

IMAGINATIVE EXPERIENCE IN 'TWO STANDARDS'

DURING the assessment session at the end of a long retreat, a gallant and rather elderly nun remarked, 'I couldn't bear those compositions of place'. Then her face cleared and she added, 'Mind you, I loved using my imagination'. A chorus of agreement covered the apparent contradiction of the moment. Upon later discussion it emerged that, for most exercitants, composition of place had previously meant grappling to construct a scene where motionless cardboard figures struck pious poses; or alternatively, fighting off images culled from Old Masters, Zeffirelli's 'Jesus of Nazareth' or the annual harvest of 'kitsch' Christmas cards. The former were the product of the mind or reason and therefore, it was considered, were good. The latter were distractions and therefore bad. Yet consider the text of the Spiritual Exercises, and these over-simplistic categories collapse. Ignatius's directives are addressed neither to the reason nor to the conscious-recall faculty of the memory, but rather to the imagination. When the imagination is properly freed, it enables the exercitant to get in touch with his deepest self and come before God as a whole person.

For the imagination is like a computer print-out, as accurate as that, and giving comparable access to those spinning reels of data that have been accumulating within us since we were first 'knit together' in our mother's womb (Ps 139,13). Ignatius's directives seem to tap the right keys, elicit the right information:

See with the sight of the imagination the actual place . . . where Jesus Christ our Lord is found (Exx 47). See with the sight of the imagination the road . . . considering how long or wide it is, how smooth or bumpy such a way may be (Exx 112).

Do we regard the imagination which they would activate as something dangerous, wild, fanciful — and this in the name of science and reason? Or do we concede that God may move us where his deep speaks to our deep, and that we may indeed experience his movement in the visual and auditory material printed out by our imagination?

In this area, as much as in any other, Ignatius's insight was not bound by contemporary understanding of science, or more properly, natural philosophy. He bridged two worlds: the medieval, where fantasy, poetry and science combined, and Gossuin de Mes's *Discours sur le Monde* (statutory reading among the intellectual élite of Paris, the bedside book at

Montaigne and Sainte-Barbe) could contain a treatise on the music of the spheres written in decasyllabics. Likewise, the renaissance world from which the scientific revolution would be born, and Descartes and Pascal with their thinking, and thinking *needs* — for goodness' sake! — would discredit intuition and feeling. If anything, Ignatius prepared the third and modern world, and to ignore his formula now, as men jostle to buy copies of Watson's *Supernature*, 'journal' their way through to inner knowledge and healing, and strive to acquire 'self-congruence', is to fail to use the means he chose. Science and intuition, meaning and myth, the head and the heart, are inter-dependent and form the matter man must discern.

As medium within which this matter is conveyed through the tangle to the front of our minds, the imagination can be read, to continue the computer analogy, above all by the feelings. Hence the pattern; 'Imagine, see, visualize', and then, 'Pray to feel and know'. The process leads through what is experienced to what this is saying of God's workings, through storyline to dynamic. Repetition, the quintessence of the experiential method, leads to deeper insight and precludes deceptive fantasy, the enemy of all true imaginings.

The Two Standards

So much by way of introduction. As model to illustrate the process, here follows an account of an imaginative contemplation of one of Ignatius's key exercises: the Two Standards. The rubric calls us to gaze on Satan with his hideous, frightening face seated on a steaming fiery throne outside the city of Babylon, calling innumerable demons to his service, and scattering them throughout the world to work his pernicious purposes. Christ, in turn, from a field near Jerusalem, a place that is unsensational and filled with grace and beauty, chooses and sends apostles and disciples to every human type and condition. They are to commend poverty, the dishonour that comes from being misunderstood, and humility as the way in to all other virtues. The contemplation concludes with colloquies to our Lady, the Son and the Father begging for the grace to be found under Christ's standard: his demeanour, way and person one's own.

I saw Satan driving along in an ultra-modern car through the suburbs of a grid city which I already knew, from a previous contemplation, to be the domain of sin. He was leaning forward in his seat, issuing orders through a Telex terminal, the world at his fingertips, his eyes fixed on a digital clock where time raced on. Everything about him spoke with authority, and it emerged that he was chairman of a multi-national company called T. S. Inc. People imagined this stood for Total Securities Inc. Only Satan himself remembered that he had originally registered as Total Solutions.

