

6. THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

I am sending you a book of the Exercises that it may be useful to you . . . The fact is that the power and energy of the Exercises consists in practice and activity, as their very name makes clear; and yet I did not find myself able to refuse your request. However, if possible, the book should be given only after the Exercises have been made.¹

The Spiritual Exercises are one of Ignatius' most original and far-reaching legacies. But if you pick up the book of the *Exercises* and try simply to read them, puzzlement and even boredom can soon set in, and you wonder what all the fuss is about, because for the most part, with the exception of one or two sections, they are neither interesting nor particularly enlightening to read. On the other hand, as exercises to be done with skilled guidance, experience shows over and over again that they are a powerful instrument for change and growth. Doing the Exercises involves two people whom Ignatius called 'the one who makes the Exercises' (sometimes called 'the exercitant' or 'the retreatant') and 'the one who gives the Exercises' (often called 'the director' or 'the guide'). The book of the *Exercises* is a handbook, a set of guidelines for the use of the one who gives the exercises, the director, to assist her or him to accompany the one who makes the Exercises through the process and to offer help and guidance where necessary.

The different stages of the process by which Ignatius composed the *Exercises* as we now have them are impossible to reconstruct in detail on the evidence available to us.² Nevertheless the basic principle of the process is clear enough. The

important point to remember is that they originate in Ignatius' own personal experience, especially from the time of his convalescence at Loyola and his months in the cave at Manresa. The insights that he 'received' on one day by the banks of the river Cardoner assumed a special importance (Autobiography, 30). From an early stage he developed the habit of making notes on his experience, reflecting upon it, sifting it, interpreting it; and this process continued in later years so that he was continuously trying to understand his experience, and in particular those aspects of it that seemed to hold special significance for him at different times. His apostolic and missionary desire 'to help souls', which dates from the time of his pilgrimage, led him to find ways of using his own experience to lead others in the ways of God. It would be a mistake however to think of this as a wholly solipsistic process; naturally enough, conversations with 'spiritual' people and his reading, especially at the time of his theological studies, helped him in the process of understanding his experience and using it to help others. From the time at Manresa onwards he apparently carried around with him a sheaf of notes which he was constantly adding to and revising, and these eventually, many years later, became the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE EXERCISES

Ignatius envisaged that the Exercises could be made and given in a variety of different circumstances and with different categories of people. This applies both to the whole Exercises and to selected exercises, whether in seclusion away from everyday occupations and concerns or in the course of daily life (Exx 18, 19, 20). But the process demands certain essential elements in any circumstances. It demands that the person who makes the Exercises does so not under any form of coercion but willingly, freely and with generosity. The generous desires with which a person approaches the Exercises, together with his or her natural abilities and capacity for spiritual growth provide a good guide to how efficacious the Exercises are likely to be (Exx

5). The Exercises create circumstances in which a meeting and communication between God and the individual person can take place, and this relationship provides the fundamental dynamic of the whole process (Exx 15). Hence the person who makes the Exercises spends several hours in prayer and reflection in the course of each day, when the Exercises are being done in seclusion over a period of thirty days (Exx 12).

The one who gives the Exercises has several functions. He or she takes care, where necessary, of the practical arrangements for food and other necessities for the person who is making the Exercises. The director also facilitates the meeting between the individual and God by briefly suggesting material for contemplation according to the plan set out in Ignatius' book (Exx 2). An essential element of the process is a regular meeting of the exercitant and the director, usually a daily meeting when the whole Exercises are being made in a month, for a conversation about what is going on in the exercitant, and especially about the movements of consolation and desolation that he or she is experiencing. In these conversations the director's role is especially to help discernment, but also to offer support and encouragement when necessary (Exx 6–14; 17). This role is the opposite of intrusive (Exx 17). The director's task is not to persuade, to give good advice, to make decisions on behalf of the exercitant nor even to influence those decisions one way or the other. The main work of the Exercises is what takes place between the individual exercitant and God. Therefore the director . . . *as a balance at equilibrium*, without leaning to one side or the other, should permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord' (Exx 15). The director has the privilege of accompanying and facilitating that meeting with reverence, keeping in mind too the proverb about fools and angels.

