

# The St Beuno's outreach programme

*Damian Jackson*

## *Introduction and brief history*

IN THE LATE 1980S I WAS ON THE TEAM at Loyola Hall, the Jesuit Spirituality Centre on the outskirts of the large metropolitan area of Merseyside in north-west England. While many people came to the house for retreats, many more were unable to do, so we decided to take Ignatian spirituality into the local parishes through giving weeks of guided prayer. These answered a real need for many people.

I continued and developed this approach when, in the autumn of 1989, together with the help of a married couple and two religious sisters, I began 'Outreach' work from the Ignatian Spirituality Centre of St Beuno's in the diocese of Wrexham in North Wales. In British terms, it is a large diocese of over 3,000 square miles covering that predominantly rural and mountainous region, but it is relatively sparsely populated with just over half a million people of whom only 5 per cent are Catholic. Only ten parishes have more than a thousand parishioners; most are much smaller and the congregations mirror the elderly age profile of this area of the UK. Only the cathedral parish has more than one priest and an increasing number of the parishes do not have a priest at all. There are a handful of permanent deacons.

I obtained an initial contract of three years with the diocese, a contract which was subsequently twice renewed. My insistence on having a contract was important and of real value as it guaranteed that the work of the Outreach team would be taken seriously (the diocese quite legitimately wanted to have 'returns' for their money!). It also enabled us to work with the backing and blessing of the bishop, and as a result more priests were willing to welcome us into their parish. The most pressing need was, and still is, to help build up the Catholic parishes as they moved into an age when many of them would not have a resident priest leader. From a base of a reasonably strong identity we could then move out ecumenically as will be mentioned later.

Over the years the work gradually developed in response to the needs of the particular diocese of Wrexham and now has three 'stages': Weeks of Guided Prayer, the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius in daily

life and Ignatian Support Groups. In addition, we trained and continue to supervise a group of Prayer Guides who, together with two religious sisters who work more or less 'part time', now run the whole 'St Beuno's Outreach' programme.

### *Methodology*

#### *'Stage One' – Weeks of Guided Prayer*

At first we went to parishes and just gave Weeks of Guided Prayer. Normally one of the team, but now usually a lay prayer guide, speaks at the weekend masses a few weeks before about the weeks of prayer, giving details of the purpose and benefits of the weeks and what is involved. Initially, we found it was of great help if the priest gave an enthusiastic backing, but now when we return to a parish, the people themselves who have made the weeks, and indeed the Exercises in daily life, encourage others to sign up.

At the initial meeting, which lasts for about ninety minutes, each prayer guide (who will have a maximum of six people to guide) explains to the members of his or her group that they are asked to try and pray for about thirty minutes each day and also to come for a half-hour one-to-one session with the prayer guide twice a week, for example on Monday and Thursday evenings. In addition, at this first session some initial suggestions about prayer are offered, stressing how to go about entering and ending prayer slowly. Normally a psalm or short poem is offered as the basis of daily prayer until the first individual meeting with the prayer guide three or four days later. Quite frequently the prayer guide will take the group through a stillness session and then ask individuals to share how they found this experience. For many, stillness in prayer is something refreshingly new. An important point, as it helps bind the people together, is to end the evening with a cup of tea or coffee.

During these four weeks, the recipients are helped to use various methods of prayer: praying with Scripture (which is frequently something completely new to them), through *lectio divina* and by using their imagination, particularly with gospel scenes and talking to the Lord from their hearts. They are also encouraged just to be still and silent in prayer. Finally they are shown how to reflect on their faith history and pray the Examen.

On the final evening, which is always a moving occasion, people again come together in groups to share on the experience. Although they have prayed alone during the weeks, a strong sense of community

builds up in the group as people realize that the others have had similar experiences. Many who make these weeks have previously only used vocal prayers and devotions. Many say that their introduction to prayer using Scripture and reflection on their lives has opened up to them a completely new way of praying. They now feel that the Lord is someone real whom they can talk to about the real issues in their daily lives. The one-to-one sessions are also of great benefit in that people find that in their prayer guide they have someone they can talk to, someone who will listen to them at a deep level and help them articulate their hopes and desires and not in any way judge them. Quite a number of those who have made these prayer weeks are people who had previously stopped coming to church. The weeks enabled them to make a fresh start. Some others had previously no affiliation with any particular church, but had been searching for a deeper spiritual meaning to their lives. They have found this through these weeks of prayer.

*'Stage Two' – the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius in Daily Life*

We soon found that the great majority of those who had made the Weeks of Prayer wanted to continue. The question was how? At first we just continued to meet in groups about once every three weeks. Instruction on prayer was given, together with texts from Scripture which often linked in with the Sunday liturgies. However, people wanted more than this; they realized that the prayer was making a real difference to their lives and a real sense of mutual support was building up in these small groups. So we decided to offer them a Nineteenth Annotation retreat, but done in groups and not in the classic individual way.

