

FORGOTTEN TRUTHS OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

By GERARD W. HUGHES

AND THEN I have to fit in a retreat sometime'. So ends the sentence of many a priest and religious as they try to work out their programme for the summer. For Jesuits, an annual eight-day retreat has been part of the rule since 1608, over fifty years after St Ignatius's death; and many other religious orders have adopted the same rule. Official documents of popes and jesuit Generals recommend the Exercises of St Ignatius with enthusiastic praise for their wonderful effects. Those who have to make them do not always share that same enthusiasm, but keep their grumbles to themselves or to a select group of friends. This article takes a selection of these grumbles as a means of rediscovering truths about the Exercises which many of us had forgotten.

In 1957, the extensive *Bibliographie Ignatienne 1894-1957* was published. Another bibliography is being prepared, with over 2000 titles, for the period 1957-75. The weight of all this scholarship can crush the amateur retreat director. He has not the time to read the current literature, but is vaguely aware that his own understanding and method of giving the Exercises is now considered out-of-date. Reactions vary. Some, suspicious of all that is new, continue as before, only more so, describing 'the length and breadth of hell' in even more vivid detail, and bemoaning the declining numbers of retreatants. Others, who have always been a little uncertain about their own ability to understand and give the Exercises, but have continued trying, have become even more diffident. I count myself among those who grumble at having to make the Exercises and among the diffident who give them. Recently, I have had some time to read ancient and modern commentaries on the Exercises, and to meet people who are specialists in ignatian spirituality. It has been an encouraging experience, which I should like to pass on to those who do not have the time.¹

¹ There is an excellent series of articles on the Exercises and Ignatian Spirituality, produced by The Program to Adapt the Spiritual Exercises, available from Rev. T. A. Burke S.J., 144 Grand St, Jersey City, N.J. 07302. Articles from this series are referred to as PASE

Grumbles

1. 'If I hear once again that man is created to praise, reverence and serve God, I'll scream': a sister's reaction after yet another jesuit retreat. Men react less dramatically: 'I re-read old copies of the school magazine', said one Jesuit whom I knew. For him it was certainly true that 'it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish' of all that had ever happened at the school of his youth, where he always made his annual retreat. We may never have been driven to screaming or reading the old school magazine, but we know the boredom which repetition can induce.
2. Another reflection on the Exercises from the old-school-magazine friend: 'I never have understood all this consolation-desolation business; I suppose it is something which afflicts hot-blooded foreigners. I usually feel much-of-a-muchness myself, occasionally dropping into a mild depression at retreat times'.
3. As retreat-director I met a very unhappy and broken religious who, on being asked, 'Have you not spoken to anyone about this before?', answered, 'Yes, many times, but I am always told to practise the third mode of humility'. This is one example among many of the damage that the Exercises can do. Far from liberating, they can often be given and made in such a way that they cripple the retreatant, imprison the spirit, and engender religious nausea, rather than the love of God.
4. The experience of many in making the Exercises may be compared to riding a bicycle which has no chain. One may pedal away vigorously at the meditations and additions, but somehow the Exercises do not engage with real life. One retreat-giver, after exhorting his retreatants to 'go in spirit with St Francis Xavier and lick those lepers' wounds', was later heard by one of them complaining loudly at breakfast about the quality of the marmalade. We can all identify with that retreat-giver.
5. Eulogies of the Exercises by popes, bishops, jesuit Generals and retreat-givers can sometimes give the impression that they are a kind of magic. 'Are you worried, anxious, bewildered, confused, lukewarm? Try the Exercises and become a fully integrated, dynamic christian, apostolic witness and eschatological sign'. The Exercises are enjoying a vogue at present, especially among religious. 'Solve your problems with a thirty-day retreat'. If the Exercises are treated as a magic panacea for the ills of our day, we shall reap a rich harvest of problems.
6. This last remark leads on to a final grumble. Recent writings, emphasizing the damage the Exercises can do, the skill required in a director etc., can lead the amateur to despair of ever being able to make or give them.

