

PRAYER AND LIFE

Experiencing the Fullness of God's Love

By MAUREEN CONROY

AS WE APPROACH THE END of the second millennium, we are experiencing a shift in our understanding of spirituality. The shift is complex as we move from a fixed to a process notion of God, from a dualistic to a holistic approach to the human person, from a hierarchical to a mutual engagement in relationships, from a separation from the world to a reverence for the earth and towards a full immersion in the gifts of the universe. We are being challenged to see life unfolding in an integrated, inclusive way rather than a linear, separatist way. We are drawn beyond a 'left-brain', logical, black-and-white view of life and God to a 'right-brain', imaginative, expansive experience of life and God.

As someone steeped in Ignatian spirituality for many years, a spiritual director and educator of spiritual directors, I continue to marvel at how the Spiritual Exercises invite individuals into a profound reverence for God's creation, into a mutual relationship with God and a holistic approach to the human person, into an integration of prayer and life and an experience of the fullness of God's love. As well as offering a way of praying and a method for prayerful decision-making, the Exercises encourage a contemplative way of seeing which enables us to become aware of God's presence in all aspects of life. Not only are they meant to be prayed with over a fixed period of time or at times of major decisions, they are also intended to transform our ongoing relationship with God, our vision of life in general and our daily life in particular. They enable us to develop an interior attitude so that we can respond to the 'breadth and length and height and depth' of God's love (Eph 3:18) in the breadth and length and height and depth of our life and provide practical ways 'to find God in all things'. They offer us the profound opportunity to enter into the mind, heart and life of Jesus Christ so that we can see our own life and all of life through God's mind and heart.

This article explores how the Spiritual Exercises invite us into a pervasive experience of God's love and into a contemplative way of life that enables us to see, respond and surrender to God and by so doing 'to find God in all things'. It focuses primarily on the Contemplation to

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Attain the Love of God, the culminating prayer exercise, as a way of exploring how to integrate the depths of God's love as experienced in prayer with various aspects of life. It describes actual experiences of individuals who have made a residential or Nineteenth Annotation retreat, and whose lived experience and relationship with God have been deeply transformed by the experience of God's affective presence. Lastly, it discusses how ways of praying suggested in the Exercises can become ongoing ways of living.

Praying with the four Weeks of the Exercises can be a rich experience of God's love in its many manifestations. The First Week is an experience of God's unconditional and redeeming love. God loves us no matter what our sin history and darkness and redeems us from sinful tendencies that keep us from responding freely to God's love. God heals and redeems deep places of inner darkness. The Second Week is an experience of God's mutual love inviting us to labour with Jesus for others and to know, love and follow him 'more' readily and completely. God is doing *with* us and not only for us. The Third Week involves a deeper commitment to love and follow Jesus in times of trial, suffering and hardship. We experience the privileged invitation to be with Jesus in his pain and vulnerability. We vividly enter into God's faithful love in suffering, and our heart and spirit are inspired to remain faithful to God even in difficult times. The Fourth Week encourages us to let the pain of loving be transformed into the joy of loving, to rejoice with Jesus in the new life gained through faithful love. By the end of the Fourth Week, we have come the full circle of love and celebrate the new life which faithful love brings; new life from redemption and freedom, mutuality and intimacy, compassion and faithfulness. We have entered deeply into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; now we are invited to become the One we have contemplated.¹ We have been deeply affected by the overwhelming experience of God's love; now we are moved to allow that love to overflow into our life.

The Contemplation of the Love of God and the fullness of love

The Contemplation to Attain the Love of God offers us the opportunity to synthesize and deepen the graces received during the Four Weeks and to carry these forth into life.² It invites us even more deeply into the fullness of God's love and the continued living out of that love.

The preliminary two notes (Exx 230) reveal the quality of love to be lived out. First, it is an active love, a love that 'manifests itself in deeds rather than words'. The deep affective love experienced during the retreat is intended to become an effective love, a love that concretely

expresses itself in daily actions.³ Second, it is a mutual love, a love that 'consists in a mutual sharing of goods'. The giving and receiving of heartfelt love between the 'lover and beloved' is carried out in concrete love by the mutual sharing of knowledge, honours, riches and other possessions. Third, it is a total love, a love that 'always gives to the other'. The mutual sharing is meant to be a constant sharing and continuous self-giving. The lover and beloved hold back nothing from each other.

