

# THE CONTEMPLATION TO ATTAIN LOVE

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**I**S THE CONTEMPLATION TO ATTAIN LOVE integral to the Fourth Week of the Spiritual Exercises? The Spiritual Exercises grew out of St Ignatius' own conversion experience, following his convalescence after injury in battle at Pamplona (1521) and during a period of profound prayer in Manresa, near Barcelona, in Spain during 1522. At first, it seemed, he had been left to his own resources, but later he realised that God had been teaching him 'in the same way as a schoolteacher deals with a child' (*Autobiography*, n.27). The Spiritual Exercises comprise four Weeks, or sections, with supplementary notes and additional material. They offer a way to free oneself from sinful or constricting attachments. The person making the Exercises is then invited to contemplate imaginatively the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ; to respond to God's love towards us by loving God in return, especially in whatever way God invites us to serve. The Contemplation to Attain Love (often referred to as the *Contemplatio*) invites one to love and serve God in every aspect of human life. In the text it comes immediately after the Fourth Week. But nowhere does Ignatius give any instructions about how we are to use this exercise. Recent practice tends to consider that Contemplation is part of the Fourth Week. However, views have differed throughout the history of giving the Exercises.<sup>1</sup>

The text of the *Spiritual Exercises* is not an easy read. Basically it is a textbook for the one who gives the Exercises. Because Ignatius was not in favour of changing or expanding the text once it had received papal approval in 1548, issues of interpretation arose once the early Jesuits began to give the Exercises. However, Ignatius made a point of asking his secretary, Juan de Polanco, to collate such issues and questions as

<sup>1</sup> References for the views that follow and further discussion can be found in Michael Buckley, 'The Contemplation to Attain Love', *The Way Supplement*, 24 (Spring 1975), 92–104.

they arose. He contributed some points of his own, as did some of his closest collaborators, such as Jerónimo Nadal. Many Jesuits, working in different parts of Europe, wrote notes on specific points or longer treatises. Finally, making use of this material, the fifth Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Claudius Aquaviva, produced the *Official Directory of 1599*, which is one of the fundamental documents of the Society.<sup>2</sup>

The following are some examples of the different views that have been held among interpreters of the *Spiritual Exercises* about the place of the *Contemplatio*. The *Breve directorium* of Brussels<sup>3</sup> allows it to be given anywhere in the Second, Third or Fourth Weeks. James Mirón allows it after the First Week, when the Exercises have been limited to that week. Gil Gonzalez Dávila notes that some directors give it at the beginning of the Second Week as a foundation for the Election. A strong body of opinion (including Jerónimo Nadal and Juan de Polanco) see the *Contemplatio* as proper to the unitive way of prayer,<sup>4</sup> and so to the Fourth Week. Polanco writes that it can be ‘either intermingled with the contemplations of the risen Christ in the Fourth Week or on the days which follow’.<sup>5</sup> Polanco’s influence meant that this approach got into the *Official Directory of 1599*. But this did not settle the matter. Joseph de Guibert, for example, considers it akin to the three methods of prayer—a form of prayer one could use any time, like the Examen.<sup>6</sup> Ignacio Iparraguirre regards it as a synthesis of the Exercises—the kernel of what they are about.

One other factor to notice at this point is that the language of the *Contemplatio* is very different from, and has a very different feel from, the language of the Fourth Week. Retreatants often comment on this.

So the question I should like to raise here is this: is the *Contemplatio* a way of praying (akin to Ignatian contemplation, the three methods of

<sup>2</sup> Ignacio Iparraguirre published the *Official Directory* and other documents mentioned below in MHSJ in 1955. *On Giving the Spiritual Exercises*, translated and edited by Martin E. Palmer (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), contains most of this material.

<sup>3</sup> This is an anonymous directory, preserved in the archives of the Belgian Jesuits and which probably dates from the 1580s. It does not seem to have been used in preparing the *Official Directory of 1599* (see *On Giving the Spiritual Exercises*, 204).

<sup>4</sup> Traditionally some have described three stages of prayer: purgative, illuminative and unitive. With reference to the *Spiritual Exercises*, the First Week would be purgative, the Second illuminative and the Third and Fourth Weeks unitive. Because the *Contemplatio* is unitive, with the emphasis on loving and serving the God in all things, the authors mentioned would give it during the Fourth Week.

