

THE PRAYER OF FAITH SEEKS UNDERSTANDING

Simple Prayer and the Ignatian Exercises

Tom Shufflebotham

WHEN I WAS 27, my Provincial inflicted me as a teacher—untrained—on schoolboys in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. I say ‘untrained’ because a degree in history was no substitute for teacher training; moreover my pupils did not have the sort of speculative interest in pedagogy which might have caused them to observe patiently how the apprentice would handle his empty toolkit. I was unused to the heat and the altitude and, as just at that time the school was badly understaffed, I was quickly exhausted. In the mad round of chores there was no time for conscious prayer except for ten or fifteen minutes before throwing myself into bed. Flopping on a kneeler in the chapel I would immediately nod off. Thinking that this would not do, as God needed me awake, I would retreat to the lawn under the stars and walk up and down. I thought that if I could not manage first-class prayer, I had better take out my rosary, foolishly seeing this as third-class prayer. I was so tired that the beads felt like lumps of lead sliding through my weary fingers.

Quite literally, I now regard that as the best prayer I have ever prayed. It forced me to face the dilemma: either this is not prayer at all—or I have to take St Paul seriously: ‘the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words’ (Romans 8:26). Since I want to pray, the Holy Spirit is praying within me. Why demand more?

Returning after three years to Heythrop College to study theology, I clung to this conclusion but without much reflecting on it. After the theology in my Jesuit training came our year of tertianship and an experience of making the full Spiritual Exercises (for the second time—I had already made them as a novice): this for various reasons left me dissatisfied and, so to speak, none the wiser.

What to Make of the Experience?

In the following years I returned to schoolmastering, but also directed retreats during some of the vacation time. Now, at last, my African experience fell into place—and, incidentally, showed me why the word ‘director’ is less satisfactory than St Ignatius’ ‘the one who gives the Exercises’. Ignatius precisely did not want to be too ‘directive’: for him it was vital to ‘allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord’ (Exx 15).

My growing convictions were confirmed for me when I had on retreat a 73-year-old woman who was patently a good and sensible person, generous in the service of others, and who, over all the years, had been persevering doggedly in prayer. She did not seem depressed, but a little sad and resigned. Here she was, making her umpteenth annual retreat, but both now and throughout the year prayer was always ‘dry’, ‘empty’ and—despite persistent effort—‘getting nowhere’: it felt as if she was somehow ‘doing it wrong’ or God was not on her wavelength. She was a bit of an artist and fond of gardens. I advised that she feel free to make lots of use of the outdoors and let God speak to her through nature. I suggested two or three texts, but with the advice to loiter wherever a verse spoke to her. A week later she looked transformed. Instead of trying to marshal thoughts on which to base what she remembered of an Ignatian structure, she had—as it were—gently and slowly sucked one verse from the psalms like a lozenge while handing over the controls to the Holy Spirit.

A fortnight later I received a package. It contained a dozen notelets that she had made with drawings of a flower and a butterfly, and the



text ‘you give breath, fresh life begins, you keep renewing the world’ (from Psalm 104, which many of us would know from the Missal as ‘Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth’). This was the verse that had so held her.

Towards Expressing the Inexpressible

I began to realise that there was nothing unusual in this: it fitted well with the simplicity of the gospel references to prayer; and that passage from St Paul (Romans 8); and the constant insistence of St Augustine that ‘it is your heart’s desire that is your prayer’; and the traditional ‘if you cannot desire, then desire to desire’. And I would reflect on the way that so many of the deepest things in life, so much of human relationships, grow by simplification rather than complexity. There was encouragement, too, in many authors of that time. One book that was important to me was *The Prayer of Faith* by Leonard Boase: others, of course, had already used the expression, but here was Boase entitling a book thus in 1950, and reworking it after Vatican II in 1976, at just the time when I was doing my own modest pondering.¹

Referring to the title, *The Prayer of Faith*, Dermot Mansfield remarks,

It is a good description, conveying the positive meaning of the condition and experience of many people who pray, who find themselves unable to concentrate in prayer, who try to accept as best they can their helplessness and offer the time to God in faith. Once it may not have been so for them, but was good and satisfying. Then gradually it changed, and the earlier sense of satisfaction began to evaporate. And usually now it is a matter of giving time, making space, being faithful. For periods, perhaps, this can be relatively easy, but it can also be very difficult and almost dreaded in anticipation.²

Mansfield’s 1980s article ‘The Prayer of Faith, Spiritual Direction, and the Exercises’ was the best of all, I think. Within a few pages he encapsulates the experience of so many and gives wise advice to retreat directors in the Ignatian tradition. The British Jesuit Jack Gillick puts it this way:

¹ Leonard Boase, *The Prayer of Faith* (Wimbledon: Apostleship of Prayer, 1950) and (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976).

