

BECOMING WHOM WE CONTEMPLATE

By GEORGE ASCHENBRENNER

CONTEMPLATION IS A radically transforming process. For this reason, many people become fearful of serious contemplation and either avoid it altogether or practise it only halfheartedly. As the contemplative process develops, its challenge and cost become more threatening. But at the same time, a taste of its joy and intimacy exercises an alluring attractiveness. This article, while focusing on the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises, will treat both the costly challenge and the joyful intimacy of contemplation. It will also show how essentially interrelated these two aspects are, such that one cannot happen without the other.

The central point of this article is that the whole method of ignatian prayer in the Exercises is actually a process of interpersonal transformation in faith. In this interpersonal process God is carefully and insistently calling us away from our false self and exposing a new self, glorious in this world and ever so much more in eternity. After treating its essential trinitarian aspect, I will try to show that the process involved in ignatian contemplation, which is one part of the ignatian method of prayer, is also aimed at a deepening interpersonal encounter. Finally, we will see how this contemplative process also creates an enlightening, discerning presence in the midst of the quandaries, opportunities and choices of our personal and social daily life.

Because ignatian prayer gradually peers deeper and deeper into the heart of mystery, its fruits are never easily described. The most profound realities of life are usually so simple that they leave us at a loss for words. For example, we stutter and stammer or revert to a wooden unhelpful objectivity in describing our experience of a friend beloved beyond words. And though friends are always able to find a beautiful full connotation in words, someone outside the experience may either misinterpret the apparent use of cliché or criticize what seems to them a disproportionate, exaggerated use of language. This article will labour under a similar

difficulty of expression and interpretation. For this reason, I must presume that the reader's own experience of contemplation and mystery can enrich my simple, struggling statement and thereby prevent much misunderstanding. I write here of an experience in faith—but one which, *within* faith, is not far-fetched or terribly rare. And yet contemplation is an experience known finally only *in* experience. So I am writing for people who have tasted, in however diluted a fashion, the sweetness of contemplation and, because they have tasted it, hunger for it more and more.

Beyond the difficulty of expression and understanding, real danger attends the practice of contemplation. Its cost is steep and serious: nothing less than the death of a very real, but false self. Any complacent contemplation that would struggle to avoid this mortifying conversion, however understandable it may be, is actually a contradiction. Genuine contemplation is always a dangerous encounter with a God whose jealousy for our love and our very person surpasses finally our stubborn selfishness. Therefore something much more than a craving for emotional highs and dramatic insights is needed to fuel our practice of contemplation. Only the experienced attractiveness of God's love can encourage our sense of inadequacy and inspire a persevering practice of contemplation.

Ignatian method in prayer

Ignatian prayer is easily misunderstood. The multiplicity of details, directives, techniques and methods presented in the Spiritual Exercises frequently distracts a person from the fundamental dynamic and orientation actually intended. To take care to darken the room, to take care not to bring up pleasing thoughts, to strive to grieve—all of this can seem like a straitjacket of rigid control of environment, mind and feelings, facilitating frustration and tension rather than simple prayer. Such misunderstanding always betrays a lack of genuine experience of the Exercises.

Rather than a repressive restriction of spontaneity and freedom, ignatian method in prayer is really a matter of progressive concentration and integrative assimilation of a human person's powers in an interpersonal encounter of love. The movement from 'Consideration' to 'Meditation' to 'Contemplation' to 'Repetition' to 'Application of the Senses' is truly a method, a method carefully paced and attuned to a heart's profound desire for simplicity and intimacy in shared commitment. It is the method or process of a human person's entering ever more thoroughly into the mysterious

union of love. Only truths and beauties that get to the heart, the emotions and the sensibilities can deeply affect a person and make that person really care, thus making love ready for the details of daily living.¹

This method and development in prayer reveals Ignatius's genuine sense of human development and his great concern for the thorough, dependable commitment of human love. We cannot settle for mere reasonable weighing of the things of God in consideration, nor for the thinking and daydreaming about God in meditation. But all this invites us further in contemplation to let God in Jesus happen to us and transform our whole affective presence in the world. We will need to be with God again and again in repetition if our commitment in love is to become sensually alive and responsibly effective through the application of our senses and all the psycho-sexual energies of our identity. Ignatian method in prayer, then, facilitates a person's development in the intimate assimilation of faith with God whose love, as revealed in Jesus, quickens us to loving service now and to a longing for fullness in eternity. In the ignatian method of prayer, as in all contemplation—and in any genuine love too—we become whom we contemplate.