<sup>5</sup> MHSJ MI Dir, 322–323.

<sup>6</sup> See Joseph de Guibert, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice. A Historical Study* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1986), 130 n. 38.

prayer or the Examen) or is it something of greater importance: an introduction to a new way of living based in the Fourth Week? After the struggles and graces of the four Weeks, now brought together in the risen Christ, the retreatant is beginning to live in a contemplative way, 'loving and serving the Divine Majesty in all things' (Exx 233). In the second part of this paper I want to offer some reflections on living the *Contemplatio* after the experience of the Exercises, but I shall look at the text first, savouring it, because the text itself can be an inspiration to living according to the way of Ignatius.

### ***The Text of the Contemplation to Attain Love***

Ignatius begins with two very clear points (Exx 231). Love 'ought to find its expression in deeds rather than in words' and 'love consists in mutual communication'. The importance of these points becomes clear throughout the exercise. Ignatius asks for the usual preparatory prayer. This prayer, said at the beginning of every exercise, that everything 'may be directed purely to the service and praise of his Divine Majesty' (Exx 46), will soon be assumed into and find its fulfilment in the *Suscipe* ('Take, Lord, and receive ...'; Exx 234). The composition of place (Exx 232) asks me 'to see how I am before God our Lord, and the angels and saints interceding for me'. Standing before the court of heaven links this exercise with the Three Classes of Persons (Exx 151) and the prayer in the Call of the King (Exx 98), and gives a solemnity and importance to all three passages. The grace to be prayed for (Exx 233) asks for an 'interior knowledge' of all the good I have received, so that, acknowledging this with gratitude, I may be able to love and serve the Divine Majesty in all things. This desire for an interior or intense knowledge links up with the graces asked for in previous weeks (for example the Second Week grace [Exx 104]). Again, emphasizing the *Contemplatio's* connectedness with the exercises that have gone before underlines its importance. The grace will be taken up again in the *Suscipe*. To come to a deeper knowledge of the 'good ... received' (Exx 233), to develop our sense of gratitude, Ignatius proposes we pray over the following four points.

The First Point (Exx 234) states simply that I am to recall 'the benefits received', namely 'creation, redemption and particular gifts'. As I do this, Ignatius asks me to ponder with deep affection how much God our Lord has done for me. All is gift. God gave me existence and

all that flowed from it. The details of my own faith history and all the graces of the retreat so far are now gathered, pondered over and contemplated with deep gratitude. Now I am contemplating, not merely listing, my gifts.

Going further, I am asked to ponder how much God 'has given me of what he possesses'. Further still, it is the 'divine plan' (as far as God is able) for God to give God's very self to me. It is important to notice how Ignatius stresses not only what I have received but also how much God wants to do. God has loved through deeds. God has shared, and will continue to do so. Mention of the 'divine plan' (its only appearance in the *Spiritual Exercises*) again stresses the importance of this exercise.

In Ignatius' view the evidence is overwhelming. Existence, redemption, special gifts, God's very self: all is gift. Pondering with deep affection, 'reason and justice' and 'heartfelt love' impel me to offer not only 'all I possess' but also 'myself as well': 'Take, Lord, and receive ...' Offering and committing one's life to God is a theme that has been developing gradually throughout the Exercises.

The Second Point (Exx 235) states that God dwells in creatures. God dwells in inanimate reality (by giving existence); in plants (by giving life); in animals (by giving sensation); in human beings (by giving understanding). At first this might seem dry and philosophical in comparison to the previous point. However, it is a step forward. God not only gives gifts but also dwells *within* them. By dwelling within them, God makes them what they are. Created reality contains God. Created reality is holy.

Moreover, God dwells in me, giving me being, life, sensation and understanding. In the second point, 'in me' signifies a progression from the 'for me' of the first point. Ignatius then goes on to say that I am a temple, created in the likeness and image of the Divine Majesty. I should reflect on this, as in the first point. But he also says that I can do this 'in some other way I feel to be better'. Ignatian flexibility! He makes no suggestions. Elements, plants and animals might suggest a walk in the garden; human beings might suggest contemplating the crowds in the marketplace or a visit to an art gallery! The prayer usually finishes with the *Suscipe*, though it is not mentioned.