² Dermot Mansfield, ‘The Prayer of Faith, Spiritual Direction, and the Exercises’, *The Way*, 25/4 (October 1985), 315–324, here 316. Joseph Veale, himself highly regarded as a writer and speaker on Ignatian spirituality, rated the Mansfield article ‘the best treatment of the question I know of’ (‘Manifold Gifts’, in *Manifold Gifts* [Oxford: Way Books, 2006], 24 n.6). The literature, of course, is enormous, but I would particularly recommend Thomas H. Green, *When the Well Runs Dry* (Notre Dame, In: Ave Maria, 1979) and *Drinking from a Dry Well* (Notre Dame, In: Ave Maria, 1991). Green’s esteem for the Carmelite classics along with St Ignatius comes through to advantage.

The significant thing is the *wanting* to pray—then finding it impossible when one goes to pray: it won't work. So one looks for other 'techniques' Nothing seems to work So prayer is our biggest and most constant act of faith—and it is by faith that we grow.³

So far I have been recalling experiences and writings from the later decades of the last century. Since that time I have had the impression that writing or talking about the 'prayer of faith' has become markedly more rare, especially in Ignatian retreat circles, and have often wondered why this should be so. Actually, I doubt if the praying as such has altered (people still speak of it in private), but open discussion seems to have subsided and I am reflecting on possible reasons for this.⁴

Earthing Spirituality

Praying in any particular way, or style, or 'school' will always be open to the suspicion that it is esoteric, a fad, 'out of this world', for people who have nothing better to do and who are inclined to prefer such fads and hobbies to the real Christian business of loving God in your neighbour.

'Like Goering whenever he heard the word "culture", I find myself reaching for my revolver when I hear the word "spirituality". Nowadays that means that my hand is rarely off the holster.' So wrote Eamon Duffy twenty years ago.⁵ Although I have spent 26 years of my Jesuit life in one centre of Ignatian spirituality or another, I take no offence at what Duffy has to say; his writings (particularly his university sermons) have helped nourish my own spirit. I take it that he values what you and I

³ John Gillick, in private correspondence. In similar vein Alban Goodier wrote: 'Every soul comes to prayer wanting something; it may not know what that "something" is, it may not "know what it asks for when it prays", but it longs and desires nevertheless; and often, for very many indeed, the whole of prayer consists in the expression of that desire and longing—"My God, I want"—"What do you want?"—"I know not what I want, but I want"—In how many is this the prayer of their whole lives! Beautiful and powerful prayer, truly contemplative prayer, though such souls, because they seem to get no farther, think they do not pray at all.' (*St Ignatius Loyola and Prayer: As Seen in the Book of the Spiritual Exercises* [London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1940], 165.) Goodier's writings sprang from a profound wisdom and spirituality, which could easily be overlooked because of his rather quaint style and because his works on the life of Christ antedated Pius XII's unshackling of Catholic scriptural scholarship (Goodier died in 1939).

⁴ There are two very recent exceptions. Finbarr Lynch has followed up his book *When You Pray* (Dublin: Messenger, 2012) with *When You Can't Pray* (Dublin: Messenger, 2016), which has a very helpful section for directors. Lynch mentions the important possibility that the praying person may be best helped by pondering scripture (for example) *before* praying, but not worrying if in the actual prayer it seems to have evaporated. Michael Paul Gallagher's posthumous work *Into Extra Time* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2016) is particularly poignant and the more noteworthy because of his great insights into the cultures of non-belief and of youth. He writes, 'As life goes on many people experience more fog than clarity in their sense of God. But this fragility may be not only normal but fruitful, and the gateway to a different kind of prayer.' (51)

⁵ Eamon Duffy, 'Postscript: An Excess of Spirituality?' *Priests and People* (November 1997).

would understand by 'spirituality', but is put off by such faddism and escapism as may shelter behind the word. Even the word 'retreat' may sometimes be unfortunate and do a disservice to 'real' spirituality.

Maisie Ward put her finger on the problem in her introduction to the collected letters of the spiritual writer Caryl Houselander:

Reading recently a French collection of spiritual letters, I wondered why I found them so spiritless. Presently I realized that they were written as though from and to someone living in a vacuum. Other people, daily events and surroundings were ignored: one bodiless spirit was trying to lead another to the God who had created them bodiless. There is nothing to show that God had set this man and woman, priest and nun, in a world of people—people to be thought about, to be helped, to be made helpful, whose hands could be clasped in a fellowship intended by Him to lead men to Him as what St Thomas More might have called a merry company.⁶

Houselander's letters, by contrast, strikingly pass the test implied in Ward's final sentence: they are spiritual, but they are grounded in humanity. When prayer becomes the subject of writing and discussion we need to beware of making it sound esoteric, out of touch with real human life, or abstract or (perish the thought!) snobbish. But, generally speaking, Ignatian spirituality has avoided such criticism. Herein perhaps lies a partial answer to the question about the relative eclipse of the prayer of faith.

