

THE CONTEMPLATIVE PHASE OF THE IGNATIAN EXERCISES

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THE BOOK OF THE IGNATIAN EXERCISES reflects both Ignatius' own spiritual experience and the ways in which he characteristically directed others. Directors draw on this source, and supplement it out of their own personal experiences, in ways that lead to many refinements, both in the practice of giving the Exercises and in the understanding of the text. I admire this diversity, and delight in this richness.

In this article, I describe my own way of giving the Exercises, centred on the idea of contemplation.¹ I make no claim to offer an exact historical or exegetical study of the *Spiritual Exercises*; I am simply setting out how I understand Ignatius' text on the basis of my own practice, in the belief that this kind of reading can greatly enrich a more classical approach.

Contemplation

The Latin word *contemplari* means 'to look at', and it is in this sense that Ignatius uses the word *contemplación*. He distinguishes between three levels of *contemplación*: looking with the outer senses (Exx 106), looking with the inner senses (Exx 121-126), and a mental looking that occurs without the involvement of other mental capacities such as memory, understanding and will (Exx 234).² This latter is the purest form of 'acquired contemplation'. It is called 'acquired' because, with the help of grace, we can make it our own; it is the purest form of such contemplation, because other mental capacities are no longer active, and because our regard is simply and lovingly directed to nothing but the 'divine person' (Exx 258)—not to 'divine things' besides God's own self.³ I shall use the term 'contemplation' to refer only to this pure

¹ I have described my approach much more fully, though without direct reference to Ignatius, in *Kontemplative Exerzitien: Eine Einführung in die kontemplative Lebenshaltung und in das Jesusgebet* (Echter: Würzburg, 2002 [1994]). An English translation is available in India: *Called to Share in His Life: Introduction to a Contemplative Way of Life and the Jesus Prayer (A Retreat)*, translated by Lucia Wiedenhöver (Mumbai: St Paul's, 2000).

² I am well aware that I am reading Exx 234 in an unconventional fashion, and will defend this option below.

³ Compare the manualist description in, for example, Adolphe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, translated by Herman Branderis (Tournai: Desclée, 1930 [1923]), n. 1299.

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form of acquired contemplation. For Ignatius, in my opinion, teaches a simple beholding of God's presence in prayer, excluding the activity of all the other mental faculties. Indeed, this state is the goal of the Exercises. It is this conviction that I want to explain.

The Major Shift

The Ignatian Exercises follow a simple plan. They begin with the Principle and Foundation, and move through the four Weeks. Most givers of the Exercises see this cycle as making up the full Ignatian reality. If a retreatant comes back a year later, they repeat the same process: it may just be that the Election is about something different, or that the First Week is shortened a little, or that other small changes are made.

It is my experience, however, that a quite new phase of the Exercises begins after the meditations on the life of Jesus that make up the Second and Third Weeks and the first half of the Fourth. The exercitant is drawn into a contemplative phase, a situation that continues into daily life and that enables them to become 'contemplative in action'.

Before the Contemplation to Attain Love, Ignatius makes two important comments (Exx 230-231). The first marks a transition from words to deeds: 'love', we are told, 'ought to be put more in deeds than in words'. The point refers to the situation of the retreatant, who will soon be returning from their meditations and words to their everyday activities. But it also refers to God, and the second comment underlines the mutuality:

Love consists in communication between two parties . . . in the lover's giving and communicating to the beloved what they have . . . and likewise, conversely, the beloved to the lover.

God's love, too, is placed more in deeds than words.

Here, Scripture ceases to be the privileged place for encounter with God. The exercitant stops meditating on God as present in word, and passes over to a contemplation of God's own reality, whether as manifest in God's acts or simply the divine presence as such. Ignatius is therefore issuing a warning: 'pay attention! Something quite new is coming, a quite new dimension of the Exercises. Don't miss it.'

The second comment relates to commitment, and it raises a difficult question. After all, the exercitant is meant to have already committed themselves and their whole life's work to Christ (Exx 98). Is Ignatius insinuating that a decision for the Third Manner of Humility was

somehow bogus? (Exx 167) Surely a retreatant who has got this far must have given themselves to God already?

