

Social retreats

The tale of a new method

A. Paul Dominic

THE TERM 'SOCIAL RETREAT' IS A NEOLOGISM which provokes different reactions. By some, especially those regularly engaged in the direction of retreats, it will be nothing surprising if it is dismissed without much ado. A pointer to this reaction is that, in at least four of the Indian Jesuit retreat centres, there is hardly any mention of this type of retreat in their programme.

General reluctance

Among the reasons against welcoming the new practice, one would be that the very expression is self-contradictory: while 'social' is obviously a question of one's encounter with others, the meaning of 'retreat', as found even in the dictionary, let alone the Ignatian tradition, is a matter of personal engagement with the Other, implying withdrawal from usual social intercourse. Another reason would be that any retreat worth the name should start with the particular situation of the retreatant at the time of the retreat and cannot be programmed in advance. Even granting the antithesis to the above reasoning, that in the burgeoning spirituality of our times no spiritually inclined person can ignore the social context, many of the veterans and scholars in the retreat-field insist that the Spiritual Exercises, properly given and properly made, will surely produce in the exercitants whatever is called for by the prevalent social (dis)order. To support this claim they may well point to St Francis Xavier as a man of the Exercises who took up the cause of his persecuted converts in the Tamil coastal area, fighting in the process not only the local rulers but the foreign powers-that-be.¹

Exceptional response

These and other similar reasons against the social retreat surely make a point. But they may be easily countered, or come to be seen in the course of time in a different light. Indeed the last reason in particular may be even interpreted in favour of 'socializing' the Exercises, i.e., translating them in overt social terms. Even the Jesuits of a century ago, governed by nothing but the Exercises, so impressed the Indians by

their positive social impact that a Hindu patriot like Lokamanya Tilak came to found the Deccan Education Society for the reconstruction of India, formed of members calling themselves *Indian Jesuits* because of their pledge to dedicate themselves to society like the foreign Jesuits. Recalling this little-known story, a Jesuit editor has argued for the social potential active, though hidden, in the Exercises, and urged the specialists to uncover and accentuate it and so make the Exercises an instrument of social change today.²

In tune with this spirit there have already been, in India and elsewhere,³ several serious attempts in this direction. They are impelled by the belief that in our days the retreat-ministry, no less than other ministries, must be imbued with the spirit of faith doing justice.

The Indian search

To limit the picture to India, the initial attempts here began in the early seventies. Certain inspired individuals and groups became responsive (at the level of the mind or heart or both) to the deteriorating human and social reality of the times. As a result there have been some remarkable givers and takers of such socially conscious retreats all over the country. Whereas the former, perhaps understandably enough, were almost all Jesuits, the latter numbered more non-Jesuits! What is more surprising, in certain cases it was the non-Jesuits who solicited the Jesuits to lead them through their retreat in the societal context of their life and mission. For instance, a small community of Brothers of St Gabriel, living and working in a tribal area in Orissa, arranged their annual retreat in the very conditions of tribal living, so that they could learn to discover their God for themselves and their people in the thick of their struggle for transformation.⁴

Since 1975 several of the protagonists of the socially oriented retreat from a couple of Southern Jesuit Provinces have met together as a *satsang* at regular intervals, shared their novel experiential ways of conducting retreats for social awakening and action, and reflected on their experience of success and the difficulties involved.

Three types of social retreat

Two of their meetings are of the greatest interest to our present task: the one in 1979 which discussed the Exercises as the instrument of social change in India today; and the other in 1986 which deliberated on socially oriented retreats.

Facing the urgent need of social renewal, the first meeting agreed that, alongside other methods aiming at effective social change, the

Spiritual Exercises had their own specific contribution to make in this regard. This is one of experience of God in Christ empowering us to be converted to him and so join the necessarily social mission of God carried on down the ages. They also agreed that the Spiritual Exercises lent themselves to different forms depending on the kind of groups addressed.

Carrying the discussion further, the second meeting evolved the convergence of the various experiences and named three graded formulations of the Exercises with a positive social thrust: retreats for social consciousness, retreats from social commitment and retreats in a social context.

The retreat for social consciousness targets people concerned about themselves and their spiritual life – rule-abiding religious may come in this category – and aims at conscientizing them at once spiritually and socially by consistently exposing them to the themes of the Exercises in a social light. For example, it would situate individual creation as part of humanity, individual sin in its roots and fruits in society, individual mission in solidarity with others and Christ, etc.

People who are already socially conscious, or those who are searching for something better because they are dissatisfied with their manner of life and work, and so are open to the social dimension of life without necessarily being aware of the fact, may be led to move from consciousness to commitment to others. *The retreat from the perspective of social commitment* will then present the God of revelation as gathering and forming a people, and in the process being involved with the nameless, voiceless and classless.

The retreat in a social context radicalizes the experience of the socially committed people. It invites them to go into retreat, not in a cosy, comfortable seclusion, but in their very working environment or one similar to it, and there to stay put, immersed in their chosen milieu of the poor, like the incarnate Christ. In this way, sharing the life of the crowd and commonalty, they may come to contemplate God in the social trappings of the least, lowly and lost (as visualized by Rabindranath Tagore⁵). In this way they would be led by God and God's people to progress further in the mission of God for them. Here is the social Contemplation to Attain Love of God.

