

UNION WITH GOD IN THE IGNATIAN ELECTION

Sylvie Robert

NEAR THE BEGINNING OF THE *SPIRITUAL EXERCISES* Ignatius speaks of how the soul can ‘approach and arrive at its Creator and Lord’ (Exx 20.9). In some sense, the Exercises promote union with God, even if Ignatius generally, as he does here, uses more indirect expressions. But there remains a question as to whether or not such union forms the Exercises’ main purpose. Some commentators believe it does; others insist that the Exercises centre on the Election. In his discussion of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Joseph de Guibert attempts to steer a middle course: the Exercises centre on a union with God that is attained through the process of election:

... the outcome of the Exercises cannot but be a strong impulse towards perfection, towards union with God. . . . Nevertheless, it remains true that what characterises the Exercises . . . is this orientation of all the interior work towards the will of God, as something to be found and embraced . . . their primary fruit is not so much the light, the fervour, the *élan* placed in the soul, but rather the firm and strong will to accomplish this will of God, just as it has appeared regarding specific issues at the moment of the Election.¹

De Guibert, however, seems to be working with false alternatives. Is it really the case that union with God can come about only as the *consequence* of the election process? Is it really possible for the Election to take place without the whole process *already* being united to God? Surely the Election needs to be seen as *itself* an experience of union with God?

Henri Bremond eventually came to speak of an Ignatian ‘mysticism of election’. In this article, I want to argue, both from Ignatius’ text and

¹ Joseph de Guibert, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice: A Historical Study*, translated by William J. Young and edited by George E. Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1986 [1942]), p. 128 (translation slightly altered). De Guibert refers to an article published in 1920 by Léonce de Grandmaison as an example of the interpretation centred on election, and to a book by Louis Peeters, revealingly entitled *Vers l’union divine par les Exercices de S. Ignace*, as an illustration of the other view.

from experience, that Bremond was on the right lines here, and indeed that he could have taken his insight a great deal further. I shall, however, avoid the ambiguous term 'mysticism', and talk instead in terms of 'union with God'. Firstly, I shall explore how we can see the process of election as itself a means of union with God. Then I shall reflect on the nature of this union, a union of wills. In the final section, I shall try to bring out how original and distinctive Ignatius' teaching was, and how even today it can still call standard ways of thinking into question.

The Election as Means of Union with God

It is generally said the Election *opens us up for* union with Christ. Ignatius in fact never talks directly about the unitive way. Whereas he is clear that the First Week is purgative and the Second Week illuminative, he never characterizes the Third and Fourth Weeks in terms of this scheme. Most people see a gap to be filled here, and take the simple course: it is the Third and Fourth Weeks that are unitive. This strategy can be traced back at least to the second generation of Jesuits, to the work of Achille Gagliardi (1537?-1607).² In this connection, people often invoke the intensely expressed petitions naming the graces of the Third and Fourth Weeks—prayers to experience what Christ himself experienced (Exx 193, 203, 221).

Now, it is clearly true that the dynamic of the Exercises does gradually open us to a union with Christ. Nevertheless, I also think that Ignatius' silence about the unitive way can be interpreted as something other than prudent reticence, or than a concern to forestall possible misunderstanding.

The conventional account just sketched presents the union with God attained in the Third and Fourth Weeks as a confirmation of the Election. The one receiving the Exercises prays through the death of Christ. They experience, in the fullest sense of the word, compassion, a suffering-with—even if this may take the form of pain at feeling distant from the suffering Christ. Then they open themselves up to the joy of the Risen One, or at least to desire this joy. All this suggests, then, that they are already open to receive the full reality of salvation. Is it, therefore, consistent to suppose that the transition from the Election to the Third and Fourth Weeks involves any great qualitative

² Achille Gagliardi, *Commentarii seu explanationes in Exercitia spiritualia Sancti Patris Ignatii de Loyola* (Brugge: Desclée, 1882), p. 99. See also a French translation, *Commentaire des Exercices Spirituels d'Ignace de Loyola (1590)*, compiled under the leadership of André Derville (Paris: Desclée, 1996), pp. 115-116.

leap? Do we really want to say that before the Election there was no union with God there at all, and that this union only began once the Election was made? Experience suggests otherwise. People who give the Exercises have often observed how after the Election people are already open to the Lukan Christ's great desire to eat the Passover with his disciples before he suffers (Luke 22:15); from the outset, they are fully able to enter into the contemplation of the Last Supper. It makes more sense to suppose that the Election itself already involves a union with God, even if of a kind rather different from what people experience later in the process.

