

Blending of directed retreat methods with group processes

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in collaboration with
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THIRTY YEARS AGO A MAJOR SHIFT OCCURRED in the understanding and practice of guiding the Spiritual Exercises according to Notation [20], the Exercises in daily life. As a result of this shift significant experiments have been taking place with regard to the directed Spiritual Exercises in connection with group processes.

Since then we have come to believe that interior movements of the heart are more important than private thoughts. Spiritual directors now base their practice on the belief in the possibility of God's direct dealing with the directee and on the belief that paying attention to interior reactions helps to dispose a person for this more direct encounter. Narrative discourse now appears more important than analytical discourse in fostering movements of the spirits. Where, before, Ignatian spiritual directors theorized about the Guidelines for Discerning Spirits, now, in practice, they actually use them.

*Two approaches in guiding the individually directed retreat*¹

Since the time of this shift, there emerged two major approaches for honouring the interior movements of the heart during the Exercises journey:

- The *From outside in* approach uses the structures of the Exercises more explicitly in directing someone on the Exercises journey. It uses the structure of the Exercises both to understand and provoke the interior experience of the directee and then to propose the material for the next step.
- The *From within* approach uses the structures of the Exercises more implicitly. In this approach, a spiritual director keeps the text of the Exercises at the back of her or his mind and uses the text only as a means of recognizing the experience that is emerging from the directee at the directee's own pace.

Practitioners at the Guelph Centre of Spirituality have been using the *From outside in* approach when giving the Exercises in the full thirty-day format, particularly with directees desiring to discern a major decision or with those who desire to use the Exercises in their future ministry. Often, for other reasons, both approaches are combined. Usually the *From within* approach only is used in shorter directed retreats.

It was in the combination of these two approaches as applied to groups in four sets of experiments that we came to appreciate the versatility of the instrument of the Exercises for the needs of the future. The *From outside in* approach set the stage for the creative developments of these ventures. It showed us over and over again how various focused external structures provoke certain kinds of subjective experiences. Christmas, for example, brings up memories and a variety of subjective experiences; loss of a job can evoke grief experiences of various depths; or the success of a friend may provoke a spontaneous subjective response along a spectrum of possibilities. This approach led us to realize that there are many other ways of getting at authentic subjectivity. However, these developments can take place only when the creators of the communal process learn how to use the new content for prayer or group reflection according to a pattern analogous to that of the Exercises. The *From within* approach set the stage by making us aware of how the inner dynamic of the different parts of the Exercises can be found in any number of converting experiences outside the Exercises.

Experiment 1 – a group, as a group, can experience the movements of spirits

The communal charism retreat/workshops,² carried out in the early seventies, started these experiments. They were developed into Spiritual Governance Workshops for executive bodies of religious communities. In these events, the basic themes of the Exercises were translated into communal themes:

- Principle and Foundation became discovering God's presence in our communal history;
- First Week became our sin history;
- grace of the First Week became what God has been doing in our history;
- Kingdom Exercise became how God has been calling us in our history; and

– all this led to discerning the call and making decisions for the future.

From this set of experiments, we learned that the Exercises can be used communally and that a group, as a group, can experience consolation and desolation just as individuals can.

Experiment 2 – changing content still preserves dynamic for individuals and groups

A second set of experiments from the late seventies to the early part of the eighties linked the group process with a directed retreat and used social justice themes. Social sin and our personal complicity in it were associated with the First Week. Social analysis was used as a kind of Third Exercise in the First-Week phase. The image of what is happening in our world and the Trinity's hope for the world were at the beginning of the Second-Week phase just like the First Prelude (Exx 102) of the Incarnation Exercise. Material on the human rights movement and on how Jesus is presently suffering in the world was given in a Third-Week phase, etc. From this set of experiments, we learned that, even when we changed the content quite radically but still kept it in some sense analogous to the themes of the Exercises (the social justice themes were not part of the original Exercises), the dynamic remained on both a communal and individual level.

Experiment 3 – blending organizational development with the Exercises

Around 1983, some members of the Loyola House staff co-operated with the Jesuit Center of Spirituality in Wernersville, Pennsylvania, in a very creative project known as Ignatian Spiritual Exercises for the Corporate Person (ISECP). As a result of this project, elements from organizational development theory and the Spiritual Governance Retreats were blended. This blend had many benefits:

- It contributed in a very practical way to develop further insights into the life and spiritual workings of a group or small community.
- It helped to sharpen and expand the training aspects and practical applications of the Spiritual Governance Retreat/Workshop in such a way that, in time, the staff were able to give many elements of their instrument in smaller units.
- It helped to 'secularize' Ignatian jargon so that the instrument could be used with people who did not have any tradition of the Exercises.
- It furthered the *From within* approach without needing to use the jargon.

Experiment 4 – the communal, ecological and feminine as a blend in one retreat

In November of 1997, another significant experiment was expressed in a nine-day retreat/workshop for spiritual directors. It brought together the learnings from the above experiments as it coalesced three themes facing spiritual directors today: the Communal, the Ecological and the Feminine (CEF). It attempted to help spiritual directors grow in the 'ability to listen more deeply to the communal, ecological and feminine experiences as they surface in the individual lives and prayer of their directees'. Again, the themes, focusing and engaging the hoped-for dynamic, followed the rhythm of the Exercises in both the individual and group processes.