The first prelude (Exx 232), the 'composition of place', invites us to enter into a contemplative stance in the presence of God, the angels and saints. We are not alone as we live our lives, but live in the presence of the Trinity and of the Communion of Saints 'who intercede for me'. Many spiritual beings are an integral part of our individual lives. Our growing contemplative spirit now enables us to live our daily life in conscious communion with the Trinity and the entire Mystical Body, in heaven and on earth.

The second prelude (Exx 233) states the heart of the matter:

This is to ask for what I desire. Here it will be to ask for an intimate knowledge of the many blessings received, that filled with gratitude for all, I may in all things love and serve the Divine Majesty.

This grace highlights three important dynamics. First, we ask for 'an intimate knowledge of the many blessings received'. We are encouraged to feel in our hearts and spirits, to savour, to absorb even more deeply all the blessings of God's love that we have experienced. We are drawn into a heartfelt knowledge (*sentir*) of the variety and richness of these blessings, absorbing each of them into the fibre of our being. Second, through this savouring and absorbing of the many blessings received from God, we are 'filled with gratitude for all'. We are moved to respond with the fullness of a grateful heart for the generous outpouring of God's love. Third, having savoured the graces and blessings received with a grateful heart, we are moved to respond to that love in all aspects of life, that is, in 'all things to love and serve the Divine Majesty'. The 'more' of the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks becomes the 'all' of total self-giving, of complete surrender, of responding concretely to the gift of God's love in the various dimensions of life.

First point: mutual self-giving

The four points of the Contemplation reflect four dynamics of mutual love and the integration of God's love with life, an integration which leads to an ongoing experience of the fullness of God's love.

The first point (Exx 234) draws us into a panoramic, universal view of the many ways in which God has blessed us through creation, redemption and the unique gifts given to each person. We contemplate 'with great affection' how much God has done for us, the abundant spiritual gifts God has given and how much God desires to give Self. God has not only poured out many individual and spiritual gifts, but also has given the greatest gift – the gift of Self. The overwhelming generosity of God moves us to offer ourselves completely to God. We enter into the experience of mutual self-giving with 'great feeling' as we move on from the richness of the retreat. 'What you have received as a gift, give as gift' (Mt 10:8). We strive to give ourselves to God completely each day in our growing personal relationship and to bring to others the many gifts and blessings received.

Joan experienced this dynamic in a surprising way at the end of her thirty-day retreat. Joan's life before the retreat was filled with doing many good things for others. As a social worker in a social service agency she worked many hours a day responding to the needs of the homeless, the unemployed and the hungry, and she did so with love and compassion. A pervasive movement during her retreat was one of Jesus inviting her into an intimate relationship with him – the relationship of lover and beloved, a relationship of being together and not only doing together. As she prayed with the first point of the Contemplation, she sensed God deepen and confirm this grace:

I experienced God inviting me to a new 'quality' of life with God and others, not only to 'do' for God and others but also to 'be' with God in a more intimate way and to be with others from a deeper place within me. I sensed God saying, more in a feeling rather than a verbal way, 'I want *you*, not only your good actions'.

I experienced a greater freedom from my workaholism, felt challenged to have a greater balance in my life between doing and being, and desirous to grow in a more intimate relationship with God.

Joan's response to God's passionate love, her 'Take, Lord, receive', was to give herself to God in a growing personal relationship with God in her daily life as 'the beloved shares with the Lover', and to be with others in a quality way, not only by doing good actions for them.

Second point: mutual indwelling

Whereas the first point of the Contemplation emphasizes mutual self-giving, the second point (Exx 235) highlights mutual indwelling. We are invited into a reverence for all of creation as we contemplate

how God dwells in all creatures. There is nothing in creation that is not permeated by God's loving presence. Craig's Nineteenth Annotation was saturated with this grace:

My outlook and vision of life have been so broadened during and since my retreat. My life had been so focused on my job and making enough money so my family can live comfortably and my children can be well-educated. I have become so aware that life is bigger than my individual concerns. I have vividly experienced God's presence in the beauty of the sky and trees as I drive to work. I have taken many walks in a local park and see God in the lake, ducks, trees and flowers.

I am saddened by the growing pollution and destruction to the natural environment, and now attend a monthly meeting to pray with and ponder what we can do to change this growing destruction. I know my outlook will never be the same; I feel a holiness in God's creation that I never felt before.

