

ID QUOD VOLO

The Erotic Grace of the Second Week

Robert R. Marsh

LET ME START WITH A SERIES OF PUZZLES THAT NAG AT ME. The first is this. The Exercises open with a rather formal reflection on indifference—the Principle and Foundation—and yet they end with the grateful, passionate Contemplation to Attain Love. How do we get from the one to the other, from the formal to the passionate?

The second puzzle is similar, but focuses on our specific concern: the Second Week. The Second Week begins with the idealistic King and his heroic plans, but ends with something more intimate and more surprising: Jesus going to his death. The way we approach him during those first days of the Second Week is so different from the quality of our companionship at the end. What makes the difference? And what makes this difference possible?

My third puzzle is this. Why was Ignatius so obsessed with the Holy Land, with the Holy Places? He tells us in his *Autobiography* that he sought out the place, footprints and all, on Mount Olivet from which Jesus ascended into heaven. He was fixated on which way the footprints faced, even to the point of risking death to see and touch them again? Why? What powers such a passion?

Beginning Some Answers

I believe that these three questions share a common answer. Let me begin to sketch it out.

What are the Exercises all about? Some say they are about making decisions; others that they constitute a school of prayer. I have sometimes spoken of the Exercises as a training in discernment. But none of those accounts of what the Exercises are quite resolve that first puzzle: how do the Exercises get us from the Principle and Foundation to the *Suscipe*, from ‘I *ought* to desire and elect only the thing which is

more conducive to the end for which I am created' to 'Give me only your love and your grace—that's enough for me'?

In one sense these two exercises, standing as they do like bookends framing the whole sequence, say the same thing: something about creation, something about mission, something about purpose. They both put the question of indifference: what is *enough*; what can satisfy the soul? But something has happened in the thirty days between them. Perhaps the differences in language bring it out. At the start, the Principle and Foundation, we are talking to *ourselves*—lecturing ourselves even—and proposing an ideal that we can measure ourselves against: what I ought to desire. By the end, in the Contemplation to Attain Love, we are talking to *someone else*, to God, to Christ. We are opening our hearts with a shocking intimacy. What has happened to us? All I can say is that we have fallen in love. 'Give me only your love'—whom else could we speak to so but a lover? What are the Exercises for? They are for *falling in love*.

Perhaps the point becomes most obvious in the Second Week. Who is Jesus to us as the Week begins? The Kingdom meditation presents a hypothetical King full of projects, a gauntlet of idealism thrown down before us. Should we, could we, ever follow him, share his knocks, live his dream? But a long week later, as Jesus goes to the cross, what dies is not just a dream or a project. It is my beloved. I'm not mourning my shattered hopes, my doomed calling. I'm mourning a man, a man I have come to love. At the start he was all abstraction and hope and activity; but by the end he is *this* man, a man I have come to know intimately. I've watched his birth and held his warm weight; I've been there as he's grown up and been made man before me; I've seen his struggle and loved his laughter. I've gazed at him and found him gazing back; I've heard my name on his lips. I've been drawn into his friendship; I've watched him work, suffered his hardship, wrestled with his self-discovery. I've discovered I need him, and been sweetly shocked that he needs me too. To repeat my first puzzle: how can his death mean so much to me *now*, when a week ago he was just God? Something has happened. I have fallen in love.

Isn't it the *particulars* we fall in love with? The shape of *that* nose; the way he works with fish; the look in his eye; the things he can say to move me; the fire in his heart; the little hurts that bruise him. I think

that Ignatius knew this only too well.¹ He needed to touch the places that Jesus had touched, to stand in Jesus' footprints, to know which way Jesus had faced. He so yearned to feel kinship and connection with Jesus in his body, through his flesh, that it took the threat of excommunication to pry him loose from that almost physical presence. And it was a dream that died hard. Sixteen years later he was still waiting and waiting to take his new companions back to the same shores, to show them the same sites. He never did.

Ignatius' compromise was the Exercises. If geographical presence was impossible he would draw his pilgrims to experience Jesus in the flesh



Santa Trinità, by El Greco

of the imagination. I think that anyone who has walked the ways of the Second Week has their own parallel to Ignatius' experience with the footprints. For me personally, it was sitting beside Jesus in the last days of the Second Week: there was a price on his head, and I was looking with him out into the desert, seeing sand and sand and sand, as he struggled to find a way forward with God which led him past Jerusalem and his death. I can feel it now: sitting tensely, unable to help, the stone wall under me and grit in my eyes, feeling intense sorrow, intense love, even a sort of pride. The body remembers. The body knows.