As the evidence for God's love mounts and as the sense of gratitude deepens, the one giving the retreat might notice and the one



making the retreat might sense that the feel of the retreat in the Fourth Week is different from the beginning of the retreat: the retreatant is growing into a way of life; life is opening out to God in new and different ways. Slowly 'loving and serving the Divine Majesty in all things' is becoming a reality.

The Third Point (Exx 236) considers how God 'works and labours' on my behalf in all created things on the face of the earth. Not only does God bring into existence and preserve creation, God is continually involved in all created things on the face of the earth, working and labouring at the heart of creation, and doing all this *for me*, or, as Ignatius puts it in this point, 'on my behalf'.

This concept of a God who works, labours and even suffers has been present throughout the Exercises. 'Works and labours' reveals a dynamic, active God, continuously sustaining 'created things on the face of the earth'. This God likewise never wavers in love for human beings; always there, God meets our needs and enhances our lives.

The phrase 'that is, he acts in the manner of a person at work' is in Latin (*habet se in modum laborantis*) in Ignatius' original Spanish edition. Why? Perhaps he was forestalling criticism from people who would interpret him too literally. He is speaking analogically, figuratively. He knows God cannot change, cannot suffer. However, at a mystical level, the image of God as one who works and labours expresses how God loves us through God's creatures.

Creation was important to Ignatius. In Exx 60, 'passing in review all creation', he asks why 'the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars and the elements, the fruits, the birds, the fishes and the animals' have all been 'at my service' and have not denied him life, given his sinfulness. Here in Exx 236 he reflects on how 'in the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle etc.', God is at work, giving being, conserving, giving life and sensation etc. Ignatius offers us a picture of a God who is lovingly involved in every nook and cranny of creation, indeed in every detail of my own life. Again I am invited 'to reflect within myself'.

The Fourth Point (Exx 237) invites us 'to see how all that is good and every gift descend from on high'. Clearly we are invited to see God as Source, though Ignatius is reluctant to put it so bluntly. There is no mention of the Divine Majesty or God our Lord. We are invited to contemplate the many gifts and blessings flowing before us, as we might contemplate moving waters from a river bank; recalling, perhaps, Ignatius' vision by the river Cardoner. Throughout the Exercises we have contemplated Christ. Now the focus moves to contemplating God in all created reality, and especially in our own lives. Ignatius just lets the shift happen. As we move out of retreat, contemplating Christ in the gospel passages widens to include contemplating the work of the Trinity.

It is worth dwelling on the gifts Ignatius mentions in this section. Here he refers to less tangible blessings, such as justice, goodness, pity, mercy; qualities that ennoble human beings. My limited appropriation of such qualities 'descends from the supreme and infinite power, goodness etc.', of God. Remember how in the First Week (Exx 59), we considered God's attributes of wisdom, power, justice and goodness. We are not asked to reflect on these qualities in a philosophical way but to contemplate



them. We can only really contemplate them in people and events. As we contemplate such gifts, we move, as we have learnt throughout the Exercises, to God who is their source. We find God in all things.

Ignatius points us in the direction of God. I remember one cloudy day, standing on a mountain ridge and admiring the beauty of the sun's rays as they pierced a small opening in the clouds and danced on the surface of Derwentwater. I never saw the sun that day but I knew where the rays came from. In the First Point of the *Contemplatio* Ignatius invites us to remember God's gifts. In the Second and Third Points we are asked to contemplate God present and working in these gifts. Finally the gifts point to God above, 'the supreme and infinite power', but Ignatius leaves us in contemplative mode to imagine what is beyond the clouds. In the Fourth Week, excitingly, the focus is not on 'for me', but on Christ and God. Ignatius is content to finish the point with 'a colloquy', though we can finish this, as each of the points, with the *Suscipe*.

The *Suscipe* sums up the retreatant's desire, a desire weighed with the cost counted, to give himself or herself totally to Christ—a total giving that excludes nothing, a total giving that may include a reformation of life or a new calling. This total giving is symbolized by the offering of our *liberty* and of the powers of the soul, 'my memory, my understanding and my entire will'. Dedicating my freedom, 'all my liberty', to God's will is the purpose of the Exercises. Thus, right at the end of the Exercises, 'dispose of it entirely according to your will' (Exx 234) echoes the words at the beginning of the Exercises, 'to seek and find the divine will in the disposition of one's life' (Exx 1). Deeply conscious of God's gifts and God's love, one asks at the end of the Exercises for the grace to love and serve God in all things.

