

# CONTEMPLATION

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IN THE AFTERTHOUGHTS to the second edition of Dom Cuthbert Butler's book on *Western Mysticism* there is a curious, yet illuminating footnote on ignatian contemplation. Remarking that Ignatius's use of the word 'contemplation' is different from the traditional one, he goes on to say:

The fact that St Ignatius in the Exercises is silent concerning contemplation and contemplative prayer has been, probably, the principal reason why so many of the spiritual writers of the Society have looked on meditation as the normal life-long prayer of devout souls.<sup>1</sup>

Ignatius did interpret contemplation in a new way, but blithely to assert that he had no connection with traditional teaching is far too sweeping. Abbot Butler was undoubtedly right when he said that 'many of the spiritual writers of the Society have looked on meditation as the normal life-long prayer of devout souls'. To blame Ignatius would be more than misleading; it would be inaccurate. The changes of emphasis after Ignatius's own life-time are described in Fr Veale's paper in this supplement.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately the consequences are still with us: retreat directors find that ignatian contemplation is badly understood, almost alien to our culture. The purpose of this article is to counteract this deficiency by stressing the place of ignatian contemplation in the western tradition of contemplative prayer. This approach will, I hope, help to clarify the contemplation of Christ's life within the Exercises themselves.

## *Contemplation and Contemplation*

Ludolph of Saxony, a fourteenth-century Carthusian, is Ignatius's immediate source for his method of contemplating the mysteries of the life of Christ.<sup>3</sup> His *Vita Christi* is not a life of Christ in the modern sense. It is rather a series of meditations taken from the bible, the Fathers and the liturgy, concentrating on the person of Christ and

<sup>1</sup> Butler, Dom Cuthbert: *Western Mysticism* (London, 1926), p lii.

<sup>2</sup> *Supra*, pp 3-14.

<sup>3</sup> Rahner, H.: *The Spirituality of St Ignatius Loyola* (Chicago, 1953), pp 24-25; Raitz von Frentz, E.: 'Ludolphe le chartreux', in *RAM* 25 (1949), pp 375-88.

intending to bring the reader to a deeper knowledge and imitation of his Lord. Much of the book was copied without acknowledgment — as was the custom of the day — from another fourteenth-century work, *Meditations on the Life of Christ* by Pseudo-Bonaventure. In spite of his franciscan background, Pseudo-Bonaventure is in a direct line of succession from the early Cistercians, particularly Bernard; his whole flavour is affective, scriptural and christocentric.

We most clearly see Ludolph's direct influence on Ignatius's style of contemplation in the prologue to the *Vita Christi*:

If you want to draw fruit from these scenes (of the mysteries of Christ's life), you must offer yourself as present to what was said or done through our Lord Jesus Christ with the whole affective power of your mind, with loving care, with lingering delight; thus laying aside all other worries and cares. (Hear and see) these things being narrated, as though you were hearing with your own ears and seeing with your own eyes, for these things are most sweet to him who thinks on them with desire (*cogitanti ex desiderio*), and even more so to him who tastes them (*gustanti*). And though many of these are narrated as past events, you must meditate (*mediteris*) them all as though they were happening in the present moment; because in this way you will certainly taste a greater sweetness (*suavitatem gustabis*). Read (*lege*) then of what has been done as though they were happening now. Bring before your eyes past actions as though they were present. Then you will feel (*senties*) how full of wisdom and delight they are.<sup>4</sup>

Besides the obvious *sentir y gustar* of the second annotation, echoes of Ludolph in the Exercises readily spring to mind. There is Ignatius's reference in the colloquy of the first contemplation of the second week to the Word Incarnate 'who has just become man for me'.<sup>5</sup> In the second contemplation of the second week we find: 'I will make myself a poor little unworthy slave and as though present look upon them, contemplate them and serve them in their needs with all possible homage and reverence'.<sup>6</sup> Ignatius was not simply repeating Ludolph's exhortation to make oneself present to the mystery. Both the pattern of seeing, hearing and watching<sup>7</sup> and the instruction to draw fruit from the contemplation<sup>8</sup> are taken from Ludolph.

<sup>4</sup> *Vita Jesu Christi e quatuor evangelis et scriptoribus orthodoxis concinnata per Ludolphum de Saxonia*, ed. Bolard, Rigollot and Carnandet (Paris, 1865), p. 4. My thanks to Fr James Walsh for his translation of the bulk of this passage and help with this part of the article.