Then I listened to what he was saying: 'Tell them poverty is something to be feared, that there are not adequate resources in the world, that all is not gift and therefore that hungry mouths represent a threat'. I glanced at his

hand where a coil of metal was held, apparently the company emblem. He was muttering something about meeting deadlines, and efficiency. I realized with a shock that the little devil messages he was transmitting by means of the Telex were directed to some third world country, and concerned the sale and implantation of devices aimed at destroying life at its most vulnerable, immediately upon conception. With the money obtained from the sale of these coils, I heard Satan move on to negotiate the purchase of their natural mineral resources from these same developing countries. He sowed a new fear in men's minds: 'You have your image, your honour to uphold', he warned them, 'And now your lives are in jeopardy, for other nations threaten you. Buy arms and protect yourselves'. With war, the people would accept those constraints upon their liberty which sacrifice in the name of honour can demand: black-out, curfews, restriction of movement, a censored press. Above all they would accept the vocabulary of holocaust, victim and martyr, and the waste of death at each other's hands. The metal coil had become the spring in every trigger. The final debasement, however, came when Satan flicked the switches and spoke to one of his subsidiaries, an insurance corporation. I found he was selling life insurance. 'Tell people', he said, 'that you will accept a satisfactory premium on all their goods; their homes, pictures, wives, cars. In the event of accident you will replace these with their cash equivalent. Effectively it does not matter if they have these items or hold their value'. I saw here the trap completely sprung. Death in the seedbed of life, death at one another's hands, had now become death of the spirit. All art, all relationships were meaningless where self-esteem was measured in terms of possessions, and autonomy thus assured.

With relief I turned to seek for Christ. I was walking down a road and saw a man with astonishingly curly hair standing by a gate that led to a cornfield. He had a nice tumble-down family Peugeot and offered me a lift. I glanced inside it and saw a child's sandal and a beer bottle top, obviously left behind by other passengers, and felt safe to accept. The back of the car was jammed full of seed and fertilizer catalogues and as we drove along, it transpired that this young man had inherited a large firm from his father. It specialized in grain and fertilizing chemicals and had worldwide interests. As we drove he kept pointing to the natural life about us. 'Look at those birds', or whatever, and then, like Hopkins with the bluebell, he painted their inscape and instress with words that caught the essence of the moment.

We approached the campus of some modern university, where, he explained, a symposium was to be held on world food resources. I was invited to join him and gladly assented. We went into a low, well-lit lecture theatre and I looked about me at the men and women who were Christ's companions. They came from every nation under heaven and were bound together not by a common preoccupation with the unequal distribution of resources (for that is all poverty is), but by love for the Lord. He stood up at the dais, took out a single sheet of paper from his briefcase and read just

three sentences to us. We received them in silence, but as he sat down again, it seemed right to question him. For he had said, 'I am the bread of life'. 'Unless a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it remains alone'. 'I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly'. He began to explain that all his gifts are gifts of life. He comes to our poverty as bread in the universal gift of himself. He comes where we experience misunderstanding, and shows that the cycle of life and death and life is a natural one, that we may be without fear: for he comes as seed. He comes above all as being, as the gift of life that is God's salvation, where we would cling to our pride and find there our own salvation.

The context of this contemplation was a Thirty Days retreat at St Beuno's in North Wales. It took place on the thirteenth day, with three repetitions, during which attention moved away from Satan to centre on Christ. The evening meditation was on the Three Classes of Men. Asked to describe my feelings then, I would have said a certain awe and surprise at the strength of what arose in me. Asked to describe them now, a conviction and confidence at what seems so utterly right. For so clear are the details in my memory that, at four months' remove, it is possible to recall them without reference to notes. As a devotee of card index and retrieval systems, I can now recognize that all the material lay in my databank or unconscious. After all, I have devoured articles on the arms race, glanced at advertisements for life insurance, lost sandals, passed the time of day in lecture theatres and, no doubt, dropped the odd beer bottle top. No amount of effort, however, would have enabled me simply to recall this flotsam and jetsam or indeed to impose a form on it. St Ignatius's text and the word 'multinational' which sprang wittily, or knowingly, through the tangle, served to release the imagination.

God made the angels to show him splendour — as he made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But man he made to serve him wittily, in the tangle of his mind.

(Robert Bolt: *A Man for all Seasons*, Act II).

And so strong is the imagination that it provides a visual presentation of Christ's standard and that of Satan, in terms of which all subsequent contemplations of the Spiritual Exercises can be prayed, and life in turn be lived. The basic insight is that God is labouring in this world to bring life into being, that he wills the salvation of mankind, that all is gift, and that love casts out fear: all this may be lived under the standard of his Son. His Christ I have seen, moreover, standing by a gate, calling me through poverty, misunderstanding, and humility to freedom and growth in him. My experience, therefore, is that the imagination is the place where the Spirit may work.

M. Oliver Byrne I.B.V.M.