Divine initiative and mortification

Although ignatian prayer's transforming assimilation of us into the Jesus of God always requires much patient, regular work on our part, from beginning to end all the effort and activity springs from love. I mean God's love for each one of us. Rather than something pelagian, something performed on our own, the hard work of contemplation is always anteceded by our loving God's boundless desire for each one of us and is inspired by our touch, feel and savour for such a fact in faith. The art of sensitivity to divine desire and love always takes precedence over, but does not excuse one from, the science of human techniques of prayer. The initiative, whether we consciously realize it or not, is with God whose beautifully loving ways are always wooing our hearts. And so, all the regular, patient effort at prayer on our part is response, never our own initiative—always a response in careful co-operation with God whose love and desire for us will always far exceed our struggling effort.

Without a proper sense of the divine initiative in contemplation, the cost and sacrifice of the venture either becomes too much or is

dealt with in a very unhealthy manner. Serious contemplation is always a mortifying experience. For a new self to be born, for each of us to become the One whom we contemplate, an insidiously false self must die. Without an attractive intimation of all that we can become in Jesus, the prospective death of our very real self-centredness can overwhelm and petrify us. Or deficient experience of God's inspiring love can instigate an onslaught against self-centredness that will undercut healthy self-acceptance—the necessary foundation for all human, spiritual development.

Without the mortification of our deceitful self, the process of ignatian prayer cannot achieve its goal: the revelation in all its beauty of a new self in Jesus. This mortification and revelation, this dying and rising, is a process and tension within which we live our daily lives. On this earth, one is never had without the other. We all know those exhilarating moments when the integration of these two aspects, rather than making us tense, stretches and thrills us to the intensity of enthusiastic love. But we also slip and slide and lose this decisive integrity of our inner life whenever we mistakenly try to find life and truth in our false self. The daily asceticism of going against (*agere contra*) our false and desolate self gives birth and decisive clarity to a new self revealed in our contemplation of God's love in Jesus. This asceticism, an essential component of any mysticism, has often in the past been misunderstood in too un-nuanced a way as a simple 'going against self'. Without the careful qualification of which self we are to go against, which self we are to die to, our practice of the spiritual life can become either unhealthy or sloppily shoddy and plagued with over-reaction to a past misunderstanding. Much of the aimlessness, gloom and anger of the 1960s and 1970s may have resulted from such confusions of the spiritual life. At times, as mentioned earlier, an unhealthy loss of self-acceptance and self-confidence resulted from a destructive going against self. On the other hand, an understandably angry reaction to or a hazy disregard for advice simply to go against self produced in many an unascetical sloppiness which prevented much decisive inner intensity and clarity.

In all this concern for a mortifying asceticism, the divine initiative must never be forgotten. Otherwise the mystical goal of ignatian prayer will be overlooked—and with disastrous consequences. Ignatius has been accused of preferring ascetics to mystics. This misunderstanding fails to realize that the power to go against our false self is a mystical grace born of and fired by desire for

God's transforming and satisfying love.² Because of Ignatius's fierce desire that God's love transform our human hearts and world, his method in prayer, always geared toward an interpersonal experience of God's unifying love, acknowledges the necessary interrelationship of contemplation and mortification. He claimed that a mortified person 'would easily accomplish more prayer in a quarter of an hour than another who is not mortified would do in two hours'.³ Ignatius saw very clearly that his great concern for 'finding God in all things' would always be in direct proportion to his 'being mortified in all things'. And this mortification, as mentioned above, is really an experience of God, not a repressive denial of self. It is such an experience of God's love that it can expand and enthuse a human heart with that joyous intensity for which our hearts are always yearning and struggling. In this way the process of ignatian prayer can bring us to what is everyone's most coveted revelation: a new self, discovered as we enter and share the lively intimacy of Jesus with the one he called 'my dear Father'. 'Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his, to the Father, through the features of men's faces'.⁴

A trinitarian experience

While the first part of this article focused on the general method of ignatian prayer, this second part will concentrate on Ignatius's understanding of the process of contemplation as one element in that general method. From the Second Week on, ignatian contemplation plays a major role in the Exercises, and this contemplation is an explicitly trinitarian experience. The contemplation on the Incarnation focuses on nothing less than the Trinity itself as the continuing object of all further contemplation in the Exercises. Though the prayer style can seem simple, with a certain child-like quality, the 'matter' being contemplated is awesome: a creator God revealing in the precious human details of Jesus a Spirit of such intimate love and faithful forgiveness as to magnetize us for a whole new life. The material in the scenes of the life of Jesus can, at times, seem so ordinary and pedestrian that we misunderstand the loftiness of the venture. Or a self-conscious fear of the lofty trinitarian nature of these contemplations can rob us of our courage and plague us with a doubting lack of confidence. For this reason, in the Second Week retreatants often need to renew an act of trust in the Spirit, even more lively within them

after the purification of the First Week and now more eager than they realize to compose them contemplatively with the inner life of God revealed in the beauty of Jesus.