Craig's heartfelt response to God's indwelling presence in creation was a change of heart and outlook and a specific action to help others to reverence the sacredness of God's universe.

The second point also reflects on how God dwells in us, making a temple of us, and reminds us that we are created in the image and likeness of God. Liz, the mother of four children and a teacher of disabled adults, experienced the effects of God's dwelling in her in a growing self-love and appreciation of others:

A significant blessing of my retreat in everyday life is a firm knowledge of Jesus' love for me. In many different ways throughout the year, Jesus called me his 'Rose'. He showed me in different ways how special I am to him and how close he is to me in all aspects of my life.

Jesus' deep love produced a dramatic change in my self-esteem. I began to see how important it was that I teach others that I am worthy of their love and respect. When people hurt me I no longer just accept it but tell them lovingly that I am hurt and why. When they criticize me I do not argue with them. I calmly tell them I do not deserve the criticism and drop it. I have experienced deeply who I am in God's eyes, God's beautiful masterpiece, so I appreciate myself more and relate to others from a place of inner strength.

I also have seen more deeply how the disabled adults I teach, limited and broken in so many ways, are precious to God. I feel God's vibrant presence in each one.

Liz's lived response to God's dwelling in her with such reverence and love has been to act out of a growing self-respect and to reverence the

gift she is to God and to many others. She dwells with God in the daily unfolding of her life and is vividly aware of God's presence in others. She experiences herself and the disabled adults as God's temples.

Third point: mutual labouring and giving life

The third point (Exx 236) underscores how God works and labours for us and all aspects of the universe, giving life and sensation and preserving all created things. We contemplate a God who not only gives Self to us, who desires to dwell with and within us, but who also actively works and suffers with us in our daily lives. The third point brings out the masculine and feminine face of God.

Brenda, a well-liked pastor of a Lutheran parish, experienced God suffering with her in her hard work of inspiring people to respond to the parish ministries such as teaching summer school and working in the soup kitchen. She tried a number of ways to encourage people to take leadership, but with little results. As Brenda dealt with her disillusionment and pain during her Nineteenth Annotation retreat, she experienced the following:

When I sat down after the sermon last Sunday, I began to weep quietly – the people's faces seemed so unresponsive. When I went back to this moment in my prayer time, the tears began to flow again – such deep feelings of disillusionment. As I sat with Jesus in my pain, I had a vivid sense of Jesus weeping too. He was weeping over Jerusalem in pain and disillusionment. He wanted me to see that he knew the pain of the unresponsiveness of others and that he was sharing my pain with me. We sat for a long time weeping together. I felt so close to him. I felt deep gratitude for his presence, and how grateful he was to me for my seeming fruitless hard work.

This experience conveys a masculine sense of God, as one who is willing to labour and suffer with us and for us. Brenda experiences a mutual labour of love as she struggles to bring God's lively presence into her parish life.

The third point also reveals the feminine face of God, who 'gives being, conserves them, confers life and sensation, etc.' God is a life-giving God who energizes 'the heavens and the elements', and who breathes life into all living things, 'the plants, the fruits, the cattle, etc.' God also gives birth to the growing life of God within us. During his directed retreat Ed had such a powerful experience of God birthing life in him that it profoundly transformed his attitudes towards and relationships with others.

I have always been a very masculine person, with an underdeveloped feminine side. As I prayed with the Annunciation, I experienced being pregnant with Mary and Elizabeth. After resisting for a long time this seemingly embarrassing experience, I finally went with it. For several days I sat pregnant with Mary and Elizabeth. Our stomachs grew larger together as we drank tea and conversed. I had a clear sense that God was birthing new life in me, the feminine side of me that was repressed.

When Jesus and John the Baptist were born, a gentle, loving and vulnerable part of me was born. I cried and cried – something I do not do easily. I had a deep sense of God's gentleness being born as well as the feminine side of myself.

I have never been the same after this experience. After the retreat, I grew more gentle and loving with my wife and children and became much more accepting of others. I allowed my vulnerability to come out and experienced a tender love for others that I never felt before. Mary and Elizabeth have continued to be my women friends who have shown me how to love with the feminine heart of God.

Ed's eventual surrender to the new life that God was impregnating in him enabled him to bring new life to his family and co-workers. He mutually participated in God's life-giving presence in his relationships with and attitudes toward others.

