IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION AND THE CONTEMPLATIVE WAY

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THERE IS OFTEN CLAIMED TO BE A MYSTICAL DIMENSION to the making and giving of the Spiritual Exercises. The text makes a distinction between meditations and contemplations, and implies that the contemplations evolve until they culminate in the Contemplation to Attain Love. At the same time, there is something strange about the idea of an 'exercise', something of its nature ascetical, becoming mystical. The tradition has generally presented asceticism and mysticism, action and contemplation, as mutually exclusive. Contemplation is a passive attitude, characterizing the unitive way or the unitive life. Yet what Ignatius calls 'contemplation' is something we actively do.

Ignatian contemplation is ascetical, active, even though it may lead to the contemplative, mystical life. Perhaps, then, there is a potential latent within it, from the very beginning, for contemplative transformation—a potential which the one who gives the Exercises somehow mediates and guarantees. What follows is an attempt to develop this idea by looking more closely at how the Exercises move from meditation to contemplation and beyond. We begin by considering the process of making the Exercises, and then at the experience of giving them.

The Colloquy

The conversion experience of the First Week puts two basic structures in place: the colloquy and the Ignatian day. Let us begin with the colloquy. Every exercise, throughout the whole process, is meant to end in a colloquy, in our being able to make contact with the Word. 'Word' here is a biblical and theological concept that also converges with some modern currents in linguistics and psychoanalysis. If we want to understand the links between mysticism and Ignatius' spiritual pedagogy, we need to explore this rich concept.

There is more to speaking than uttering words, or even than expressing oneself. Speaking is essentially interpersonal: it occurs

when one person addresses another. It is not just a matter of saying something; it is a matter of addressing another person by saying something *to them*, and by engaging one's own self in a relationship with that other person. Even in human communication, therefore, what is actually said, the content exchanged, is always secondary; it is subordinate to the commitment that it enables. The word that engages two persons as persons always transcends the objective form it must take if it is to be expressed and received. At the same time, however, this reality *beyond* the form is never there for us except *through* the form. Now, what is being said here about any personal communication must apply to the human experience of union with God. This union is a reality that goes beyond the spoken form through which it comes about, but at the same time it also depends on there being a form.

Moreover, a word can be exchanged between two people only if there is listening as well as speaking. The listeners hold their train of thought within, allowing it to be modified by the significance apprehended in the words they hear and in the gestures they perceive. Thus *the silence involved in listening is an integral element in the communication*, quite as much as anything that is said.

The colloquy with God that Ignatius envisages may be an artificial exercise to begin with, but it is fundamentally a conversation with the God who has spoken first. This conversation becomes deeper, and turns out to be silence as much as speech, stillness as much as movement—a reality that transcends form while taking place through form. As far as I know, all the great mystics who have been able to say anything at all about their union with God speak in some way of a verbal exchange that is at once significant and silent. The second Annotation encourages the one giving the Exercises to be reticent. They may indeed speak, but only enough to let the one receiving the Exercises discover that God has already been taking an initiative in speaking to them, and that they can in their turn speak back to God.

The Daily Rhythm

This gradual approach towards the colloquy is supported and paralleled by a progression through different forms of exercise in the course of the day. Two meditations or contemplations are followed by two repetitions, and then a final exercise. From the Second Week onwards, this is called the Application of the Senses, but the structure has already been established in the First Week with the Hell meditation. Ignatius does not tell us how the different days of the First Week should be spent, but he does set out, in his five First Week exercises,

the progression within the Ignatian day. The establishment of this rhythm is one of the fruits of the First Week; it will give shape to all that follows.

These different procedures allow different capacities within the human psyche to work in a co-ordinated, integrated fashion towards the goal being sought. They empower the person truly to speak to God. This climax in the dynamic of the Exercises is mystical in the full sense, and informs the whole process, however much the initial steps are ascetical.