As each contemplation is repeated and passes into another, we are glimpsing more and more clearly the very inner life and heart of God in the tone of voice, gaze of eyes, touch of hand—all those wonderful human details of Jesus. Karl Rahner, the memory of whose recent death is still with us, makes the point very forcefully: 'Then the gaze into the face of Jesus of Nazareth is changed into the face-to-face vision of God, even if both the encounter with Jesus and the consequent vision of God only make their presence fully known when the confinement of our poor body is split open by death'.⁵ As the astonishing reality of what is actually happening to us in these simple contemplations dawns—and there will always be special, privileged moments of realization—we are halted in the awesome reverence of wonder. A beauty beyond words! An invitation to let go and become whom we are contemplating. What an apostolic impulse to serve faith! What an apostolic impulse to promote justice! A whole new life beckons us. God, reaching out to save us (and the world) in Jesus. If we let this process of contemplation have its way within us, an inner composure of consciousness develops which will slowly transform our presence to the ordinariness of daily life. And so, if we oversimplify ignatian contemplation, so as to back down from and avoid its genuine trinitarian mysticism, we not only make ignatian prayer superficial but we also cheapen the quality of our presence and activity in the world, as we will see later in this article.

The process of contemplation

As seen earlier, the whole dynamic of ignatian prayer is a progressive movement toward greater interpersonal involvement with God in Jesus. Contemplation, as one part of the whole ignatian method in prayer, has built right into its structure a very similar process. From the additions (Exx 73-75) and the preparatory prayer (Exx 46), right through to the closing colloquy, everything aims at facilitating the careful, loving composition of a whole person with the awesomely renewing mystery of God's love in Jesus. Let us sketch the journey of composition briefly now.

The additions invite a genuine sense of presence both to God and to ourselves as we stand at the doorway of contemplation. The effort to concentrate our powers, in an acknowledgement of

God's loving presence to us here and now, brings an awareness of the thoughts, feelings, moods and desires alive within us at this moment. A lively sense both of God's loving gaze upon us (we are the apple of God's eye, Ps 17,8) and of God's eagerness to communicate and be with us at this precise time must motivate our effort at concentration.⁶ This awareness of God's readiness can open and poise our own hearts, in hopeful anticipation of the ensuing encounter. The preparatory prayer actually gives words to this humble openness, this poised eagerness for praise and service of a faithfully loving God—attitudes without which no genuine interpersonal encounter is possible.

In the Second Week the first prelude is the history. Rather than an objective recalling of the facts of a certain gospel scene, this begins to involve us personally with the mystery to be contemplated. Rather than a concern for objective details of past incidents, this personally involves us here and now with the 'how' and 'why' of the mystery. For example, in the contemplation on the Incarnation our concern is not simply with the fact in faith. Ignatius's narration of the history reveals that his chief concern is with the *how* and *why* details which personalize the Trinity's decision, in the face of our human blindness and sinfulness, to 'work the redemption of the human race' (Exx 107). All the following contemplations in the Exercises spring from and reveal further this one, radical—this paschal decision in the heart of the Trinity. At times the *how* and *why* of this decision will shine forth from the tone of voice and the look on the face of Jesus of Nazareth in some specific interpersonal encounter of his earthly life. So the first prelude of history does not focus us on the past. Rather, it begins personally to involve us with that mystery which is always alive and available here and now: a God, forgiving and saving each and every one of us beyond any merit or power of our own.

The second prelude—seeing the place—further this on-going contemplative composition of ourselves with the mystery. Seeing the place is not a whimsical pictorializing of a scene. Our imaginative powers, stirred in faith and treasuring the gospel details of a particular incident, further engage us, concretely, with all the powers of our person, in the beautiful details of the mystery of our God whose heart in Jesus is always set on saving us. In this way the encounter begun in the history-plelude is personalized even more by entering into the local conditions of time and place of the mystery. This 'entering into' is not a matter of detached

objectivity. Nor is it a matter of self-fabricating the details of a scene in a flight of fancy. Rather the imagination can bring an intimate, subjective feel for and a carefully centered concentration on, the details that give local colour to the mystery—the mystery ever old and ever new, of the innate attractiveness of God's saving love winning human hearts. As this composition of ourselves with the mystery deepens, we are gradually becoming whom we contemplate.