But there is something else to be given. The exercitant has not yet handed over their own inner faculties: memory, understanding and will. They have not yet given up a preoccupation with consolations and desolations. It is this kind of surrender that Ignatius' prefatory note is referring to. The change, the major shift here has nothing to do with an introduction of contemplative gazes on the divine persons: ever since the Second Week, Ignatius has been introducing contemplative elements in this sense. What is new here is that the exercitant gives up the mental activity of thinking, gives up interpreting consolations and desolations, gives up distinguishing between them. They let their spiritual faculties come to rest. Experience shows that this transition is strenuous, both for the one receiving and for the one giving the Exercises. And it is new. Ignatius is saying, 'Pay attention. Here comes an essential change, from words to deeds. Here comes something new. Here we are crossing a threshold, into another level of commitment, another level of self-communication. Here a quite new phase is beginning. Be careful! Don't miss it!'

A New Commitment

The two notes just mentioned lead into the Contemplation to Attain Love (Exx 232-237). The concern to do something for God becomes a concern to be utterly transparent, just to behold God, and to hand over to God our inner spiritual capacities as well: freedom, memory, thought, concern with our feelings, the will to achieve something.

The difference becomes quite clear if we compare what happens in this Contemplation with the Kingdom meditation. The commitment fostered by the Kingdom meditation (Exx 98) is concerned with how to act rightly as a disciple of Christ. Clearly grace is necessary, and it is presupposed that God will 'choose or accept' me. But the focus is on a style of discipleship centred on my own activity: 'I make my oblation . . . I want and desire . . . my deliberate determination . . . I bear'. The Contemplation to Attain Love is concerned with something more. No longer is it a question of wishing or doing. Rather, we hand our capacities back to God. There are no promises to engage oneself in God's cause, or to accomplish or achieve anything. Instead, the inner faculties come to rest, so that God can become the agent in what I do:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my intellect, and all my will—all I have or possess. You gave it to me: to you,

Lord, I return it. It is all yours; dispose of it in accord with your full will. Give me only love for you and grace—that is enough for me.

It is this passivity, this letting one's own activity become transparent so that God does everything—just this is what is meant by contemplation.⁴ For Ignatius, the triad of memory, understanding and will is a shorthand for the whole range of interior faculties: the retreatant remains with one thing alone: attention, beholding.

This Contemplation is not peripheral; it is not an insignificant piece of decoration at the end of the meditations. It introduces a new phase in the Exercises, because it marks a qualitative difference from all that has gone before.

Scripture

Ignatius lives from revelation—revelation grounded in the Bible. This interpretation in no way denies this fundamental principle. But the direct use of the Scripture in the *Spiritual Exercises* is limited to the Second and Third Weeks, and to the first part of the Fourth.

In the First Week, the exercitant does not actually use Scripture. Biblical texts are present only directly, through the words of the retreat-giver. It is from the Second Week to halfway through the Fourth that Scripture shapes the process of the Exercises. But even here, more is happening than the simple use of Scripture. At the end of each period of imaginative prayer, Ignatius asks the retreatant to lay the Scripture aside, and to speak freely, spontaneously and confidently to Mary, to Jesus or to the Father—what he calls 'colloquy' (Exx 109-110).

With beginners, this part of the prayer is quite brief, because they still need much in the way of memories, thoughts and reflections in order to come into conversation with God. They need time in order to feel their way into the individual scenes of the Gospels. Ignatian imaginative prayer serves to lead the exercitant into confident conversation with Jesus Christ. As time goes on, the preparatory work with Scripture becomes briefer, and the retreatant comes more easily and more quickly into the state where this intimate conversation can take place. It is not that the exercitant has stopped living out of the Bible; on the contrary, the Bible has already led them to a direct contact with the Lord. This contact makes active engagement with the Bible text superfluous.

⁴ In my book, therefore, I call Ignatian gospel contemplation 'pre-contemplative'.

In the contemplative phase, the whole hour of prayer is taken up in an immediate encounter with God, without a biblical text. Attention has now shifted to the inner vision, to God's own self. The Contemplation to Attain Love does not directly use the Bible. The preliminary comments shift the focus from words to deeds, and none of the four points laid down by Ignatius refers to Scripture. We have made a transition from meditating on the Bible to an inward beholding of God as manifest in God's deeds. The point will apply in everyday life afterwards; it applies here too in the hours of prayer. We have taken leave of scriptural meditation as the normative form of prayer.