<sup>5</sup> Exx 109.

<sup>6</sup> Exx 114.

<sup>7</sup> Exx 106-08; 114-16.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Exx 108, 113, 115, 116, 124, 125.

In the passage I have quoted Ludolph was not original. He took it over intact from Pseudo-Bonaventure (perhaps a tuscan Franciscan called John de Caulibus, who lived towards the end of the thirteenth century), who had borrowed it in his turn from a contemporary Carthusian, Guiges du Pont (died 1297). Pseudo-Bonaventure's prologue, which includes our passage from Ludolph, consists mainly of a quotation from Guiges, recommending an ardent devotion to the humanity of Christ and meditation on his life.<sup>9</sup> The terminology common to Ignatius, Ludolph, Pseudo-Bonaventure and Guiges can be traced back to the Cistercians.

In his article on the 'Application of the Senses' in this supplement<sup>10</sup> Fr James Walsh has analysed the vocabulary used by Ludolph to describe his method of prayer. He believes that Ludolph was writing about the monastic *lectio divina*: 'the contemplative process as a whole — reading, thinking, praying, contemplating'.<sup>11</sup> This fourfold systematization can be found in yet another Carthusian, Guigo II, who was ninth prior of the Grande Chartreuse and who died in 1188. There are three good reasons for looking more closely at his exposition of the *lectio*: firstly his *Letter on the Interior Life* or *Scala Claustralium*<sup>12</sup> is one of the clearest accounts in medieval sources; secondly his language is so much like that of the Cistercians that his work has been attributed to Bernard; thirdly because we can gain an insight into the tradition to which Ignatius belonged.

For Guigo there are four rungs or stages in the contemplative life: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. *Reading* is a careful, concentrated study of the scriptures. It puts food into the mouth; once there, *meditation* has to interiorize the process just as the grape is chewed to extract its juice. Guigo also uses the images of the spark that lights the fire and the perfume box that has to be broken in order to release its sweet smell. The initial steps of reading and meditation only serve to increase our longing; the more we search the more we thirst. Good and bad people alike, even pagans, can go so far; they can catch glimpses of the highest and truest good. God must give the fuller

<sup>9</sup> Cf Grausem, J. P.: 'Le "De Contemplatione" de Guiges du Pont', *RAM* 10 (1929), pp 269-71: espec. p 270, n 30; Art. 'Guiges du Pont', *DS* 6, col 1176-9.

<sup>10</sup> *Infra*, pp 59-68.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p 62.

<sup>12</sup> Cf *Lettre sur la vie contemplative*, ed. E. Colledge and J. Walsh, *Sources chrétiennes* 163 (Paris, 1970), pp 82-123. For an english translation, cf *The Way*, 5 (October 1965), pp 333-42.

understanding for which we yearn.<sup>13</sup> Recognition that our intellect is incapable of 'true wisdom, that sweet tasting knowledge which rejoices and refreshes the soul', leads to a humble and intense *prayer* of desire. Prayer expresses what we do not possess and what we long for. With *contemplation* God begins to co-operate in our work. The Lord becomes present, interrupting our prayer. The Spouse runs to meet us, to restore us in our weariness, to slake our thirst, to end our hunger, to make us forget earthly things. Contemplation, for Guigo, is 'when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness'.<sup>14</sup>

In chapter twelve Guigo summarizes the four steps and shows how they depend on one another:

Reading comes first and is as it were the foundation; it provides the subject matter which we must use for meditation. Meditation considers more carefully what is to be sought after; it digs (Prov 2, 4) as it were for treasure which it finds (Mt 13, 44) and reveals, but since it is not in meditation's power to seize upon the treasure it directs us to prayer. Prayer lifts itself up to God with all its strength and begs for the treasure which it longs for, which is the sweetness of contemplation. Contemplation when it comes rewards the labours of the other three: it inebriates the thirsting soul with the dew of heavenly sweetness. Reading is an exercise of the outward senses, meditation is concerned with the inward understanding, prayer is concerned with desire, contemplation outstrips every faculty. The first degree is proper to beginners, the second to proficients, the third to devotees, the fourth to the blessed.<sup>15</sup>