### ***Living the Contemplation in Daily Life after the Exercises ...***

'Work, for I am with you.' (Haggai 2:4) The prophet Haggai presents Yahweh as inviting the people of Israel to labour with him to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem. This section attempts to take the *Contemplatio* beyond the time of the full Exercises. How can it be lived in daily life?

Contemplating Jesus, the Word made flesh, has characterized the retreatant's prayer from at least the beginning of the Second Week. Therefore, we would expect contemplation to play an important part after the retreat. I would like to stress the following preliminary points of daily importance:

- The *Contemplatio* focuses not simply on the individual's further spiritual development but on involvement in God's divine plan. God's plan that, through the work of Christ, all creation should come to the fullness of life in God for God's greater glory, is a fundamental consideration both at the start of the Exercises and for life lived after them. God's plan is referred to many times in St Paul (for example Ephesians 1:3–14; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; Romans 8:22–23).
- Having made a decision about God's will during the retreat, afterwards the individual will seek to live out that calling in a profound sense of union with Christ. My life's meaning finds a place in Christ's mission and God's plan or purpose.
- Discernment, decision-making and doing the will of God develop union with Christ: 'Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother' (Matthew 12:50). Daily life offers countless opportunities for this. Decision-making is the main unitive factor in Ignatian spirituality.
- Ignatius is not prescriptive about formal spiritual duties after the retreat, nor need we be. He trusts that the experience of the Exercises will take care of this. I presume that reflective (Examen) prayer, which includes a contemplative element, will play an important part. It may well provide a welcome period of silence in an otherwise very busy day. Also, most people are helped by an ordered approach.
- Seeking to find God in all things, I cannot picture God directly, as I can the risen Christ in an imaginative contemplation, but I am able to contemplate the goodness of all created reality and, in doing so, move to an interior knowledge, aided by faith, of God's presence—an experience which will inspire me to love and serve the Divine Majesty in everything.

Victoria station in London has a balcony from which one can observe people in large numbers, in all their diversity of dress and appearance, rushing to work, hurrying for trains: some black and some white; some healthy, others sick, some swearing, some drinking Costa coffee, others *caffé Nero* (see Exx 106–107). Many years ago, when I first gave the full Exercises in Daily Life in London, I found myself observing people in this way whether in underground trains or from





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the top of a red bus—observing people, contemplating them, and consequently moved by them, wanting to help them as did the Three Divine Persons. This is *contemplation*: a sense of being with God, who loves and labours for people—the Second Week approach, working for people with Christ.

Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry speaks of a God who dwells and labours in created reality. 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.' When the countryside in autumn is resplendent in greens and browns—even golden in the sunlight—faith moves me from contemplating the goodness and beauty of the leaves and colours to God whose goodness and beauty surely exceed what I can see. Ignatius suggests I ask for interior knowledge of all the good I have received. The good I have received here is the leaves and their colours, green, brown and golden. Contemplation needs space, time and sensitivity to appreciate goodness and beauty, as contemplative prayer during the Exercises teaches us. Faith leads me to a deeper level of interior knowledge: to recognise God's part in all this. This in turn leads me not just to find God but to love God. Appreciating the goodness and beauty I can see leads me to reflect with appreciation on the goodness and beauty of the God I cannot see. Goodness and beauty descend from above (Exx 237). Our hearts and minds turn in the direction of God.

Ignatius avoids being too specific about this 'interior knowledge'. During the Exercises he suggests we have a 'colloquy', or a personal

meeting with God. Sometimes he even suggests what graces we should ask for. But later on this happens less. The colloquy is a moment of intimacy. He is content to leave us with God.