The shift becomes clearer if we consider the movement of the Mysteries of the Life of Jesus. The final mystery is that of the Ascension (Exx 312). This, for the apostles, marks the beginning of a new era. They have to detach themselves from the warm intimacy they enjoyed with Jesus of Nazareth, and turn instead to the risen Christ who is present everywhere. They can behold him in all creatures, especially, however, in other people and in their own selves. With the whole Trinity, he dwells in the primordial ground of their souls. He is nearer to the apostles than they are to themselves. This transition is one that the retreatant too must make. Ignatius confronts them with this challenge, and demands it of them. They must make a transition from the kind of intimacy fostered by imaginative gospel prayer to everyday reality. Like the apostles after the Ascension, they must overcome the anxiety this transition involves. The risen Christ, who is present everywhere, is leading them on and giving them the Spirit.

The same transition can be documented quite clearly from Ignatius' personal prayer. In Ignatius' *Spiritual Diary* there is not a single place suggesting that he opened his Bible during his personal prayer. Scripture is like a well, from which we can draw water. It is not that the water runs dry; it is just that there is no need of a well if the whole land is under water. Scripture never runs dry. But why do you need the text of Scripture if your access to God has grown so much that you are permanently in immediate contact with God? You no longer need texts and words to foster this immediate encounter. Something like this is said in classical spiritual theology. Biblical meditation is characteristic of relatively early stages in the life of prayer; at the genuinely contemplative stage, it falls away.

This is not to say that Scripture is undesirable or unnecessary. It remains vitally important. It is just that one does not use it actually during the time of prayer. When children want to thank their parents, they do not need to look at a textbook about gratitude; they simply go up to them and make eye contact.

Grace is Enough (Exx 233-234)

There is one further enormous surprise in this Contemplation to Attain Love. The prayer, 'Take, Lord, receive . . .', ends, 'give me only love of you and grace, for this is enough for me' (Exx 234).

God is love (1 John 4:16), and grace is Jesus Christ himself. With this 'enough'—*esto mi basta*—Ignatius simplifies the petition with which he has begun all the previous hours of prayer. The exercitant prays for grace, because *God* is enough: we are not dealing with anything secondary. This *basta* must be taken seriously. If a person has entrusted themselves completely to God, they cannot still want to be specifying what God should give them. That would be to retract the 'enough'.

The contemplative attitude implies, in fact, the end of petitionary prayer. It changes into trust. In place of 'give me what I need', one is saying simply, 'I know that you are giving me everything. I place my whole destiny in your hands. Your providence is enough for me. I do not need either to say or to describe how your providence should work out in practice. I lay myself completely in your hands; it is good for me that it should be so, just as you are giving it to me.' This is an attitude of enormous trust, but one which Ignatius is not afraid to demand of the exercitant.

Trust in God now takes on a quite new quality. It is the will that is given to God. The exercitant wants nothing except love. This marks a significant shift from what has been happening before. In every imaginative prayer previously, the exercitant has always been praying for a particular grace, for what they desire. From here onwards, they are praying simply for love and grace. In the contemplative phase, they are no longer specifying what God should give them.

This attitude is necessary if the *indifference* of which the Principle and Foundation speaks (Exx 23) is to be attained. How can you ever attain indifference with regard to the world—'a long life or a short one'—if you still are driven constantly by wishes related to this world? The way to full *indifference* necessarily includes a phase in which there is nothing for which a person wishes. The goal is a state in which the person is seeking God rather than God's gifts, however important and exalted these might be. Only this constant seeking after God brings about genuine indifference. The contemplative phase has a fundamentally different character.

Beholding God's Presence

Let us turn now to the four points of the Contemplation to Attain Love. At first sight, it appears that Ignatius has brought together an

inexhaustible amount of material for meditation. When one looks more closely, however, it becomes clear that the opposite is the case. Ignatius is seeking to set aside, once and for all, material for meditation. A careful reading of the text leaves us in no doubt that Ignatius' long descriptions are an attempt to communicate a vision of the whole, a quite definite style of seeing.

The fourth point runs as follows:

To look how all the good things and gifts descend from above, as my poor power from the supreme and infinite power from above; and so justice, goodness, pity, mercy, etc.; as from the sun descend the rays, from the fountain the waters, etc.

There is a struggle here: Ignatius can hardly express what he means. The same is happening when he asks us to consider how God gives being, or that we should look how God dwells in creatures. What is this looking meant to be? How can I look at how God gives me being, 'animating me, giving me sensation and making me to understand', 'making a temple of me'? This looking is surely the interior vision of God's presence that we call contemplation.