I think these are useful grumbles, because they can remind us of forgotten truths:

(i) In the time of St Ignatius, and for many years after his death, the Exercises were normally given to individuals, not to groups. In 1584, Fr Crusius, a master of novices in Germany, wrote to the Jesuit General, Fr Acquaviva, asking if he might give the Exercises to groups of three to six novices. He had obviously been trying this already, because he tells Acquaviva of the great advantages in group retreats: the novices encourage each other, are more ready to discuss their meditations in a group, and make the meditations better because they know they will have to discuss them afterwards! Acquaviva's reply is interesting. He writes that group retreats are contrary to the tradition of giving the Exercises, because different people have different needs, and their individual needs cannot be answered in a group. In public discussions, the novices will talk generalities and not about their own experience. If there are not enough directors to give individually guided retreats, then Fr Crusius should do what they do in Rome, namely cut down the length of each individual retreat.²

'Different people have different needs'. Therefore there is no one form of the Exercises suitable for all. They must be adapted to the needs of each individual retreatant. The reason why we feel bored with retreats is because in the form in which we make them, or are given them, they no longer answer our needs. St Ignatius himself does not seem to have envisaged the Exercises being repeated annually for eight days. Nadal, his trusted interpreter, saw the purpose of the thirty-day retreat in the noviceship as an initiation into Jesuit spirituality, which would then become a way of life. Once the Exercises begin to 'take', the retreatant may well want to spend some time in prayer and quiet; but there should be a growing freedom in prayer and the manner of it. There is a false glorification of the Exercises which treats them as though they were magic. 'Keep on making them, and they will work, provided you have the right dispositions'. When they do not appear to work, the answer must be that we do not have the right dispositions; so we try again, until repeated dissatisfaction ensures that we never shall have the right dispositions. Boredom with the Exercises may well be a very healthy sign that we should no longer be making them in the form in which we are accustomed. We should pay more attention to our boredom.

(ii) In his preliminary observations to the book of the Exercises, St Ignatius writes (Annotation 6):

² Hugh, G. A., S.J.: 'The Exercises for Individuals and Groups' (PASE).

When the one who is giving the Exercises perceives that the exercitant is not affected by any spiritual experiences, such as consolations or desolations, and that he is not troubled by different spirits, he ought to ply him with questions about the Exercises. He should ask him whether he makes them at the appointed times and how he makes them.

Ignatius expects the retreatant, even Englishmen, to have these experiences. Unless they have them, the retreat cannot continue, because it is through consolation and desolation that we come to discern what God's will is in our lives. The central importance of this experience is another commonly forgotten truth. Pelagianism, always a temptation for Anglo-Saxons, can creep into the Exercises, turning them into an endurance test: will-strengthening exercises designed to produce valiant men and women ready to advance under withering fire, heedless of life and limb and, consequently, of their own feelings. Desolation comes to be regarded as something to be snapped out of; and consolation is a feeling to be treated with circumspection, if not suspicion. Relying on the word of Ignatius, that 'love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words', and adding 'or in feelings', we feel justified in paying scant attention to the consolation-desolation talk. Yet this was not the mind of St Ignatius, for whom feelings were of primary importance. The Exercises are designed to help us discover the will of God in our lives, not by ignoring our feelings, but by listening to them, coming to know them and learning how to interpret them. The power of the Exercises, the need for skilled direction, lies precisely in this point. The Exercises, the Society of Jesus, began, in a sense, with Ignatius's own feelings, when he was lying wounded at Loyola. He read romances, he dreamed of courtly love and daring deeds. He also read the lives of the saints and Ludolph's *Life of Christ*. He noticed that his day-dreams left him in a sad mood; whilst his thoughts on Christ and on the lives of the saints continued to attract him. These were not feelings he aroused in himself. They just happened. But he did not just snap out of them. He reflected on them, and this was the start of his discernment of spirits. He was uneducated in letters, in theology, in spirituality. He observed his moods in relation to his conscious activity, he came to know them, to be less naïve and more circumspect in discerning them, but he never stopped listening to them. It became a lifelong and continuous habit. Every decision, even the apparently most minute, was tested in this way. He tested his decisions, not against some external criterion, a practice which would have driven him insane, but on the criterion of the at-one-ness of his whole being which he had given over to Christ. He

entrusted himself to Christ, an instrument in his hands, and therefore believed that if in some decision he was going against God's will, the disharmony would sooner or later manifest itself in his feelings of consolation and desolation.