In the *Contemplatio* Ignatius reminds us of the value of the human person. God ‘makes a temple of me, as I have been created in the likeness and image of his Divine Majesty’ (Exx 235). We often use human beings for purely selfish ends. Using human beings as objects of lust or selfishness, we will not find the likeness and image of the Divine Majesty. ‘I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made’, sang the psalmist, ‘Wonderful are your works’ (Psalm 138/139). We may not see ourselves quite as Velasquez’s Venus or Michelangelo’s Adam, nor the people we meet as blessed with the personalities of St Francis, Gandhi or Florence Nightingale, but we need to contemplate human beings in such a way—without lust, fear, hatred or self-interest—that we begin to recognise the God who dwells within them (body and soul). We need to recognise the goodness and beauty that shines forth from them as the likeness and image of the Divine Majesty; to recognise the God who is labouring to help this or that person fulfil his or her potential; to recognise that goodness and beauty descend silently, as the morning dew, from above. ‘From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.’ (Wisdom 13:5)

**We are made by God and are precious in God’s sight** We are good; we are beautiful. We are made by God and are precious in God’s sight. In the goodness and beauty of ourselves we are drawn into the goodness and beauty of God. Is it beauty that entrances us? Or could it be the One who made the beauty tugging at our hearts in the loveliness we see? Contemplating something beautiful is letting it fill the senses, enhance the mind, give life to our whole being. Contemplating something good moves our hearts, our feelings. The movement is towards God. It must be! God is the source of goodness and beauty.

We can never be the same after goodness or beauty that is of God has touched us. Goodness and beauty give us a sense of the God who creates, of goodness that pours itself out; in meeting goodness we sense why God creates: to share with us, to share what God is. God loves us in creation, in deeds, not just in words. To find this God in all things, in the circumstances of our lives, is our calling.

Not infrequently I find myself groaning inwardly. There is something on my mind. I have an article to write. But I have nothing to say. I

cannot think how to present the little material I have. Then suddenly, possibly in prayer, perhaps in reflection time, whenever, a helpful thought comes, gently suggested. 'Have you thought of doing this or that?' God labours with and within us, working all things for good, 'removing all obstacles so that the person may move forward in doing good' (Exx 315). I have some reflections on this:

- The Examen is fundamental to becoming aware of, to getting to know and love, God at work in our daily lives. The Examen helps us pay attention to what we might scarcely notice in the busyness of daily life.
- What we noticed in the Examen is a privileged moment and might merit further attention. It might provide the material for a longer prayer period.
- This dynamic in daily life (reflection on action, which leads to prayer, with prayer leading to action) is something like an ongoing colloquy with God—a continuous dialogue, fruit of an ever-growing intimacy with the Lord. Finding God, listening to God and conversing with God will help us 'love and serve the Divine Majesty in everything' (Exx 233).

The God who 'works and labours on my behalf in all created things on the face of the earth' (Exx 236) will be a welcome companion in the normal stresses and struggles of daily life. This will lead me to a deeper love and more generous service of God in most situations. But there may be times when personal suffering overwhelms me. It will still be helpful to remember 'all the good I have received' (Exx 233), including the experience of being 'with Christ' in the passion during the Exercises. There I asked 'for grief with Christ in grief, to be broken with Christ broken' (Exx 202). In my own passion, God will be faithful to the mutuality of the *Contemplatio*. God's love 'will find expression in deeds rather than words' (Exx 230); God will give what God is 'able to give' (Exx 231). From above will come 'compassion, mercy etc.' (Exx 237).

There is a creative polarity, a tension between prayer and action, between contemplation and action. This polarity arises because these activities are usually considered to be separate. For many people prayer is different from action; action is different from prayer. The tension arises when we combine the two activities. Finding God in a relationship, in our daily work or in any human endeavour can be an experience of

tasting and feeling God's presence (something usually presumed to take place in prayer), an opportunity 'to praise, reverence and serve God' in the midst of life. This polarity and tension can become creative and consequently life-giving—an exciting way to live, and certainly a prayerful 'praising, reverencing and serving God' in whatever activity we are engaged in. The Examen is an attempt to bridge this gap, but only a beginning. With the interplay and fusion I have described, Jerónimo Nadal's phrase 'contemplatives in action' begins to make sense. Finding God in all things, with gratitude, I will become more aware of God's love for me. Freed from obstacles, I will become more able to love and serve the Divine Majesty in everything (Exx 233), with the magnanimity, generosity and availability which, at the beginning of the Exercises, Ignatius saw as vital for personal growth and God's glory (Exx 5).

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