What Ignatius is talking about here is a pure grace. In his limited language, he is describing his own state. He is living fully in the presence of God. The exercitant has handed over to God all their faculties, outward and inward, and let them come to rest. What they retain, what they cannot give away, is their attention, their awareness. But this they now direct to God. That is the contemplative vision.

Contemplation cannot be learnt. It is pure grace. But one can dispose oneself for it. And the final act of disposing oneself consists in letting go of inward mental activity, till nothing is left but pure consciousness, pure attention. This state of pure attention, in which one seeks to look only at the present, is a preparation for the grace of contemplation. Ignatius is striving for a new level of immediate vision—a vision of God's being and God's acting. We have moved into a new and distinctive spiritual phase, one with its own methods, its own form of discernment of spirits, its own method of election, and a new style of prayer.

Because the attention remains now with the presence of God, there is no need any more for meditation material. Discursive reflection, and the distinguishing between states of consolation and desolation, have now been laid at God's feet. The prayers at the beginning and the end of the hour remain, but the prayer time itself does not have any material. Anyone who has begun to taste this prayer feels themselves

constantly drawn to this simple regard. Obviously it remains possible to do meditation, but when this happens, you know that you have moved back to the Second and Third Weeks.

The Principle and Foundation

Whenever Ignatius begins a new phase of his process, he sets out the goal in advance, as if to test the exercitant's readiness to move on. So, before the first exercise proper, he presents the Principle and Foundation; the Second Week is prefaced by the meditation on the Kingdom. The Kingdom focuses the goal of the Second Week in a grand vision; it indicates the way forward in a prayer (Exx 98); and afterwards, the method of prayer changes.

Ignatius repeats this procedure as a third phase begins. The text of the Contemplation to Attain Love provides a grand vision, the vision of God in action. The prayer, 'Take, Lord, receive', indicates the demanding path towards this goal, namely that of bringing all our mental faculties to stillness and then just looking. The parallels are clear: Ignatius is here introducing a new spiritual phase. But what corresponds to the 'exercises' leading to this goal, to the extensive material, lasting two and a half weeks, that Ignatius puts forward after the meditation on the Kingdom? There is a new form of prayer for the new spiritual phase, and Ignatius presents it thoroughly and conscientiously, just as he has done earlier in the Exercises. But there is a difference: now the exercises to be done have become very simple. Our task is now just to look attentively, and not to employ our mental faculties in activity. The exercises we undertake must promote this simplicity.

The New Way of Praying (Exx 238-260)

Immediately after the Contemplation to Attain Love, Ignatius places the Three Methods of Prayer. These are not there simply for the guidance of the one giving the Exercises, as are the Annotations and the descriptions of the three 'times' of Election. Quite clearly, the Three Methods of Prayer are integrally part of the Fourth Week, described in the Fourth Annotation as being 'the Resurrection and Ascension, putting three methods of prayer' (Exx 4.3).

The fact that there are three methods suggests that Ignatius is making a provocative challenge to the exercitant's generosity. Ignatius has already confronted the exercitant before with texts involving three steps: the strategies of Lucifer and Christ in the Two Standards (Exx 142-146), the Three Classes of Person (Exx 153-155), and the Three

Modes of Humility (Exx 165-167). The parallel suggests that the third of the Ignatian methods is the most important. I was struck, therefore, by how it was that all the directors I knew regarded the second as the most significant. This led me to look more closely at the text.

The first method of prayer (Exx 238-248) is made for people who are at a First Week stage: they still have sinful habits, and they are liable to commit deadly sins (Exx 242). Ignatius is telling them to think about the Commandments.

The second method (Exx 249-257) is appropriate for the person in the second stage of the Exercises, namely the contemplations of the Second and Third Weeks, and the first part of the Fourth:

The second method of prayer is that the person, kneeling or seated, according to the greater disposition in which they find themselves, and as more devotion accompanies them, keeping the eyes closed or fixed on one place, without going wandering with them, says *Father*, and is on the consideration of this word as long as they find meanings, comparisons, relish and consolation pertaining to the word. (Exx 252-253)

The correspondence with the dynamics of Ignatian imaginative prayer is unmistakable: it is there that one is looking for significances, making comparisons and reflections, there that one is occupied with feelings, consolations and relish.