Fourth point: mutual empowering

The fourth point (Exx 237) reveals an empowering God. We consider that all Godlike qualities – the power of love, justice, goodness, mercy and many others – have their source in God. Having been transformed by the strength, justice, goodness, love and mercy of God during our retreat, we are now moved to let these vibrant divine qualities energize and overflow into all aspects of life, 'as rays of light descending from the sun and waters flowing from their fountains'. By our attitudes and actions we are invited to convey that Jesus is the Light of the World (Jn 12:46) and that he is the Living Water that quenches our deepest thirst (Jn 4:13).

Len, a talented musician and liturgist, had a powerful experience of this dynamic during his eight-day retreat, an experience that deeply affected him during the rest of the year. Preparing to enter into a new ministry situation, he felt tremendous fear of using his gifts – that he might be considered to be a 'show off'. As he struggled during the retreat, he had a rich and empowering experience of God:

I walked along the ocean on a beautiful sunny day weighed down by my concerns, fears and worries. As I shared these with God, I heard

God say clearly and buoyantly, 'Let your light shine before others'. As I heard these words, I felt the sun's warmth on my back and had a deep sense of God's warmth and light filling my body and whole being. My fears and worries seemed to melt away as God's light filled me. I felt a confidence to let my gifts be used freely, knowing that God has given me these for the well-being of others.

During the year when my fears begin to surface again before a liturgical celebration, I enter back into the unmistakable surety of God's word to me, 'Let your light shine before others' and feel again the warmth and light of God's strengthening presence. My confidence and freedom are renewed.

As with the other points of the Contemplation we are invited into a mutual response. How can we empower an already powerful God? We come full circle to the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23) which lays the groundwork for openness to a growing interior freedom. Having experienced a freedom from the binding power of our inner darkness through the redeeming power of God's merciful love during the First Week and allowing that freedom to grow during the rest of the Weeks, we can now let God be God in our life. We empower God by letting go of our need to control and by giving God the freedom and power to work through us and in us. We now can truly say: 'Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess' (Exx 234). By our 'magnanimity and generosity' (Exx 5) during the retreat, we have experienced God's transforming power. Now we empower God to use our gifts freely for the growth and well-being of others.

The ultimate goal of the Exercises, 'to find God in all things', includes not only the 'things' of our daily life and decisions, but also the realities of our ongoing relationship with God, with one another, with ourselves and with the earth. The four points of the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God, and the experiences described, reveal how the fullness of God's love can be given and responded to in the fullness of life.

Ways of praying become ways of living

In addition to synthesizing the graces of the Retreat and being a bridging exercise to integrate these in our life experience, the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God also reflects varied ways of praying that can help us to continue to allow God's abundant love to overflow into our daily life. Some ways of praying that can become ways of living are: contemplation, repetition and the application of the senses, dialoguing with God and discernment. These correspond with the four points of the Contemplation.

The Contemplation to Attain the Love of God draws us again into the process of *contemplation*, which we have experienced during the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks. Contemplation is the act of looking at God, listening to God and becoming absorbed in God. We have contemplated Jesus' thoughts, feelings and actions many times during the retreat. We have looked at him with continued attention and have grown in an 'intimate knowledge' of his heart, mind and behaviour. By praying with the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God, we move again from self-absorption to absorption in God as we take a long engaging look at the many ways in which God has been with us. We allow God's loving presence to absorb us, surround us, fill us.

As we go about our daily life, this contemplative way of praying during the retreat helps us to move from a compulsive to a contemplative way of living: to be attentive to the present moment rather than to become caught in past memories or future plans; to allow the beauty of creation and various persons in our life to reveal themselves spontaneously rather than trying to manipulate or control them; to live from a deeper, uncluttered interior space rather than from a superficial, fragmented inner space. We not only know but experience that life is a mystery to be lived and enjoyed, not a series of problems to be solved. We enjoy *being with* God and others and not only *doing for* God and others. We see all as gift, especially the gift of God's presence in our life (first point), and our grateful heart spontaneously says 'Thank you, God'. We live more consistently and deeply from an attitude of surrender, striving each day to pray 'Take, Lord, receive' in all the inner and outer dimensions of our life.

