

METHODS FOR SANCHE PANZA

Henri Bremond and the Interpretation of the Ignatian Exercises

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MANY PEOPLE USE THE WORDS ‘mystical’ or ‘contemplative’ of figures like Ruusbroec, Eckhart or Teresa of Avila, but not of Ignatius. In doing so, they are echoing a judgment made by the noted French writer Henri Bremond (1865-1933), whose work on the history of spirituality, especially French spirituality in the seventeenth century, has been seminally influential. For Bremond, the Jesuits in general prefer ‘ascetics’ to ‘mystics’:

... they would rather have people who are not so much brilliant as ‘a safe pair of hands’, people who seem excellent examples of the ideal in terms of which a son of St Ignatius must govern himself and the souls in his care—undramatic, strong-willed, methodical, pragmatic.¹

I shall return in a moment to this judgment of Bremond’s—one which he developed and modified, but which has left a lasting mark on people’s minds, both in France and beyond. For the moment, there are two important points to notice. Firstly, for Bremond, asceticism and mysticism are sharply distinguished, even opposed to each other; secondly, Jesuit or Ignatian spirituality is in general ascetical, and as such anti-mystical. Bremond tells us indirectly, in his description of the Jesuit ideal, what he means by ‘ascetical’; mysticism, by implication, is then something quite opposite to safety, sobriety, the use of the will, practical concerns, and obsession with rules and regulations.

Though this account is only an approximation to Bremond’s position, it is often in oversimplified form that an author has the most

¹ *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu’à nos jours* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1916-1933), 11 vols., vol. 5, p. 11. An English translation of the first three volumes was produced by K. L. Montgomery under the title, *A Literary History of Religious Thought in France from the Wars of Religion Down to Our Own Time* (London: SPCK, 1928).

significant influence. A second text—equally something of an oversimplification—brings out a further feature of how Bremond saw Ignatian spirituality. It comes not from his published work, but from a piece which he wrote for his own purposes in 1911-12, at the time when his 'grand design' of a 'history of prayer' was taking shape in his mind. The ascetic is 'active'; the mystic is 'passive':

Human beings are active (*l'homme s'agite*); mysticism begins when it is God who is at work, and the first sign of this divine intervention is that human action ceases (whether this is obvious or not). This is what they (the mystics) call the prayer of quiet, or of simplicity, or of pure love.²

This passage brings out quite clearly the framework of ideas informing Bremond's distinction between what is mystical and what is not. The spiritual life is like a two-stage rocket, or alternatively like a relay race. The mystical life starts when God takes over the baton in the person's life and prayer, when activity and asceticism stop. Moreover, Bremond places Ignatian spirituality in the realm of activity, the activity of the 'powers of the soul', of memory, understanding and will—which for Bremond amounts to will-power. This 'activity' is simply busy-ness (*agitation*). Normal Ignatian or Jesuit spirituality is busy. Its aim above all is to be doing things: doing things to oneself, pushing others into doing things, pushing others into doing things to themselves. By contrast, the mystical attitude for Bremond simply consists in receiving, in 'letting God act'. And on this point, Bremond observes, Ignatius has oddly little to say:

When St Ignatius wants to get our ascetical powers working, he increases the number of suggestions and prescriptions. But once the clock strikes and it is time for mystical activities to come on the scene, he becomes brief, silent.³

These statements of Bremond's echo standard contrasts that can be found very frequently in the literature about spirituality and mysticism, contrasts that originate in the Quietist controversy at the end of the seventeenth century. The opposition between 'asceticism' and 'mysticism' echoes other well-known distinctions: activity and

² Quoted in Emile Goichot, *Henri Bremond, historien du sentiment religieux; genèse et stratégie d'une entreprise littéraire* (Paris: Ophrys, 1982), p. 67.

³ Henri Bremond, *Introduction à la philosophie de la prière* (Paris: Bloud et Guy, 1929), p. 49.

passivity; the acquired and the infused; habitual grace and actual grace; above all, the natural and the supernatural. There were particularly sharp debates about these contrasts at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴ The debates centred on what was to be classed under these opposing terms, and particularly on the distinction between what did and did not count as mystical experience. These disputes raised questions about Ignatius. What kind of experience was he offering in the *Spiritual Exercises*? Was it mystical, or was it ascetical? If the latter, then the Exercises were simply a school of prayer and of self-discipline, aimed at helping a person 'conquer oneself and regulate one's life without determining oneself through any affection that might be disordered' (Exx 21). Later accounts have claimed that these questions were badly put. Nevertheless, it remains true that the underlying theological problems—those of nature and grace, and of grace and freedom—have still not been solved. There is something stubbornly persistent about these debates and about the clichés they have engendered.