The third method of prayer (Exx 258-260) is envisaged for people who have already interiorized the full Exercises, including the Contemplation to Attain Love:

... with each breath in or out, one has to pray mentally, saying one word of the *Our Father*, or of another prayer which is being recited: so that only one word be said between one breath and another, and while the time from one breath to another lasts, they should look chiefly at what such a word means, or at the person to whom they recite it, or to their own baseness, or at the difference between such great height and their own so great lowness.⁵ (Exx 258.4-5)

The major difference here from the previous methods lies in the absence of any sort of reflection or consideration, of any quest for

⁵ *Translator's note:* Fr Jalics's argument here depends on a particular—though linguistically defensible—translation of the Spanish text: *se mire principalmente en la significación de la tal palabra*. Mullan, for example, translates *se mire* here as 'let attention be paid', taking *mirar* as metaphorical, whereas Jalics takes it more literally.

significance, any striving for 'relish' or 'consolation'. What remains is the 'looking' proper to genuine contemplation.

Particularly important here is the idea of looking at the person in themselves: not what they are doing, not at mysteries of the life of Jesus, not images or icons, not even their characteristics. The exercitant is meant to be looking at the person as such. This looking replaces the memory's recollections, the understanding's considerations, and the discriminations between consolations and desolations.

A person cannot be beheld or looked at like an object. They can only be looked at and known in relationship. That is the point of Ignatius' reference to the difference between 'such great height and their own so great lowness'. Ignatius' concern lies here not with the comparison; he wants us, rather, to look, so to speak, at the relationship between the self and God. Other mystics have expressed the point: 'I am nothing, you are all'. Francis spent a whole night praying, 'who are you and who am I?' A parishioner of John Vianney's answered a question about prayer by saying, 'He looks at me, and I look at Him'. Paul is saying the same kind of thing when he says, 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20), and the fourth evangelist is even clearer: 'I ask . . . that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us' (John 17: 20-21). Ignatius is not encouraging any kind of confrontation here; that would engage the understanding again. The talk of contrast here is meant to focus us on our relationship with God. We should become conscious of the fact that encounter is happening, an interplay between God's mercy and our humility. The exercitant is meant to be looking on the presence of Jesus Christ within the self.

The first two methods of prayer involve distinctive actions: the first method involves simply letting go of the world's noise (Exx 239.1); the second adds some further provisions that foster reflection and other inner activities (Exx 253-254). By contrast, a person using the third method of prayer leaves behind memory, understanding and will: only looking remains. However, since this state is very difficult to attain, Ignatius suggests something that might help, namely attention to breathing: 'with each breath in or out, one has to pray mentally' (Exx 258.4).

It is well known the world over that attention to breathing can help a person let go of thoughts, attain a deeper recollection, and let their attention broaden out into pure contemplative vision. Ignatius does not need to say again that this word can also be a name, because he has already said this in connection with the previous two methods of prayer. We can also assume, on the basis of the second method, that

this repetition of a name can last a full hour (Exx 254-255). Given that the inner stillness of a person using this method is likely to be deep, they will probably stay much longer with simply the name than exercitants at earlier phases—perhaps even for months or years.

Given this pattern of increasing simplicity and interiorization in prayer, the repetitions (re-seekings) and the so-called Applications of the Senses that are part of Ignatian gospel prayer can be seen as a preparation for this third, contemplative method of prayer. To attain stillness in one's memory, understanding and will is a demanding task: these preparations are necessary, and there are also various traditional means that can help, such as attention to one's own open palms. This practice is akin to that of holding one's hand open in prayer; it can be connected to Christ's wounds and to the laying on of hands.⁶ Sounds, too, can help recollection and prayer: plainchant and bells ringing. By listening to one's inner sounds, one can awaken—without thoughts interfering—to the presence of the Risen One.

In this connection, we can also, of course, mention the Jesus prayer. Ignatius is well known for his devotion to the name of Jesus. At La Storta, he saw himself being placed by the Father with Christ. He insisted that the Society he founded be known by the name of Jesus. Until the rise of devotion to the Sacred Heart, Ignatius' Society strongly promoted devotion to the name of Jesus; when the new devotion began to spread, the Society enthusiastically promoted it. Most of the *Spiritual Exercises* is taken up with prayer around the life of Jesus. It is surely plausible that the word to be spoken in the third method of prayer should often be the name of Jesus.