The final Contemplation is also another experience of *repetition and the application of the senses*, reminding us of the value of our dwelling with God and letting God dwell in us (second point). The Exercises mention these two related dynamics of prayer throughout (Exx 62, 118, 121-125), and sum these up in the Fourth Week: '... attention and more time is to be given to the more important parts and to points where the soul was more deeply moved and spiritual relish was greater' (Exx 227). These two ways of praying have a clarifying and deepening effect in our heart and spirit. That is, as we stay with the most engaging dimensions of the prayer matter, we allow God to reinforce and simplify significant spiritual truths. We notice more about God's self-communication, enjoy the affective touches of God and discover sources of desolation. Our spiritual senses of tasting, seeing, listening, touching become more involved, so we are able to respond to God's loving presence from a more complete sense of self.

As we live out the riches of the retreat in our daily life, we are encouraged to acquire an ongoing attitude of savouring our affective experiences of God so that the fullness of these experiences can penetrate the depths of our being. We are invited to dwell with, to rest in, significant experiences as our personal relationship with God unfolds, so that God can permeate all aspects of our life. We have learned the blessing of *staying with* an experience of God for a long time during retreat, and are invited to integrate this stance of prolonged pondering in our daily life. 'Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart' (Lk 2:19). The dynamics of repetition and the application of the senses challenge us to have the same stance of pondering God's revelations in our life as Mary did in hers.

As throughout the entire Exercises, the Contemplation suggests that we conclude each of the four points by *dialoguing with God* in the colloquy. We have integrated into each prayer period a heart-to-heart sharing of our thoughts and feelings with God, Mary or one of the saints. To allow the fullness of the retreat to unfold in our life, we are encouraged to have an ongoing dialogue with God – to share with God all the concerns, issues and feelings that our life experience precipitates, to listen to God's response and to respond with love and freedom. By integrating an ongoing dialogue with God into the fabric of our life, we grow in a more real, mutual and intimate relationship with God that can sustain us in our labours and struggles and nurture life-giving experiences (third point).

The making of the Exercises challenges us to incorporate the dynamics of prayerful *discernment* into our daily life. 'Discernment' is the process of sifting out interior movements of consolation and desolation so that we can respond to those that come from God and go against those that do not. This sifting out helps us to see the source of them so that we can allow God to nurture and deepen the God-originated movements and to purify the sinful and self-centred ones. The fourth point of the Contemplation invites us again into this discerning stance by having us look at and experience again the source of true power, justice, goodness and mercy, so that we know when these qualities are rooted in God and when they are not.

This attitude of prayerful discernment can become an integral part of our daily life during a Nineteenth Annotation retreat and, after a residential retreat, through an Examen of Consciousness, a concrete discernment exercise that helps us to sort out interior experiences of the moment and to grow in a discerning vision of heart.⁴ By developing a discerning heart and spirit, we can notice more readily what inspires

our daily actions and go with the interior movements that bring life and freedom to ourselves, others and the world. We can see more clearly the roots of binding darkness in ourselves and the causes of destruction in the world. This ongoing, prayerful sifting out will result in choices which are life-giving for others and for the earth, as well as bringing us the fullness of life.

By entering into the Spiritual Exercises, we receive into the depths of our interior life various manifestations of God's abundant love. We are filled with the desire to live out this love exteriorly, to foster an ongoing integration of prayer and life, to live our daily life from the inside out. We have learned specific ways to savour God's love and to respond to that love affectively, effectively, mutually, concretely, constantly and fully. The fullness of God's love can now permeate all dimensions of our outer life just as it has transformed and enriched the depths of our inner life. A contemplative way of praying has now moved into a contemplative way of living in which our 'Take, Lord, receive' and our desire 'to find God in all things' become daily experiences that affect all of life.

NOTES

¹ See Aschenbrenner, George, 'Becoming whom we contemplate' in *The Way Supplement* no 52 (Spring 1985), pp 30-42.

² See Buckley, Michael, 'The Contemplation to Attain Love' in *The Way Supplement* no 24 (Spring 1975), pp 100-104 for an explanation of how the four points of the Contemplation relate to each of the Four Weeks.

³ See Coathalem, Herve, *Ignatian insights* (Taiwan, 1971), p 226.

⁴ In recent years many articles have been written on the Examen. Probably the most well-known article which is used by many retreat directors was written by George Aschenbrenner in *Review for Religious* vol 31 (1972), pp 14-21.