

RETREAT PRAYER

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

THE Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola have often been called a school of prayer. But it is unfortunately incontestable that many who have made the Exercises, either completely or in an abbreviated form, emerge from their retreat with little experience of true prayer. Their retreat has contributed nothing to their understanding of what prayer is; and very often the impression remains that Ignatian prayer is a coldly rational process, accessible only to the intellectual. Indeed there are many who still cling to the notion that Ignatian prayer consists of certain complicated spiritual gymnastics performed with the memory, intellect and will, preceded by a series of 'preludes' which resemble the child's game of hopscotch, and followed by an impossible quarter of an hour's soul-searching examination.

It is irrelevant to our purpose here to apportion the blame for these misconceptions, or to analyse that woodenness in the presentation of the Exercises which has given rise to a rigid interpretation of Ignatius' instructions about prayer. His Exercises, let it be said, are here considered for what they are, an intense spiritual experience. They are not, in their purest form, a method of recharging a run-down psyche, or a series of spiritually inspiring talks. Hence it is only to be expected that those who look for some sort of psychological boost from their retreat will find Ignatius' instructions on prayer inapplicable to themselves. Ignatius was a man who knew how to adapt his methods to particular needs, and his Exercises are for those who wish seriously to find the will of God, not for those who want inspiration without tears. Great-hearted generosity is a prerequisite for making the Exercises; it is not their final product. The spiritual experience of the Exercises is intended to refine, intensify and direct enthusiasm, not to arouse it. It is a means of firmly implanting on the ontological level of faith, what has been conceived on a psychological level of religious enthusiasm. It is from this point of view that we mean to consider prayer in the Spiritual Exercises and it is only in this perspective that the instructions given about prayer in the Exercises are fully applicable.

It is important to bear in mind that the spiritual experience of the

retreat opens the way to an experience of prayer which may not follow the normal work-a-day pattern. This does not mean that it has no relation to the prayer of our working lives. A man who subjects himself for a time to a serious physical toning-up will obviously experience its benefit as he runs after his bus or climbs a flight of steps. Similarly the man who submits to an intensified spiritual experience should inevitably experience greater ease in finding God in his ordinary life. There should be less hesitation, less fatigue, greater experience of how to go about things, which will make subsequent routine exercises of prayer more profitable. Devotion for Ignatius was not a burst of adolescent enthusiasm, spectacular but inevitably short-lived; it was ease and facility in finding God in all things. In the Exercises, the retreatant must struggle like Jacob wrestling with the angel, determined always to find God and not to let him go before he imparts that blessing which puts the divine mark on his life.

There is no doubt in Ignatius' mind that the time of retreat is going to mean a time of temptation. There is going to be a struggle, in which the retreatant becomes the battlefield for the forces of good and evil. The absence of any experience of a struggle indicates that the retreatant is not giving himself to the Exercises as he should.¹ This struggle does not disrupt prayer in any way; but it is an essential element of it, as for example in the contemplations on the passion of Christ.² Furthermore it is important to note that this interior struggle has nothing to do with intellectual difficulties. The retreat is not a time for resolving theological perplexities, but for deepening faith. The understanding gained from the prayer of the Exercises is the understanding of the heart rather than that of the head: an interior relish and appreciation.³ It is precisely to counteract any temptation to turn the retreat into a time for intellectual speculation that Ignatius insists on open-mindedness and receptivity in the retreatant. The retreatant must be ready to give the retreat director the benefit of a charitable interpretation of anything he may say. And there is a corresponding obligation on the director not to burden the retreatant with his own ideas; his explanations are to be brief and to the point.⁴ This mutual respect is part of the reverence which Ignatius stresses so often as the fundamental attitude of prayer. The director must be careful not to interpose himself between the Creator and his creature; and the retreatant, in his ef-

¹ Exx 6.

² Exx 195.

³ Exx 2.

⁴ Exx 2.

forts to dispose himself to co-operate with God, must be prepared to be helped by the director.

As far as prayer is concerned, the first thing the retreatant has to do is to accept the programme laid down by the Exercises. The normal retreatant in good health will find himself faced with five hours of meditation, Mass, and two examinations of conscience of a quarter of an hour each, as his daily stint of prayer. Modifications may be made, but they depend on the physical and mental state of the retreatant and not on any assessment of his gifts of prayer; and they are to be made only with the approval of the director. Many people would consider such a programme of prayer beyond their capacities: one which, considered in cold blood, would daunt most of us. This serves to remind us that the Exercises cannot be undertaken in cold blood, but only in the warmth of enthusiasm for Christ. The act of faith which inspires the undertaking of the Exercises includes the confidence that God will reply with infinite generosity to any movement of generosity which he evokes in man. The feeling that of ourselves we are incapable of so much prayer is to be seen not as a reason for discouragement but as part of our act of faith in God. It should lead to an awareness that prayer is the divine initiative in which we are called to co-operate: it is God's gift and our need. It is spiritually most healthy to realise from the start that in prayer we do not seek to satisfy ourselves: not even by deciding for ourselves how much praying we are going to do.