The exercitant at this stage has already handed over, in the prayer of the Contemplation to Attain Love, their memory, understanding and will. Are they now prepared to go the whole way? Can they let these mental capacities become really and permanently still? Can they let God alone work within them? This is the great challenge represented by the Three Methods of Prayer. If the exercitant has not been really able to pray the 'Take, Lord, receive', or if they have simply prayed it as a variation on the offering in the meditation on the Kingdom, then they will choose the second method of prayer. If, however, they have made the 'Take, Lord, receive' prayer fully, as an act of surrender even of their inner capacities, then they will opt for the third method. How they choose will reveal where they are.

Ignatius, therefore, is here showing people who have gone through the full spiritual dynamic of the Exercises a new way of praying. This

⁶ *Called to Share in His Life*, pp. 94-96.

is the summit, the ideal, the end of the road marked out by the various styles of prayer in Ignatius' text. Once they have arrived, the exercitant should stay with this method of prayer, and entrust everything else to divine grace. The one praying has handed everything over. They are in the best possible state for grace to work. Their prayer has become simple, direct. It is an interesting and legitimate question why this teaching has not been discovered before, but it is one that must be left to the historians.

It is quite clear from even the syntax of the Fourth Annotation that the Three Methods of Prayer are an integral part of the Fourth Week. The same Annotation encourages givers of the Exercises to lengthen or shorten the individual weeks if the exercitant's progress suggests this would be appropriate. It can therefore happen that a person goes very easily through the process; their Election is like a ripe fruit just falling off a tree, and they arrive at the third method of prayer after, say, just three weeks. In this case, the person can happily stay in the third method of prayer for the rest of the time: it will stand them in good stead for the everyday life in which this will be their normal spiritual nourishment. Once they have tasted this kind of prayer, they will never want to leave it.

Discernment of Spirits in the Contemplative Phase

For the first and second phases, Ignatius gives us rules for discernment. Why are there none for the contemplative phase? One reason may be that discernment has now become very simple. Prayer has become a simple regard; points for meditation have been laid aside; the choices to be made, as we are about to see, require us not to prepare actively but just to let go; our commitment to God takes the form simply of attention and confidence. Our whole spiritual life has developed into an immediacy of relationship with God. How can there be any need for elaborate discernment?

There is only one thing left that requires discernment. It is very difficult to bring our mental faculties (memory, understanding and will) to stillness. We have serious need of a discernment that verifies whether it has really occurred or not. For this discernment, the fundamental question is whether my attention is really towards God or towards myself. Is my attention really centred on the name, on the word, on the person I am speaking to? Or am I just going round in a circle within myself and my own world?

If I am really with God or with the person to whom I am speaking, then I am under the influence of the good spirit. If, by contrast, I am

stuck in my own world, then I am under the world's spirit. This is a simple rule that can be broken down into more detailed questions. Is my concern with God, or with the activity of my understanding (Exx 234)? Is my attention on God, or on my own relishes and consolations, which may have been important before but which have now become distractions? Is my attention on God, or on my plans, expectations, cares, because I have, so to speak, forgotten that I have already handed my will completely over to God? Do I trust God, or am I still tormented by my sins, my feelings of guilt and inferiority? Am I centred on God, or do I brood on my problems? Am I in God's presence, or am I preoccupied by my own petitions and wishes—as if God's own self is not enough for me? As with the other discernment rules, only experience can teach us how to use this rule about attention to God. Only a person who lives this form of prayer can understand what is being said here.⁷

The Election in the Contemplative Phase

Ignatius obviously envisages an election taking place in the Second Week. Can one happen during the contemplative phase? The answer is, of course, yes. Ignatius speaks of a first 'time' of election:

The first time is when God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that, without doubting or being able to doubt, such a devout soul follows what is shown; just as St Paul and St Matthew did in following Christ our Lord. (Exx 175.2)

This text must be placed alongside the discernment rule about consolation without preceding cause, 'without any previous perception or understanding of any object such that through it consolation of this sort would come by the mediation of the person's own acts of understanding and will' (Exx 330.2).

The connection with the contemplative phase is obvious. Here any thought of 'cause' is excluded, particularly given Ignatius' gloss on 'cause' in the discernment rule. Moreover, it is not difficult to see connections between the second 'time', arising from discrimination between various spirits, and the prayer of the Second Week. Similarly, the third 'time' corresponds to the First Week.

