THE EXPERIENCE OF IGNATIAN PRAYER

By JOAN SCOTT

MY OWN EXPERIENCE OF IGNATIAN PRAYER began as a pre-Vatican II novice in a Congregation which based its formation on a rule owing much to Jesuit sources and on a spirituality based largely on the Ignatian Exercises (even though other traditions were not excluded). The eight-day annual community retreat meant that a Jesuit priest came and preached four times a day for anything from fifteen to forty-five minutes, after which the remainder of the hour was spent in prayer. The retreat followed the sequence of the Exercises, and while one retreat-giver might bring Scripture to life, another might kill it. In spite of some obvious drawbacks it seems that most people found it a time of growth and renewal. This was partly because there was total silence and freedom from one's normal work and other responsibilities. During my first retreat after leaving the noviciate, I sat one day on a hilltop looking at the folded hills and the tall trees, forgot time and felt myself a part of God's creation. As I walked back I found myself thinking that I had not prayed like that since the day I entered the Congregation. Although my early experience of Ignatian prayer had had a positive side, it had also brought about a temporary loss of a kind of prayer that I valued. I think this was largely caused by misunderstanding; no one had tried to restrict my way of prayer but neither had anyone pointed me towards spiritual freedom. Today I would claim that Ignatian prayer should lead to an increase of spiritual freedom.

Over the last thirty years there has been a flood of books, articles, lectures, seminars and courses of study on the Spiritual Exercises and Ignatian prayer, with a corresponding growth in understanding and practice. The Second Vatican Council encouraged religious orders and congregations to return to the charism of their founder. For the Society of Jesus this led to a great revival in the practice of the Spiritual Exercises and to the rediscovery of the individually guided retreat. The movement has taken off among religious and laity, Roman Catholic and Anglican, and even among some members of Nonconformist churches. Even if they have nothing like the Exercises in their own

tradition, Nonconformists are very much at ease with the idea of entering into a deeper and more loving relationship with Jesus through a Scripture-based prayer. The Society of Jesus has been generous in sharing the rediscovered riches of the Exercises, and many have benefited, to the point of being retreat-givers themselves.

We would expect prayer, of whatever school of spirituality, to lead to faith in the presence of God in our lives and to a desire to deepen and strengthen that faith through continued personal prayer. Sometimes one is greatly encouraged by such growth in faith in retreatants who have had some of the spiritual experiences which are encouraged by the Exercises. The retreat guide may at times be privileged to see in a retreatant an entering into or a strengthening of a deep love relationship with Jesus. But perhaps the most important effect observed, especially during a thirty-day retreat but also in shorter retreats, is a significant and very real growth in spiritual freedom. As a small country child I remember being afraid of the dark outside the house and especially in the woods and in clumps of trees. Then one night, walking home from the village with my hand in my father's, I was no longer afraid, then or ever again. I see the freedom that can come through prayer as something like that. It may have been a gradual process but it is often apprehended as a single event connected with a particular experience. Many things that have crippled and impeded, such as fears, prejudices and self-imposed limitations, drop away. In their place is the freedom to stand before God in a unique relationship or to sit at God's table happily assured that, however unworthy, I have a place there with my own name on it.

This new-found freedom is partly a result of no longer thinking that we can or must win that place through personal effort and consequently ceasing to worry about whether our prayer is good enough or sufficiently high up the ladder of prayer. We are no longer interested in whether any one kind of prayer is higher and in some mysterious way closer to God than another or whether this is better and more to be desired than that. Prayer merit tables are still encouraged by certain types of spiritual teaching, but how can we claim that God prefers one type of prayer to another?

It is the one who communicates rather than the method of communication which is important. God gives to each one the gift of his presence in the way each can most fully and happily receive him. This may be why in the Gospels Jesus gives guidance in prayer generally by example, only seldom by word, and then usually in response to a question. The most quoted example of one of his answers is probably his

teaching of the Our Father which, after a salutation, moves straight into petition and stays there. The parable of the Pharisee and the publican contrasts two very different men at prayer. It says something about our attitude before God and recommends a heartfelt cry for help rather than a manifestation of self-righteousness and smugness about our relationship to God. There is a very subtle catch in this parable: if I ever begin to think I am, after all, a bit like the publican, I am already in danger of becoming the Pharisee. The only way out of this dilemma is to seek only God in our prayer and not waste energy looking longingly, and for our own satisfaction, towards those misty spiritual heights that we hope are out there somewhere.