Ignatius is in fact very clear on this. At the beginning, the one giving the Exercises is told not to make recommendations about choosing one state of life rather than another, but to 'leave the Creator to act immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord'. The reason given is as follows:

. . . in spiritual exercises like these, it is more fitting and much better, when seeking the Divine Will, that the Creator and Lord himself should communicate himself to his devout soul, inflaming it with his love and praise, and disposing it for the way in which it will be better able to serve him in future. (Exx 15.3-6)

There is an immediacy here: the Creator's own self is imparted to the soul, so much so that the soul is inflamed in God's love. What is this meant to be if it is not already a union? Anyone who has ever actually made an Ignatian election, or heard other people talking about how they made it, cannot be in any doubt. We can recognise the truth of an Election by how it confronts us with the simple, weighty splendour of an intimate presence—a presence both to God and to oneself, a presence of oneself to God and of God to oneself, all at the same time. This presence leads us to articulate a choice in covenant with God; it is experienced as a moment of profound union. To describe what is happening, or to hear someone else describe it, only confirms this reality.

Ignatius does, of course, describe the Second Week in terms of the illuminative way (Exx 10); nevertheless, it is also an experience of union. It all happens 'with Christ', right from the contemplation on the Call of the Temporal King that begins the Second Week and sets the tone for it. There is no reason to reserve the term 'union' for 'being *in* Christ'; 'being with' is as much union as 'being in'. The theme continues all through the Second Week: the request to be received under Christ's standard, the choice for 'poverty with Christ poor rather

than riches, insults with Christ replete with them rather than honours' (Exx 167.3). These deepen the desire for union with Christ that gradually grows during these days. Gradually, our desire is moving towards a complete openness to God's desire; gradually, a true union of wills is coming about.

The meditation on the Three Classes of Person (Exx 149-156) is a particularly revealing illustration of this process. The first class of person wants 'to find God our Lord in peace', but never takes the necessary steps; a will in this state never integrates God's will, and never makes the link between desire and reality. The second class stand for a will in competition with God's, a will that fails to respect who God is: God is meant to come where the person wants. The third class, by contrast, want to choose 'according to what God our Lord will place in their will, and what will seem better to such a person for the service and praise of God's divine majesty'. This class is made up of those who receive and welcome God's desire, and let their own will be shaped by God's.

This unification of wills is not the only form of union occurring in the Second Week. The very structure of the Second Week's prayer is also unitive. The process of election is grounded in, and nourished by, contemplation on Christ. Ignatius' Second Week is in fact a very precise, careful structure, involving two intertwining movements: one centring on the Election, on calling, on gradually being freed from inordinate desire; and another following the journey of Christ in his earthly life. The interplay is there at the outset, in the Call of the Temporal King. This exercise is at once a prayer for the grace to be open to the Lord's will and calling, and a schooling in the contemplation of Christ—as Ignatius' own heading puts it, 'the calling of the temporal king helps in contemplating the eternal king' (Exx 91.1). Thus the two motifs are already present together. Then the pattern of gospel contemplation is put in place, before any election process begins.

The text suggests that questions about a state of life should be raised after one has begun to contemplate Christ. The question of just how I am going to respond to God's desire should emerge from the gospel contemplation:

The example which Christ our Lord, being under obedience to His parents, has given us for the first state—which consists in the observance of the Commandments—having been now considered; and likewise for the second—which is that of evangelical perfection—when he remained in the Temple, leaving his adoptive

father and his natural Mother, to be open for the pure service of his eternal Father; we will begin, at the same time contemplating his life, to investigate and to ask in what life or state his Divine Majesty wants to be served by us. (Exx 135.1-4)

The election material comes later, following the contemplation of Christ's baptism, following what we might think of as Christ's own election.