We can therefore say that the most important 'time' of election is the first. If the exercitant's spiritual state permits it, it can and should be

⁷ Much of *Called to Share in His Life* is taken up with dialogues that illustrate how exercitants in this phase deal with the thoughts and feelings arising in prayer.

tried first. Obviously this kind of election cannot be forced, or even directly prepared for. Yet it is also said that this is more important than the others, and that the others are to be undertaken only if this first one does not occur.

This is not, however, to say that we cannot attempt an indirect preparation. Precisely this is one of the functions of the third method of prayer, simply looking at the person, and letting go of 'acts of understanding and will'. The only way to prepare for the first 'time' of election is to avoid dealing with the question at issue. In the contemplative sphere, we can do nothing: this sort of election is one of the things that will be given to us 'as well' if we seek God (Matthew 6:33).

Suppose someone comes for a contemplative retreat, and says that they have a decision to make. The one giving the Exercises must ask them if this decision is urgent or not. Perhaps the decision must be made by the end of the time set aside for retreat. In this case, the person must use the second and third of the Ignatian 'times', and return to the prayer of the Second Week. This is necessary, because contemplative grace cannot be forced; in this situation the only way lies through reflection, and through discrimination between experiences of consolation.

If, however, there is no such urgency, and a resolution can wait for, say, a year, then it becomes possible to explore the first of the Ignatian 'times'. In this case, the person must continue in a mode of handing themselves over, of not thinking and of not desiring any particular thing. They must also avoid paying too much attention to consolation and desolation. They need to forget the whole matter; their task is to direct their attention exclusively on Jesus Christ.

Very often, the person then, after five or six or more days, wakes up one morning, and is amazed to discover that their decision is just there in front of them; it is as though there had never been any question about it. It has arisen with no particular preparation, because the person has been looking simply on God or on Jesus Christ. Experience shows that decisions of this kind give far clearer inner conviction than those emerging from reflection or from the interplay of consolations and desolations.

Even if this clarity does not come about, people who go down this road are generally very satisfied with the retreats they make. Though the decision does not happen, they often become much clearer within themselves about the matter in question. Inwardly, they have become more open; they have been led closer to a decision.

In Ignatius' own practice, described accurately in his own *Diary*, we can see a second way in which the first of the Ignatian 'times' can happen. He wanted to decide whether or not the sacristies for the churches he was taking over should be allowed to possess an endowment. He knew that without this they could not live, yet poverty lay close to his heart. His way of moving forward has come down to us in his *Diary*. He can be seen gradually shifting the stress in his choice process. It begins with reflections and thoughts; it moves to a more affective sensitivity to consolations and desolations. Eventually, he decides not to concern himself any longer with the matter at all, and to direct his inner looking exclusively at God—at Jesus and the Blessed Trinity. At the beginning, he goes through the pros and cons methodically; later, he decides 'to stop all consideration' of all such points, recognising that reflection 'diminished the intensity of my devotion'. Indeed he comes to see reflection as a temptation to be resisted. Initially he seeks confirmation through consolation; later, 'I no longer desired nor sought more or greater signs of confirmation of what was past. I felt quiet and peaceful on that score'. Now he prays that Jesus 'conform my will with that of the Blessed Trinity to follow the way that would seem to him best'. He is 'satisfied and content' to be 'ruled by the Divine Majesty, to whom it belongs to give and withdraw His graces as and when it is most appropriate. He commends himself to Jesus, 'not asking for any further confirmation, but that, before the Blessed Trinity, their greater service be done in my regard etc.; and by the way that would be most suitable with me still being in their grace'. The choice to be made fades into the background; it is Jesus, the Blessed Trinity, devotion, trust, and love for God that have become dominant. Indeed, it seems to Ignatius, 'such was the intensity of the love I felt towards the Trinity that I thought I neither wished to, nor could I, look within myself, remember the past'. He is being drawn in his whole self 'to the love of the Most Holy Trinity'.⁸ On February 16, Ignatius weans himself off mental reflections (third 'time'); on February 26, he ceases to be concerned with consolations (second 'time'). Increasingly, he came to remain in the presence of the Most Holy Trinity.

⁸ The *Diary* is most conveniently to be found in Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, translated and edited by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 65-109. This paragraph refers to a separate sheet of 'pros and cons', and to entries for 16 February, 26 February, 27 February, 5 March, and 7 March 1544. The original text is sometimes obscure, and some of the argument in this paragraph depends on options different from those taken in the Munitiz translation.