Faber, whilst giving a retreat to Peter Canisius in 1543, wrote:

I observe more clearly than ever certain evident signs for proceeding in the Exercises: how important it is for the discernment of spirits to see if we are attentive to ideas and reflections or rather to the Spirit itself, which appears through desires, motions, ardour or despondency, tranquillity or anxiety, joy or sorrow, and other analogous spiritual motions. For it is in these motions much more easily than in thoughts that one can pass judgment on the soul and its quests.³

Thus, the matter for discernment is the involuntary feelings and moods which arise in and from the meditations. This is the subject matter for discussion with the director. Through trying to articulate these feelings and moods, we become more aware of them. In one of his directories of the Exercises, St Ignatius says that exercitants may be encouraged to write down their reflections and feelings (*conceptus et motiones*).⁴ The function of the director is to help the retreatant to get in touch with his feelings and to learn to discern them, not to discern them for him. If the retreatant does not learn to discern for himself, the Exercises will have no lasting effect.

Herein lie both the difficulty and the importance of the Exercises today. In western countries we have fostered the intellect and despised the emotions, thus becoming more cerebral than sensitive. We have developed a wonderful technology which threatens to extinguish human life either sooner, by nuclear war, or later, by pollution of the environment and exhaustion of vital resources. If we lose touch with our feelings, we become inhuman and capable of a terrifying callousness to the sufferings of others. Hence the phenomenon of ardent supporters of social justice imprisoning, torturing and killing those who oppose their particular theory. We keep on hearing about the misery and needs of the Third World; but the information stays in our heads and the Third World grows poorer. In the promotion of social justice we need information, but unless the information touches our hearts as well as our heads, it will have no effect. That is why the Exercises have such a valuable contribution to make in the Church's mission of justice and peace.

³ MHSI *Faber*, 638-9; and cf Robb, P., S.J.: 'The Retreatant in a Directed Retreat' (PASE).

⁴ MHSI *Monumenta Ignatiana*, vol 2, *Directoria*, Doc. 3, no 8.

The experience of consolation-desolation is not easy for us today, because the pace of life and our very conceptual education can so easily keep us out of touch with ourselves. Even in the sixteenth century, when the pace of life was so much slower, Peter Faber writes of pious retreatants who do not seem to experience any consolation-desolation:

However, holy as they may be, lead them on to examine themselves in terms of a higher degree of perfection in their lives and conduct; then you will see two spirits appear, one a source of strength, the other of darkness, one of justice, the other of degradation.⁵

To become aware of our feelings, we need to articulate them in writing and in talking with a director. But we can only do this with a director who can treat us gently and not judge us. 'If the director observes that the exercitant is in desolation and tempted, let him not deal severely and harshly, but gently and kindly' (Annotation 7). Because of the difficulty of experiencing consolation-desolation, an individual may require a long preparatory period before beginning the Exercises. Faber, for example, before he began the Exercises with Dr Cochlaeus, spent several hours daily for several weeks in conversation with him. Ignatius was four years with Faber himself before giving him the Exercises. There are other reasons too, why retreatants may require a long preliminary period before beginning the Exercises: for example, their basic notion of God may be so tinged with unacknowledged fear, or resentment, or scrupulosity, that to plunge them into the Exercises may only accentuate their difficulties.

So far, the answers I have given are open to the charge that the Exercises encourage and foster a spiritual narcissism. There is one prayer in the Exercises, the only one which never varies in all the meditations: 'I will beg God our Lord for the grace that all my intentions, actions and operations may be directed purely to the service and praise of His Divine Majesty'. The Exercises are not centred on our feelings and emotions; they are centred on Christ. It is in the light of God's revelation in Christ, and in the faith that 'God is in all things and all things in him' that we consider ourselves. 'What have I done for him? What will I do for him?'. The Exercises are designed to lead us gradually into this light. Too much light blinds, which is another way of expressing grumble no 3 on the danger of the Exercises.

