

# MANIFOLD GIFTS

By JOSEPH VEALE

IT IS NOT AT ALL CERTAIN THAT ST IGNATIUS would recognize himself in the term 'Ignatian prayer'. What he tried to make clear was that the only teacher of prayer is the Holy Spirit. This is evident to anyone who has often accompanied people through the full Spiritual Exercises and reflected on the experience. It is not necessarily so clear to those who are unfamiliar with Ignatius' letters, his Constitutions and what was recorded of his conversation. The text of the Exercises on its own has misled many.

His principle is clear. That level and kind of prayer is best for each one where God communicates himself more.

God sees and knows what is best for each one and, as he knows all, he shows each the road to take. On our part we can with his grace seek and test the way forward in many different fashions, so that a person goes forward by that way which for them is the clearest and happiest and most blessed in this life.<sup>1</sup>

St Ignatius always preferred to proceed empirically. He was less at home with generalizations or with rigid nostrums. He preferred the concrete to the abstract. He said there could be no greater error in spiritual things than to direct others 'according to one's own way' (*por sí mismo*). This was very harmful, and the work of people 'who neither knew nor understood the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit and the variety of graces through which he distributes his loving kindness, giving each person their own special and particular graces, to some in one way and to others in another'.<sup>2</sup>

That does not look like the traditional notion of 'Ignatian prayer'. Yet there has been a way of speaking of 'the Ignatian method of prayer' and more recently of 'Ignatian contemplation'. It has come partly from an understandable tendency of writers to claim more originality for a saint or a school than the facts warrant. Ignatius borrowed from the living tradition as it was available to him in his time. When it came to trying to put words to the 'understandings' he was given in Manresa or to recommending what his reflection on his guidance of others had taught him, he had to work within the limits of the language and the forms of the spiritual culture of his time.

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*The methods*

In more recent years we have heard less frequently about 'the Ignatian method of meditation'. The phrase normally referred to the method of the memory, understanding and will which Ignatius commended in the First Week of the Exercises. Blood was shed early in this century in controversies between those who were hostile to methods of any kind and uncritical admirers of method. The argument often ignored the many ways of prayer recommended in the Exercises as well as the many exercises that no one would normally call prayer.<sup>3</sup>

More recently the term 'Ignatian contemplation' has been used to refer to the simple way of being present with the whole self to events in the gospel, to 'mysteries of the life of Our Lord' (Exx 261). Ignatius introduces the exercitant to this way of prayer in the Second Week of the Exercises. In that context he used the term 'contemplation' in a sense different from that which it has normally had in the tradition. What he desired was that someone making the Exercises should become absorbed in the reality of the deeds and words of Jesus, that they would look and listen and wonder, behold the persons, what they did and said, would assimilate and be assimilated to the 'mystery'. The one contemplating might be drawn through the icon of the scene or happening and beyond it into the mystery beyond the 'mystery'. The grace desired was to be given an 'interior knowledge' of Jesus, St Paul's *sensus Christi*, the 'mind' of Christ (Phil 2:5).

What Ignatius presupposed in all that was that a person setting out on the road to a serious life of faith was being guided by someone experienced in 'the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit and the variety of graces through which he distributes his loving kindnesses'. The director, if we must use the term, would be aware that 'it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul but to savour and to taste the reality interiorly' (Exx 2). The one making the Exercises would, in the day by day exchange with the director, be shown that 'where I find what I desire, there I remain quietly in repose . . .' (Exx 76).

That was Ignatius' simple pedagogy by which he opened the door upon the possibility of contemplation and the uniquely personal action of the Holy Spirit. The kind of prayer which ended each day of the Exercises, conventionally called Application of the Senses, is an occasion for a further deepening of a contemplative grace.

What is probably original in Ignatius is that in the Exercises he commends a person who is praying an event in the gospel to hear what the persons in the scene 'say or might say' (Exx 123). The movement is one from looking on at what is happening to participating in it, from

what could be impersonal to what is personal and intimate. Ignatius was concerned to bring the gospel reality into intimate and personal encounter with the contemporary reality of the exercitant's own experience and history. How otherwise was Christ to become incarnate in the world, in greatly different times and cultures, in the faith and life of the believing community?

