

From the Ignatian Tradition

LEARNING TO PRAY

An unknown Monk of Montserrat

In 1553 Ignatius dictated for his Reminiscences (§17) the following:

After his arrival in Montserrat, having said a prayer and come to an arrangement with the confessor, he [Ignatius] made a general confession in writing, and the confession lasted three days. He also arranged with the confessor that he should give orders to have the mule [which had brought him from Loyola] collected, and that his sword and dagger should hang in the church at the altar of Our Lady. And this was the first person to whom he revealed what he had resolved, because up till then he had not revealed it to any confessor.

While it is good to know that Ignatius took such good care of his mule, one regrets that he did not say more about his relations with Dom Jean Chanon, or 'Fray Juan Cañonees' as Pedro Ribadeneira calls him in a letter bearing witness to the spiritual instruction that Ignatius received from the monk. And in particular, whether he was introduced to a work with the title Ejercitatorio ('Book of Exercises'), composed by the previous Abbot of Montserrat (1493–1510), García de Cisneros. Fortunately a Spanish Jesuit, Javier Melloni, has now published a short work that may provide some clues to understanding the development of Ignatian spirituality. This very short treatise (calling itself a 'tratadico') is a summary presentation ('Compendio') of the fuller work by the Abbot. Fr Melloni argues convincingly that the differences between the longer work and the Compendio are best explained by the suggestion that the latter is not the work of Abbot Cisneros himself, but of someone else who has not been identified. And, curiously enough, one of the main differences is that in the shorter work the final section is clearly written

not so much for experienced monks but for those who are starting out on the spiritual road. The following extract is intended to give a taste of the text that may have been set before Ignatius, or at least explained orally to him, in the instruction he received from his confessor.

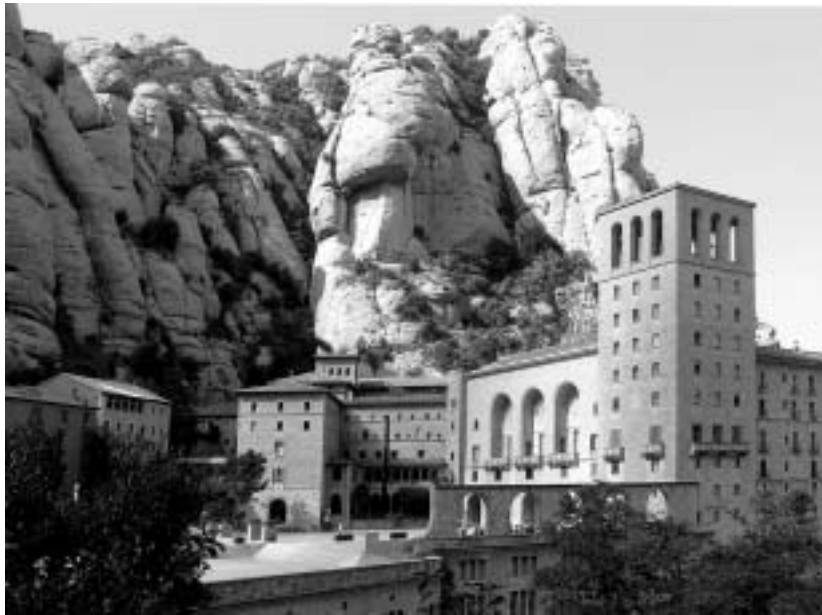
A word of warning should be added: the earliest printed copy of the Compendio found so far dates from 1555, long after Ignatius' departure from Montserrat. But, argues Fr Melloni, an earlier edition may have been lost, or the work—only a few pages after all, just like the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius in their original state—may have existed already in manuscript. Again, even if one is prepared to admit the direct influence of the Compendio, this is not to diminish the personal contribution that Ignatius made as he drew up his own 'Book of Exercises'.