There has been a tendency to speak as if Ignatian prayer were coterminous with what is variously called 'Gospel Contemplation' or 'Ignatian Contemplation', and this latter way of praying has flourished, especially when introduced in retreat centres or in parish weeks of accompanied prayer. It can engage the mind and heart, develop a sense of the closeness of God and provide material for a fruitful meeting with a person's accompanier or 'director'; and it sits easily with reflection on daily life, and on larger issues, too. When it comes to writing or talking about the experience of prayer, the prayer of faith can seem colourless by comparison, impossible to pin down—even 'un-Ignatian'.

'Un-Ignatian'? It is time to confront the objection that the very words of Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises* imply that the emptiness and monotony experienced in the prayer of faith make it unsuitable for anyone intending to pray in the Ignatian way, and particularly for anyone making the Exercises:

⁶ Maisie Ward, 'Introduction', in *The Letters of Caryl Houselander: Her Spiritual Legacy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1965).

When the one giving the Exercises notices that the exercitant is not experiencing any spiritual motions in his or her soul, such as consolations or desolations, or is not being moved one way or another by different spirits, the director should question the retreatant much about the Exercises: Whether he or she is making them at the appointed times, how they are being made, and whether the Additional Directives are being diligently observed. The director should ask about each of these items in particular. (Exx 6)

Dermot Mansfield's article cited above confronts this objection and, in my view, responds to it satisfactorily:

... it might be good to mention why I consider that such an approach is in keeping with the intentions of Ignatius. For it could be felt that an insistence on the prayer of faith, based especially on the teaching of John of the Cross regarding our growth in grace, seems to deny the richness of a more active and imaginative prayer and is out of place in Ignatian apostolic spirituality.⁷ But I do not believe that this is the case. Rather, it is a question of noticing what is being opened up in the Exercises about prayer, and of appreciating the subsequent ways of God's leading, as really occur even in people whose lives are very active

In this way, the Exercises are being fulfilled in their deepest meaning, and there is no need to fear that some other path is being followed apart from that intended by Ignatius, who desired that those called to an active life would be truly contemplative.

Hence, he concludes: 'The director must beware especially of mistaken expectations which would force the retreatant to pray and report on the prayer in the more accepted manner'.⁸

St Ignatius is said by his friend and associate Pedro de Ribadeneira to have held that it is a great mistake to try to force others along one's own spiritual path. Often quoted is his advice to Francis Borgia in a letter dated 20 September 1548:

... what is best for each individual is that in which God Our Lord imparts Himself more fully, displaying His holiest of gifts and His spiritual graces. It is God who sees and knows what is better for a person, and God, knowing everything, shows the person the way forward.⁹

⁷ Conversely St John of the Cross instructed his novices on the Ignatian 'method' of gospel contemplation.

⁸ Mansfield, 'Prayer of Faith, Spiritual Direction, and the Exercises', 321–322. The late Michael Kyne used to remark that 'there seems to be a marked correlation between the expectations of the director and the reporting back of the directee'.

⁹ Ignatius to Francis Borgia, 20 September 1548, in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, edited and translated by Philip Endean and Joseph A. Munitiz (London: Penguin, 1996), 206.

As Joseph Veale remarked, ‘people pray in a thousand different ways’.¹⁰

I believe that Mansfield has given convincing reasons for holding both to Ignatius and to the prayer of faith without contradiction, though obviously retreat directors and (ongoing) spiritual directors will need sensitivity to avoid leading a person down one path if it is to another that he or she is being drawn. The compatibility of Ignatian spirituality with the prayer of faith is thrown into clearer relief if we take the historical background into account.

St Ignatius in His Time, We in Ours

Ignatius’ retreatants (those whom he was primarily targeting) would on average be much younger than ours. Obviously his fellow students at Paris University to whom he gave the Exercises were junior to himself; and some of the doctors and dons whom he would badger until they embarked on the Exercises would be no older than he was. In the years when Ignatius was the Jesuit General nearly half of those who entered the Society were under the age of 21 at their admission (and more than half under his successor Diego Lañez).¹¹ They would normally make the full Spiritual Exercises during their first year.

Compared with those making the full Exercises nowadays Ignatius’ retreatants would include relatively more people making a full Election of a state of life rather than aiming ‘to improve and reform’ (Exx 189) a state of life already chosen. Moreover they would normally not have made a retreat, short or long, before; most of ours have, some of them twenty, thirty or forty times. Ignatius’ retreatants would be more familiar with the outline of the life of Christ than most people today, but less familiar with *scripture* than our average retreatant (St Francis Borgia needed permission from Rome for even the Spanish Princess Regent to read the scriptures in the vernacular.)¹²

We know that Ignatius spent a very long time preparing his fellow student Francis Xavier to make the Spiritual Exercises, but clearly many of the retreatants that he and the early companions directed were jumping in at the deep end: they had not made a retreat before; probably vocal

¹⁰ Note also Exx 238–260, the ‘Three Ways of Praying’, especially the third linking simple prayer with rhythmic breathing.