This is the tradition to which Ignatius belonged. It does not matter whether he knew that he was indebted to men like Pseudo-Bonaventure, Guiges du Pont or Guigo. What matters is for us to realize that the *lectio divina* to which Ignatius was introduced by Ludolph at Loyola became part of his own experience and so found its way into the Exercises. The signs are there for us to read them. The second annotation tells us that the aim of the exercitant's prayer is to produce 'greater spiritual relish and fruit (*gusto y fructo spiritual*) . . . an intimate

<sup>13</sup> Here can be seen Guigo's most original contribution to medieval spirituality. He is the first to work out the roles grace and free will play in man's ascent of the traditional ladder to the contemplative heights. Cf Introduction to 'A Letter on the Interior Life', *The Way*, art. cit., p 333.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p 334.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p 339. Cf art. 'Contemplation', DS 2, col 1960-61 and art. 'Guiges II', DS 6, col 1175-6.

understanding and relish of the truth (*sentir y gustar de las cosas internamente*).<sup>16</sup> This is precisely the aim of the *lectio divina*. Annotation fifteen speaks of Ignatius's certainty that God will communicate himself to the retreatant and *inflamm* him with his love.<sup>17</sup> Annotation twenty tells us that the more closely the soul is united to God 'the more it is disposed to receive graces and gifts from the infinite goodness of its God'.<sup>18</sup> Ignatius is clearly speaking about the ascent to contemplation in the traditional sense.

Ignatius first mentions contemplation in the colloquy of the first exercise of the first week. 'Imagine our Lord present before you on the cross and begin to speak with him'.<sup>19</sup> The point is an obvious one: Ignatius wants the exercitant to move towards a more personal response to Christ and a closer union with him. The contemplations of the second, third and fourth weeks provide opportunities for this movement to become deeper. Each day there are to be five contemplations in the second and third weeks,<sup>20</sup> four in the fourth.<sup>21</sup> The two scripture passages are followed by two repetitions, which are simpler and more personal encounters with Christ. The day ends with the more intuitive and passive prayer called the application of the senses. The pattern of these days speaks to us eloquently of a prayer that is centred on Christ; longing for Christ, a confidence that he will communicate himself more intimately, an awareness of his presence. We have arrived at the ignatian description of consolation: contemplation is accompanied by consolation; where there is consolation there is contemplation.<sup>22</sup>

Although Ignatius and the medieval writers were describing the same *lectio divina*, it is important to remember that Ignatius was providing us in his Spiritual Exercises with a director's manual. It is understandable that he emphasizes how contemplation is to be achieved and only gives us glimpses of the infinite variations and possibilities which lie ahead of each retreatant. One such hint is contained in the note to the director about adapting the length of the second week: 'If he wishes to shorten the week he may omit evensome of the mysteries that have been assigned. For they serve here to afford an introduction and method for better

<sup>16</sup> Exx 2.

<sup>17</sup> Exx 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Exx 53.

<sup>20</sup> Exx 101-26, 158-63, 190-209.

<sup>21</sup> Exx 227.

<sup>22</sup> W. Peters is undoubtedly right when he says that 'contemplation is essentially and closely linked with consolation . . . The link is so close that as soon as there is true consolation, meditation turns into contemplation, even though the subject matter remains the same'. *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. Exposition and Interpretation* (PASE, New Jersey, 1968), p 38.

and more complete contemplation later'.<sup>23</sup> In the Exercises and in life itself we are continuously called to further and more intimate meetings with Christ.

*Ignatian Contemplation in the Exercises*

An examination of ignatian contemplation leads us to the same conclusion. In contemplation the imagination creates fantasies — a symbol, a scene, a story — to help us to enter someone else's world. As far as possible we share in the other person's experience; we attempt to see things as he does, to feel as he does. We become assimilated into the other person's life and so establish an empathetic relationship. From the point of view of human talents empathetic and contemplative faculties are identical. The task of both is union, and for them to be effective they must recruit a whole range of human qualities and feelings.

A good example of empathy and contemplation is to be found in *Journey to Ixtlan*, by the anthropologist Carlos Castenada. He describes how the old Yaqui Indian wise man, Don Juan, takes him on a trek through the desert chaparral. During the journey Don Juan comes to the conclusion that Castenada is taking himself and his quest for knowledge too seriously. Don Juan goes on:

'Now we are concerned with losing self-importance. As long as you feel that you are the most important thing in the world you cannot appreciate the world around you. You are like a horse with blinkers. All you see is yourself apart from everything else'. He examined me for a moment. 'I am going to talk to my little friend here', he said, pointing to a small plant. '... It doesn't matter what you say to a plant', he said. 'You can just as well make up words; what's important is the feeling of liking it and treating it as an equal'. '... From now on talk to little plants', he said. 'Talk until you lose all sense of importance. Talk to them until you can do it in front of others'.<sup>24</sup>

Fantasy could have helped Castenada to see things as they really are by effecting a communion between his whole person, body and mind, feelings and judgment, and the creatures around him.