These ways of prayer, however subtly Ignatius gave them his own colouring, he picked up from the many teachers of prayer in his time. The 'contemplation' of the gospel is Franciscan; Ignatius found it in Ludolph the Carthusian's *Life of Christ*, which, as we now know, Ludolph borrowed from the pseudo-Bonaventure and which therefore belongs to the Franciscan tradition. But in those days, happily, the different families within the Church gladly borrowed from each other. Frontiers were open.

What is implied in all that is that these methods of prayer were ways of helping beginners to pray. It opens the question as to how those ways of prayer may or may not be helpful to people who are experienced in prayer. Our terminology is strange. It seems to suggest that we are able to know who is not a beginner, as though any of us cease to be one. Our language is clumsy. It can be useful to make a distinction between those who are setting out on a serious life of faith and those who have been on the road for some time. Those of us who have been on the road for many a year are likely to feel that perhaps we were able to pray in those early days but that now we no longer know whether we pray or not.<sup>4</sup>

The books speak of beginners and of the advanced. It is true that after some time prayer can tend to become simpler, more quiet, more wordlessly attentive; images and ideas seem to get in the way. Prayer becomes darker. Certainly Ignatius expected that in the course of a day during the Exercises one's prayer would become quieter, simpler and more focused.<sup>5</sup> Can we say, as seems often to be suggested, that such prayer is 'better'? Is it common? Is it universal? Is it the way prayer always develops? If we were honest, I think we should say we do not know. We do not have the evidence. At most, from our experience in accompanying others on the journey, we can surmise. Beyond that, it is good to be happy with an educated ignorance.<sup>6</sup>

It is in that connection that some people ask whether the way of contemplating the gospel mysteries is only for beginners. As one 'advances' in prayer, does one leave it behind? St Ignatius would be wary of large statements that tended to be dogmatic or general. For him the only way to judge is 'by their fruits'.<sup>7</sup>

He would explore with a particular person in what direction their spirit was being moved. In what way does God communicate himself more? Or, in another of his idioms, where does a person more easily 'find God', find 'devotion'? A sign would be a certain quality of 'consolation', not necessarily sensibly experienced or easily recognizable on the surface. His concern would be to see whether a particular way of praying (or seeming not to pray at all) opened the spirit more to the action of God. Was a person more open to God? Less self-preoccupied? More selfless in service? More unpretentious? Less rigid? More true? Showing effective signs of living the gospel more truly? More authentic in relating with others? Less subject to illusion? Growing in hope and love?

Ignatius would be less inclined to ask whether a person's prayer was more advanced than to explore whether it was more authentic, more suited to this individual's capacity and grace, disposing towards a more authentic way of living, a more selfless service 'in the Lord', as he would say.

### *The historical inheritance*

Of course Ignatius, with his instinctive sense of history, would expect us to have enriched and enlarged his insights, not to say corrected some of them, with the experience of the intervening centuries and the resources of our contemporary culture and theologies.<sup>8</sup> Properly to understand the heritage he left us, to give some true meaning to 'Ignatian prayer' or 'Ignatian spirituality', we need to know something of what happened to his teaching in the intervening time. How did it come about that within a short time after he died there were Jesuits who taught a narrow and confining doctrine of prayer?

Within his own lifetime the Exercises came under attack for being too mystical. The Spanish inquisitor, Tomás Pedroche, in his desire to identify the Exercises with the errors of the *alumbrados*, was exact in pinpointing those parts of the Exercises that, if we must use the term, can be called mystical. He and Melchior Cano, one of the most learned, distinguished and influential theologians of the time, feared the Exercises because they gave too much place to subjective experience, to affectivity; they saw them as being insufficiently ascetical and rational, as seeming to bypass the objective teaching of sound doctrine, and as giving a dangerous prominence to the interior leading of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> They feared particularly what was the central underlying assumption of the Exercises: 'It is far better that the Creator and Lord himself should communicate himself to the devout soul, embracing it to

his love and praise . . . to allow the Creator to deal directly with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord' (Exx 15). They suspected what Karl Rahner has said was Ignatius' chief concern and the core of his spirituality, 'to help others to experience God'.<sup>10</sup>