Ignatian Contemplative Retreats

Ignatius never gave anyone the Exercises twice, and therefore never envisaged the situation of a person who has made them fully and well coming back for a second time. Today, things are different. Suppose someone asks for an annual retreat, or for a retreat in connection with a decision—someone who has already made a thirty-day retreat and entered the contemplative phase. How should they set about this subsequent retreat? Should they begin at the First Week, and go through the whole process again as set out in Ignatius' book? Or can they do something different, and simply spend the whole time in the third method of prayer?

In these circumstances, a permanent move back from the third method of prayer will be impossible. It would imply that the person was going back on the prayer they had made in the Contemplation to Attain Love. It is not that they will not be able to do meditation at all; it is just that they will not find meditation a satisfying form of prayer. Shortly after they have begun, they will be yearning for greater simplicity and immediacy, yearning just to be in God's presence. For them a much simpler method of prayer is appropriate. When they try to reflect and consider, they will feel—as they listen to what is happening inside them—that they have been thrown back into the Second Week.

Such an exercitant will still be able to make the Ignatian preludes and colloquies, but as vocal prayers. The hour of prayer itself will be taken up with the third method of prayer. Anything else they will experience as oppressive. Through this prayer of simplicity, they will not miss out on any of the fruits of the four Ignatian Weeks. The stillness and the third method of prayer not only maintain the Ignatian purification process, but intensify it. The stillness and the emptiness allow every kind of 'disordered attachment' (Exx 1.3) that might still hinder God's service to come into consciousness. The type of experience proper to the First Week can still happen. Similarly, the Jesus prayer gives ample scope for growth in the following of Christ. Experience richly shows that it is precisely the busiest people who are most grateful for this contemplative way of praying.

Who Can Make Contemplative Retreats?

Ignatius tells us that not everyone can move beyond the First Week (Exx 18.4-11). The question thus arises: what sort of people are suitable for the contemplative phase of the Spiritual Exercises? What sort of people, by contrast, should stay with imaginative prayer?

Contemplative retreats can be given to anyone who has made the full Exercises, and experienced their full dynamic; they can also be given to people who have reached the same state by some other means. Some others, too, can make them—people regulate how they pray for the most part spontaneously. Even if people have not fully reached the spiritual maturity required for the contemplative phase, they can nevertheless be introduced to it. It can happen that they will then revert to meditation, but even so they will have gained great benefit from their exposure to contemplative prayer. They will know something about how they might develop, and make the transition more easily when the time is right.

All who give Ignatian retreats should know more about this contemplative style of prayer. It can often happen that people come for retreats who have been ready for a long time to be led into contemplative prayer. If those who give the Exercises are simply ignorant of how they can be made contemplatively, these retreatants will go away unsatisfied.

Psychologically unstable people should always be discouraged from contemplative retreats. Long periods of intense stillness will bring a lot of difficult material to the surface that cannot be worked through within the time-frame of the retreat, and therefore should not be opened up in this kind of context. Retreat-givers should also refrain from giving contemplative direction to people who cannot follow guidance—Ignatius himself speaks of the need for docility (Exx 5). Should unconscious material surface in them, provoked by the contemplative style of prayer, it will be impossible to lead them through the experience.

Conclusion

It was always parish missions in which the First Week was most effective. Over the centuries, these have brought faith to life, both in the country and in cities. When I was young, I was enthused by this work, and I wanted to be on a mission team.

The Second and Third Week, together with the first part of the Fourth, are given in their purest form in what we now call 'individually guided retreats'. After many years during my studies of preached retreats, I was introduced to the directed retreat. I became even more enthusiastic, and for many years spent much of my spare time giving this kind of retreat.

I then found myself giving a retreat to some sisters in Latin America who could not read. They were cooks, or auxiliary nurses in hospitals,

or carers in old people's homes. They could not read Scripture. Yet, something radiated from them that was rare—not many other religious had it. It was that experience that sent me back to Ignatius' text. I tried to listen to its deep message, and I was led to the Jesus prayer. This is the goal, the summit, of the Ignatian style of prayer; this is its purest form.

A friend active in the business world has told me that I have found 'a gap in the market'. As I came to understand what he meant, I agreed with him. But later I thought better of it. 'No, my friend, I'm sorry: it was not me who discovered this gap in the market. Ignatius did. Or perhaps it wasn't even him. Perhaps he learnt it from a monk in Montserrat, or a friar in Salamanca. All it is, in the end, is Church tradition.'

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