¹ He tells us as much in the *Autobiography*, when he describes his time in Jerusalem (nn. 35-48).

Grace and Desire

If I am right about any of this, the grace of the Second Week is an *erotic* grace. What do I mean?

All of the Exercises' graces are erotic in the sense that they are something we *desire*. Desire is the core of what I mean by *eros* and the erotic—and not just desire as whim or fancy, but desire as an impelling passion, a passion that justifies the language of *eros*, even when its articulation is not overtly sexual.² Ignatius asks us to pray for *id quod volo*, that which I desire. We call it 'the grace', but to put it like that dresses it up much too much. The prayer here is about desire, and desire is not always graceful. I am *in want* of what I want; what I desire I also lack. And we feel it in the flesh. We miss it, in both senses of the word: we yearn for it, and we fail to attain it. The grace is something always desired, something beyond grasp. When we talk about 'getting the grace', it sounds as though the desire could be fulfilled and put to rest, as though I could stop wanting what I want. But the reality is different. To 'get' the grace is always to find that desire has run ahead, and that my original desire has been replaced. What I want has transformed itself so that my desiring strains after it yet again: grace upon grace.

To Know, to Love, to Follow

All the graces of the Exercises are erotic in this sense, but the grace of the Second Week is especially so. What is my Second Week desire?

Here it will be to ask for an interior knowledge of our Lord, who became human for me, that I may love him more intensely and follow him more closely. (Exx 104)

That threefold unfolding of the grace is key: to know, to love, to follow. And listen to the modifiers in the English version: 'interior', 'intensely', 'closely'.³

² I am following Wendy Farley, who uses the language of *eros* 'as a metaphor for modes of thought and relationships whose movement runs in a direction ... outward, towards others, toward the world Enchanted by this reality, in its concreteness, variety, and beauty, *eros* is drawn out ... toward others, toward truth, which is for *eros* always exterior to consciousness and possession.' *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State UP, 1996), 67.

³ Ignatius' Spanish is rather more concise, speaking simply of loving and following *more*. Quotations in this article generally follow the translation of George E. Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992).

What we pray for in the Second Week—what gets us from idealism to companionship—is this desire: the desire to know and to be transformed by knowing. Our Hebrew ancestors in faith said something profound when they used the same word, *yāda*, for knowing and for sex, because both invite relationship and both demand transformation. The Second Week desire is not just to know *about* Jesus but to know *him*. Ignatius is perfectly confident that to know Jesus is to love him. He cannot imagine anyone knowing Jesus interiorly without feeling growing attraction, intense attraction. Second Week knowing leads to loving because in it we feel desire, feel attraction, feel knowledge in the flesh. And through desire, knowing moves into action—not just any action, but the action that emerges from loving, and from loving what the lover loves. To know and to love move us to follow: not just doing but doing *with*, doing what he is doing.

What gets us from idealism to companionship is desire

How do I, as Ignatius writes in the title of the Exercises, ‘overcome myself and order my life, without reaching a decision through some disordered affection’ (Exx 21)? It sounds so rough and wilful—overcoming myself, ordering my life. But it’s not wilful; it’s about relationships. How do I find *my* way and *my* lifework? I look at someone *else*. I watch. I contemplate. Yet those words, those visual metaphors, suggest a distance—physical and emotional; if these are the only words we use, the risk is that we’ll remain at a distance, unengaged. Ignatian prayer calls us beyond the merely visual into an intimate, felt experience of the mystery we contemplate: the tone and timbre, taste and touch. Like Ignatius’ imagined maidservant in the Contemplation on the Nativity, I am moved from ‘gazing at’ the Holy Family to ‘serving them in their needs, just as if I were there’ (Exx 114). What we see with our eyes calls forth our desire ... and our desire to desire; it draws us closer and closer to its heart, to its touch.

And—amazingly—we discover it is a mutual vision, a mutual knowing, loving and following. I start each prayer with that complex, simple moment of mutual gazing: I look at God looking at me—God’s contemplation of me precedes my ever contemplating God—and I

honour that gaze. I make some sign of reverence. Or maybe God does. This is the beginning of falling in love.⁴

But Is It Eros?

