

Learning love

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TWO OR THREE TIMES IN LUCKY MUSIC LOVERS' LIVES they share in a magical musical moment. Many years ago an audience in a Chicago suburb at the Ravinia Musical Festival participated in just such an event. Four or five people performed a concert version of Donizetti's magnificent opera, *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The music that night so captured the audience that seconds, perhaps a full moment passed between the last note being sung and the audience getting to its feet. Any hearing their applause heard in it an almost-impossible-to-describe-or-explain difference from other clapping. People familiar with Chicago area audiences had no trouble recognizing the unusual impact of the concert that evening. People walked to their cars quietly, spoke very softly, waited with patience for a place in the exit queue. Drivers in line made space for others so that three lines became one easily, without fuss. No one honked. The next day Beverly Sills, commenting on her performance the previous night, described it as one both audience and opera stars together created. It was as if they met and together made the music event that so electrified everyone present. As a result of their collaboration Sills said of herself, 'I sang better than I can sing'.

Those privileged to walk with others as directors of people making, praying the Spiritual Exercises, witness and even share in a moment awesomely similar.

As Sills learned her art in hours given to vocal exercise; practice; study of score, story, drama and interpretation, so too the one making the Exercises has given him- or herself to the retreat with its hours of reflection and prayer. He or she has learned that some things foster and nourish prayer because they foster and nourish relationship with God and so with one's self. This person has learned that some thoughts, memories, imagings and activities create the sort of cognitive and affective dissonance that interferes with, even seems to impede, relating to God. Beverly Sills could do her part in making musical magic because she knew in every fibre of her being that even as she sang alone the magnificent solo arias given her by Donizetti, she did not sing alone. She understood the story the music made alive and knew Lucia well enough to sing Lucia, indeed to be Lucia. She knew her part

and she knew all that was not her part. For the magic to happen she needed, and knew she needed, everyone else on the stage and everyone sitting in the participating audience.

So too with the retreatant. As Sills learned to hear the slightest differences in her tone and came to understand much about what heightened or lessened its quality and power, the retreatant learns to recognize more truly and accurately God's voice and touch as well as what distorts that voice or deadens feeling.

The retreat teaches even as it forms inner discipline. Just as untold hours singing scales have formed operatic voices and trained their ears, indeed their entire persons, so too the weeks of prayer have formed and deepened habits of discernment. As Sills learned to breathe in ways that made the most of her glorious voice, so the retreatant has discovered what it means for him or her to be the person he or she is given to be. The retreatant ends retreat praying the Contemplation to Attain Love, the last of the specific exercises suggested by Ignatius. It brings together and makes whole all that has been lived and prayed, experienced and received in the four weeks of the Exercises with their specific exercises. With a lifetime of study, work and practice brought together in one concert Sills outdid herself that night in Chicago. She sang better than she can sing. At the end of the retreat the Contemplation invites the praying person to stand in the total mystery prayed in the weeks, receive their gift(s) and to be more than he or she can be, which is to say a person 'capax Dei', capable of God. How can the person not respond, 'Take Lord, receive'?

The mystery prayed

To begin to make the Exercises is at the same time to enter Mystery, the mystery of God shot through each person's life, the lives of all people and all of creation. This mystery serves as the foundation on which the whole of the retreat and, more profoundly, one's life can be, will be built. No words can capture, no expression can contain the mystery. They point simply, directly to the fundamental truth: because God is we can be. We are: because God is who God is and has created us, given us ourselves to be who we are – beloved personal beings made to be one with God. Everything about us, then, is fitted and ordered to that oneness, that fullness of unity which is literally meant to be finding ourselves in God. Principle and Foundation prayer roots or grounds the retreatant in this core awareness, one that provides a horizon within which he or she can see the meaning of the human person, in fact of the human family. This vision opens the person and/or opens him or her

again and does so in two ways. It works the sort of freedom the retreatant needs to let him- or herself be loved – loved without qualification, loved without explanation, loved because God loves and finds doing so divine good sense. It awakens the retreatant's need to love too, to love in ways that live, to love in ways that order life. Such love leaves nothing untouched, unchanged. It prioritizes everything. It evokes a response: 'Take, Lord. Receive.'