***Rules and Advice for Those Who Are Not Experienced in Prayer,
and Which May Be of Service for Those Who Make the 'Exercises'
Contained in this Brief Treatise***

Initial remarks

[468] Firstly, a devout person, before getting down to prayer, should make ready in two ways: one way concerns God, and the other concerns oneself. In relation to God, one should consider briefly the lofty majesty of God, adored and praised by hundreds of thousands of angels who fear and tremble before Him; also that in comparison with Him everything created is like a tiny weight that one adds to a pair of scales, and that everyone before Him might as well not exist. As for the one who starts to pray, his or her thought should be that if the whole universe taken together is of so little weight, how much less is one before Him, and that this minuscule nothingness is what has risen up against God by committing sin and is packed full of endless wretchedness, defects and ignorance. These considerations will make one humble, realising in Whose presence one is.

[469] Again, the person who sets about praying and meditating should do as little children do; as soon as they find something, they go with it to their mother. Just so, when making one of these exercises, if somebody comes across something in the meditation that moves to



The monastery at Montserrat

devotion, or to knowledge of God, or to praise of Him, or to wonder at His perfection or His lofty judgments, that person should go with it to God, giving Him thanks, requesting favours, offering Him praise, in accordance with what one feels. But still, one has to be careful not to be diverted too far by small happenings, nor to lose the thread of the meditation.

[470] One should also be warned that prayer is not undertaken for one's own consolation and enjoyment, but in order to be well disposed to have greater knowledge and to love God. Otherwise, one would be looking for one's own gain rather than for the honour of God, and very serious harm can befall those who act in that way: later, when they receive no delight and consolation, they abandon the exercise.

[471] Be careful also not to tell everyone what God may have communicated to you in prayer—such as devotion or tears or insights—unless it is to a person whom you should keep informed of your experiences, so that you may be taught; and even then, with caution, lest the devil takes away through vainglory the fruit of your progress.

[472] Should anyone call on you while you are praying and feeling devotion, or blessed with tears, go out to meet the person and deal with them, keeping your face calm and without giving signs of what you were doing.

[473] All this is something that you should take care of when you are beginning, because after some time you will want all the glory, honour and praise simply for God, and you will realise that all you deserve is a sense of confusion.

[474] Another thing to bear in mind is that before any meditation there should be some *lectio* (holy reading), and the latter should be about things that can help you to reform and improve spiritually, and that can provide you with knowledge of God; moreover, although all that has been included in this little treatise—following the order of the Three Ways, the Purgative, the Illuminative and the Unitive, and that of the life and passion of Christ—can be of great benefit for meditation, do not because of it cease to make the most of other holy readings from sacred Scripture.

[475] Keep therefore to this rule and system: as long as you do not know by heart the texts that are to be used for meditation each day, make sure that you read each of them several times, very slowly and attentively, so that when you take up your position for doing the exercise, the text will be like the *canto fermo* around which God, using your mind, constructs the counterpoint.

On Development in Mental Prayer

[476] When you happen, while reading sacred Scripture, to come across some words or actions of God that display His mercy, or generosity, or patience, or gentleness—for example when He says through Ezekiel, 'The sinner's death is none of my contriving! I would have him leave his sinning, and live on' (Ezekiel 33:11); or when He says through Jeremias, 'The husband who finds his wife in adultery, leaving her let him never more return to her; however, although you have denied me and committed many sins, return to me and I will welcome you' (cf. Jeremiah 3:1); or when in the Holy Gospel you read of the kindness with which He would welcome sinners, cure the sick, and, moved by pity, give food on the mountainside to those who followed Him; when He preached or prayed on your behalf; and finally,

everything that He did and suffered for you. Whenever any phrase of this sort moves you, allow your affection to dwell there and stop for a while before God, praising and blessing Him, or asking for some condescension similar to what you have read. And in this way what you read will do you good, making you ready both to enter into prayer and to undertake any other of these 'exercises'. A person who wants to follow and serve God should therefore always have a little notebook full of the sweet and gentle words of God that one



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Crucifix by Josep Llimona, Montserrat

finds in the sacred Scriptures, so that one can recall them. Anyone who does this will see by experience that God gets in touch.