The third prelude to ignatian contemplation involves a begging for the grace genuinely desired. Because our hearts can house a great diversity of inner experiences, it is never easy, in the midst of unruly impulses, false expectations, unpredictable moods, selfish needs and flighty fancies, to recognize the genuine, profound desires of our heart — desires which situate us within centuries of mature humanity. Ignatius, as other graced people down the centuries, was led so deeply into human experience that he puts into words in the various graces concatenating the Exercises what are the perennial, true desires formative of the mature human heart. Though finally we can trust Ignatius in his experience and articulation of the true desires of the human heart, usually serious scrutiny and struggle are needed to allow us to discover Ignatius's recommended grace as the genuine and personal desire of our own heart, here and now.

Begging for our heart's true desire can gradually become so persistent that it draws us virtually into identification with that desire. So much more than a quick, flimsy petition, a trustingly peaceful and intense begging for our heart's true desire can so fire us that we are actually identified in the desire. Since these perennial, profound desires are God-given, the process of identification is really a deepening union with God, now known in the yearning of our desire. That this third prelude furthers the interpersonal encounter of ignatian contemplation becomes even more obvious when we realize that the graced desire begged for remains the same all through the Second Week (even in the background of the major ignatian meditations and considerations of the Two Standards, the Three Types of People and the Three Ways of Loving). To know Jesus so intimately that intense personal love and enthusiastic following will result is the heart's persistent cry in this part of the Exercises. It is a cry that echoes deep within the realm of mystery, stirs the very heart of God, and brings to our own heart the gradual realization that God is always more involved with us

in love than we will ever realize before the surprise of death. Clearly, then, a decisive element in the process of ignatian contemplation and its transforming union with the beloved is a begging heart's true desire.

As William Peters indicates in his controversial but seminal book on the Exercises, the points in the contemplation of the Second Week are:

a further development of the preludes, and the contents of the preludes are intensified in the points . . . 'Points' does not primarily refer to a number of consecutive parts of a mystery that is being contemplated but to various activities of the exercitant.⁷

The points involve us in seeing, hearing, inspecting and considering further what we have already become involved with in the preludes.

Hence, 'points' are only possible once the exercitant has been brought face to face with a reality that is the object of these activities . . . This is the link between preludes and points; the latter are simply impossible without the former.⁸

The points for the contemplation on the Nativity can serve as a model for all other contemplations. The quaint suggestion of imagining ourselves in the cave as a 'poor, little, unworthy slave' is simply a way of making ourselves concretely and carefully present in this moment of the one mystery. No looking on from afar will do. Only a presence that will allow contemplating the details of the mystery 'with all possible homage and reverence' (Exx 114) is appropriate to the developing interpersonal experience of One whose love is so set on us that 'he might die on the cross, and all this for me' (Exx 116).

The process of ignatian contemplation climaxes in an unrestrained, heart-to-heart colloquy, like the sharing of friends whose intimacy and trust is such that they have nothing to hide or fear. The colloquy is always a development of the grace begged for. But it is a mysterious, unpredictable development — the result of grace inspiring a human person during the contemplation. It is not simply a human mind's logical development of a propositional truth. For this reason, though Ignatius will usually suggest appropriate affections for the colloquy, he rarely puts precise words on the retreatant's lips. Though the fundamental trustworthiness of

profound faithful love can be predicted, love's intensity of emotion and articulation of words cannot always be foretold. So the precise emotional tone and words of the heart's colloquy will be more spontaneously affected both by the consolations which further, and by the desolations which resist, the growing interpersonal intimacy of ignatian contemplation. The colloquy born of these consolations and desolations organically prepares for a prayer of repetition (Exx 118) and then can gradually become a profound composure of heart unifying the souls of lovers in a wordless quiet that radiates in the eyes and in gentle touch. In this way, ignatian contemplation, in a manner true of all mature love, finally leads to such careful, thorough coalescence as to have become not only dialogue but duet.

Ignatian contemplation and presence in the world

As a process of interpersonal assimilation to God, ignatian contemplation is first and foremost an end unto itself; then, and only then, is it also a means to special apostolic presence in the world. As we have seen so far, all the elements of ignatian contemplation aim at one thing: a thorough and intimate being with and in God. As lovers know, being with the beloved is such a paramount and supreme value that it needs no further justification. Therefore, whether it be contemplation or the love of friendship, to overlook its value as an end in itself, to be too utilitarian about it as a means to something else, betrays only a surface experience both of contemplation and of the friendship of lovers.

