually-guided retreat he had experienced the majesty of God but in the second God's vulnerability. He struggled with encountering God in Christ. He wanted him to be strong and felt that all his own vulnerability was being exposed. This led to an awareness of his tendency to avoid pain and to a greater identification with the vulnerability of people in his pastoral care. Christ's total identification with the world, and his call to follow him, has profoundly changed him and brought him into a deeper experience of encountering the world's pain.

This has had an effect in his church. A building programme has now been completed to make it not only a place of worship but a seven-day-a-week open, caring centre to demonstrate in practical ways Christ's compassion to a broken world.

The dynamic of the Exercises leads people from where they are (and they enter the Exercises from within society and with all their experience

of life so far) through further freedom to discern and follow what God has in store for them. This may or may not mean more activity.

The Exercises can provide people with a tool for reflection for the rest of their lives, giving a direction for living and challenging the norms of secular society. Reflection on their own experience leads to discernment for further action. Emphasis on the kingdom keeps our sights on target. To ask ourselves constantly for whose kingdom, ours or God's, we are doing this or that is to keep us on the gospel track. Someone heavily involved in work among people with learning difficulties says:

I could well be an arch-activist, a constant doer, but it was introduction to the Exercises that drew me to contemplation, solitude and silence, to an increasing awareness of my need to centre myself with God. This I see as enabling me to continue my journey, active for God and not just for myself. Through the Exercises I became more aware of what really motivated me.

The Exercises generate the freedom to face reality and to make responsible decisions.

Having spent some years in the Third World, on returning to the UK, a Catholic priest knew exactly the sort of parish he did not want—middle-class, affluent. After doing the Exercises, he felt free to go to whatever parish seemed right. Another, through the Exercises, began to see the disability and emotional poverty often found among the middle classes and to struggle in his parish with issues of affluence, material success, the rat-race and all that goes with it.

The Exercises are neither appropriate only for activists nor do they create activists but help people to become who they are truly meant to be in Christ. The creative power of the Exercises is to allow people to be themselves as fully as possible.

What the Exercises have done for some people is not to lead them into more activity but to root them where they are. One housewife and mother of three says how they 'helped me to come to terms with where I am and my place in life and in society'. They helped her realize that she cannot do everything and is not expected to, but that she was to be herself and willing for God to work in and through her in whatever situation she is in. Another, a hospital chaplain, says how they acted as 'a springboard to a more positive life style, more in tune with life, rooted more'. A discovery by many is that it is exactly when they have reached a point of 'indifference'/detachment/poise, like a balance at equilibrium, as Ignatius says, that God is able to act and bring about what all their striving fails to do.

*Frustration with the Church*

The call or recall that the Exercises give to stark gospel values sometimes brings about frustration with the mediocrity and hypocrisy of much of church life. One parish priest speaks of his impatience with the institution of the Church, his pain at the resistance he finds to change and his longing for a deeper social consciousness. He adds:

Without the Ignatian retreat annually, I would have shrivelled up and become cynical, disillusioned and institutionalised. These retreats, keeping me journeying on, help to sustain me as a person in Christ and therefore prevents the role of priest crippling me.

A woman in her forties told me that her involvement with her parish had gone steadily downhill since she did the Exercises. Everything she believed in and talked about was seen as a threat to many parishioners and especially her vicar. She has moved even more out to the edges but, at the same time, people have begun to treat her as someone in whom they can confide when the going is rough. She finds herself encouraging people to stay in the Church and make their voice heard. A difference she has found in her ministry since doing the Exercises is that she can encourage others in their prophetic ministry rather than thinking she can change things single-handed.

The Church is an agent of the kingdom and not the kingdom itself. To seek first the kingdom and its values is to get the Church in perspective as an all too often weak, failing instrument. I was struck by what the Bishop of Southwark said in the recent General Synod debate on the ordination of women to the priesthood. To have a high doctrine of ministry is good so long as we have a higher doctrine of the Church. To have a high doctrine of the Church is good so long as we have a higher doctrine of the Kingdom, which implies true justice.

To sum up, people who do the Exercises come from a wide variety of social, occupational and educational backgrounds and out of their own particular circumstances and needs. The dynamic of the Exercises can only be discovered, not produced or manipulated by human effort. Time and again, retreat-givers are amazed by how powerfully they work in people's lives and in such different and often surprising ways. They work by the power of the unpredictable Spirit who starts from where people are, gives them what they need and, by the measure of their openness, leads them to be and do what God wills. This may involve greater or less activity, an overt prophetic ministry or a more quiet prophetic witness by being who they are. Christ-centric as they are, it is not surprising that the Exercises reveal the divisions within a person,

speeding up the process of individuation. Nor is it to be wondered at that a result of doing the Exercises can be division and opposition even in the Church.