We have all come across many different ways of prayer. We may have wondered at the saffron-robed Buddhist monk or nun, sitting in a yoga position hour after hour without moving a muscle – we know that behind that stillness is a long discipleship and a long, hard training. We have watched, at least on the television screen, and responded to the rhythm of the members of a black evangelical church singing, dancing, shouting, praising God and being filled with joy. We may have found helpful the Orthodox tradition of the repetition of a prayer such as the Jesus Prayer or listened with awe to the balanced and disciplined beauty of Gregorian chant in the austere praise of the night office. But what help would it give us if we could put these and the many other forms of prayer into an order of merit and then aim for the highest if that was not where we could rest? There are some who seem always to be looking, with a strange restlessness, for new and possibly better experiences in prayer. In the end the only possible criterion of choice is where I feel drawn and where I am most at home. Of course there is always growth and development in prayer, but that will happen without our keeping looking at the map. If we find a resting place why not enjoy it while we can? Why not be like the 'birds of the air or lilies of the field' in our freedom from anxiety?

The hierarchies of prayer often put the prayer of petition at the bottom of the ladder. Over the years I have talked to a number of hermits, some of long standing and others mere beginners, about the development of their prayer in the hermitage. Nearly all have begun with a strong desire to deepen and give more time to a form of prayer that is already silent and wordless and then, sometimes to their surprise, have found themselves drawn strongly to the prayer of petition. The hermit is not there to seek a personal satisfaction in his or her own progress but somehow to bring God, or to enable God's coming, into our disordered world. In the same way no other follower of Christ can seek primarily for personal satisfaction in prayer. One thing Jesus kept

telling his disciples was that they should ask for all they needed. It is proper then that an element of petition is built into Ignatian prayer.

One can think of prayer in linear terms: in spite of minor ups and downs it rises steadily higher and never returns over the same area. I prefer a spiral model, like a coiled spring, dark on one side but in bright light on the other. The life of prayer then moves along at varying speeds, passing over and over again through light and darkness. It is never in quite the same place as it was the last time round, and sometimes it rests for a long time in the light, sometimes for a long time in the dark. We do not leave behind one experience in prayer for ever and go on to something higher and better, but we return again and again to what seems to be the same experience. But we are never quite the same person so it is never quite the same place. In times of light we rejoice that God is near; in times of darkness we encourage ourselves by the memory of the experience of God's presence.

I am not suggesting that there can be no progress in prayer. It is an important characteristic of Ignatian prayer that we are encouraged to reflect upon our time of prayer and so to become aware of the movement of the Spirit. Moreover, in the daily Examen, which is an ongoing part of Ignatian prayer, our reflection on our prayer cannot be divorced from reflection on our relationships, our actions, our reactions and the whole of our lives. Making this daily reflection should help us to shut out the subtle temptation to search for spiritual experiences in prayer rather than for God and God's will for me. Most of us have met the person who prays for hours on end, day after day, year after year, with unfaltering fidelity and yet, at the end, is not perceived by contemporaries as having become more Christlike. At the other extreme we meet the person who is not seen as having any great attachment to prayer or to doing any of those things usually associated with reaching a state of holiness and yet he or she moves among us like a reminder of the presence of Christ in our world. The only explanation I can offer for this apparent contradiction is in the words of the hymn 'God moves in a mysterious way' or maybe in the words of Scripture, 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts'. Nevertheless, we can of course trust that if we are generous in giving our time to God he will reward that generosity, but maybe not in the way we anticipate.

The retreat guide too sees himself or herself as an ordinary and fallible but committed and praying person. This might raise the question of how people become qualified to accompany retreats. A good knowledge of Scripture would be one qualification, and a good knowledge and practice of the Exercises another. These are not easily acquired simply by making a couple of eight-day retreats followed by a short

course on the Exercises. There are more extended and demanding training courses which are time-consuming and fairly costly, so that it is understandable if clergy and religious tend to outnumber the laity on these. But more lay persons are taking up retreat work and bringing their own valued insights, experience and understanding to it. Retreatants all bring their special insights but in the end, if the retreat guide encourages them to go straight towards a deepening of their own relationship to God, all find their right place.