As the person lives not just in the awareness but also in the reality of being loved absolutely, without condition, and conscious of his or her own need to respond, to live love, to live lovingly, another awareness dawns: 'No matter what my words say, too often my life says to God and God's gift, which is love, "Thanks but no thanks." "Thanks but later please." "You first after me."' He or she experiences what it is to be a person whose response to God's love is to step back from or out of the relationship. This catalyses understanding. It precipitates the sort of self-knowledge that wants to hear his or her inner tone of voice when it says, 'No!' It needs to look squarely at what saying 'No!' means, the ways it works in the person, and the results of these sorts of choices for his or her life.

This awareness, this self-learning flowed from the foundational understanding that God's love creates and gives God's self. The lesson of sinfulness deepens the understanding. How could it do otherwise when one sees sin and one's own involvement therein against the far broader and more vivid horizon which is God's love made concrete on Calvary? How could it be otherwise when one's graced person looks at sin and asks, 'What have I been doing for Christ?' 'What am I doing?' 'What ought I to be doing?'

Some despise the third question, thinking it speaks of rigid morality and narrow, self-limiting, self-lessening regulations. To make this judgement is to misunderstand just how love works, the ways in which it provides reason, motivation and norms for life. The ought here does not speak constricting obligation any more than it does when doctors say, 'lungs ought to be inhaling and exhaling, receiving life-sustaining oxygen and expelling poisonous carbon dioxide'. Rather it rouses and reinforces the retreatant's desire to be one with his or her God and so to change behaviour that works against that relationship. It gives the power, the grace to live in the relationship rather than at the edges of the self. It teaches the person that God's love and grace are enough, that all can, is, will be found in it. 'Take, Lord, receive' deepens in meaning. Giving the self becomes an imperative in new and fuller ways. Less and less can be held back.

The need to be part of Kingdom-making is born and strengthened in such learning. The 'ought' gives birth, as it were, to a certain readiness for the lessons about discipleship. Always it begins with Christ's invitation to see the world with his eyes. It wants to be, is meant to be God's glory. It needs saving. It needs work, even labour done in and with pain. Concretely, realistically, pain hurts. It costs. Ah, but first and foremost one has been called by Christ. The work, the labour, the pain are never divorced from him, never done or suffered alone. This is the offering the retreatant wants to make of his or her self: 'I long and am determined to live and work with you and as you lived, with all the suffering and loss and pain it may mean, if only it can be for God's glory and your service.'

Service takes on new meanings. Its embrace widens. The retreatant has not learned what sin is in itself and the havoc it wreaks in abstractions and theoretical dicta. The lessons come wrapped in the concrete stuff of his or her life. People wear its effects in stinging slights, haemorrhaging wounds, with results that cripple and scars with which others must live. Truly, others bear the pain the sinner knowingly or unknowingly inflicts. When Christ calls to discipleship he invites and empowers the one called to see the world through his eyes, to cultivate his vision. He sees a world badly in need of the redemption only complete love and total self-gift can work. He sees that world's people with all their differences and disparities, the yawning chasms that separate them, in ways that prevent them from being the people they are given to be, that is, God's one, whole people. It is these people, all of them, Jesus Christ came to serve, to redeem. Service requires expanding vision realized in actual inclusion so that all find a place at the banquet. Service rooted in the conviction that all the retreatant has and is comes as God-given gift must put these very gifts in common. Jointly owned and possessed by God and the retreatant, then, they must be made available and used for the good of God's people . . . and so the retreatant prays, 'Take, Lord. Receive. All I have and am you have given and are giving me. I give them back to you to use as you will.'