For most people today without any particular experience of the spiritual life, the words 'mystical' and 'mysticism' spontaneously evoke something more than the words 'spirituality' and 'spiritual'. 'Mysticism' suggests, more or less explicitly, the 'supernatural'—'supernatural' understood to mean 'extraordinary' or even 'miraculous'. When such people read John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, they think that the experiences recounted can be described in terms of mental and physical states that are out of the ordinary. In the end, they are almost repeating a position put forward by Bossuet in the eighteenth century, in his debates with Fénelon during the Quietist controversy.⁵ Bossuet described so-called 'mystical states' in terms of the suspension of our powers. God intervenes, exceptionally and miraculously, to interrupt ordinary mental activity for a short while.

Now it is certainly true that the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*—all too often seen as the only Ignatian text worth referring to—never explicitly mentions 'supernatural states'. Unlike John of the Cross or

⁴ These were associated with such figures as Augustin-François Poulain, Auguste Saudreau, and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange. Bremond himself was also involved, as were a number of those who had been his confrères as Jesuits and who founded the significantly named *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* shortly after World War I. For brief accounts in English, see Rowan Williams, 'Butler's *Western Mysticism*: Towards an Assessment', *Downside Review*, 102 (1984), pp. 197-215; Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 25-26.

⁵ Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), bishop of Meaux, clashed with François de Fénelon (1651-1714) regarding the latter's defence of the figures known as the Quietists (notably Mme Guyon), and a treatise entitled *Explication des maximes des saints sur la vie intérieure* (1697). Pope Innocent XII condemned 23 propositions from this book in 1699.

Teresa of Avila, Ignatius never uses the word 'mysticism' or the phrase 'mystical theology'—a phrase which in John and Teresa includes 'contemplation', the 'contemplative life', and more generally the kind of mystical experience evoked by such figures as Denys and Eckhart. Nor do the writings of Ignatius and the first Jesuits make any explicit mention of 'bridal mysticism'. Such observations easily give rise to claims that the experience outlined in the *Spiritual Exercises* does not deserve the name of 'mysticism'; it belongs only on the lower slopes of Mount Carmel, and one should speak of Ignatian spirituality rather than of Ignatian mysticism.

'Mysticism' and 'Spirituality'

Nevertheless, the terms we are using need to be questioned. The distinction between asceticism and mysticism is well established; that between spirituality and mysticism is much more recent. The word 'spirituality', in the sense in which we now use it—a masters degree in spirituality, the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld—is quite new. It took root in France between the two world wars, at the time of the disputes about prayer I have already mentioned, the arguments about what does and does not count as 'mystical'. Surprising as it may seem, it was only in the aftermath of World War I that the noun 'spirituality' started to establish itself in ordinary language and—revealingly—in the titles of specialist works. It was in 1917 that Saudreau published a *Manuel de spiritualité*; a year later, the Dominicans began their 'review of spirituality' entitled *La vie spirituelle*. The word was a novelty; before that there was no book whose title included the word 'spirituality'. Admittedly, the word was not completely absent from theological talk and from what today we call 'spiritual writing'; but it appeared only rarely (notably in Fénelon and Bossuet) and then in a very restricted sense. Previously, right up to World War I, people in France and elsewhere spoke of 'devotion' or 'piety' rather than of 'spirituality'; the standard phrases were 'devotional literature' and 'Christian piety' rather than anything involving 'spirituality'. In religious orders, too, people did not speak of 'Ignatian spirituality' or 'Franciscan spirituality', but rather of 'the spirit of our father St Ignatius' or 'the spirit of our father St Francis'.

Whenever a new word makes its appearance, or an old word takes on a new meaning, it is generally filling a gap, or meeting a new need in language and in people's minds. The word 'spirituality', I would conjecture, arose as a means of filling, at least partially, the gap in Catholic discourse left by the disappearance of the word 'mysticism'.

Michel de Certeau has uncovered how this word came to take on a more refined, esoteric significance in early modernity; what is less well known is that mysticism was effectively suppressed altogether at the beginning of the eighteenth century, with the condemnation of Fénelon by Pope Innocent XII. The word 'mysticism' disappeared more or less entirely from the titles and content of 'works of devotion' for nearly two hundred years. Various factors contributed to this repression: in society at large the spread of rationalism; among Christians an obsessive fear of Quietism, a mistrust of illuminism, and a vestigial Jansenism. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that people started to show a renewed interest in mysticism, for quite complex and diverse reasons. This interest arose within the human sciences—psychiatry, anthropology, psychology—as well as among theologians.