Making the Spiritual Exercises then is a complex experience involving a number of different elements. The director offers the exercitant, usually once a day when the Exercises are being made in a period of a month, material for prayer and reflection which follows the guidelines given in Ignatius' book. In the

same circumstances, when the exercitant has withdrawn from everyday life in order to do the Exercises, he or she will spend four or five hours per day making the prescribed exercises, each one followed by a short period of reflection on what happened during the exercise (Exx 77). All this and the process of continuing discernment of spirits is helped by the regular, usually daily, meeting between the exercitant and the director.

Not unexpectedly, given the kind of person he was, the 'day' and its activities recommended by Ignatius have a certain structure. The periods of prayer are spaced at intervals throughout the day, with the suggestion that the exercitant might find it helpful at times and especially during the First Week to interrupt sleep to pray during the night (Exx 72). Ignatius himself prescribes the material for each of these periods of prayer or contemplation. But the material that he suggests is meant as a starting-point and he does not expect that everyone will use all the material to the same degree. The important thing in the contemplations or exercises is not to make sure of 'getting through' all the material, as if it were a syllabus for an examination, but to stay and savour whatever strikes the heart, and not to move on until one feels satisfied and ready to do so. In the course of each day it is expected that a process of focusing and simplification will take place, so that out of all the material offered for prayer and reflection, the individual exercitant gives attention to what is experienced as personally significant for him or her at any given point. Ignatius' principle here is the truth that change and growth in a person come about not so much through trying to work through a mass of material but through what strikes the heart and is grasped and savoured interiorly. It is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth' (Exx 2). So he recommends that in the course of each day some of the prescribed exercises should take the form of 'repetitions' (Exx 62) and 'applying the five senses' to the material for contemplation (Exx 121–6).³ This process means that the one who is making the Exercises goes over the material of previous contemplations of that day and focuses

quietly on those points which have seemed particularly significant and in which consolation or desolation has been felt. Those are the points at which noticeable movements of the spirit are experienced, and they are therefore noteworthy in the process of discernment and growth.

Hence in the course of a day, then a week and then a month of this kind of activity, a pattern and a dynamic emerge which are both part of Ignatius' Exercises and at the same time particular to each individual person, just as a musician's playing of a cello concerto is both the composer's and at the same time particular to that cellist alone. In the course of this process the individual who is making the Exercises is helped to be attuned to the presence and action of God in his or her own life with its unique personal features, and from this to follow the leading of the Spirit into the future.

It is characteristic of the dynamic of Ignatius' Exercises too that in the material offered for contemplation we move from the objective to the subjective, from the revelation of what God has done and is doing, to our own and others' responses to this. So in the First Week we move from a consideration of sin at large in the world in scripture and history and social structures to, eventually but later, a consideration of our own personal sins against the background of God's love for humanity and for each of us individually (Exx 45-64). The prime focus then is God and God's self-revelation. This primary objective reference, together with the presence and help of the accompanying director, helps to prevent the process of the Exercises from becoming a purely subjective, individual experience or an emotional fantasy 'trip' with little or no grounding in objective reality.

Making the Exercises in the full form over a period of thirty days is a profound experience which affects and influences a person at different levels of the personality. As regards the overt content of the experience, by which I mean the material proposed for contemplation and consideration in the various Weeks of the Exercises, the starting point – which Ignatius calls the First Principle and Foundation – is a recognition,

which is more than a notional assent, of the unconditional, creative and saving love of God for humanity as a whole and for each individual: 'men and women are created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and in that way to attain salvation' (Exx 23; my translation). The recognition of the power and depth of this love is the setting in which the whole of the Exercises takes place. In a sense the unfolding of the experience of the Exercises is nothing more than the unfolding of the implications of this love in the life of the person who makes the Exercises. The more fully and profoundly one appreciates this love the richer the experience of making the Exercises is likely to be. And if a person is unable to recognize this love at the start of the Exercises it is very doubtful whether the time is right for embarking on the whole Exercises.