The style of theology represented by Cano and Pedroche became a dominant orthodoxy in the Church for more than four hundred years. Jesuits subscribed to it and interpreted the Exercises in its light. It disallowed the central insight of the Exercises, that God deals directly with the soul sincerely seeking him and that the way forward in a living faith, in prayer as in service, is the way shown to each by the Holy Spirit. The Church was fearful of mysticism. The Spanish theologians who would have had the Exercises placed on the Index feared mysticism because they feared illuminism. Later the fear was reinforced after the condemnation of quietism (1687) and, subsequently, that of modernism (1907). During all that time, Jesuits with experience of helping others on the way quietly taught the sound Christian contemplative tradition, though not always without being told to stop. It was only with Vatican Council II that there has been a great flowering in the understanding of the authentic tradition. This has given us the freedom to understand Ignatius better now than, for the most part, he has been in the intervening centuries.<sup>11</sup>

### *Finding God's will*

What was original in Ignatius is that he took the contemporary teaching on 'contemplating' the gospel and transposed it to the context of *discretio*, to the Christian search for the circumstances and dispositions that open people to be made free with the freedom of the Spirit (Gal 5:1,16,25). He was concerned with finding God's will for his kingdom. For him the chief criterion for finding God's will is the *sensus Christi*, a spiritual sensibility that is in tune with the mind of Jesus in the gospel and with the Spirit of Jesus giving life and direction to his Church.

Such an attitude – sometimes called 'indifference' – is presupposed in anything that Ignatius said or wrote about prayer:

. . . the calm readiness for every command of God, the equanimity which . . . continually detaches itself from every determinate thing which man is tempted to regard as *the* point in which alone God meets him . . . [A]n ultimate attitude towards all thoughts, practices and ways: an ultimate reserve and coolness towards all particular ways, because all possession of God must leave God as greater beyond all possession of him . . . [T]he perpetual readiness to hear a new call

from God to tasks [— and obviously to ways of prayer —] other than those previously engaged in, continually to decamp from those fields where one wanted to find God and to serve him . . . [T]he courage to regard no way to him as being *the* way, but rather to seek him on all ways.<sup>12</sup>

What matters, therefore, is neither this or that way of service, nor this or that way of prayer, but rather a readiness to let go of whatever seemed to be the only way to find God in order to give oneself to that way alone in which God *now* desires to be found.

For Ignatius 'prayer' was 'to have God always before one's eyes'. In his Constitutions he came back again and again to the need for 'a thoroughly right and pure intention'. He refers to a condition of purified desire that is, as he would say, *de arriba*, from above.

The love that moves and causes one to choose must descend from above, that is, from the love of God, so that, before one chooses, one should sense that the greater or less attachment for the object of one's choice is solely because of one's Creator and Lord. (Exx 184)

#### *Prayer and illusion*

The other point in Ignatius' teaching that bears on his understanding of prayer is that place in the Exercises that we know as the Two Standards.

The whole central section of the Exercises, the part that gives them their specific character and makes them original, is the process of discernment that St Ignatius calls 'election'. It begins with 'a meditation on Two Standards' (Exx 136): the standard of Satan and the standard of Jesus. There is no question here, of course, of choosing between them. Rather a person prays for his or her spirit to be clarified in order to be made sensitive to the ways by which the 'enemy of our human nature' deceives the good under the appearance of good as they seek the good. One begs, in the daily repetition of the triple colloquy, to be given an interior knowledge of the contrary ways which are the ways of Jesus in the gospel. Those ways involve a desire to share his experience of poverty, rejection and humility (Exx 147; Constitutions 101).

Both the Exercises and the Constitutions have to do with godly decision, decision as a mode of prayer. That is what is implied in his two chosen ways of speaking of these things: 'to have God always before one's eyes' and 'to seek and to find God in everything'.

How, in a life of outward fret and stress, in the demands and responsibilities and enjoyments of life, of family, of public life, of kitchen or

office or field or classroom or workbench, in the inexorable demands or delights or pains of relationship, is a person genuinely to find God? We all know that in the fret and the stress God often is not found, nor for that matter sought. How is one to grow through those familiar experiences (not in spite of them) into union with God?

It is evident that there are lives of zeal and activity in which God is absent. There are ways of being busy in which people hide themselves from themselves and hide themselves from God. They run from that reality. Prayer itself can be the idol that most comfortably substitutes for the living God. The holiest and most prayerful people can be beguiled by the attraction of power or influence, of learning, of work, of prayer itself or of particular ways of prayer. These are all good things. But the reality that lies behind the Two Standards is that the noblest aspirations can disguise the protean forms of self-seeking. It is easy to build one's own kingdom.