It was at this point that the word 'spirituality' made its appearance in Catholic circles. It appeared alongside the word 'mysticism'—which now regained some of its former splendour—but it had rather the air of a euphemism: it was less compromising, less perilous, less potentially infectious. In short, spirituality was tamer. It was also more general and more inclusive. 'Mysticism' thus became a particular sub-discipline of spirituality or 'spiritual theology', concerned exclusively with 'exalted' states, and with the most unusual manifestations of the spiritual life, even when their value was uncertain. 'Spirituality' was less obscure, less esoteric (we should never forget that 'mystical' originally signified 'hidden'), calmer. It somehow was more reasonable, more practical, more accessible to the average person. It denoted a more ordinary way of living according to the spirit of Christ. If mysticism was for Don Quixote, Ignatian spirituality would do for his sidekick, Sancho Panza.

All this sounds like Henri Bremond without the panache. It is easy to see why. This prolific and gifted historian, who did us an enormous service by rescuing many treasures of mystical writing from the dust that covered them, has in large measure shaped the image of the Ignatian way to be found in the minds of many people today: Ignatian spirituality as a spirituality for Sancho Panza. Let us have a look, therefore, at some of the claims Bremond makes about Ignatian spirituality, and then see how these claims are echoed in some recent reputable writing.

Bremond and the Spiritual Exercises

Bremond was a Jesuit for twenty-two years. He had left the Society in 1904, for reasons linked to the modernist crisis. He no longer felt at

home, intellectually or personally, among the Jesuits, whom he found too inflexible. For the rest of his life he was a diocesan priest, with not a breath of scandal against him. One suspects that he had an unfortunate experience of the Spiritual Exercises (like every Jesuit, he had twice made the 30 days); he had only known aridity, and, as he admits in his private writings, 'boredom'. The way in which he (and many of his contemporaries) had been given the Exercises was obviously a cause of his disquiet. And his interest in, indeed fascination for, mystical literature, to which he devoted his most important writings, stemmed from this frustration. He was well aware of the connection.

It was in 1921 that Bremond was able to set out his views on Ignatian spirituality, in the third volume of his *Literary History*. In this volume he introduces Bérulle and what he calls—in a way that many experts today question—'the French school'.⁶ He makes an extended contrast between Bérulle and Ignatius:

For St Ignatius, the interior life is above all a form of asceticism, in the old sense of the word . . . In his thinking, prayer must above all make us perfect, draw us closer to our end. Obviously this is the glory of God—but a glory brought about by us, actively, laboriously, heroically. It is an 'exercise', and as such it demands discipline. Hence the complex method that is so well known. The French School takes a different angle; for this school, the inner life is totally 'referred' to God . . . St Ignatius aims above all to form people of morality and asceticism; Bérulle those who adore. The Jesuit's overarching virtue is energy, whereas for the disciples of Bérulle it is religion. And there is no method, or carefully planned progress, that can lead us to religion.⁷

In a footnote, he disparages the Ignatian desire for 'what I want': 'the expression *id quod volo* which rings out through the whole of the Exercises, like a knight's spurs on the cobblestones . . .'. The publication of this volume kindled a controversy with Jesuit scholars of the time, such as Ferdinand Cavallera and Alexandre Brou, that sometimes took bizarre turns.⁸

⁶ Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629), responsible for bringing the Carmelite Reform to Paris, for the foundation of the Oratory there, for initiatives to reform the French clergy, and for much else of a more political nature. The 'French school' of those influenced by him is commonly taken to include such figures as Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), John Eudes (1601-1680), and Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657).

⁷ *Histoire littéraire*, vol. 3, p. 121.

⁸ See Goichot, *Henri Bremond*, pp. 183-208.