We have divided the material of the Spiritual Exercises into seventeen sections – each with a small pamphlet. We compiled these leaflets through our own experience as a team of making the Exercises together in daily life during the Ignatian anniversary year in 1991. To this we added material from, among other sources, John Veltri's *Orientalisms* and Joseph Tetlow's *Choosing Christ in the world*. The pamphlets are deliberately simple – I even think that some are still too wordy and require some amending – and contain material for two weeks' prayer. Each is set out in a similar way, stressing the particular theme (e.g. the Principle and Foundation), the grace to be prayed for and texts to be used during the two weeks.

At the fortnightly group meetings, after an initial period of quiet prayer, the participants share their experience of life and particularly their prayer since the last meeting. Each listens quietly and reverently

to the person sharing, and after he or she has finished there is a short silent space while the group prays for the person who has just shared, and reflects on the effect that the sharing has had on them. After all have shared, the prayer guide may then make a few observations and invite any further comments before giving out and explaining the next pamphlet. The meeting, which lasts for ninety minutes, ends with simple prayers of intercession and all share in turn what the meeting has meant to them. The meetings begin in late September and run through to the middle of June. We have found that it is wise to have a four-week break over Christmas and also at Holy Week and Easter because for many people family life at that time can be so busy. Quite often the Exercises run behind the Church's liturgical year around Easter, but we have never found it a problem to ask people to pray the Third Week of the Exercises during Eastertide.

*'Stage Three' – Ignatian support groups*

We decided to give the Exercises to groups rather than to individuals in order to answer the needs of the diocese: to build up faith-sharing communities. To develop this, the groups who made the Exercises continue to meet, normally on a fortnightly basis. The team provides a monthly leaflet for prayer. These have been based, for example, on the Church's liturgical seasons or on the mysteries of the rosary or on the Beatitudes, but are always linked to a relevant part of the Spiritual Exercises. The meetings are now led by members of the group who are supervised by the prayer guide responsible for that particular group, and follow the same format as the 'Stage Two' meetings.

*Some reflections*

*The Weeks of Guided Prayer ('Stage 1')* have helped many people replace a way of merely saying prayers by rote with a more *affective* form of prayer. At first, some people found they were 'locked in their heads', but once they had discovered how to use their imagination when praying with Scripture they found that the Lord is a real person with whom they could share and talk from their heart. Indeed, many said, 'Why was I not taught this *real* prayer before? The Bible is now something powerful for me.' Through an initial use of the Examen, many have been helped to find God in the middle and amid the muddle of everyday life. The one-to-one sessions with the prayer guide have not only enabled a tutoring in prayer, but have also provided an opportunity for people to talk about the real issues in their lives and be

helped to bring them before the Lord. Prayer and the Lord have become a natural part of life and not 'something different or separate'.

*The Exercises in daily life ('Stage 2')*. Over the past nine years several hundred people have made the Exercises in groups. Group work is important because the great need for the diocese was, and still is, to enable people to support each other in the parishes, particularly where there are no priests, and also to have that confidence to encourage others to pray – regardless of denomination or even church affiliation.

Undoubtedly the disadvantage of not making the Exercises individually with a prayer guide is that sometimes people are at different stages and yet have to move along with the rest of the group, but we have never found this to be a severe handicap. Also, some people would go deeper into their lives and perhaps derive greater benefits from the experience if they made the Exercises individually. Making the Exercises in groups has meant that sometimes a person has just skimmed their surface. However, there is no doubt that the needs of the diocese, as mentioned above, have been met: sharings in the groups have been real gospel moments when people's faith has been challenged and has grown through listening to others; many have made real elections and amendments of life. The dynamic of the Exercises has worked, and the support and encouragement received and given in the group has far outweighed any of the disadvantages of making the Exercises in a group context.

*Ignatian Support Groups ('Stage Three')*. The great majority of those who made the Exercises in daily life have continued to meet and support each other in these Ignatian groups. The habit of daily prayer in the Ignatian way (at the very least the Examen) has deepened even further. We have found that, with the help of the monthly pamphlets, as mentioned above, the effect of the Exercises has deepened and the 'Ignatian tools', such as discernment, are found to be more and more of great daily use. Parts of the Principle and Foundation and the offering in the Kingdom Consideration (Exx 98), for example, have provided easy-to-use daily guidelines for a reflective and apostolic way of living. These groups, far from being inward looking, are now great instruments for the parish and also, perhaps because they have a stronger sense of Catholic identity, reach out more and more to include members of other churches. They are truly ecumenical.

From the beginning we followed two principles. We preferred to deal with smaller numbers of people and at greater depth rather than spread out to too many with little effect. This has meant that most of the parishes have a good number of people who are now at 'Stage Three'.

Some of these are eucharistic ministers or readers and find their ministry is being greatly helped by this prayer and the support of their group. We have only fifteen lay prayer guides, but they are very thoroughly trained, very closely supervised and supported. This has really paid off, as some of these now supervise others and all supervise the lay leaders of the Ignatian support groups.

Second, we have always believed in the adaptability of the Exercises. So in many ways we have simplified them to help people from all backgrounds, regardless of intellectual ability. This has meant that Ignatian prayer, far from being exclusive – as it is sometimes labelled – is working in all types of parishes, strengthening them and opening them out more and more ecumenically.

It has been a privilege for me to be with the people of North Wales and a real blessing and inspiration to see the effects of the Exercises on so many people.

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