I say that deliberately: *falling* in love rather than just loving. Loving alone might let us stay in the safer setting of *agape*. It is far from comfortable to let God look at us even with *agape*, with *charity*—the disinterested benevolence towards which we are urged when we can't bring ourselves actually to like a person—but it is at least *respectable*. But for that look of love to be erotic, for there to be a *falling*—that makes me tremble. How can I fall in love with God that way? How on earth can it be mutual? How can God experience that lack, that want, that need that infects desire and gives it its heat?

Writers on love love analysis; they divide love into kinds and species. Anders Nygren finds two kinds, *eros* and *agape*. C. S. Lewis, famously, four: *agape* or charity, *eros*, *philia* or friendship, and *storge* or affection. Sallie McFague opted for three in her *Models of God*. What any theological account of love has to grapple with is the question of how these terms apply when the language of love is spoken to God and by God. Understandably, we protect God from those aspects of love which we find most disturbing ourselves. We do not want God's love for us to be capricious, as our love can sometimes be. We do not want it to be based in our merits, because we know how undeserving and unattractive we can be. Yet, if we know anything of love, we know how it makes us vulnerable. Love is the chink in our armour—our armour against change. When God gazes at us and we gaze at God, something distressingly mutual passes between us. We uncover the daring of a God who matches us desire for desire, want for want, need for need. Can we risk falling into the hands of such love?

Eros and Sex

As Pope Benedict recently wrote, 'fundamentally, "love" is a single reality'.⁵ We might experience love in friendship as different from love

⁴ See Robert R. Marsh, 'Looking at God Looking at You: Ignatius' Third Addition', *The Way*, 43/4 (October 2004), 19-28.

⁵ *Deus caritas est*, n. 8. He goes on: 'We have seen that God's *eros* for man is also totally *agape*. This is not only because it is bestowed in a completely gratuitous manner, without any previous merit, but

in desire; *we* might have to be taught the kind of love that gives and fails to count the cost. But in God all love is one. *Eros*, *agape*, *philia*, and God knows what else are one in God, indeed are God.

This is an important point—particularly important in a world where ‘erotic’ usually suggests something titillating, illicit, sordid. So what do I mean by ‘erotic’? Desire is certainly part of the picture. Particularity is another part; bodiliness is a third; and beauty a fourth. Let me throw in vulnerable risk as well.

Eros is the kind of love proper to our being embodied. Look back at how Ignatius talks about the Second Week grace—‘an interior knowledge of our Lord who became *human* for me’ (Exx 104). *Eros* is felt in the flesh—this human flesh; *eros* moves me. The prime example is certainly the sexual love that draws one person to another, drawing them together not through a mere idea but through the here-and-now configuration of physical being. But *eros* is there also when you hold your newborn nephew for the first time, and know in your bowels a complete connection and devotion. I think *eros* powers the passion of a Mother Teresa too—that love for the unlovely unloved. And I hope I can show shortly that there is an *eros* is at the heart of *all* callings from God, a vocational love beyond all reasons or unreason for a particular way of life and its fit.

***Eros is the
love proper
to our being
embodied***

Eros, then, is the love we feel when we are moved to desire by the particular beauty of some person or way of life. Sometimes it is a beauty that only we can see. ‘What *does* she see in him?’ is a question we may all have asked. *Eros* is, in this sense, a creative love. Sallie McFague says that the heart of being in love is not lust or sex or desire but *value*:

It is finding someone else valuable and being found valuable. And this perceiving of valuableness is, in the final analysis, unfounded ... the reasons do not add up.⁶

She is right: in *eros* the lover *makes* the beloved valuable, makes the invisible visible. *Eros* lifts up the lowly. *Eros* is inherently healing.

also because it is love which forgives. Hosea above all shows us that this *agape* dimension of God’s love for man goes far beyond the aspect of gratuity.’

⁶ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 127-128.

But *eros* is also risky. It is no accident that half the songs on the radio are laments over *eros* run awry. To feel desire is to become vulnerable. To *express* desire is to place your heart in another's hands; when we contemplate Jesus in the Second Week we take a terrible risk. But there is a consolation. While we are worrying about *our* risk Jesus is hazarding his own heart into our hands, over and over again, undaunted yet vulnerable.