The question of method

What distinguishes these social retreats from social seminars and workshops of social analysis is that they aim at developing a social conscience of people along with inner conversion that does not stop

short of, but leads to, personal commitment to urgent social concerns. Holding such a clear-cut view, the vanguard of social retreats argue tendentiously, 'Hence the *Method* followed in the process becomes more important than the content offered during the retreat'.⁶ And thereby hangs a tale, a tale of the method.

The models proposed for social retreats of various sorts are, to my mind, striking only in their content and not as a method. This is all the more striking since the socially biased retreats are offered as ways of giving the Spiritual Exercises which constitute primarily a method, which itself is a message. Most of the novel offerings of the retreat could easily have come from anyone barely acquainted with the Spiritual Exercises but spiritually inspired to respond zealously to the burning social questions of the day. And not all those who are familiar with the Exercises could readily find them in what is purported to be the social version of the Exercises.

Towards a new method

This criticism is not to be minimized specially when one sees how the Zen meditation or Neuro-Linguistic Programming is taught by its masters strictly according to the method, down to the smallest detail, although in other areas of their life they may flout the rules. Adaptation of the method and not its rigid application is, however, written into the very structure of the Exercises.⁷ The method of adaptation must be, first, in the spirit of the Exercises, second, aiming at their unique goal, and third, using certain indispensable means. The more these elements inhere in an adaptation, the more faithful it will be to the Exercises.

The spirit of the Exercises ought to be, for the director and the exercitants, a matter of God being ever active in them⁸ – without this there can be no Exercises. This means that God is to be recognized more and more as the God of greater justice (to use the expression of G. K. Chesterton). In relation to the victimized classes, it would seem imperative that the directors opt for this contextualized revelation of God. They will make it explicit as they find it, no doubt mostly implicitly, *all through* the Exercises, and highlight it when they are surprised by its occasional explicit expression,⁹ and so claim the retreat as social. However, in the very spirit of the Exercises, the goal of the Exercises is, paradoxically, not simply zealous social activism but finding the will of God in one's life.¹⁰ This, of course, is bound to be socially directed, as exemplified by the new Moses of the new Exodus contemplated during the Second and Third Weeks. And the means by which one arrives at the variety of social goal for oneself, is the

discernment of spirits which certainly should take into account the inescapable social factors and voices too that shed light on the spiritual forces at work. All this is, surprisingly, what the pedagogy of the Exercises is about. It trains retreatants to discover for themselves where God is calling them, what God wants them to do, as they are, where they are, among their own people. It therefore enables them to stand back from the spurious absolutes of competing ideologies in order to play a constructive part in the reform of social and cultural structures.¹¹

Keeping to this triple principle of the Exercises, and presenting the themes for prayer in accents not only personal but social – the accents of the Exercises themselves¹² – the social retreats may be conducted more or less intensely (again like the Exercises themselves), depending on the preparedness of the retreatants. Appreciation of this point is one of the key elements of the Exercises – wisely taken note of by most of those who give social retreats. Accordingly a greater or lesser living exposure to the situation of the people (which is no doubt against the letter but in accord with the spirit of the Exercises¹³) will be a setting of divine revelation and challenge, like the meditation on the Three Classes of People. What is more, it will be a small personal initiation into the immediate change of structures much talked about, giving an insight into the passion and resurrection reflected on as one mystery by way of social ‘baptism’.

Here is a picture of Ignatian praxis inculturated in oriental wisdom which counsels thus:

If I just hear something, I forget it.

If I see I remember it.

If I do something I know it.

If I discover something, I use it.

Tailpiece

I have at times desired to lead retreatants through such an experience, contextualizing them wholly or partly in an undeveloped area so that they share the life of the working poor, learn from their discourse, discern in their milieu and find their way of collaborating with God in re-creating society. But I have never dared, thinking that they were not ready. Now I wonder if I was ready to pay the price myself!

A. Paul Dominic SJ lectured in mathematics before joining the staff of Satayodayam, the Jesuit Retreat Centre in Secunderabad. He has studied New

Age and creation-centred spirituality, and contributed to several pastoral and theological journals in Asia, Europe and the United States. His latest book, *God of mission*, was published in 1998 by Claretian Publications, Bangalore.

NOTES

1 See *Ignis* 120, pp 93–99.

2 See *Ignis* 40, pp 18–19.

3 See *Ignis* 125, pp 15–20; 134, pp 185–189; 135, pp 24–38.

4 This is not an isolated story. See *Vidyajyoti* 53 (1989), pp 273–274.

5 See *Bitanjali*, n X:

‘When I try to bow to thee, my obeisance cannot reach down to the depth where thy feet rest among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

Pride can never approach to where thou walkest in the clothes of the humble among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

My heart can never find its way to where thou keepest company with the companionless among the poorest, the lowliest, and the lost.’

6 *Ignis* 93, p 11.

7 See Exx 18–20.

8 See Exx 2, 15, 155. This cannot be too much emphasized.

9 See Exx 59, 237. I have not known anyone adverting to them.

10 See Exx 1, 5, 15, 21, 234.

11 See a little-known passage in 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, Decree 4 (slightly changed).

12 Dealing with this will require more space than this piece.

13 What Exx 19 allows for practical reasons is recommended here for reasons of socio-spiritual praxis.