[477] Following on the *lectio* comes the meditation. You should be aware that someone who reads, but does not make use of what has been read, is like someone who has had a good meal, but later fails to digest it and vomits it out again. The holy *lectio* provides us with the food of doctrine; the meditation has to digest it and draw sustenance out from it, and from this the will can make the resolve which lasts. While this goes on, each should receive what is one's due, so to God go praise, blessing, love and glory. This is what we should try to do in each exercise. Putting it in another way: the *lectio* is where the treasure is hidden, meditation digs for it, *oratio* (prayer) draws it out, contemplation puts it on show, and the will, full of joy and delight, distributes it.

[478] As for meditation, you should take note that on occasion it is about things that can be represented imaginatively, like the various events in the life and passion of Christ, or the torments of Hell, or the

final judgment, or the glory of paradise, or the greatness, beauty and strength of created things. At other times it is about things that belong more to the understanding than to the imagination, as when we reflect on the perfections of God, such as His omnipotence, His infinite goodness and wisdom, etc.; or on His blessings. This is called intellectual meditation, because this sort of meditation is an act of the understanding, busy and anxious in seeking out and considering the nature, order, condition and truth of something. The other is called imaginative [meditation] and is the sort of excogitation by which the imagination does not rest but goes around from one area to another.

[479] Contemplation consists of an act or consideration by the understanding which freely and clearly tries to grasp the highest Truth, which is God, in so far as it is possible to know Him in this life.

[480] Let us give some examples of these acts, so that someone who is beginning can find the way to what he or she is wanting. First, concerning those things that can be imagined, so that we may move from what is imperfect to what is more perfect. [481] on Death; [482] on final judgment; [483] on hell; [484–485] on the passion of Christ; [486] on heaven.

[487] Now it will be good to explain briefly some example of how you should set about meditation of things that cannot be presented with the imagination, and that belong only to the understanding, such as the blessings given by God, or His goodness, patience and mercy. [488] on God's blessings; [489] on God's goodness.

Closing Words of Advice

[490] So that the beginner will not feel constrained to follow too closely the examples and method of meditation given above, one should be aware, [firstly,] that one should not think any of this is to be taken as a system and rule which always has to be observed, but if the Holy Spirit takes one along a shorter route—setting the will alight and moving one to devotion, to contempt for oneself and the pursuit of virtue—then that way is to be followed, leaving the other to one side; God does not withhold His grace from the person who gets ready, and it is to that grace, and not to our efforts that any progress is to be attributed.

[491] A second word of advice is that one need not be always tied to the meditations appointed for the different days if a person realises that more good is to be gained from some other subject of consideration; however, the exercise on the life and passion of Christ should never be put to one side.

[492] In the third place, one should not stay stuck, as many do, thinking about their sins, for these are now swallowed up in the immense sea of divine Mercy. And this word of advice comes from St Bernard, because such thoughts, quite apart from reviving in such persons some temptations, do not allow one to alleviate the sadness felt in the will by means of the sweetness of love, so that one can enjoy oneself in God and become one with Him, which is what, above all, one should be aiming for. Nor is it true that the servants of God are always occupied with such low matters, being always sad. Neither should they be like some others, who from the first day, without wings, still want to fly up to the heights, from which they can easily fall ... they are building houses without foundations.

[493] A fourth piece of advice is that a person doing these 'exercises' should take care to avoid any excessive or inquisitive speculation, as otherwise one can go to excess and fall into vainglory. One should try to undertake all this business with simplicity, relying on the feelings and affections of the will, cutting short excogitation rather than extending speculation; Scripture urges us to experience the goodness and perfection of God with simplicity of heart (Matthew 11:25; Luke 10:21). Experience shows that this is true: if somebody is enjoying some spiritual sweetness while contemplating and wants to insist on looking speculatively and inquisitively at some aspect of God, the devotion is lost, and the reason for one's happiness disappears. One has to realise (as a certain learned writer explains) that the relation between the understanding and the will has to be like that of a wet-nurse to an infant she feeds: after she has masticated some piece of food, she puts it into the child's mouth so that the infant can taste and draw nourishment from it—something the child could not do unless the wet-nurse had first masticated and eaten from it. Well, that is how our understanding has to relate to our will: it has to grind and masticate spiritual truths, and then pass them on to the will so that the latter can taste and enjoy them.