While on the subject of hazard, we might say that authentic *eros* involves avoiding two pitfalls: lust and obsession. *Eros* is a desire for what I want. The *I* here can cause trouble. *Eros* can shade over into lust if my focus shifts from the connection with the one I love to the satisfaction simply of my desire, a satisfaction involving little care for the other. What separates lust from erotic love is not lust's strength or its fleshliness or its capacity to incite strange behaviour—all of these are part of *eros* too, and in themselves good. The problem with lust is that it cares less and less for relationship, it refuses risk.

There is also a temptation to addiction in all *eros*. *Eros* is always searching for the satisfaction of a lack, a need. And whenever that

goal is reached, there is, alongside the pleasure, the possibility of disappointment—climax never escapes anticlimax. *Eros* knows that its object can never be quite obtained. It knows that anything—anyone—which *can* be possessed is not worthy of the loving. So *eros* is always striving for more, for *magis*, whereas addiction and obsession fall victim to the illusion that they can be satisfied—*next* time. And in the search for satisfaction they seek things less and less capable of satisfying them. What lust and obsession share is a mistaken shift of focus.



Smiling Christ, 13th century, Xavier Castle

Eros and Jesus

The deeper we explore *eros*, the less safe it sounds. How can we possibly apply it to the relationship with Jesus we try to foster in the Exercises?

The grace of the Second Week is to know, to *love*, to follow. *Eros* is a bridging term: the copula and connection between knowing and doing. Doing is often seen as the hallmark of Ignatian spirituality, with the result that loving becomes, intentionally or not, just an incidental along the way. Once the way of discipleship has been revealed, once I know what I'm meant to do, I won't have any time or need for love or for the lover I have known and followed. Once I know the will of God, I can go and do it on my own. But for Ignatius the loving is essential. Knowing, loving and doing: none of this is abstract; none of this is a matter of universal law. Each is contingent and particular. What matters is knowing *this* Jesus—the one whom my graceful imagination makes present—loving *him*, and following him in a unique way. In him my own desire is revealed to me and with it my life's pattern at his side. Desire is both the engine of the Second Week and its endpoint.

Discernment and Eros

I hope I am hinting that *discernment* is erotic through and through, both when I elect a life alongside Jesus under the banner of his cross, *and* in the delicate dance of day-to-day discernment of spirits. Ignatius structures the Exercises around a potentially explosive collision between desire and freedom. How can I ever find my heart's desire when my desires are disordered in so many un-free ways? Ignatius' solution is to encourage one desire to grow in us until it rules them all, to set us up to fall in love with Jesus in such a way that our desire for him draws all our other desires in train behind it. This is Ignatian indifference: to be so passionately drawn by God that all those other good and glorious desires of ours can be taken up or left behind as seems fit. And not just at the moment of choosing, but also in the living out of our choices.

The journey to this kind of indifference, this kind of falling in love with Jesus, is the journey with which I began, the journey from the Principle and Foundation to the Contemplation to Attain Love. But, as Catherine of Siena once said, 'all the way to heaven is heaven'; that epic, erotic journey is made in a million little erotic steps. The engine



Detail from The Garden of Earthly Desires, by Hieronymus Bosch

of the Exercises is powered by discernment—choosing where to linger in a prayer period, where to return in repetition, which threads of experience to encourage and which to set aside. And discernment is about a growing feel for the differences of desire and attraction and beauty. Second Week discernment involves a growing nose for the unique scent of the real Jesus as he chooses to be for me. It is informed by an ever more certain sense of exactly who one is falling for, and of how he differs from all our previous loves and attachments, with their compulsions and cautions, fears and unfreedoms.

Those of you who have read as far as this will probably be wondering how much of what I have said fits your experience as makers and givers of the Exercises. Does the full-blown language of erotic love come anywhere near describing your experience of the Second Week or your relationship with Jesus? Maybe it does and

maybe it doesn't: the last thing I'd want to do is to shoehorn anyone's experience of God into footwear that doesn't fit. My hope is simply that an awareness of what is erotic in the grace of the Second Week may be of help to us in directing others. Let me illustrate that hope with just two points about the erotic in spiritual accompaniment: one about what I'll call *taboo* and another about what I'll call *seduction*.