The Contemplations

From the Second Week onwards, Ignatius' meditations are called 'contemplations'. Two important features characterize these contemplations. The first of these concerns the form they take. No longer does a contemplation involve dwelling on particular turning-points in the story, as in the second exercise of the First Week (Exx 56). Instead we imagine *a whole gospel story* in three different ways, one after the other: seeing the characters, listening to what they are saying, looking at what they are doing. There is still mental activity here, and it involves a succession; however, it is now less discursive. As the biblical record and the person's own memories intersect, affective reactions arise. And Ignatius asks us to let them resonate within us—or, as the Spanish text puts it, *refletir* (Exx 106.4).

The second feature to be noticed is more central. The contemplations lead us into the 'mysteries', the images of how Christ lived in the past. But they do this only by at the same time revealing to us what kinds of life this same Christ is empowering today, through our present-day relationship with him. Indeed, the very reason why we contemplate these mysteries is so that they can reveal to us what Christ's mystery amounts to for us today.

The contemplation asks us first to see the persons, then 'to hear what the persons are saying'—not just the content, but the actual speaking of it—and finally to consider what they are doing. If people are talking, their words are having an effect, and it is on this effect—'what the persons are doing'—that the third point of the contemplation focuses. The process is thus one of learning to see reality as what a word brings about—a word that is understood, yes, but not directly seen as such, only perceived through actions. The climax is reached in the Fourth Week:

> ... to consider how the divinity, which seemed to hide itself in the Passion, now appears and shows itself so wondrously in the most holy Resurrection by its true and most holy effects. (Exx 223)

In the Second Week, the contemplative work gradually gives us access to Christ experienced as a person—a reality that goes beyond the particular forms we see or hear, a reality-beyond which grounds that personhood, allows it to exist fully, a reality-beyond which fulfils rather than abolishes. It is this access which permits the Election to spring forth, where the Word of God and the word of humanity come to converge in a plan of action—not far from what the biblical authors mean by 'covenant'. The Word expresses itself anew, and brings about new effects, new deeds in particular human and social situations.

The Election leads into the Third Week. The structure of the contemplations remains the same for the mysteries of Christ's passion, but a different kind of use is made of the gospel text. There is far more material presented in the two contemplations—it is no longer one or two mysteries, but rather a succession of mysteries, accompanied by particular points that draw the attention towards some quite precise details.

The one making the Exercises by this stage no longer needs to be searching. They now know who they are under God, and how they, in their particular circumstances, can live out their union with God. Now it is a question of learning *how* to live this option under God with Christ, like Christ. Prayer becomes more passive. We quickly run through long passages of text; it is the repetitions and the Application of the Senses that focus us on one or other aspect of the mystery. The imaginative content that appears in the prayer becomes a kind of sacrament, signifying how Christ's action unfolds in and with the one praying, and thereby making it a reality. It prefigures what the one praying will have to live out, as a consequence of their election after the retreat.

The suggestion made for the seventh day of this Third Week effectively does away with the different kinds of exercise, and replaces them with one single activity that takes up the whole course of the day—the colloquy can, if this grace is given, take over the whole (Exx 208.9-11). There has already been a suggestion for such a development in the fourth day of the Second Week. When Ignatius presents the Three Modes of Humility, he invites us to make the triple colloquy of the Two Standards 'from time to time throughout the whole day' (Exx 164.2-3)—a colloquy that is at this stage already being used five times daily, at the end of each exercise.

The Fourth Week

In the Fourth Week, the only contemplation set out in the body of the text, that of the apparition to Mary, does not involve any image set directly before us—there is merely an introduction referring to Christ's visiting the just souls in Hell (Exx 219). The soul is invisible; the references to Christ's soul and body draw on theological ideas, and present nothing that can be seen. When a person tries to make this exercise in the way it is suggested, they may well conjure up a mental picture that leads them back to a meditative attitude. But if they imagine some version of the resurrection of the dead, this will not in fact be the risen Christ's self-manifestation to his mother. Alternatively, their time of prayer may be marked by interior silence, with no attention being paid to the images evoked in consciousness, but rather with an openness to the effects of the peace and joy being communicated to them—a joy that they will live without taking it as their own, a kind of limit experience, something beyond themselves. This kind of prayer often feels at first like a form of dryness. It is only at the end of the prayer, as one is looking back or making some kind of spontaneous colloquy, that one will recognise how special this experience is. One is experiencing the consoling effect of the presence, here and now, of the risen Christ—Christ who is visible not as an image, but rather through his effects of grace in the person praying, effects of which the person becomes aware as they struggle to find words to articulate them. These words will spring from the Scriptures, and in particular from the gospel accounts of the resurrection apparitions.