It is well known that Ignatius divides the material of the Exercises into four Weeks of unequal length. The length of the Weeks depends upon the judgement of the director in assessing when the one who is making the Exercises is ready to move on to the next Week, although obviously the Weeks cannot be prolonged indefinitely and the whole experience is designed to last about a month, when the Exercises are made in seclusion away from everyday life (Exx 4). After spending some days contemplating the love of God for the world, the exercitants spend more days looking long and hard at humanity's and their own responses to that love in the form of the history of sin (Exx 45-64). The purpose of this is not to induce or deepen feelings of guilt and remorse, which may already be present, but to arouse a sense of genuine sorrow for sin as a rejection of love, and even to arrive at the point of:

a cry of wonder accompanied by surging emotion as I pass in review all creatures. How is it that they have permitted me to live and have sustained me in life? Why have the angels . . . tolerated me, guarded me and prayed for me? Why have the saints interceded for me and asked favours for me? And the heavens, sun, moon, stars, and the

elements; the fruits, birds, fishes and other animals – why have they all been at my service? . . . I will conclude with a colloquy, extolling the mercy of God our Lord, pouring out my thoughts to him, and giving thanks to him that up to this moment he has granted me life. (Exx 60–1)

Sorrowful appreciation of humanity's and of our own individual and collective sinful responses to God's unconditional love, and likewise of the institutions and structures in which we embody these responses, bring the one who makes the Exercises before the figure of Jesus on the cross. At this point, for Ignatius, Jesus sums up the forgiving, saving love of God for the world, expresses the scope and power of that love and also calls for a response from each of us who look upon the cross:

Imagine Christ our Lord present before you on the cross, and begin to speak with him asking how it is that though he is the Creator, he has stooped to become human and to pass from eternal life to death here in time, that thus he might die for our sins. I shall also reflect upon my self and ask: 'What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?' (Exx 53)

This movement into the Second Week already begins early in the First Week. After the profound appreciation of the disorder of sin with its tendency to enslave us and of the joyful mystery of saving forgiveness, the one who makes the Exercises is ready to look seriously at the implications of a commitment to following Jesus as a disciple, and that constitutes the bulk of the material for contemplation during the remaining three Weeks of the Exercises. The very characteristically Ignatian contemplation on the Call of the King (Exx 91–9) acts as a bridge into the Second Week and, as we saw in Chapter 3, during that Week the person who is making the Exercises is immersed in contemplating the mystery of the incarnation and the life and ministry of Jesus. The purpose of this focus is clear: 'to ask for an intimate knowledge of our Lord . . . so that I may love him

more and follow him more closely' (Exx 104). This kind of love means surrender and commitment which are expressed in choices (Exx 1), and during the Second Week the exercitant spends a lot of time in various exercises, composed purposefully by Ignatius, which offer a way of exploring her or his own personal commitment to Jesus and of coming to the point of making such a commitment or renewing one already made before (Exx 135–89). Ignatius suggests that 'those who wish to give greater proof of their love, and to distinguish themselves in whatever concerns the service of the Eternal King and the Lord of all' might make this commitment repeatedly during the Second Week:

Eternal Lord of all things, in the presence of your infinite goodness and of your glorious mother and of all the saints of your heavenly court, this is the offering of myself which I make with your favour and help. I protest that it is my earnest desire and my deliberate choice, provided it is only for your greater service and praise, to imitate you in bearing all wrongs and all abuse and all poverty, both actual and spiritual, should your most holy majesty deign to choose and admit me to such a state and way of life. (Exx 98; cf. Exx 147)

No genuine Christian commitment can ignore the fact of the cross, though we balk at committing ourselves to sharing in the paschal mystery of death and resurrection, as did Jesus' original disciples (Mark 8:31–3 and parallels). The Third and Fourth Weeks of the Exercises immerse the exercitant in that mystery. Again, as in the Second Week, the person who makes the contemplations of these weeks is not a detached observer of events which have only historical or academic interest. In the passion it is proper to ask for sorrow with Christ in sorrow, anguish with Christ in anguish, tears and deep grief because of the great affliction Christ endures for me' (Exx 203; cf. Exx 193). What befell Jesus is bound up with every disciple's own life and commitment to discipleship. The contemplations of the Third Week in particular, which focus on the suffering and

death of Jesus, offer choices and challenges to anyone who makes them in the context of the Exercises as a whole. The 'meaning' of the passion and death of Jesus is neither more nor less than love without conditions. But the question they put to the person who contemplates them is whether the commitment to Jesus and the kingdom of God, made in the often headier air of the Second Week, can be sustained in the face of the cross.