*Experience the
goodness of God
with simplicity of
heart*

[494] As a fifth word of advice, for anyone who is in danger of straining and cannot last much time in prayer, this much at least is possible: one can pray in short bursts, and as many times as is possible, keeping one's mind always occupied with God or with some incident in the life and Passion of Christ, going and coming in the presence of God, from whom help is to come, with occasional sighs and longings of love, exclaiming—more with the heart than with one's mouth—phrases like: 'Oh my God, help me, as you can see what my needs are', or 'Look at me with eyes of pity, with those eyes with which you looked at Peter', or saying, 'Do not despise me nor reject me from your worship because of my wickedness; enlighten me so that my enemy may not say that he has won victory over me', or again, 'Let me love you, my God'. 'Oh highest and infinite Good, when will all my heart become completely yours in your service?' These or other phrases can be used: the saints call them 'ejaculatory' prayers because they are shot upwards like arrows carried with our desires and affection to the worship of God, and they always return with good effect. They can be used when one is walking, eating, on waking at night, when the clock strikes an hour, or while one is strolling in the garden and gazing on a clear sky, or looking at a beautiful flower. Later, one goes with one's praise to the One who deserves it. In this way there is no straining of effort and a person's soul is attentive and mindful of God.

[495] A sixth thought to bear in mind is that if you do not find much devotion while doing an exercise, but on the contrary feel dry and tepid, and no matter how much you turn over thoughts and meditate, you do not seem to feel any affective devotion, do not be sad about this nor think that you have wasted your time, when you have tried your best. Admittedly, very often this condition comes about because of our own fault: either we have been distracted, or have been eating and drinking in too dainty a fashion, or because you have not been properly humble before God, putting all your hope in Him. But should that not be the case, do not worry; when God blesses you with relish in prayer, it looks as if you are serving Him in return for something; but when, in spite of dryness and boredom, you persist and persevere in your prayer, then it seems that you are serving Him out of your own pocket. And just as the profit one makes when there has been no investment is more highly prized than one that comes from one's capital, so you can hope for a



*Stained-glass window depicting St Ignatius,
Montserrat*

double dose of consolation from Our Lord when He decides that it will be good for you.

[496] A seventh word of advice: the person who wants to serve God should take care to avoid two things: (1) such a person should not follow those who on the one hand would like to enjoy relish and joy in their prayer and be counted in the group of the 'spirituals', and on the other hand would like to eat and drink well, and have their entertainments and their chats, and also be very civilised and particular about their clothes, and books, and pictures, and monastic cells; those who, to sum

up, would like to find their joy in God, but would not like to lose their bite of the world. The reason is that God is not wont to send his consolations to the household that already enjoys its own pleasures, but rather to places where there is affliction, hunger, lack of sleep, voluntary poverty undertaken out of love. There is incompatibility between light and darkness, between the divine and the sensual, between spiritual consolation and fleshly satisfaction. Therefore, who wishes to enjoy the one has to reject the other. (2) Neither should such a person follow those who want to deprive themselves even of what is necessary, and who then are brought to a state where, having deprived themselves of what is necessary and proper, later have to indulge themselves and get dispensation for things, which would not have been allowed if they were not in such a mess. Rather the servant of God should say: 'The consolations of this earth—meaning those that are not necessary—

were not to my liking; I remembered my God and there found consolation—meaning that I conducted myself with discretion’.

[497] The eighth and final piece of advice is that someone who is exercising himself or herself in prayer should not make an excuse for leaving it, saying that one has many duties, and one needs to study and to look up certain things, because one will find that the holy Fathers were able by their efforts to cope with both one and the other: they dealt with problems in the world and were able to make much gain and profit for their souls interiorly. Without any study, St Antony acquired understanding of sacred Scripture. Moreover one’s obligations are never such that they do not leave room for even an hour in which a person may bring to mind God and his blessings and promises. From this one may draw the energy and strength to do much more in accomplishing one’s duties in a single hour than in many when one does not take refuge in God. Nor should one think that time spent in prayer is lost for study, since David never attended lectures and he says that he understood more than the old and their teachers; the reason he gives is that his ‘exercise’ was to meditate on the law of the Lord (Psalm 118:174). However, neither should one abandon study and necessary works of charity, because God made use not only of Mary, but also of Martha.