Only faith-filled love can begin to grasp the scandal of God's love. Given us to fulfil and complete us, we throw it back as if it were the wrong fish caught on our way to more important prizes. What mystery: for God, our self-defeating rejection of God's love, our sin, becomes reason to love us more, to labour fully to so heal us that we can and do come home to ourselves, to one another and to God. Such love demands incarnation. It always has. It always will. It did in a pre-eminent way in the person of Jesus Christ.

Anyone who ever fell in love knows that a desire with its own urgency comes with the falling. One wants to know the other ever more fully and totally. Knowing about does not satisfy. One wants to know with the understanding that sustained being with, gazing upon, listening to gives. We want to spend time and spend ourselves in companionship with the other. To know the other makes necessary knowing that one in his or her life, from cradle on. True in all relationships, that with Jesus Christ, love incarnate, proves the rule.

The retreatant keeps company with Jesus Christ in the key moments of his life. As she or he does so, he asks for what is wanted and needed: to know with the sort of knowledge that can only love and to love so completely one must live one's loving response. One must serve. It becomes the imperative that frees. One is purified in the realization that two standards operate in our world, that it is not enough simply to talk about love and service and that in fact one must choose to stand under one standard or the other. The retreatant appreciates then that real peace and fullness of being lie only in that sort of readiness which is alive to God's call, unencumbered by anything which interferes with a prompt response. No matter what is possessed, possession for its own sake attracts less and less until the person spending time with Jesus Christ realizes: all she or he has came not to be owned but rather as gift to be received even as it remains common property. What matters is not comfort. Indeed, one can enjoy genuine comfort only when one goes where Christ can be found. Being found in him redefines richness and poverty. Criteria for judgement and so life choices and daily decisions rise out of the discerned sense that what is being chosen will in fact best serve Christ and his people.

Because one can find comfort only where Christ can be found and his love takes him to Calvary, the one praying the Exercises chooses to follow Jesus into the consequences of his 'Yes' to the Father. Jesus suffers for him or her and for all. He does so in a crescendo of love which loves so totally and suffers so completely that he finds no room in his gift or self for self-protection. He or she wants only to be with this Jesus. Such desire needs the grace of courage if it is to remain through the agony and receive the gift given. Utterly powerless to do anything, the retreatant can only be with Jesus. This is true in two ways. Love for Jesus glues his or her feet to the spot. If Christ is suffering his passion he or she must remain. With Christ, the praying person learns the passion's lessons, among them his or her own poverty with its radical inability to do anything that might lessen the pain or change the course of Christ's history. He had to die that we might live. The Incarnate One

chose to give himself, spend himself in this way. What a school of love for the retreatant who realizes in the fibre of his or her person that she or he must say yes, must receive the gift, must let Christ redeem him or her, which is to say, die for him or her.

Little refines the heart of a person more than accepting such a gift. Even one's own powerlessness to make a difference loses importance. Suffering, one's own and most especially another's, can never look quite the same as it did before such prayer. One can never quite read the headlines or see the faces of the world's suffering, today's passion made evident in their starving, their long treks – these refugees from war, hunger and thirst – in the same way one did before. Passion prayer does in the retreatant what Christ's suffering did for Mary and the women beneath the cross. Just as surely as metal filings are drawn to magnets, so they were drawn to be with him. Even as it consumed them, in some way their suffering ceased to matter. They had to be with him. The retreatant knows the same pull. His suffering simply changes the way the retreatant can and will view any human suffering hereafter. It renders complacency in the face of such agony impossible.

At the same time it creates the possibility of joy. No matter one's own suffering, when one loves with a love that stays with the other's pain and person, then even in the midst of one's own anguish one rejoices. Love works that way. As the gospel song asks, 'How can we keep from singing?' God raised Jesus from the dead, gave him the victory and the glory. How can we keep from singing? How can we not risk joy? How can we not pray the overwhelming reality: 'Give me only your love and your grace. They are enough for me. I can neither want nor seek anyone or anything else.'