In the Fourth Week of the Exercises the one who is making them moves from an experience of the cross to a share in the resurrection of Jesus and its multiple meanings for us. The gift peculiar to that Week, in Ignatius' own words, is 'the grace to be glad and rejoice intensely because of the great joy and the glory of Christ our Lord' (Exx 221). This is the point at which, also, the exercitant begins to make the Contemplation to attain Divine Love, which I have mentioned before (Exx 230-7). The Exercises began with a recognition of the unconditional, creative and saving love of God for the world and for each individual person. This contemplation allows the person who is coming to the end of the Exercises to explore the workings of that love more fully in every dimension and aspect of life. It offers a picture of the world and of human existence shot through with God's active and efficacious love of humanity. It is the vision, a new heaven – and again a surrender and commitment – with which the exercitant completes the Exercises and moves back into everyday life:

Thus, as one would do who is moved by great feeling, I will make this offering of myself: Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will. You have given all to me. To you, O Lord, I return it. All is yours, dispose of it wholly according to your will. Give me your love and your grace, for this is sufficient for me. (Exx 234)

A JOURNEY IN FREEDOM

Since the *Spiritual Exercises* were first published much discussion has naturally centred upon their purpose, on what exactly they are for, what they are meant to do. They have been variously seen as a way to mystical union with God; as a grounding in Christian asceticism and a fund of ascetical principles and practices; as a way of putting order into a disordered life; as a process of decision-making; as a pedagogy of life in the Spirit. Perhaps their purpose is best understood by what they actually achieve, as well as by what we know of Ignatius' own original intentions. The complexity of the experience of making the Exercises, the fact that within that experience they operate simultaneously in different areas, both conscious and unconscious, of a person's life, touching the mind, the imagination, the feelings and the most fundamental personal attitudes, choices and commitments, all this means that the actual experience is difficult to describe, especially in a few words. For many people however, in recent times, making the Exercises has meant a discovery of and a journey into an efficacious kind of personal freedom such as they have never known before. This is directly related to what Ignatius says of the purpose of the Exercises right at the beginning, in the language of his own time: 'we call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul' (Exx 1). I want to conclude this section with a few words about growth in personal freedom.

By freedom, of course, I do not mean licence, nor do I mean the theoretical possibility, faced with two choices A or B, that we can choose B rather than A. By freedom I mean something much more like sufficient possession of ourselves so that, appreciating and relying on God's love for us, we are able to give shape to our own lives, able to commit ourselves to being the person we believe God intended us to be, and to commit

ourselves to the path of life we believe God invites us, in love, to follow.

As a result of making the First Week of the Exercises, many people discover for the first time, or appreciate more fully than before, that this freedom is severely limited. There are obvious external limitations on our freedom which stem from the simple facts of physical and social living. But the experience of the First Week very often also includes the recognition of the factors within ourselves, 'areas of unfreedom' which hinder us, almost, it depressingly seems, to the point of paralysis. There are attitudes and dispositions, habits of mind and behaviour, patterns of thought and feeling, dependencies and attachments, weights and burdens from the past which trap and imprison us. That is why we need a saviour God. Blindness prevents us from seeing even the love of the God that is inviting us. Even some of our habitual and deeply-rooted images of God and of ourselves are such that they trap and enslave us rather than setting us free to be what God intended us to be. And at the present time this is true both of many who have spent half a lifetime conscientiously serving God and of others who are just beginning to do so. One of the gifts of the First Week is to be able not to despair about these distressing facts about ourselves, but to see that the unconditional, creating and saving love of God for each of us has the power to set us free from our prisons.