The closer we get to the Election, the more intensively such exercises as the Two Standards, the Three Classes of Person and the Three Manners of Humility invite us to work on our desires, precisely though having us ask to be with Christ. By this stage the very form of our prayer has become unitive. Through the contemplation, the mystery being contemplated is reflected within ourselves. The Application of the Senses invites us to offer our whole being, and all our faculties of perception, to the mystery of Christ.

The quest for God's will is indeed a quest for illumination, and perhaps it is for this reason that the Second Week has traditionally been thought of as illuminative. But the quest takes place within a relationship which is already one of union, linked to this 'knowledge from inside of the Lord who has become human for me' (Exx 104). The interplay between election and gospel contemplation enables a person seeking God's will in the disposition of their life to receive illumination precisely from the contemplation of Christ: a light indicating their own proper way. Thus they learn to read their life as a place where the call of Christ's glory is reflected. The pattern begun in the first colloquy with Christ on the cross (Exx 53)—that of turning one's gaze on to Christ and thereby learning from him how to look on oneself—continues here. As Gagliardi was to put it, 'within us Christ the Lord extends his kingdom; and we in turn . . . reign in Christ'.³

Again, both the preparation for the Election and the event itself are clearly and profoundly unitive. Ignatius' language consistently underscores the point. In the first 'time', he says, 'God our Lord so moves and attracts the will, that without doubting, or being able to doubt, a soul in this state follows what is shown it' (Exx 175.2). There is no divergence between God's will and the human will; both desire the same thing, both assent to it together. There is a perfect convergence between God's desire, the person's desire, and reality; immediately the soul 'follows what is shown it'.

³ Gagliardi, *Commentarii*, p. 78 (French version, p. 97).

In the second 'time', the Election takes place 'through the experience of consolations and desolations, and the experience of discriminating between different spirits' (Exx 176). It thus depends on consolation: on God and the angels finding themselves at home in the soul, entering within it, drawing it 'entirely to the love of his divine Majesty' (Exx 330.1).

The third 'time', for its part, draws on the person's 'natural powers', used 'freely and in tranquillity' (Exx 177.3). This does not, however, mean that it is not a unitive activity. Ignatius uses the image of a balance to indicate an almost bridal docility to the divine movement: 'to follow what I feel to be more for the glory and praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul' (Exx 179.3). The person's own activity is here held open to God's, in a way that is certainly unitive. The text then continues in even stronger terms:

To ask of God our Lord to be pleased to move my will and put in my soul what I have to do regarding the thing proposed, that will be more to his praise and glory; discussing well and faithfully with my intellect, and choosing agreeably to God's most holy pleasure and will. (Exx 180)

The request is for what God does in another way in the first 'time': God should 'move and attract the will'. The prayer here also recalls the desire of the third class of person to will 'according to what God our Lord will place in their will' (Exx 155.2). It may be reason which here does the work, but what happens is no less authentically Ignatian or unitive than what we find at the other 'times'. Like Ignatius' other methods, this procedure is aimed at union with God through a decision. The second method for making the Election in the third 'time' begins as follows:

... that love which moves me and makes me choose a thing of this kind should descend from above, from the love of God, so that the one who chooses should feel first in themselves that that greater or lesser love that they have for the thing which they choose is only for their Creator and Lord. (Exx 184)

The close similarity here with the final point of the Contemplation to Attain Love—'all goods and all gifts descend from above' (Exx 237.1)—leave no doubt regarding the union with God that is being lived out in this third 'time' of election.

Ignatius' formulations therefore make it quite clear that the Election—however it comes about—involves union with God. However, we should also look at how it is seen to occur within the Second Week. Whatever the 'time' in which it occurs, it is always a gift that we receive. It is never something we can programme. It will always involve receptive, deep silence. No-one can decide how it is going to happen nor when it is going to happen.

Ignatius' text is marked by a striking, surprising contrast. He gives rigorously precise directives, but the Election itself is utterly free, unpredictable, gratuitous. Ignatius carefully and clearly sets up a delicate interplay between contemplations on Christ's life on the one hand, and explicit preparation for the Election on the other. He tells us exactly when to begin to ask the question of 'what life and what state His Divine Majesty wishes to make use of us in' (Exx 135.4); later, and more specifically, he tells when we are to begin 'the material of the elections' (Exx 163). Yet there is no election exercise within the sequence. Ignatius says nothing about a time when it must happen, or even when it might happen.