(iii) St Ignatius's own teaching on this point is given clearly in the annotations:

⁵ Cf Robb, P., S.J., *loc. cit.*

Let him (the director) adhere to the points and add only a short summary explanation. The reason for this is that when one in meditating takes the solid foundation of the facts and goes over it and reflects on it for himself, he may find something that makes them a little clearer or better understood. For it is not much knowledge that satisfies and fills the soul but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth (Annotation 2).

'It may happen that in the first week some are slower in attaining what is sought' (Annotation 4). No one is to be hurried. Most of the retreats given by the early Jesuits did not go beyond the first week; and this included retreats to bishops, abbots and vicar-generals. In Annotation 11, Ignatius writes:

While the exercitant is engaged in the first week of the Exercises, it will be helpful if he knows nothing of what is to be done in the second week. Rather, let him labour to attain what he is seeking in the first week, as if he hoped to find no good in the second.

The exercitant has to learn to go at his own pace. To be coerced or hurried on by an enthusiastic director can damage the exercitant. I am still grateful for two points in particular which we were given in an excellent preached retreat some twenty years ago. One was that we should look on prayer time not as a duty, but as a gift: if you want to use the time in prayer, do so; but there is no compulsion. Somehow, when the pressure of 'duty' was removed, the desire to pray could grow. The other point was the director's preliminary observation on the third mode of humility. He said he was reluctant to talk about it in case he was waving us up a mountain which he had not climbed himself. His honesty was encouraging and helped us to see the third mode of humility as an invitation, not a command.

To conclude this answer to grumble no 3 and a fuller answer to grumble no 1: the exercitant must be allowed to go at his or her own pace. That is why there must be a great variety of ways in which one makes the annual retreat. Some people may be over-worked, over-tired, over-anxious. They may need a few days of quiet idleness without even attempting to pray. Others may feel that they are growing increasingly isolated, anti-social, dogmatic. They may need some form of community retreat. Others, whose work leaves them little time for reading, may need a 'preached retreat' which includes informative conferences. Others again may need solitude and withdrawal with plenty of time for prayer on their own, perhaps on only one part of one meditation of the Exercises. The director must never force the pace. We do damage not

so much by our own ignorance, or failure to live up to the ideals we profess, as by refusing to acknowledge our own ignorance and failures.

(iv) The fourth grumble was about the unreality of retreats: lepers' wounds and marmalade. The Exercises are designed to help the exercitant become a contemplative in action. This cannot happen in eight days, or even in thirty. In a retreat we can withdraw for eight or thirty days to learn a method of prayer which can open us up to God and help us to begin to experience him in a new way in our lives; but this is only a beginning. The Contemplation for obtaining Love, for example, is not an annual event to be fitted in with the packing on the eighth day. It is to become a permanent attitude, 'to find God in all things, and all things in him'. Ignatius the mystic was also Ignatius the practical administrator. He could weep at the sight of a flower and then give his whole attention to very mundane details of daily living. The Spanish Jesuits of his time were all for more prayer. Fr Oviedo, the rector of Gandia, was a three-hour-daily-prayer-man. Nadal, on his return from Spain, told Ignatius that he had agreed to the Spaniards' request for one and a half hour's prayer daily. Nadal describes Ignatius's reaction. 'He sharply denounced me in the presence of others and thereafter made no great use of my services'. Da Camara, in the *Memoriale*, reports that Ignatius said it was

his opinion, from which no one would ever move him, that, for those who are studying, one hour of prayer was sufficient (two examens of conscience plus the divine office), it being supposed that they are practising mortification and self-denial.⁶

To use a later analogy, the Exercises are not a battery-charging operation, but a way of learning how to be self-charging in our ordinary occupations. It is a continuous process, which we only assimilate slowly and gradually. Those who do learn it, as Ignatius did, are capable of turning to prayer from the most exacting occupations. The work helps their prayer, and the prayer helps their work. This leads us back to an earlier point: the need for honesty in the Exercises, bringing our whole person into them, warts and all. Otherwise we cannot find God in all things, but only in that ideal image of ourselves which we bring out at retreat time and put away again on the eighth day. There is less danger of unreality in what are termed 'Nineteenth Annotation retreats':

One who is educated or talented, but engaged in public affairs or necessary business, should take one and a half hours daily for the Spiritual Exercises (Annotation 19).