In 1927, Bremond published an article entitled 'Ascèse ou prière?'—'Asceticism or Prayer?'⁹ Here it was that Bremond put his position at its starkest, drawing on his redoubtable talent for sparkling turns of phrase. He borrowed the language of a disciple of François de Sales as a way of expressing his own criticisms:

It is easier to contemplate than to meditate, and there are more people who contemplate (although without realising it) than who meditate. Just try it. Tell a simple ordinary soul that God became human for us . . . they will humbly and meekly acquiesce when you put forward this mystery. Now have them do mental prayer on it, following the lengthy methods with which directors busy so many minds. For example, on Christmas Day, tell them . . . to put themselves in the presence of baby Jesus, to create in their imaginations the crib at Bethlehem in their mind, with the ox, the ass, the hay, and the straw. Get them to create an inner picture, comparable to what painters produce . . . ; after that, tell them to 'ask for the grace', to make preludes and preparatory prayers. From there, get them to pass on to the three points of the consideration. Show them how to expound their reasons, their ideas, looking at everything, causes, effects, times, places and persons, and all the attendant circumstances, weighing them and dissecting them . . . all so that they can use this spiritual rhetoric to show off their oratory.

Then teach them to draw out of these impressive thought-processes all kinds of emotions: love, compassion, fear, joy . . . and so many others, one for each movement of our heart. On top of all these fine emotions, teach them to fashion resolutions as multi-hued as the chameleon or the octopus. Nor is that all—give them a model for acts of thanksgiving, offering, petition, and colloquy . . . and then they must add all that preparation—remote, proximate and immediate. In short, lay so much on their bemused minds that they cannot even absorb one tenth of it. Tell them about the different kinds of attention: actual, habitual and virtual; tell them about distractions, aridities, lights, visions. . . . Don't you see that instead of giving them the wings of a dove to soar up to God, you are putting a burden on their backs which stops them from rising up, because they have no idea how to start disentangling the confusion? And because there is too much to do at once, they end up doing nothing.¹⁰

⁹ Reproduced in *Introduction à la philosophie de la prière*, from which the citations are taken.

¹⁰ *Introduction*, pp. 29-30.

Then Bremond quotes some Jesuits directly, both the older Directories (manuals of custom and practice) and his own contemporaries. "Exercises in the most vigorous sense of the word", our old Directories say—that means relentless energy. 'Exercise—in other words, ascetical gymnastics.' His comment about this idea is mordant: 'the very word is enough to set your joints creaking'. Later, he returns to the theme:

In our modern apologists, you get the same sounds of clashing gauntlets, groaning trapezes, bat on ball. Action, action, action on the will—that's what it's all about according to Fr. Cavallera. But let Fr. Brou, fiercest of warriors, be enough for us. 'Ignatius' words of command', he writes, 'brief as military orders—exercising oneself . . . acting against . . . doing the diametrical opposite . . . changing oneself intensely . . . presuppose an unceasing effort of the will. . . . The word "Exercises" must be taken literally: we strive, we struggle. . . . Ignatius is the man of enterprise. . . . With him, you have to know where you are going, and to want to go there . . .'

Everywhere (in recent defences of the Exercises) you can see traces of the muddle-headed insistence that the main agent is not grace but the exercitant. . . . Hence this profusion of military metaphors, this stress on will-power, resounding, knightly heroic; and hence these loud-speakers that from time to time relay the Pamplona campaigner's 'what I want' . . . the absolute importance of self-conquest, the stamp of the master of asceticism transgressing onto the activities which are in fact prayer.

Two years later, Bremond published an article in which it was clear that his position had developed very significantly.¹¹ However, the change remained relatively unnoticed. Now Ignatius appears not as the 'master of energy', but as 'the great mystic, so original as to be beyond imitation'. Bremond has come round to the view that there is, after all, such a thing as Ignatian mysticism, but we must look for it, not in the text of the *Exercises*, but in the *Autobiography* and in the *Spiritual Diary*. Read in the light of these texts, the *Exercises* are no longer an ascetical programme of prayer and perfection. They are entirely directed, rather, towards the Election, their *raison d'être*—election here understood as a genuinely mystical process, election understood as the heart of Ignatius' personal mysticism revealed in the *Autobiography*

¹¹ 'Saint Ignace et les Exercices', *La Vie spirituelle*, Supplément 20 (1929), pp. 1-47, 73-111.

and the *Spiritual Diary*. The tragedy, in Bremond's view, is that almost the only person who has really made the Exercises is Ignatius himself, because his experience of consolation (understood essentially as the gift of tears) was unique, quite personal to him. Very early on, even in Ignatius' own lifetime, the Exercises came to be misunderstood and badly given. He himself was very grudging about giving the Exercises or allowing others to give them. Very few of his companions were in his eyes graced with the necessary ability. 'Dialecticians' and 'asceticists' (this was a coinage of which Bremond was very proud) had taken hold of the Exercises and distorted them. The Exercises 'did not outlive St Ignatius and the four or five of the first group who were the only ones to understand them fully'.¹² The Society of Jesus had betrayed Ignatius' mysticism. It had relativized consolation and its significance. The most recent of the major sources of travesty was Fr Roothaan, Jesuit superior general during the nineteenth century, and author of a damaging Directory that had become the universal norm.