An exercitant may receive at this point the gift of continuing the Ignatian rhythm of prayer times just spontaneously, without specific preparation before each hour. All the while, however, they will acknowledge that it is only the gospel resurrection narratives that enable them to name their experience, both to themselves and to the one giving the Exercises. Thus the long labour of the Ignatian contemplations attains its goal; contemplation becomes something received, without any need for—or at least independent of—any preparation beforehand. To put the matter another way, we have arrived at the kind of experience referred to in the second of the Second Week discernment rules, a 'consolation without preceding cause . . . without any previous feeling or awareness of some object through which such consolation might come through one's own acts of understanding or will' (Exx 330).

This kind of experience is marked by silence. Mental discourse ceases, or at least becomes so muted that the exercitant no longer pays any attention to it. But the silence is not without significance. It carries within itself an intuitive sense which might focus on just one word: the 'yes', for example, that reaffirms the choice made at the election phase. What is at stake is a simple cleaving to the One who is beyond all content, however much this One is always given to us through a content.

What the exercitant is living at this stage, and what gradually becomes part of their reflective awareness, is no longer dependent on the kind of cause-effect relationship that has informed the preparation of prayer previously. Its origin is the utter specificity of the divine love, creating and unifying, acting directly at the heart of each person, through whatever is unique to that person under God.

The kind of experience I have been evoking has elements in it which are personal and unique, particular to the person concerned: it is theirs, and different from anyone else's. That said, there is nevertheless an element in it comparable to what Mary lived through. Why does Ignatius suggest we should dare to see, hear, and attentively look at what happens in an apparition to Mary of which the Scriptures say nothing? Of course, Mary as mother of God is uniquely privileged; but our daring to contemplate in faith the ineffable, unimaginable aspects of this privilege enables each person to experience what they themselves have that is unique. Whatever their limitations, whatever their past has been, whatever their collusions in the sin of humanity, God knows each person, and loves them in their unique individuality, through the one single act, at once creative and salvific, of Christ—an act which is uniting this exercitant, and at the same time all humanity, to the Father's very being. At the appointed time, therefore, we should take the risk and try this contemplation. We should have the courage to go beyond what can be represented in an image.

Most exercitants live this contemplation in a gentle dryness. Later, they will draw on the accounts of the resurrection appearances that Ignatius gives in his appendix, the so-called Mysteries of the Life of Jesus. They will therefore remain more or less dependent on the prior activities of trying to see, hear and look. But if they have really passed over from the Third Week into the Fourth, their contemplation will gradually take on a quite different quality. They will become less and less attentive to the actual words that they imagine, and more and more to the effects those words have. They will gradually be introduced to a prayer which reduces our active faculties to silence, which is without images. From this silence, a word will be brought forth. It will not be

primarily a discursive word, revealing itself in a temporal succession. Rather, it will be a yes to an intuitive movement, a movement that affects and modifies how we behave, a movement that is revealed only through these effects that it has on us. The colloquy is now in full spate. It encompasses everything; everything is transformed into an exchange between humanity and God.

This experience is, therefore, given in the form of an effective promise, a kind a pattern for an experience that must be allowed to mature and grow over a whole lifetime after the retreat. All the disparate elements of life become unified; their diversity is integrated in the unity that has now definitively arrived. The exercitant becomes a contemplative in action.

Contemplation and Ministry

Ignatius' Contemplation to Attain Love therefore marks a return to discursive prayer. It is the basis of an apostolic grace, that of being able to bear witness by preaching. But it may also be that the subsequent Second and Third Methods of Prayer lead the person back to silence, to a form of prayer expressed through just one word interiorly. This form of prayer is compatible with external activity of all kinds, even when ministry is leading the person to expound complex ideas, or to perform complicated actions, in witness to God's presence. At those very times when the minister is speaking for others' benefit, or indeed for their own, they are nevertheless led back to experience how one simple word can express everything: 'Father', or even 'yes'. A person's ministry that involves talking to others need not, then, imply any kind of regression in their own contemplative spirituality.