Nor are the Exercises intended to help us to prove or disprove our ability to pray; as if that were something which depended entirely upon ourselves. They are meant to bring before us our need for prayer; and, by a disciplined experience of prayer, to teach us that only God who inspires that need can adequately fulfil it. The times for prayer are laid down for the retreatant. Nothing is left to personal whim. It is true that Ignatius is always ready to make adaptations; but only where the external circumstances of the retreatant's condition seem to require them. Even the retreatant who wants to prolong his prayer beyond the hour laid down in the Exercises is not to be allowed to do so as the fancy takes him. Such prolongation is approved not when prayer is easy, but when it is difficult; and even then it is to be for only a short while.¹

One technical term summarises the essential character of the prayer of the Exercises: the word *affective*. The prayer of the Exercises

¹ Exx 13.

aims at purifying, co-ordinating, and directing the whole range of the affective capacity of the human heart in the service of divine charity. In his prayer the retreatant must confront the sorrows, joys, fears and loves which are present in all his practical attitudes and decisions. No greater travesty of Ignatian spirituality can be imagined than that which makes of the prayer of the Exercises an unfeeling, purely rational, and coldly cerebral discourse with the Deity. Ignatius never attempted to replace man's heart of flesh with one of stone. He would have the retreatant pray to weep tears of repentance, to rejoice intensely with the risen Christ, to feel broken with the suffering Christ, to share the heart-broken loneliness of the blessed Virgin. All this demands that prayer should be affective, a prayer of the heart, but a heart which seeks its affective richness not in itself but in Christ. Ignatian prayer does not excise the heart. It disciplines it; so that man learns to fear, rejoice, love and mourn in Christ and with Christ, instead of merely indulging his own emotions, even when these seem to be pious. During the meditations on sin, for example, even the pious feelings of joy inspired by the thought of heaven are rigorously excluded.¹ Prayer is the conforming of oneself to Christ, the putting on of the mind and heart of the Saviour.

It is only to be expected that the prayer of the Exercises be affective; for the Exercises deal with the ill-ordered attachments of the human heart which inhibit man's search for the will of God.² Ignatius is not concerned merely with the irrational emotional outbursts which lead to immediate sin. He seeks to uncover the deep-rooted and often unconscious attachments of the human heart, the real obstacles to the working of God's will in man. His own experience had taught him that unconscious prejudices and preferences, irrational fears, unrecognised regrets, all these warp the human heart out of its true likeness to Christ and ultimately lead to sin. The Exercises are designed to bring to the surface such fundamental disorders, and to correct them by supplanting their inward-turning egotistical bias with an attachment to Christ. Love, as Ignatius often said, is the impetus of the soul. If that impetus is to lead to God, love of self must be replaced by love of Christ. It is no use exorcising the demon of selfishness unless the gap left is filled with the positive attachment to Christ.

Affective prayer, of course, is not without its own dangers. Just because it is affective it can become mere emotionalism. There is

¹ Exx 78.

² Exx 1,21.

always the danger of estimating the value of prayer in terms of the emotional experience it may or may not provoke. Affective prayer, in Ignatius' own day, had often degenerated into illuminism; and he had to defend himself continually against the accusation that he was an illuminist. Such accusations are obviously false and a study of the Exercises is sufficient to refute them. For Ignatius does give a standard by which prayer is to be judged. The retreatant is to find his peace of soul in the thought that he has spent the full hour in prayer: that and nothing more. Here is a standard which is completely objective, since its verification depends on the clock. No subjective impressions can interfere with it or change it. Fidelity to the time of prayer, and not its emotional or affective content, dictates the retreatant's fundamental reaction to prayer. The answer to the question 'Have I prayed well?' is made immediately objective when the question becomes: 'Have I spent the allotted hour in prayer?' The retreatant has to learn to find contentment when he can answer Yes! to this question. Subjective feelings are to be considered only in this context. I may feel that I have prayed badly; but that should not disturb my peace of soul. I may feel that I have prayed well; but those feelings are not the ultimate grounds for contentment. The retreatant judges himself on a concrete experience which nothing can change.