⁶ McNally, R.E., S.J.: 'Prayer and the Early Society of Jesus' (PASE).

(v) The answers given to the first four grumbles contain the answer to grumble no 5, on the danger of considering the Exercises to be a magic remedy for our ills. If the exercitant is not ready to begin them, if they are not adapted to his needs, if there is not a careful discernment of consolation-desolation, and if the Exercises are not 'earthed' into the actual life experience of the exercitant, then they will not produce their effects. The Exercises are designed to help us to grow in the knowledge and love of God according to our talents, energies, abilities, and the grace he gives us. Any attempts to reach sanctity by a short cut, which ignores us as we really are, is like trying to jump a mountain: a useless expenditure of energy which can land us flat on our faces.

(vi) I hope the effect of these reflections has not been the opposite of what I intended, discouraging instead of encouraging the diffident amateur to make or give the Exercises. Ignatius says:

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 (Annotation 1).

There are hundreds of ways of 'preparing'. That is why it is to indulge in pedantry to worry and argue about what is to be termed Spiritual Exercises and what is not. Are school retreats of one to three days, with a few talks each day, to be called Spiritual Exercises? What about sunday afternoon retreats? All these activities can 'prepare and dispose the soul'. But some people will feel the need for something more, and may want to make an eight-day, or thirty-day retreat. To direct someone in such a retreat does require skill and training. The greater the skill, the more we can help. Many of us know we are not skilled, but would like to be. If we try to be honest with ourselves and do not try to coerce the exercitant, then though we may not give them all the help they need, at least our willingness to be with them will be of some help, and we shall not damage them. Practice will make us more honest and less likely to force or coerce. In St Ignatius's own time, novices were giving the Exercises. Once Laynez, in Parma, was invited to give lectures in a convent of eighty nuns. The tailor to the convent had been given the Exercises by a jesuit novice. He suggested to one of the nuns that she should try the same. The nun asked Laynez to give her the Exercises. Then a few more came, till eventually the whole convent was asking. Laynez began to direct some of them and then handed them

over to a jesuit novice to complete the retreats.⁷ If in Ignatius's time there had been a well educated and talented body of laity, he would have had them giving the Exercises. After all, he was a layman himself when he began giving them. It is good to know that the practice is being re-introduced.

Finally, to whom should the Exercises be given? According to Nadal, the Exercises can be given to every class of people, including heretics and pagans. (Some would claim that we have been doing this for years in our school retreats!) The Exercises may be given to pagans, according to Nadal, provided they can be brought to believe in one God and pray to him. Such exercises will include the Principle and Foundation, the meditations of the first week (excluding confession and communion); whilst the Kingdom and the Two Standards can be given and referred to the one God. If all these exercises are completed, an election, adapted to the individual, is in order. With 'heretics', Nadal says that the director should prescind from those truths which are unacceptable to the heretic. During the second week meditations, simple contemplations and application of the senses are to be preferred to subtle intellectual speculations.⁸

In Ignatius's own lifetime, a time of rapid change, when old structures were falling and everything was being questioned, the Exercises, and the early Society of Jesus which grew out of them, were a most powerful instrument for renewal in the Church. After his death, later jesuit General Congregations began to make changes, which the Constitutions allowed for, as the need arose. These later Congregations began to determine by law universal norms for the spiritual life of Jesuits, for example one hour of meditation daily, daily Mass, an annual retreat. These regulations, opposed by Ignatius in his own lifetime, became the criteria for a jesuit vocation. Retreats began to be made in groups, sometimes five hundred at a time. Different people were not allowed to have different needs: and the Exercises, consequently, no longer produced their extraordinary results. They began to be used to buttress whatever we happened to be doing. We are now living in a time of much more rapid change. Old structures, formerly accepted assumptions in the Church and in society, are being questioned, found wanting, and swept aside. The Exercises too have been questioned; but the questioning has uncovered forgotten truths, which speak to us in the confusion of our times.

⁷ Hugh, G. A.: (PASE), *loc. cit.*

⁸ PASE Workshop on the Exercises — Fordham 1967: 'Nadal on the Exercises', Erhart, F. X., s.j.