Of all the various steps in the Exercises, the Election is the one prepared with the greatest care, and at the same time the one that is left most explicitly to occur at God's own time. It happens in a colloquy, in a unitive dialogue with between Creator and creature. Even when it has been taken in the third 'time', it should be taken to prayer and confirmed through dialogue with God:

. . . once such an Election or deliberation has been made, the person who has made it must go with much diligence to prayer before God our Lord and offer him the Election, that his Divine Majesty may be pleased to receive and confirm it, if it is to his greater service and praise.⁴

The one making the Election is in no way in control of the process. This moment of union is one of free encounter. Though the person may have opened themselves up for it, the divine presence is something *given*.

Union of Wills

There is, however, something distinctive and original about how Ignatius sees this encounter coming about. It may be misleading to see only the Third and Fourth Weeks of the Exercises as unitive, but it

⁴ Exx 183; compare Exx 188.

would also be wrong to present the Second Week as unitive in the conventional sense. Ignatius' silence about the unitive way in the Exercises may indicate something original that does not fit within the traditional scheme at all. The union in question is a union specifically of *will* between the creature and God.

During the Election it is the individual concerned who is wishing, desiring, choosing, articulating what is happening. Experience shows that the Election cannot happen unless the retreatant has the courage to desire great things and to ask for them; when the Election springs forth, it is like the birth of a new freedom. But this freedom, this use of the will, is anything but self-centred individualism, locked in itself, narcissistic and destructive. The individual has accepted God's transforming gift within their own will; their freedom has been liberated; they can choose in true freedom, in other words in covenant relationship. It is precisely in their wills that they are united with God.

This might sound rather restrictive, as though the union in question occurs only in one human faculty. Again it is Gagliardi who suggests another way of looking at the matter, based—though the references are discreet—on Christ's own experience at Gethsemane. For Gagliardi, the will and the action which flows from it express the whole reality of the person, whereas the mind is secondary:

Union's strength is present principally in the will, not in a way dependent on the mind's speculation, but because of the will's power to direct and carry out deeds, of whatever kind, for God's sake; to present itself to God in person, with everything it has to offer, out of—so to speak—the purest desire for God's glory; and on top of all this, the will's desire and intention for exchange with God's own self, present in the very thing it is doing, and for its own total self-transformation into God. For to act with this intention and this effectiveness is at the same time to be united with God, united through activity.

And through the complete interchange of the person's own will with this divine love to which it is bonded, there arises a true and very profound transformation of the person into God, an *ecstasis*, a standing outside, not in the mind, but in the will, the whole person. For when the will is bringing things about, the will and its action are the whole person—as it says, 'Fear God and observe God's commandments: for this is the total person'.⁵

⁵ Ecclesiastes 12:13 (Vulgate).

This is much more than when it is just the mind contemplating God. For love is present and active more in action and in the will than in the connection made by bare speculation. Therefore, the human person passes over into God and becomes transformed far more effectively and fully through this union of will and action than through an elevation of the mind . . .

Further, this way really does include all times, all actions, even the slightest; every state of soul, even in the deepest desolation, aridity and dereliction, of the kind that imitates Christ in the garden as he began to be afraid, to be weary, and to say 'not my will but yours be done'; every place, every kind of person and state, with absolutely no-one excluded; every form of life, whether active or contemplative, because it mingles the one with the other and joins them together perfectly. This is why this way is useful, secure, delightful, shared by all: it is the route we can always delight in, in every place, in every action.⁶

The Second Week involves work on one's own desires and conflicts: one meets the divine Other, perhaps painfully. The conflicts arise because our wills and God's will differ; the fundamental sin exemplified by the fallen angels consists in their 'not wanting to help themselves with their liberty to reverence and obey their Creator and Lord' (Exx 50.4). By contrast, the union which arises when the wills are woven together is solid, lasting, precious.

This kind of union of wills is more than a restful looking at God face to face. The human will operates within the public world; it is essentially active. This union with God, therefore, occurs in quite particular circumstances, and it includes the world that the Creator has entrusted to humanity. This version of election and of the mystical involves a kind of union between the absolute and the particular. A person who has experienced this kind of union with God lives out of a transfigured consciousness. Often the Election leaves a person surprised. It is like being in love: though in one sense nothing has changed, in another sense nothing will ever be the same again.