Evaluative comments on CEF

Eight months after the CEF retreat/workshop, one of the participants³ wrote a letter to me recording some of her memories of that experience:

From the start, I had the sense that the directors and the retreatants formed one community and that we were learning from each other and experimenting, even 'pioneering' together. While the leadership team had clearly worked hard in preparing the CEF retreat, they seemed to allow room for the experience to be shaped by the participants . . . The CEF retreat depended on communal learning, learning from each other as we shared the fruits of our prayer. Early in the retreat, for example, each of us wrote a personal myth that expressed our vision of how the communal, ecological and feminine could be integrated. We then read them to the group. I still have vivid memories of most of them. I began to see the world through new eyes, the eyes of my companions on retreat. My world became much larger, and so my prayer was expanded.

Through liturgies, we also experienced the power of sharing our . . . hope-filled visions and our awareness of places of suffering and crucifixion . . . In several liturgies, both retreatants and team members were invited to come forward and do something (light a candle, extinguish a candle, place a symbol around a cross, sprinkle water on a symbolic object), sometimes silently but often naming a concern or commitment or sign of hope.

My other strong memory is of the evening faith-sharing circles, where we would pray with the same small group and have time to name a key experience of the day in the context of a communal awareness examen. In a second round of sharing, people were invited

to say what had moved them in the first round of sharing. I had come with a strong history of engagement with all three themes of the retreat and I know that I would have moved in different directions had I been in the usual individually directed retreat. Here I found myself actively engaged in the group evolution. The most moving experience for me was to see men of my father's generation actively struggling with the feminine aspects of the Holy and with the ways their own lives had been limited by a socialization that had taught them to deny and judge as weak or lesser the 'feminine' aspects of their own human nature.

One deacon said that he had come to learn how to direct women in his parish by being more sensitive to the feminine; instead, he discovered a call to grow into a more integrated human being . . .

The dynamic of the Exercises was the backbone of the retreat. We prayed on our personal graced history of the communal, ecological and feminine. We prayed over our sinful response to the call of the communal, ecological and feminine in our own history. The myth writing was the Kingdom Exercise. The fifth day of this retreat was a day devoted to the theme that paralleled the Two Standards Exercise. A powerful ritual and presentation set the ambience for noticing the deceptive voices and the true voices in the communal-feminine-ecological movements of the age. On the following days, we prayed with the suffering and then with the joy of the Cosmic Christ.

In general

All the above experiments included most of the following components: thematic presentations and teachings according to the pattern of the Exercises; praying for a definite grace; time for private prayer; individual spiritual direction; group rituals; liturgies; times of silence; plenary-group sharing; small-group sharing, such as a serious conversation on the theme or sharing of the experience from the prayer exercise or a focused exercise for the group to do in common; attention to the movements of consolation and desolation in the group and in individuals according to the dynamic of the Exercises; and use of imagination with Scripture or on some aspects of life.

Such experiments have made creative use of the structures and dynamic of the Exercises for issues that are current in our world. They have:

- helped to raise the awareness of social issues and helped directors pay attention to the presence of these issues in the subjective experiences of their directees;
- contributed to the spirituality of groups and communities;

- taught people to base their group decisions on the experience of true consolation;
- attempted to help in the conversion of Christians towards crucial issues of our time which involve mature, healthy, interdependent decision-making and activity;
- contributed to Christian leadership by training people in skills that could help their constituents operate more effectively.

In different parts of the world, particularly in retreat centres and in religious communities, many of the techniques devised by these experiments are becoming part of Ignatian spiritual practice.

Questions still remain concerning these adaptations of the Exercises. Are the techniques which have been developed through these experiments available to a wide enough clientele? Could not bits and pieces of these techniques be used with a great deal of benefit without having to go through the longer programmes or without the use of Ignatian jargon? The Guelph Centre of Spirituality is beginning to answer these questions in the affirmative by facilitating some of these processes in smaller units of two days and by giving them to people who have never made the Exercises, such as members of parish councils and members of school boards.

Most of these programmes are effective for the expansion of awareness on the intellectual and affective levels, but are they effective in actualizing these awarenesses in our more public world? As Thomas Merton commented: 'Beliefs and politics can no longer be isolated from one another. Christians have got to speak by their actions.'⁴ In our retreat centres, can we afford the luxury of 'talking the talk but not walking the walk'?

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John Veltri SJ, a member of the Canadian province of the Society of Jesus, began work in retreat ministry in 1967 and has had a significant role in the Guelph Centre of Spirituality. Residing at Ignatius College he continues to be associated with Guelph while also writing and giving pastoral counselling and spiritual direction. His practical writings include: *Orientations, Volume 1: a collection of helps for prayer*; *Orientations, Volume 2: Part A and Part B—for those who accompany others on the inward journey* (recently published); and *Week of directed prayer in a church setting*.

NOTES

1 This distinction can clarify many of the misunderstandings surrounding the differences in approach among various centres of spirituality. Over the years, many people used to accuse the staff at the Guelph Centre of being too literal or fundamentalist in its approach to the individually directed Spiritual Exercises.

2 These processes are recorded in *Communal graced history: a manual of theology and practice* by John English SJ, and are available from the Canadian Religious Conference, 324 Laurier Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1N 6P6.

3 Christina Del Piero, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, has made the full Spiritual Exercises and has attended several workshops at Loyola House, Guelph.

4 Thomas Merton, 'Christian action in world crisis', an essay in *Non-violent alternative* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1980), pp 219–226.