In the course of the other three Weeks of the Exercises the one who is making them begins to see more clearly the shape, in the following of Christ, that his or her life could have and therefore the direction in which real freedom lies. During and after the profound experience of the First Week Jesus captures the heart. On the strength of a deep appreciation of the unconditional love of God which, as I have said, should characterize the Exercises from the start, those who make them are also able to offer and commit (or re-commit) themselves in love to living as disciples of Jesus. Theirs is no blind commitment but one in which they have a realistic appraisal of their own weakness and lack of freedom (First Week), of the joy and the

glory of following Jesus for love and for the sake of the kingdom (Second Week and Fourth Weeks), and of the cost that this entails in terms of poverty (Second Week) and the cross (Third Week).

Naturally it is usually in the months and years that follow the experience of the Exercises that the seeds of freedom sown here come to fruition. Thirty days is a short time measured against the slow years of human growth. What often takes place in the course of making the Exercises is a crucial change, a conversion, the beginnings of a new way of seeing and behaving whose effects have to emerge gradually in the time that follows, when we have returned to everyday life. As we have seen, this conversion and its subsequent effects are based on a profound appreciation of the presence of a loving, saving God, and perhaps new, liberating images of God to replace old, distorted ones. This also can give rise to a new image of ourselves in relation to this God which allows us to be captivated by Jesus as the first disciples were, and freely to surrender and commit ourselves in love to Jesus and the kingdom of God. Our recognition of God's unconditional love towards us as a constant, efficacious presence helps to set us free to be the people God intended us to be, less burdened and hampered by fears, guilt, anxiety and other similarly paralyzing and destructive factors.

ADAPTATIONS OF THE EXERCISES

In his instructions about how to give the Exercises, Ignatius explicitly mentioned several adaptations for different circumstances and different people, as I have already said. He estimated that, for a number of reasons, not everyone would want to do or be capable of doing the whole Exercises, and not everyone who wanted to do them would benefit from them (Exx 18). Therefore, 'each one should be given those exercises that would be more helpful and profitable, according to his or her willingness to dispose himself for them' (Exx 18). And he lists the exercises which he thinks might be given to various kinds

of people who would not benefit from or be capable of the full Exercises (Exx 18). Other people however, who really would profit from making the full Exercises, cannot afford the time or the money to go into seclusion away from everyday concerns for a full thirty days. So Ignatius outlines a method by which the full Exercises can be made in the course of daily life over a longer period than a month (Exx 19).⁴

Those are the main adaptations envisaged by Ignatius. The recent revival of interest in the Exercises has produced many more forms in which some of them can be given with necessary adaptations to people and circumstances. These have included adaptations in which emphasis is placed on working as a group rather than on individual guidance.⁵ In his notes on giving the Exercises Ignatius emphasized the personal yet unobtrusive guidance of the exercitant by the one who gives the Exercises, through the medium of a regular one-to-one conversation. And many have found by experience that this is part of the process of the Exercises that they would be very reluctant to abandon in favour of working with a group, because it initiates a process of discernment that is outside the scope of a group. Nevertheless the group and other adaptations of the Exercises are clearly having a considerable effect for good in people's lives and are opening up some of the power of the Exercises to larger numbers of people than would otherwise be able to benefit.⁶

THE ONE WHO GIVES THE EXERCISES

The basic essential qualification for giving the Exercises is having made them with individual guidance from a skilled director. The experience of making the full Exercises is the school in which those who give the Exercises learn their trade. One of the skills that has to be learned, of course, is how to use the book of the *Exercises* in an appropriate way.

The book was compiled more than four hundred years ago and obviously reflects and incorporates the modes and categories of thought and language of those times, which are in many important ways different from our own. One of the temp-

tations for some directors of the Exercises in the last twenty-five years, since Ignatius' own ways of giving them were rediscovered, has been to try to go back to the mind and practice of Ignatius in a very literal, almost antiquarian fashion, along the lines of 'this is what Ignatius wrote and did, and so we must do exactly the same'. This is not a satisfactory way of being faithful to Ignatius, just as a naive and literal application of Jesus' moral precepts, for example, is not the best way of being faithful to the gospel. Ignatius' cultural setting, like Jesus', was different from ours. And many of Ignatius' categories of thought and forms of expression, including much of his theology, are foreign to a modern person and would not help or sustain his or her genuine growth in the Spirit if we reproduced them literally.⁷ The opposite temptation lies in sitting so easy to the Exercises that what we give ceases to be recognizable as the Ignatian Exercises at all. Our perennial task is to find ways of giving the Exercises that are both true to Ignatius yet not fundamentalist, and at the same time capable of speaking intelligibly and acceptably to people of our own age and culture, so very different from those of Ignatius.⁸