It was his experience of such realities in the Church and in individuals that led Ignatius to speak often of illusion. He knew well how the deceit of the father of lies contaminates action. He spoke in the same terms of prayer. He used to say that of a hundred people given to extensive prayer and penances, ninety were subject to illusion.<sup>13</sup> He had experienced how people given to prayer could be opinionated, rigid, obstinate in judgement and unbiddable.

In the area of prayer as in the area of labour, St Ignatius would look to the graces of the Two Standards and of its accompanying Third Degree of Humility' (Exx 167; Constitutions 101). It was by such high graces, *de arriba*, continually sought and begged for in prayer, that one's desire would be purified. Meanwhile both prayer and action could be false. But given those graces and dispositions, both prayer and the activity that completes God's work on earth could be purgative, illuminative and unitive. Then as Blessed Pierre Favre discovered, 'I had a clear sense that one who seeks God in helping others will later find him more easily in prayer than one who seeks him first in prayer and afterwards in action, as we often do'.<sup>14</sup> St Ignatius had said much the same in a letter to Francis Borgia, 'For certainly there is more virtue in being able to rejoice in the Lord in a variety of duties and places than in only one'.<sup>15</sup>

#### *The need for a new word*

Ignatius spoke and wrote little of prayer as we understand it. He used a variety of terms that gave a great latitude for a great variety of things: '*cosas espirituales*', 'spiritual exercises of devotion', 'piety', 'exercises of

piety', 'devotion', 'familiarity with God'. With us the word 'prayer' still obstinately continues to mean what we do when we leave affairs aside and close the door and enter into that inner room. Let us be content with that usage.

We need a new word, one we have not yet discovered. It would encompass not only the prayer that opens the spirit to God and leads towards union with him but, besides, all those other things which open the spirit to the action of God, just as much as prayer (and sometimes better).

What is indisputable is that under certain conditions of desire and disposition, if you like in a certain climate of faith, the workaday tasks and responsibilities and delights and frets that draw us out of ourselves towards the needs of others have been especially blessed, and as it were, given the likeness of a sacrament, through Jesus' words about washing one another's feet. Whatever brings faith to life, whatever brings faith to bear on everything else we experience, whatever draws our focus away from ourselves, whatever beauty or goodness so absorbs us that we entirely forget ourselves, whatever strengthens hope and makes us more loving, all these can be purgative and illuminative and unitive just as much as prayer can. A sign of authenticity in prayer as in service is that a person grows more godly. To be God-like is entirely to forget oneself. Whether that comes about by a call to become absorbed simply in God or by the circumstances of life that engage a person wholly in others' needs is not for us to say.

It gives us an insight into Ignatius' mind about prayer to ponder the things he lists that unite the human instrument with the divine craftsman. He does not use the word prayer but writes instead of 'familiarity with God in spiritual exercises of devotion'. Moreover, this phrase does not come in the first place.

The means which unite the human instrument with God and so dispose it that it may be wielded dexterously by his divine hand . . . are, for example, goodness and virtue, and especially love, and a pure intention of the divine service, and familiarity with God our Lord in spiritual exercises of devotion, and sincere zeal for souls for the sake of glory to him who created and redeemed them and not for any other benefit. (Constitutions 813)

It is significant that Ignatius never wrote, as Jerónimo Nadal did, of being a contemplative in action. He had the terminology but did not use it. The wording suggests what it intended to rule out, a disjunction between action and contemplation. Ignatius preferred synthesis to separation; he was a reconciler of opposites. He was confident that God's



goodness would accomplish with his free gift, *de arriba*, not an alternation of one and the other but a compenetration of the two.

People pray in a thousand different ways. Some are led by a way that is dark and dry and unrewarding, like Karl Rahner's 'winter faith'. Some are called by a way of prayer that seems full of light. There is good reason to believe, as Nadal seems to have done, that for the apostolic contemplative the purifying darkness is there not so much in prayer as in the labour of service itself and in the frequent obscurities and irrationality of obedience.<sup>16</sup>

If prayer is authentic at all, it will be marked, even in situations of distress and pain, by a constant accompaniment of consolation. It is an error to write or speak in a way that convinces people that there is only one way in which the Holy Spirit draws us towards union with God. There are more languages than one, more images than those of one school of thinking, that can be used to attempt to describe the incomprehensible mystery of God's way of giving himself to this person or to that. Beyond that it is good to fall silent before the mystery.