These new views may involve some misrepresentations, but they are certainly interesting. They were inspired by Bremond's reading of a book by Henri Bernard-Maître: *Essai historique sur les Exercices spirituels de St Ignace*, published in Leuven in 1926. This passionate book was so revolutionary that superiors immediately had it withdrawn from sale. Nevertheless, it helped open the way to a new understanding of Ignatius, to a renewed reading of the *Exercises*, and to the kinds of Ignatian practice with which we today have become familiar.

Bremond Redivivus

However, it was the less nuanced version of Bremond's views that remained influential. Let me cite just one example. A recent major work on the Bérulle tradition, drawing on the best of secular historical research, nevertheless echoes Bremond's contrast quite uncannily. The 'essential purpose' of the *Spiritual Exercises*,

... is the discernment of vocation. Even though the climax, during the Fourth Week, is the Contemplation to Attain Love, human *will-power* has an important part to play. It is a matter of *methodically* disposing oneself to discover what God wants of one. To that end, the disciple of St Ignatius looks on Jesus' concrete humanity. They contemplate Christ's deeds and words, staying fairly close to the gospels—not *the very interior of the divinity*. The Contemplation to Attain Love makes no allusion to the Trinity; its concern is above

¹² 'Saint Ignace', p. 103.

all with the 'economy', with what God is doing for us. It is the *human person who attains to love by reflecting inwardly on all that they have received from God. Their freedom, moved by grace, freely engages itself alongside God. This does not exclude a mystical dimension, but the process is very different from that to be found in followers of Bérulle, who prefer to let themselves be seized by the Spirit, and put their stress on welcoming God's gift.*¹³

All Bremond's points are being repeated here, if in more nuanced form. Anyone familiar with contemporary Ignatian practice is startled. A little later, the same author contrasts Bérullian and Ignatian approaches to spiritual method, and cites a text by Olier. In the Bérullian tradition:

... the 'methods' are more like a route-map to get to what matters, the relationship with Jesus' inmost self. *This is quite different from what Ignatius of Loyola puts forward. Ignatius has a more voluntarist approach; meditation and mental prayer are the means to reach contemplation. Bérulle, doubtless under Carmelite influence, wants to spare himself the effort of this pedagogy, so as to adhere directly to the permanent state (état), the very being of the Word Incarnate. . . . It is, moreover, interesting to notice that Olier's manuscript outlines for meditations begin in a rather Ignatian way, and then show greater freedom as regards method, so as to allow the Spirit to act immediately and directly on the individual in prayer.*¹⁴

Some readers will perhaps think it pointless to recall ideas like these. Surely all the things complained about here are long gone. No longer are we obsessed with will-power; no longer is our spiritual rhetoric dominated by military metaphors; no longer do we give bombastic sermons masquerading as points for prayer on the Kingdom and the Two Standards. But, rather than protesting at what seems a misunderstanding, perhaps we should ask why it is that such ideas persist in what is otherwise a well-informed, up-to-date, and fine book. What is the picture of Ignatian spirituality that is coming across to Christians at large? Ignatius' text needs to be read out of a certain experience of the spiritual life, both one's own and that of others. It requires a certain freedom of interpretation. I have a suspicion that

¹³ Yves Krumenacher, *L'École française de spiritualité: Des Mystiques, des fondateurs, des courants, et leurs interprètes* (Paris: Cerf, 1998), p. 406 (emphases DS).

¹⁴ Krumenacher, *L'École française*, p. 407. *Etat* is a technical term in Bérullian thought, emerging from a doctrine that each of Christ's earthly experiences can be considered as a permanently present reality.

some retreat-givers are too literal in their following of the text, in ways that may be quite damaging. Indeed, I must confess to having on occasion caught myself out behaving like this. . . .

There are real problems here, both theoretical and practical. What do we mean by 'mysticism'? In what sense, if any, is Ignatius a 'mystic'? I have tried to bring to light a formative contribution to the discussion, one that still influences us even if we have never heard of Bremond. But this study in how the *Spiritual Exercises* have been interpreted can only be one contribution among many if the wider questions are to be adequately addressed.

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