For our giving of the Exercises to be both faithful to Ignatius and in the best sense 'modern', it is necessary for the directors of the Exercises to be in constant dialogue with the Exercises in their own lives and to live in constant touch with the Ignatian tradition. Perhaps the best ways to learn to give the Exercises are through this symbiosis and as an apprentice to an already skilled practitioner. But there is another point to be made. In making the Exercises we often find that our own symbols and images, which correspond to but are not identical with those which Ignatius offers, arise spontaneously. In making the Meditation on Two Standards (Exx 136-48), for instance, we often find our own symbols to represent the conflict at every level of human existence that Ignatius puts in the form of two leaders with their battle-lines drawn up. This emergence of our own personal images, which are expressions of our own contemporary reality, is an important part of both doing and learning to give the Exercises: to allow ourselves and others to

be immersed in the living Ignatian tradition and out of that to fashion our own images which represent in terms which we find appealing the essential truth contained in Ignatius' images and stories, as we find them in the Exercises. Adaptation to different circumstances is part of the process of making and giving the Exercises in any case, and in this form it prevents both rigid fundamentalism and its resulting petrifaction.

CONCLUSION

One of the greatest challenges to those people who give and make the Exercises at the present time is that of the demand and search for greater social justice, highlighted, for instance, in the theology of liberation. In the form that Ignatius left them to us, the *Spiritual Exercises* have a bias towards an individualistic spirituality. In that respect Ignatius was a man of his age. The Exercises focus on the individual person; they help an individual to find his or her own path of Christian discipleship; in the Principle and Foundation salvation, the purpose of human life, is a matter of each person saving his or her own 'soul' by giving praise, reverence and service to God (Exx 23); in the First Week the sin which is the subject matter for meditation is largely the history of personal sin in others and in oneself. Not surprisingly there is no analysis of sin in terms of social structures and institutions. In the Second Week and onwards the focus is upon the individual's personal commitment to discipleship of Jesus, and apostolic mission is seen in terms of helping others to attain their own ultimate 'salvation', as Jesus did, a salvation which is seen largely in terms of future eschatology: something that happens to each individual after death.

In practice of course, outside the Exercises Ignatius' individualistic bias was not total. In his evangelizing, especially as Superior General of the Society of Jesus, he was concerned with those missions and projects which would produce 'the more universal good'. This in fact led him into working for

social change by setting up new institutions and structures, though it is unlikely that he would have used those concepts or terms. He spent much of his time and energy establishing colleges which in fact transformed the social conditions of very many people in the places in which they were located, though they too were primarily aimed at helping people to live Christian lives and thus attain their ultimate eternal salvation.

In the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, however, we do find an individualistic and other-worldly bias. Today a growing awareness among Christians of social injustice and oppression, and of the need for liberation from them, finds this emphasis unsatisfactory at the present time, however adequate it may have been in Ignatius' day. There is a real danger that the Exercises will form disciples of Jesus who are more or less blind to structural sin and the need for a commitment to justice as a necessary part of being a Christian. In giving and making the Exercises now we need to incorporate some new insights. We need to acknowledge that individual and personal actions inevitably have a social, structural dimension which is inseparable and unavoidable. Even activities such as prayer, which we have often assumed to be 'purely' individual and personal, are not so in fact. In our presentation of the First Week of the Exercises we need to focus quite specifically on structural and social sin as an inescapable dimension of the history of sin and as the consequence of personal sin. We must be convinced of the eternal value of all human activity. We have to see clearly that 'salvation' is not just an individual or other-worldly reality; we have a responsibility to this world that we cannot shirk if we are to be true to the gospel. The Christian disciple's commitment to Jesus cannot be a purely individual and personal matter. It has a social structural dimension and involves engaging in a struggle for a kingdom of God that is and has to be a social and political reality here and now. For 'God wills justice among people and nations in this world, so that the humanity of people is not trampled here and now even as it will not be in the final reign of God'.⁹