To take one's stand on the criterion proposed by Ignatius means separating oneself at the start from any feelings of disgust or weariness or dryness in time of prayer. These are defeated not by gritting the teeth and straining every nerve, but by the steady movement of the hands around the clock. Similarly to finish praying at the end of the hour means to detach oneself from any feelings of enjoyment, delight or satisfaction experienced in prayer. This is a safeguard against prayer developing into self-indulgence.

The wisdom of Ignatius' directive will be immediately evident to those who follow it faithfully. Many tired religious, who have to make an eight day retreat at the end of a long and fatiguing year of work, would find retreat prayer less fatiguing and less discouraging if they were to take their stand on this simple rule. But to do this demands that in a retreat we look for an intensification of our life of faith and not a psychological uplift. The primary act of faith, which situates the retreatant in his true position as a beggar before God, consists in offering to God a fixed amount of our time. We make of our material fidelity a prayer for greater faith.

A further education of affectivity is found in Ignatius' insistence on

reverence, especially at the beginning and at the end of each prayer. The approach to prayer is never hasty or unconsidered: 'Before I begin I shall remind myself where I am going and into whose presence; I shall run briefly over the exercise I have to do. Then making the third addition I shall begin the exercise'.¹ This third addition is: 'I shall stand for the space of a *Pater Noster*, one or two paces from the place where I am to meditate or contemplate, with my mind raised up to consider how God our Lord is looking at me etc., and I shall make a gesture of reverence or humility'.² Ignatius insists that before prayer the spirit should be restful and untroubled.³ The gesture of reverence prescribed in the third addition is meant to express with the body a deep and tranquil submission of spirit. At the end of each meditation there is a vocal prayer which ensures the same deliberateness as at the beginning. Then, after the end of each meditation, there is the quarter of an hour's reflection, inspired by the urge neither for self-examination, nor for introspection. It is a quarter of an hour which many find difficult; perhaps because it is not understood as part of the service of reverence which is due to God after prayer, It is not a continuation of prayer, but a serious assessment of reactions in prayer. The question to be answered is not so much: 'What have I got out of my prayer?' as: 'How has the Lord dealt with me and how have I behaved in my dealings with him?' 'Has my prayer been a reverent dealing with God?' Ignatius wanted the retreatant to attain to *familiaritas* with God; but this being at home with God must be based on the reverence which belongs to divine charity. God does not force himself on man;⁴ and man must model his dealings with God on God's dealings with him. Brusqueness, impatience and discouragement are destructive of true prayer because they eliminate reverence.

Ignatius has been badly misrepresented and misunderstood by those who term his preambles to prayer as so much unnecessary scaffolding. What he lays down as the preliminaries to meditation are not of any value in themselves without the attitude of reverence which they are intended to foster. It is no use performing them as if they were some sort of magic rite for summoning up the deity. They are meant to help the retreatant to realise that the whole experience of the Exercises must be penetrated with a profound spirit of adoration of God, whose will is being sought. Only he can reveal his will, and he will reveal it only when the fullness of time comes. Prayer is

¹ Exx 131.

² Exx 75.

³ Exx 239.

⁴ Cf. Exx 234, 335.

not a way of putting pressure on God. This may seem very obvious; but there is a constant temptation to introduce some sort of automatism in our dealings with God. We may not go to the lengths of 'chain prayers', or adopt the more superstitious attitudes towards novenas which infallibly produce their results; but there is always the danger of behaving as if prayer were a sort of *quid pro quo* relationship between man and God. This popular misunderstanding which inspires the frequent complaint, 'God never answers my prayers', remains in all of us to some extent. The divine Majesty demands that man express his desires with reverence and respect.¹ Before the newly born baby in the stable at Bethlehem it is the note of adoration and reverence which predominates.² Sentimentality would here betray a lack of respect. Before the majesty of God man must necessarily pull himself together, re-collect himself, and abandon any childishness in his affectivity. The prayer of faithful adoration is the prayer of the adult christian.

Another aspect of reverence is the single-minded purposefulness which Ignatius inculcates. The retreatant must concentrate on the moment without worrying about the past or the future. He is 'to work to achieve what he is looking for in the first week, as though he had no hope of gaining anything from the second week'.³ The first thing the retreatant has to do is to detach himself from any preoccupation with his own problems, even those he hopes to resolve during the retreat, and follow the path of the retreat. He must abandon the presumption that he knows what his problems are and submit to a process of purification before considering them. This abandonment leaves the way open for the initiative of God which is being sought, and rids prayer of many fruitless and untimely preoccupations.