Union with God's will involves union with God's action in the world. We recognise indeed that 'all good things and gifts descend from above' (Exx 237.1). We are thus drawn too into the very action of Christ performing the works of God in his humanity, along the lines indicated in the Third and Fourth Weeks. But this union also remains shaped by the Call of the King: it always involves being sent out on

⁶ Gagliardi, *Commentarii*, pp. 104-105 (French version, pp. 119-120).

mission. The grace of the Risen Christ is never simply unitive in the conventional sense.

Creator and creature are infinitely distant. The union in question is thus of a quite exceptional power. It involves the union of two wills, of two beings at the point where they could be opposed; it is constantly holding them open to interrelationship. The union has been prepared by gospel contemplation. The 'reflecting in oneself' encouraged by this prayer never tames the sheer otherness of the Christ who is being contemplated; the prayer, moreover, culminates in the colloquy, which may sometimes be silent, but is always a matter of dialogue. The divine and the human are at once distinct and inseparable. The Exercises are a constant quest for this kind of close union within infinite distinction—a union pre-eminently exemplified, of course, by the Persons of the Trinity. Part of the power of this experience is that it subverts normal ways of thinking about union with God.

Union, not Ecstasy

Bremond's talk of Ignatius' 'mysticism of election' came, as Dominique Salin's essay in this collection shows, as a corrective to his earlier criticisms. But Bremond still articulates this nuanced position in terms of standard contrasts that are far too crude and simple, contrasts that continue to distort the ways we think about spirituality. Bremond's Ignatius is a mystic because he has let go of his faculties and let go of the reins of his normal life. Bremond's formulations are all too revealing:

It is fine to be reasoning if God has not stepped in first and sent graces so luminous that they leave not the slightest doubt about God's will. But reasoning is never enough. . . . As long as the sign does not appear, we keep on trying, we take pains; once consolation falls from heaven, as it were, we must stop using our faculties. . . .

Once I have encountered the one thing I am seeking, the *id quod volo*, the touch of God, then I must at once abandon any work with the understanding, get out of the stranglehold, break free of the spiral. . . .⁷

It seems that union with God happens only through a kind of sacrifice of our powers, almost through something like self-mutilation.

⁷ Henri Bremond, 'Saint Ignace et les Exercices', *La Vie spirituelle*, Supplément 20 (1929), pp. 1-47, 73-111, here 45 and 91.

The Ignatian Election, in fact, presents a kind of union with God that leads a person to step away only from their own self-will—in no way does it involve separation from oneself or from one's own surroundings. On the contrary, this kind of union with God involves not an ecstasy, not a stepping out from oneself, but rather a form of birth. It continues the cry of wonder—a cry of birth or rebirth—in response to God's salvation and mercy that we find in the First Week (Exx 60). It empowers a person's individuality, endows them with freedom of choice. It then sends them back into the world in which they live, and encourages them to live out this union in and through time. The union with God experienced in the Election opens out on to the future. Neither fretful regret for the past nor illusory projections have any place here.

Union with God and personal integration go together; in this respect, the personal experience of the one accompanying is particularly important. Once again, the text on the Three Classes of Person is here very significant. The first class are in conflict with themselves: they want to find God, quite clearly, but they do not avail themselves of the means. They are thus in disintegration: their actions contradict their will. The second class are in conflict both with themselves and with God: they too want to find God, but only in so far as they want God to conform to their desires. They will not let themselves really find God as God is; here too, there is a conflict between what they want and what they do. The third class, however, are at once at peace with themselves and with God, even if they remain conscious that they do have attachments. Their only desire is to want the thing in question or not, 'according as God our Lord will put in their will and as will appear to them better for the service and praise of His Divine Majesty' (Exx 155.2). This desire becomes reality; there is no contradiction here; they are in harmony with God.