Harvesting the fruit

Steeped in the mystery of God in, through and with the person of Jesus Christ, the one praying the Spiritual Exercises comes to the last formal prayer Ignatius suggests, the Contemplation to Attain Love. Different from any of the exercises proposed in the weeks that preceded it, the Contemplation does more than summarize them. It invites the retreatant to make the leap of faith-filled love (rooted in trust) to which they inevitably lead. In this prayer the retreatant harvests the fruits given during the retreat. She or he enters the mystery, finds in it a home place from which and in which to live and realizes his or her desire and need to live the mystery's implications. It is as if the graces given through the prayer of the Four Weeks, beginning with Principle and Foundation, opens the soil of the person's self and plants the seeds each

week gives. The Contemplation waters them, keeps open the ground in which they are planted and provides the nourishment they need to open, flower and bear fruit in the person's life, the retreat after the retreat. Each of the weeks of the Exercises and every mystery prayed in them is complete in itself. At the same time each has its place in the full reality, the one mystery made tangibly alive and present in the prayer of the retreat.

Ignatius suggests four vantage points from which to look at this one same reality, this mystery. The view from their perspectives has been seen throughout the retreat. Now these four points serve to focus the retreatant's vision. Before using them he makes two essential observations. Love shows itself in deeds. Love does not own exclusively but rather holds all things in common so that gift given and gift received become simply gift, 'ours'. Sure and steady in this conviction the retreatant looks at his or her person and history as the preceding weeks of prayer have illuminated them.

They consider God's great gifts, the persons they are created to be with all their native abilities, talents and their longing for God, as these express God's love. They look at the gifts of God's unfailing presence and effective redemption. Gazing on the gifts, in the concrete ways they have been given, they see through them God who wants only their love. They pray, 'Take, Lord. Receive. Receive each of these gifts, all that makes me who you give me to be. You gave them. I give them back. They belong to you. They are ours.'

God did not find it enough to give all creation and life hold for the person praying the Contemplation. Love demanded incarnation. It demands that God give God's self. In this gift God makes of the person a living temple, one made to magnify the Lord in every facet and reality of the person's self and life, one who prays, 'Take, Lord, and receive'.

Even this does not seem to be enough for God. The retreatant next stands before the reality that in absolutely every created thing met in the world, in every person met, in every phenomenon experienced, however significant or insignificant, God works. God enters the person's life, present there to labour for them that they may have life and have it abundantly. Awake to the gift, the person accepts it and gives it back. 'Take, Lord, and receive.'

Finally the person contemplates the one, whole mystery, God who is ceaselessly giving God's self in the individual's life. What faith teaches the prayer reveals. In all that is God communicates God's own self. The media for God's self-revelation are creation, the world in which the retreatant lives, the retreatant's own person and personal history, the

history we call salvation, paschal mystery. There is, then, only one mystery, that of the Triune God whose economy, that of salvation, makes us the household of God. In it the person is called to know the goodness of God and the Good God, God's own person present, acting, saving every moment of every day of the person's life. At core, then, God's self-revelation invites the retreatant to know God with a knowing which is sharing in the intimate community life we name Trinity.

And so we pray, 'Take, Lord, and receive'. Take and receive all I have, all I am. You have given all to me. I give them back. They can be mine only if they are first, last and always yours. Everything is yours. With your grace and love I can live what this means. You will teach me, help me and form me to live what this means in the life you give me, in the world in which I find myself. Use me as you will. Use all you have given me as you will. Give me only your love, your grace. That is enough for me.

To say this is one thing. It is quite another to live it. The Contemplation pulls the retreatant into the dynamic that incarnates all that is thus prayed in life after the retreat. In doing so it grounds us in the trinitarian belief that we are given the earth and we are responsible for it. Gift to be made fruitful, we do not own it or any part of it. We care for it, guarding its fundamental integrity. It makes clear the responsibility we have for all the world's people and wants to revolutionize the meaning of 'enough' because real love does en flesh itself. When we see truly that God is enough, then abundance becomes too much. Substance must be shared until all have enough to decently sustain the sort of life that allows all to say, 'Take. Receive.'

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