Erotic Taboo

It doesn't take that much experience as a spiritual director before you run into someone wanting—but hesitating—to talk about erotic feelings arising in their prayer. At this point spiritual directors have a choice. Either they cut the conversation short, in which case the erotic will probably never crop up again; or else they treat it with the kind of discerning honour they would give any other area of experience.

A friend of mine, after returning from a sabbatical course on sexuality and spirituality, immediately met a series of retreatants wanting to broach sexual dimensions of their prayer and experience. Obviously, she was—even if only half consciously—giving people an opening that no director had given them before. People hesitate to speak of erotic elements in their relationship with God for many reasons: they may sense a taboo, or fear judgment, or dislike vulnerability, or—perhaps most often—they may simply have been trained not to acknowledge that these erotic elements exist. Implicitly or explicitly, they have been given any number of strategies to suppress, sublimate or sidestep such feelings. Nevertheless, they have the deep sense that there is something more within them that they need to own, something holy. Give them the slightest hint that you might be receptive to hearing this material openly, and they will talk with relief. Conversely, even the slightest shift in body language will shut down that line of communication again. It is very sad when people's sense of God's presence to them is circumscribed in such a way. After all, we believe that God is supremely desirable, consummately beautiful, a love which we can scarcely grasp. And the God who has taken on the fullness of our humanity is a God capable of all the desire and love and need humans can know. If *eros* is at the heart of the Second Week grace, it should be no surprise when that grace sometimes takes on an explicitly romantic or sexual shape. And if God goes there, why shouldn't we?

God's Courtship

That brings me to seduction. God often seems to go to places in prayer that unsettle or embarrass us. Even when a person's experience of God isn't overtly erotic, they might still feel that God seems to be seducing, or courting, or wooing them.

As a spiritual director, I often find that people speak first and most comfortably about what they have found difficult since I last saw them: what has distracted them, what has harried them away from God, what has deepened their own poor sense of themselves, or confirmed their doubt of God's continued interest in them. Yet at the same time, buried in there, among the mess, there are usually one or two nuggets of pure gold: encounters with a God who is beautiful and attractive and bold and unsettling. Often enough, if we try to stay with those moments of consolation—delightful though they may be—there is discomfort or even acute embarrassment. Why do we so easily prefer the dark to the light? We may recognise God as the fulfilment of all our longing, but when we come face to face with this God, we find it hard to stay there. We prefer to talk about the weather. My sense is that God is *too* attractive for us. God's desire for us far exceeds our desire for God. God's gaze reveals us to be valued, valuable, beautiful—far more so than we can easily accept.

Perhaps the reason why *eros* can be a problem is that God's desire and love makes our own seem puny. We can only take so much before we back away and bury ourselves in safer stuff—even if this safer stuff is also unpleasant stuff. But God nevertheless seems to court us, woo us, seduce us. When we are enticed by God's beauty, perhaps we can stand for a moment in its sun before seeking the shade. But then we enter into a cycle of desire and distress, drawn to God as a moth to a flame, always fearing the fire. We approach and we withdraw. Left to ourselves, we can just stay in the shade, and remain permanently in the safer, duller position. A good spiritual director will encourage us to move into the sun again, and to follow our desire for God little by little. Good direction will help us not to avert our gaze, and not to despair when we do.

I suspect that mythical 'good directors' learn this skill from their own experience, from recognising in their own life-history the endless seductiveness of God. The seduction I am talking about here may not

become overtly sexual, but nevertheless it instills a familiarity with the erotic ways of God's grace, and a readiness to venture with someone else wherever God takes them.

To know, to love, to follow: interiorly, intensely, intimately—that's the grace we seek in the Second Week. We seek it for ourselves and we seek it for those we accompany. We play matchmaker. We act as go-between, watching love dawn and deepen, witnessing love's passion and price. Sometimes it may feel as if we are playing gooseberry. Yet, if we are lucky, we are also following our own beloved through life and death and life again. And we find we can pray, from an ever-healing heart, our own *Suscipe*: 'give me only your love and your grace—that's enough for me'.⁷

Robert R. Marsh SJ studied chemistry at Oxford for several years before entering the Society of Jesus in 1986. After studies in London and Berkeley, he is now on the staff of Loyola Hall Jesuit Spirituality Centre, near Liverpool, UK.

⁷ This article has emerged from a paper first given at the Loyola Hall Spiritual Accompaniment Seminar in April 2006.