Perhaps most important of all for the retreat guide, even more important than a knowledge of the content of Scripture and the method of the Exercises, are those personal qualities that make for a listening and intuitive approach and the spiritual freedom that allows a non-prescriptive way of guiding. Since God meets different people in different ways, a retreat guide cannot take up a prescriptive stance. At the same time a wide discrepancy between the background of belief of the retreatant and that of the retreat giver would not be helpful. The necessary qualities for this work are as likely to be found in committed lay women and men as in religious or priests. If these qualities are in short supply a retreat giver can do more harm than good. I have come across people who have made a Thirty-day retreat, which has demanded great commitment. They have, one hopes, derived some benefit from it but at the end they have been left full of doubt, fear and resentment because the retreat director has insisted too strongly on the importance of a particular form of prayer and has left them feeling defeated or inadequate. Such cases are rare and then one can only trust that somewhere in it all God is moving in a mysterious way.

If asked what is meant by Ignatian prayer there are those who would refer immediately to the use of imagination in prayer. This can become a stumbling block for some retreatants and not only for those who are beginners. Some have been tied in knots rather than liberated by their retreat experience. A common statement is, 'I have no imagination'. If this is said before the word 'imagination' has even been mentioned by the retreat guide there has probably been difficulty in a previous retreat. I now try to avoid the use of this word as it means so many different things to different people. Ignatius wants us to escape from the text into the spiritual reality. David Fleming in his *A contemporary reading of the Spiritual Exercises* comments on one possible outcome of praying the colloquy at the end of the Nativity contemplation. 'Perhaps there is little to say because this style of contemplation is often more a "being with" experience than a word response.' In other words, I suggest that in this style of prayer we may eventually be left without words and often without images of any kind.

The contemplation which Ignatius calls 'application of the senses', and which he puts at the end of each day, is meant to be the deepest experience of the day. The purpose of this Exercise is not to pass a test in observation after having first somehow dragged up from one's own imagination what is being observed; and there are no prizes for reporting back on the draughtiness of the stable or the colour of St Joseph's beard. What is hoped for is an entering into the deepest meaning of the day's prayer, and a leaving behind of thoughts and words in order to be still in simple desire. We are asked to begin in the context of a certain event or mystery but not to worry when even that is left behind. What is being offered here is a mysticism which begins in the world of the senses and which then passes somehow beyond senses and words to the 'being with' experience. If such prayer is properly reflected on, it will remain earthed in the reality of daily living. Properly understood this style of prayer is fairly easily taken up by anyone of a contemplative frame of mind, and contemplative qualities are found in many who do not think of themselves as such. The image of a contemplative as a remote, ethereal and abstracted being belongs to Romanticism. Who was more in touch with reality and more energetic and practical in action than the great St Teresa?

When someone has difficulty with so-called 'imaginative' prayer it is usually because of misunderstanding about what is expected, and a better explanation might help. When there is still fear or anxiety I sometimes suggest trying out what is called a fantasy journey. For example: 'You are on a hillside; look at the vegetation, at the rocks, at a clump of trees on the horizon towards which you are moving. You see a figure coming towards you . . .' etc. I have never known anyone have difficulty in getting involved in this kind of story, and it is not difficult to transfer the method to a gospel event. Strange and unexpected scenes, reactions and feelings will often surface. These things are part of us; although kept until now below the surface, they are real and belong to us. When mind and heart are set free from our preconceived understandings, expectations and desires we see and hear differently. Applied to Scripture this may enable us to see and hear in a new way and to reach a deeper silence. In many cases the most important and powerful moments of a retreat come in such contemplations.