¹¹ See *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, edited by George Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), 130 n. 2.

¹² Princess Juana’s request to make vows as a Jesuit was officially, but secretly, granted by Ignatius.

prayers and attendance at Mass were what had shaped them in so far as they *were* shaped, and Ignatius had to provide for them accordingly.

Such things are hard to judge, but I would argue that it is tricky to extrapolate from Ignatius' instructions in the Exercises about the movement of spirits to our own situation. His advocacy of review and reflection, and of repetition—'I should notice and dwell on those points where I felt greater consolation or desolation, or had a greater spiritual experience' (Exx 62)—surely applies always. But we need to reflect before drawing conclusions about people whose prayer sounds empty rather than lively, or suspiciously bland.

**The
development
of our faith-
relationship
with God**

Is it not the case that the fundamental task of our life—even if few people on the planet advert to it—is the deepening, the expansion, the development of our faith-relationship with God? Paul Edwards used to speak of the 'bright young clerics' whom Ignatius had mostly in mind when he was looking for his next retreatants in Paris.¹³ As Paul would also say, these had their foot on the first rung of the clerical ladder. Within a few years their baccalaureates or higher degrees and their family influence would bring them a lucrative benefice. The expansion of their faith-relationship with God was far from their minds; certainly its *implications* were far from their minds.

Imagine what would happen if such clerics succumbed to Ignatius' insistence and embarked on the Exercises. The effect on the best of them would most likely be dramatic, even shattering, as it was on Francis Xavier. As one of Xavier's biographers, James Brodrick, remarks, 'Never did the Spiritual Exercises prove more effectually their power to transform a man than during that September of 1534 when Francis wrestled in solitude with angels of light and darkness'.¹⁴ No wonder Ignatius looked for marked movements of the spirits. No wonder he told the director that if these did not surface, then discreet but careful enquiry should be made. Are they 'doing it right'? Are they giving the Holy Spirit a chance?

¹³ Paul Edwards served as Master of Campion Hall in Oxford, and later was a member of the team at St Beuno's Ignatian Spirituality Centre.

¹⁴ James Brodrick, *St Francis Xavier, 1506–1552* (London: Burns and Oates, 1952), 48. And another biographer, the indefatigable Georg Schurhammer, wrote: 'What Master Francis saw and experienced during these holy Exercises he was never again to forget. When he returned again to his companions after thirty days he was another man. Though he was the same cheerful and lovable companion as before, a holy fire illuminated his countenance. His heart was burning with an earnest longing and a holy love for the crucified Christ, his King and Lord' (*Francis Xavier, His Life, His Times* [Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1973–1980], volume 1, 233). The first of Schurhammer's four volumes covers over 700 pages, by which time the Apostle of the Indies has not yet left Europe!

Suppose, for example, one of those ‘bright young clerics’ in the sixteenth century was really being drawn by God on retreat to offer himself for lifelong missionary work in South America or Japan. One could fairly imagine that he would be thrilled, exhilarated by the ideal of imitating Christ and living Christ’s values in this way—and the next day (even the next hour) shaken at the thought of the practical implications of such a choice. His soul would become the battleground of the ‘diverse spirits’; in this case ultra-calm reflection would be surprising, and Ignatius would want some investigation.

But with most of our retreatants the case is different. The corresponding dramatic effect on them may well come in instalments, so to speak, over many years. Some of them will have made many, perhaps very many, retreats (my first one came at the age of thirteen, and it was in *some* real sense a serious retreat). Is not the same principle of gradualness true of human relationships and many other aspects of life? It is hardly surprising that Jules Toner, in his *Commentary on Saint Ignatius’ Rules for the Discernment of Spirits*, remarks:

At other times than the Spiritual Exercises, [Ignatius] is not in the least uneasy with those who do not experience many consolations, so long as they are praying as best they can, doing their work with a pure intention, seeking only God’s will in everything, and growing in ‘solid virtues’.¹⁵

There is no incompatibility between the prayer of faith and Ignatian spirituality. And with Toner’s last phrase the great majority of witnesses would agree: the test of our prayer lies in how we live our lives and how we treat other people outside the times of prayer, putting ourselves at the service of God who, in Christ, ‘was reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Corinthians 5:19).

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¹⁵ Jules Toner *Commentary on Saint Ignatius’ Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982), 185. This has implications for discernment among other things; but that is another story.