If the necessary grace is given, therefore, the series of different forms of prayer that occurs through the dynamic of the *Spiritual Exercises* can lead to a truly contemplative prayer. A person's faculties are stilled, but they become open to an action that is the fruit and expression of what they have received. This contemplative attitude, schooled as it has been in the various forms of prayer, shines through a person's every action and through their whole bearing. A person at this stage has in one sense passed beyond the ascetical; this is now quite secondary, however important it was at a previous stage.

The One Who Gives the Exercises

Before finishing, we might usefully take up these ideas from a different standpoint, that of the one who gives the Exercises. This person will already have gone through the process for themselves.

Hence they reread the suggestions made in the text in the light of their own experience, an experience which gives them a more contemplative, mystical view of the pathway to be put forward. They will also be well aware that each exercitant must go through the process for themselves, as the second Annotation indicates. They must find for themselves in their own experience what the gift of God is, what God's self-gift amounts to for them. The criterion the one giving the Exercises will use to assess what is happening will not be conformity with any sort of norm or expectation, but rather the consolation that comes from the person's having found something, or—to put it more deeply—from their having been found. Thus the handing on of the Exercises is sharply different from any kind of preaching or teaching; it is not theoretical knowledge that is being imparted, but rather skill and experience, *savoir faire*.

The one giving the Exercises will also allow a grace to work within them: that of perceiving intuitively how there is something of a true exchange between the exercitant and their God, however clumsily or inadequately this is recounted in their meetings. At the beginning, the exercitant will to a large extent be simply reflecting on themselves in God's presence. Gradually, they will begin to do something different: to address words of truth to God. The meetings between the one giving and the one receiving the Exercises can serve as a model for Ignatian colloquy, and thus facilitate this transition.

One can only give the Exercises in inner freedom, reliant on intuition. One must trust God, and rely on grace in order to discern what is happening in the exercitant, and in one's relationship with them. There is also the great variety of means provided by the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*. One who gives the Exercises can trust that they will receive the grace to choose and to make connections between Ignatius' indications, applying them to what the exercitant is actually experiencing. Otherwise things will go wrong. Either a deadly literalism will set in, with the result that the Exercises become a mere set of techniques, or else the process will be hi-jacked in the interests of a particular subjective interpretation, with the exercitant falling victim to unconscious manipulation.

Supported at once by Ignatius' text and by their own experience of union with God, the one who gives the Exercises will be able to authenticate the Election that might grow out of the experience of colloquy—authenticate it, and allow it to be recognised for what it is with the help of the three 'times' that Ignatius' book describes. The first is of a more intuitive kind, and is mystical in the proper sense; the other two are procedures for arriving at this first time if it does not

immediately occur. The climax of the whole process will be a choice to let things happen.

Perhaps the various steps of the mystical progression will take place in a different order. This can easily happen if the person has been through the dynamic before, or if they already have a structured spiritual life. If the one who gives the Exercises has a sufficient feeling for the mystical, they will be aware of how the different stages that appear one after the other in the book fit within a unified, integrating pattern. They will therefore be able to perceive hidden connections and resonances, to recognise that the steps may come earlier than the book envisages, or to see that what looks like regression may in fact be recapitulation. Not all exercitants move forward at the same pace, and the Spirit can lead a person through the dynamic in a manner different from what Ignatius' book envisages.

To give the Exercises in the true sense involves freeing oneself from any sense of ascetical effort or method being the central focus. One must act in freedom. This freedom, however, is not arbitrary; it merely seeks to live more authentically the underlying purpose of Ignatius' ascetical methods. It involves, too, the humility necessary for taking a risk—the risk of being deceived and then undeceived, always letting oneself be guided by the Second Week Rules for Discernment, always open to being chastened by experience, always ready for a salutary surprise.

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