The connections between union with God and personal integration are extremely close. The consolations which inform a choice made in the second Ignatian 'time' have the effect of integrating the self. The gift of the first 'time' of election has the same effect: the person is taken up into the self-consistency of God, for whom to will and to effect are one. The third 'time', too, involves a choice for what God puts in the soul, and for what the person will then themselves think to be better for God's service and praise. There is no question here of human faculties being sacrificed: union with God must not be defined in such terms. The union with God represented by the Ignatian election is not a matter of the extraordinary or the ecstatic, but rather of the whole self's commitment to its relationship with God: 'Take, Lord,

receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, my entire will' (Exx 234.4).

It is not that the human powers are here annihilated; rather, they are coming to rest in the Creator and Lord, not taking the primary initiative, but instead allowing themselves to operate as received from God, referred to God. What is at stake here is anything but withdrawal: the important thing is that we are not the primary agents. This is the exact opposite of the spirituality of will-power, of voluntarism, that Bremond saw in the Jesuit tradition.

God can impart what God is and what God has precisely within the normal life of humanity—that is what the doctrine of the Incarnation tells us. A spirituality lived in the image of God must respect this principle. Yet we still seem bedevilled by an image of God at enmity with humanity, and therefore can never be content with this teaching. We have a secret desire to flee from who we are, from the constraints of where we live. This leads us to think of the mystical as something out of the ordinary, something involving a stepping out of ourselves, an ecstasy. Yet figures such as Teresa of Avila wanted to hide the extraordinary experiences they underwent, and not to cultivate them. Why do we always want to belittle our own humanity by thinking that we must always be passive when we receive? What travesty of divine freedom is it that can be manifest only if we are somehow absent?

Seeing the Election as a manifestation of union with God subverts many of the clichés about mysticism. It enables us to see union with God as something open to a wide range of people. Moreover it locates union with God in the will, in other words precisely where, naturally speaking, it would seem to be most difficult—the place where human beings can set themselves up in competition with God, rebel, sin, refuse to receive their being from God.

There are two important implications here for understanding what is at stake in Ignatian spirituality. Firstly, the ascetical and the mystical need to be understood as two elements of the same relational reality. We struggle to become able to receive the gift; we accept it in pure gratuity. The hard work of asceticism and of the purgative way takes place within a true dialogue between Creator and creature. Secondly, we need to understand the full significance of spiritual pedagogy. The process by which a person learns with Ignatius how to walk with God should not be thought of as cold method: it is in the learning itself that we are united with God. When people today criticize Ignatian methods, or for that matter praise them too enthusiastically, they are often misunderstanding the Exercises simply as a technique or a knack. It is as a result of these misreadings that Bremond's sarcasms continue to

echo. The Exercises provide a space in which God may be met in freedom. The process by which a person learns is itself a 'way', and 'way' is also one of the terms that best describes what is meant by 'spirituality'. The words 'method' and 'way' are linked etymologically—'method' is linked to the Greek word *hodos*, meaning 'way'—but we have lost any feeling for the connection. Hence we should perhaps stop talking of methods in the context of spirituality. What is given in the process of Ignatius' Exercises is not a cold 'method', but rather a selection of 'spiritual exercises that are suitable, conformed to the need of this kind of soul' (Exx 17.3).

All this demands that we read the *Spiritual Exercises* not simply as a linear progression through the various weeks and activities. We need also to have a sense of the text as a whole, and to pick up the discreet links, echoes and repetitions that hint at the true nature of Ignatius' gentle process. Both the Principle and Foundation and the Contemplation to Attain Love inform and nourish the whole. Such a reading engenders in the one who gives the Exercises a flexibility that at once fosters fidelity to the text, and yet discourages any lazy rejection of human realities that might initially seem to be resistant, to be taking us off the track, to be annoying. Moreover, this kind of reading is also in keeping with the very nature of spiritual experience, the very nature of union with God. Such experience is marked by an interplay of linear process with particular moments of immense power or mysterious depth. Union with God involves both of these. As Stanislas Breton has recently put the matter, in terms that could sum up the whole of Ignatian spirituality,

... the path along the way is always rooting us ever more deeply in the place of rest which is holy indifference. That is what the way is there for. The collection of exercises through which it unfolds has only one function: to assure us that things are working. This rootedness in the place where one is at home bears the noble name of liberty.⁸

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⁸ Stanislas Breton, *L'Avenir du christianisme* (Paris: Desclée, 1999), p. 104.

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