Through Scripture and the movement of the Exercises, retreatants are immersed in the First Week in the whole creation story. Subsequently they are moved through the account of the Incarnation to reflect on their own salvation story. They find themselves looking at Jesus in his life and mission and are challenged to follow him. The most difficult challenge may come as a call to replace the desire to have Jesus

with me by the desire to have myself with him, in whatever place and condition to which he might call me and at whatever cost. In the Third and Fourth Weeks retreatants move into the passion, death and resurrection. To all this people respond in different ways and at different levels, but given full commitment they cannot help but move into a deeper and more personal relationship.

Ignatian prayer is above all a listening prayer. The retreatant learns to listen to God's personal word and his personal call. To listen is to have an open mind and to be open to the possibility of change. I have found, for example, that many retreatants who belong to a tradition in which devotion to Mary is suspect will form a friendship with her during a retreat. I remember especially one Baptist minister for whom that friendship became very important, and this in a situation where I had been careful not to press the subject in any way.

Ignatian prayer is prayer for the 'contemplative in action'. Whether we belong to a monastic or an apostolic tradition, whether we live behind cloister walls or in a hermitage or amid all the hurly-burly of our modern world we cannot, with integrity, separate our action from our contemplation. Ignatian prayer does not seek to remove us from the experience of what it is to be fully human but leads us towards the experience of how it is when a fully human person encounters the living God. Ignatian prayer is not exclusive, not esoteric, not precious but encourages our understanding of the essential role of the liturgical and sacramental in every part of our lives. It allows and even encourages a variety of prayer forms on the principle that different people approach and receive God's presence in different ways; its distinctively Ignatian character comes from the ways in which prayer, of whatever form, is related to daily living.

So far I have made Ignatian prayer sound like a great success story, as if everyone who perseveres in this way of prayer turns out happy, holy, saintly, and a whole person. But it is no magic formula, and I am not going to claim that this is the only or the best way of prayer. Wherever prayer is authentic and persevering we must believe that it helps us to become more whole, more human, more fully alive, better Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus or whatever we aim to be before God. But in that case, what about those who persevere in prayer for many years and then move into a kind of spiritual drought or darkness? Or into a morass in which they appear to be stuck and maybe still sinking? Over the last seven or eight years I have been aware of this kind of experience becoming more common; or perhaps it is just that people have been more ready to talk about it. They move into a place in which there is no light, no sound, no feeling, only a blank experience of hanging on; and

yet nearly always at bottom they have an awareness of peace and after a time are no longer anxious or troubled by the experience. The retreat guide may feel at a loss but should not be discouraged if there is no apparent change during the retreat. Perhaps the only advice that can be given is 'Just hang in there'.

I cannot account for the cause of this increase in what might be called a 'dark night' experience. It is most often found among those who have lived an authentic prayer life over many years and who appear to have some kind of continual awareness of God and a certain spiritual strength; yet they are unable to experience in their prayer anything that would normally be called consolation. One retreatant wrote, 'I feel somehow that my prayer is going through a process of change. It seems to be losing its intensity and emotion, which is what previously seemed to keep me going. So my prayer is not intense but I feel a patience in that experience because I think it is OK but I'm not sure.'

This same experience often goes along with, but may not have any connection with, a certain disillusionment with the institutional Church. Why this should be I do not know. It may be because loving children of the Church are watching sadly as the bright lights lit by the Second Vatican Council seem to be flickering and going out in so many places. Is this one way in which Christ is suffering in his Church today? I have wondered whether the simultaneous presence of this kind of spiritual experience in many very different people is paralleled by the way a scientific discovery or a new way of thinking or a new form of artistic expression seems to spring up simultaneously in different parts of the world. Is there a unity in the human consciousness that from time to time takes another evolutionary step? Is there a change taking place in the way we are able to receive and react to God's presence? Will there be some prophet to point a way forward?

I end on this note of uncertainty and of not knowing the future; I end where I began with the feeling that we are struggling with matters that cannot be put into satisfying categories and in areas where there are no clear answers. I am reminded of a seven-hour journey I once made in a small and rather ancient bus across the desert from Cairo to Mount Sinai. Most of the time there were no signposts and few landmarks, and sometimes the sand had drifted across the tarmac of the road for quite a distance. I thought of the children of Israel out there on foot, travelling on year after year towards some unimaginable and sometimes unbelievable Promised Land. The prayer journey can sometimes feel a bit like that, no matter to which school of prayer you belong.