Reflections on imagination, fantasy and empathy will unlock part of the truth about ignatian contemplation. To grasp the whole truth we have to understand that contemplation is a growing faith in Christ,

<sup>23</sup> Exx 162.

<sup>24</sup> *Journey to Ixtlan* (London, 1975), pp 39-40.

which is communion in the fullest possible sense for the christian believer. I believe that this particular form of prayer owes much to the johannine theology of signs.<sup>25</sup> The story of the restoration of sight to the man born blind is a good example.<sup>26</sup> A miracle is recounted which resembles miracles in other gospels.<sup>27</sup> But where the synoptics related such miracles for their own sake or as a revelation of Jesus's messianic power, John was interested in their symbolism, their sacramentality and significance. For him the giving of sight to the blind man was a pointer to the more important truth that Jesus is *the* light, *my* light. The story of how the blind man came to faith is used by John to help the gospel reader to come to faith, 'to come to the light'.<sup>28</sup>

For John 'faith' is a many-sided concept. It includes recognition, meeting, sight, hearing, listening, personal contact with Christ<sup>29</sup> and obedience to the Spirit.<sup>30</sup> In so many different ways is man prepared for the coming of God in Christ and the Spirit. Donatien Mollat writes in an article on St John:

A firm synthesis of sight and faith seems at the basis of this saying to the galileans: 'such is my Father's will that whoever sees the Son and believes in him will have eternal life' (6, 40). This is the only text in John where one finds the expression 'to see the Son'. B. F. Westcott notes that the two actions, sight and faith (the act of contemplation and faith), are described as continuous actions.<sup>31</sup> 'To see the Son' is realized in 'faith' and 'faith' includes 'to see the Son'. In 5, 24, the formula is parallel *à propos* of hearing: 'He who hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life'.<sup>32</sup>

Mollat concludes that at the heart of johannine faith there is a continuous growth of sight and hearing. Both are being deepened and affirmed as the intimacy and union between the believer and Christ mature and develop through the action of the Spirit.<sup>33</sup> Ignatian contemplation is the form of prayer that seeks to foster this seeing and hearing.

<sup>25</sup> Cf Cusson, Gilles: *Pédagogie de l'expérience spirituelle personnelle* (Paris, 1968), p 324, no 1 where he connects Ignatius's religious experience with the johannine perspective. But much more work remains to be done on this subject.

<sup>26</sup> Jn 9, 1-41.

<sup>27</sup> Cf Mt 9, 27-31.

<sup>28</sup> Jn 3, 21.

<sup>29</sup> 1 Jn 1, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Jn 3, 8; 20, 22.

<sup>31</sup> *The Gospel according to St John* (London, 1881).

<sup>32</sup> Art. 'S. Jean l'Evangéliste', DS 8, col. 226.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 225-6. I wish to acknowledge my debt to D. Mollat for much of this section.

*Contemplation and discernment*

I am well aware that an essay on contemplation does not capture the full force and originality of the Exercises. Ignatius's genius was to have transposed the best of medieval teaching and terminology on contemplation and to have re-presented it for those whose calling within the Church was to an active apostolic life. The context of contemplation was no longer the monastery; it was rather the decisions and actions of companions of Christ sent to serve their fellow-men.

It is only when contemplating Christ's life that the person making the Exercises is allowed to begin to find out what the Lord wants of him.<sup>34</sup> He must know and love Christ before he can do his will. A growing assimilation into and identification with Christ will give him the light and the strength with which to discern. As Henri Holstein has remarked: 'When the hour comes to make a choice, the retreatant will be ready to choose that which will give him the certainty of remaining *with Christ*'.<sup>35</sup> The secure knowledge of being with Christ — in contemplation and consolation — must guide our discernment during the Exercises and throughout the rest of life.

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<sup>34</sup> Exx 135.

<sup>35</sup> 'Contemplation of the Mysteries of Christ', in *Finding God in All Things*, tr. W. J. Young (Chicago, 1958), p 95.