If we take the Contemplation for Attaining Love to be in some sense a culmination of the Exercises, or if we may take it that there Ignatius was pointing to the way in which a hard-working person might 'keep God always before one's eyes', then it is striking that the final word is *etcetera*. That opens up for one who has been given the Exercises an entry upon unmapped territory, uncharted regions of being drawn into the mystery of God in ways only God knows. What happens later in such a person's prayer? Who knows? That is not our business.

It is enough that the human instruments in God's service, making available to God all their God-given gifts of ingenuity and initiative, of imagination and intelligence, desire to be used so that God may be God in his world. The instrument is united with God in being used.

Or God may build his kingdom by leaving his gifts unused. The possibility that one may not be used at all is entailed in the freedom that Ignatius calls being 'indifferent'. It can be bitter and puzzling to discover that God builds his kingdom also through the impotence of illness, the diminishments of ageing or by the dark ways of obedience. By one path or the other, by achievement or by the frustration of achievement, and always in either by the way of the cross, the instrument is sanctified.

That is God's business, not ours. All that we hand over to him. Let us think little of it. Meanwhile there are tasks to hand that are our business. Our goal is not to become holy but to be spent.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ignatius to Francis Borgia, 20 September 1548. MHSJ EI II [26], p 236; *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by William J. Young (Chicago, 1959), p 181.

<sup>2</sup> Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, *Memoriale seu diarium*, MHSJ FN I [66], p 677 (n 256); Pedro de Ribadeneira, *Vita Ignatii Loyolae*, MHSJ FN IV [93], pp 854/5 (book V, n 135), here Spanish text. Gonçalves da Câmara's work is available in French, translated by Roger Tandonnet under the title *Mémorial* (Paris, 1966). The Latin version of the Ribadeneira text ends with what appears an allusion to 1 Cor 7:7 (Vulgate).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the practices commended in the various Rules, or the more detailed techniques for examination of conscience (Exx 24–42).

<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner said of himself: 'One does not know about a relationship to God, whether one has it, how one has it, what is decisive in it . . . It is a wise, educated ignorance about oneself, which must be entrusted to God without knowing how it is' in *Karl Rahner in dialogue: conversations and interviews 1965–1982* (New York, 1986), p 297.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Veale, 'The dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises', *The Way Supplement* 52 (Spring 1985), p 10.

<sup>6</sup> St Augustine, Letter to Proba, Ep 130.15.28: *Est ergo in nobis quaedam, ut ita dicam, docta ignorantia, sed docta Spiritu Dei*: 'There is in us, so to speak, a kind of taught ignorance, but taught by the Spirit of God.'

<sup>7</sup> The best treatment of the question I know of is Dermot Mansfield, 'The prayer of faith, spiritual direction, and the Exercises', *The Way* October (1985), pp 315–324, especially pp 320 ff. The essay was reprinted, under the title 'The Exercises and contemplative prayer', in *The way of Ignatius Loyola*, edited by Philip Sheldrake (London, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> More at length in Joseph Veale, 'Dominant orthodoxies', *Milltown Studies* no 30 (Autumn 1992), pp 43–65, especially pp 60–63.

<sup>9</sup> Ignacio Iparraguirre, *Práctica de los Ejercicios de San Ignacio de Loyola en vida de su autor (1522–1556)* (Bilbao and Rome, 1946), pp 98–100.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Ignatius of Loyola speaks to a modern Jesuit' in *Ignatius of Loyola* (London, 1979), pp 11, 16, 13.

<sup>11</sup> More at length in Joseph Veale, 'Ignatian prayer or Jesuit spirituality', *The Way Supplement* 27 (Spring 1976), pp 3–14; also in *The way of Ignatius Loyola*.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Rahner, 'The Ignatian mysticism of joy in the world' in *Theological investigations III* (London, 1974), pp 277–293, here pp 290–291. Parenthesis added.

<sup>13</sup> Gonçalves da Câmara, *Memoriale*, n 195. See also nn 196 and 256, and Constitutions 182.

<sup>14</sup> MHSJ MF [48], pp 554–555; in French, Bienheureux Pierre Favre, *Mémorial*, translated with a commentary by Michel de Certeau (Paris, 1959), pp 211–212.

<sup>15</sup> MHSJ EI II [26], p 234; *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola*, p 180.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Giuliani, 'Nuit et lumière de l'obéissance', *Christus* (1955) pp 349–368. English version in *Finding God in all things*, edited and translated by William J. Young (Chicago, 1958).