So far we have been considering one or two of the more fundamental qualities of prayer as Ignatius sees it. We can now consider briefly what has been termed the Ignatian method of prayer. We must be careful to take the word 'method' according to Ignatius' own definition. In that part of the Exercises where he treats of 'methods' of prayer,⁴ he expressly states that what he is giving is not a method of prayer. Instead he speaks of ways of going about the spiritual exercise of praying: a pedagogy of prayer, not a series of cut and dried formulae. The way of praying associated with his name, that used in the first exercise of the first week wherein the retreatant

¹ Exx 3.

² Exx 114.

³ Exx 11; cf. 4, 89, 133.

⁴ 238ff.

uses the three powers of his soul, memory, understanding and will, is not the only way of praying given in the Exercises, nor is it the principal way. In fact it is used only twice. In all, Ignatius gives the broad outlines of some fourteen different ways of subjecting oneself to the experience of prayer.

No one is more supple than Ignatius when he deals with prayer, or more simple. He lays down sound theological and practical principles to guide the retreatant in the way in which he sets about prayer; but in the development of prayer he leaves great liberty. 'Two things should be noted. 1. If whilst kneeling I find what I want I shall stay in that position; similarly if when I am lying prostrate etc. 2. I shall remain restfully at the point where I find what I want without any anxiety about going further, until it has satisfied me.'¹ This directive, given in the first days of the Exercises, encourages freedom in prayer. Ignatius may propose a certain number of points in each meditation; but these are no more than helps to prayer. The last thing he wants is a sense of compulsion about getting through all the points: 'In each contemplation a fixed number of points have been proposed: for example three, five, etc. But he who is contemplating can increase or diminish these, if he finds that suits him better'.² All this is but the application of the principle he has laid down at the beginning: 'It is not, in fact, knowing a great deal which fills and satiates the soul, but the understanding and appreciation of things in one's heart'.³ Any rigidity of method comes not from Ignatius but from those who misunderstand him.

Nevertheless, the way of praying with the three powers of the soul does seem to many to be artificial; and, by way of conclusion, it will be well to examine it more closely. Ignatius is trying to help his retreatant to arrive at true sorrow for sin: a detestation and abhorrence of sin. He knew from his own experience in his early days at Manresa that sorrow for sin has many treacherous counterfeits, and that the contemplation of one's sins can lead to despair and scruples unless it is wisely directed. It is easy for the devout soul to whip up an emotional froth which has little lasting effect and practically no substance. It is also difficult to avoid introspection when examining the sinfulness of one's life. With all this in mind, Ignatius situates the meditations on sin on as objective a level as possible. His first presentation is of the history of sin in general. History requires a certain amount of remembering what happened; but history is not a ques-

¹ Exx 76; cf. 254.

² Exx 228.

³ Exx 2.

tion of remembering facts; facts are significant, but they must be understood; to understand a thing does not necessarily mean to accept it; the will must play its part, moving the affections, so that I adhere to an unflattering truth which I would rather forget. Ignatius' method, like all his methods, comes out of his subject and is not imposed on it. The way of praying with the three powers of the soul has here multiple advantages. It blocks any emotionalism about sin. Feelings are put in their proper place: under the control of the will. The whole man is engaged in prayer. The retreatant is brought before the mystery of sin in all its historical and cosmic dimensions and in the context of faith. Irrespective of whether he himself has committed grave sins, this in itself is enough to inspire horror for sin. In other words, sorrow for sin is not founded on the subjective 'I have sinned', but on the nature of sin itself. It is the sorrow of Christ, crucified for sin. Ignatius' prayer with the three powers of the soul is an instruction on how to meditate on sin and avoid that pernicious seeming-sorrow which turns the soul in upon itself.

It is impossible to do justice to the prayer of the Exercises in a few short pages. To do so it would be necessary to follow the whole movement of the Exercises and the pedagogy of prayer which accompanies it. The principle of repetition of meditations, the prayer of the five senses, discernment and prayer: all this would require a lengthy treatment.¹ However, the little that has been said may help towards understanding that the Exercises of Ignatius are a time for experimenting peacefully in prayer. Each has to find out what suits him and to be content with that, even though it may seem to be a very humble and down to earth process. The essential of prayer is that we should find God who is seeking us. We shall attain to him on the level he chooses and on no other. But once we have found him there we can be certain that we shall find him elsewhere: in all things, as Ignatius was so fond of saying.

¹ We hope to treat further of retreat prayer in our July issue, 1964. *Ed.*