Nevertheless, though ignatian contemplation is primarily a companionship in love, because it is such a profound companionship, it does also have a definite secondary side-effect. The intimate experience of the awesome mystery of a loving God in all the details of Jesus gives special vision to the eyes of the soul and a vigorous touch to the hands and fingers of an active presence in the world. Contemplation, where allowed to weld a profound *inner* composure of love, will fashion an *apostolic*, worldly presence of gifted sensitivity. That is, contemplative, loving faith ineluctably promotes loving servants of justice.

This special, active apostolic presence is the result of the interplay of mystery and history in ignatian contemplation. The contemplations of the Incarnation and the Nativity at the beginning of the Second Week serve as models for this interplay and gradual interpenetration of the awesome mystery of God's love with the

touching historical human details of Jesus of Nazareth. In the Incarnation there is a movement from the heart of sheer mystery, in the Trinity's loving decision, to the history and earthly details of a Jewish girl's overwhelming annunciation experience. Here, mystery moves to flesh in history. Whereas in the Nativity contemplation, the dynamic shifts. There, we are invited to enter very immediately and emotionally as a participant into the historical details of an uprooted young Jewish girl's giving birth in a foreign setting:⁹ surely a rather ordinary and not infrequent scene in those days. By taking the details very seriously, by cherishing them in faith, we pass through to, and finally kneel in reverent wonder before the astonishing mystery of a dear God labouring for and loving us to the very end. It is like the process of some contemporary christologies which take the humanity of Jesus very seriously and find there the awesome mysteriousness of divinity. The movement here is through history into mystery. And through the remaining three weeks of the Exercises, in each gospel scene of Jesus we experience this interplay of mystery and history moving towards interpenetration:

Notice here a twofold affective, contemplative dialectic: from mystery to history, from history to mystery—pressing ever towards the full, rich experience of mystery *in* history, history *as* mystery (full Incarnation become now not merely a faith-fact, or doctrine, but faith-*experience*).¹⁰

This contemplative experience of the careful interpenetration of mystery and history gradually has its influence in the busy arena of daily life. An apostolic soul develops special vision; apostolic senses have fine tuning. In the tangled activity of daily life, by seriously treasuring all the details of *this* time and *this* place, and precisely by *not* escaping the circumstances and options of the here and now, we can find and taste and smell and touch a God mysteriously and wonderfully labouring and loving to the end. Contemplation's discovery of the interpenetration of mystery and history allows an apostolic acknowledgment in daily life of the same dynamic fusion of detailed earthly history and awesome divine mystery. The continuing rhythm of formal contemplation *and* action moves the apostle to an integration and special presence in *action as prayer*. It is, then, a daily mysticism of careful, detailed service that grows out of the process of ignatian contemplation.

Ignatian contemplation is a school of discernment. A mysticism of pilgrim service is the daily incarnation of a discernment learned in contemplation and now giving a special presence in the world. To seek out and freely to respond to the breath and fingerprints of God in every situation is very different from a life either of doing whatever one wants or of a secularly competent but spiritually naïve commitment. The contemplations of the Second Week create an inner milieu and atmosphere of heart within which confusion, doubt and cowardice gradually evanesce as decisions emerge with a clarity, courage and energy for action. The invitation of God, even when it involves anguished suffering and frustrating hardship, as Jesus knew in that darksome olive grove, can hearken with an enlightening attractiveness that is almost irresistible. This milieu of heart, this profound inner orientation to God is the lover's experiential feel for a beloved God's truth recognized here and now in a way that is not irrational or selfishly unreasonable, but which also is not simply the result of syllogistic reasoning.

This intuitive sense for the beloved's way and desire has important implications for the role of contemplation in relation to the Two Standards and the Election in the Exercises. Since this inner contemplative composure is just beginning to develop, Ignatius has us spend a whole day meditating on the Two Standards. While at first it may seem an interruption to a simple contemplative style of prayer, this meditation, after four successive hours of prayer, itself coalesces as part of the growing inner composure. It is no slip of the pen when Ignatius later refers to the Two Standards as a 'contemplation' (Exx 156). Four hours of prayer have given the meditation a simple but very enlightening contemplative presence in one's heart and consciousness. And now this enlightened consciousness becomes a backdrop to be further sharpened and discovered in the ongoing contemplative investigation and receiving of Jesus during the retreat. Beyond the retreat, it continues as a focus synchronizing a human heart to the mentality and way of God in Jesus and inspiring courageous apostolic interpretation and service of God's way in all the cultural worldly particulars of daily life. One lives and loves and serves now carefully and gratefully, but always in light of the cosmic confrontation between two mentalities, at odds in every human heart, enfolded in social structures and splitting our whole world.

This inner atmosphere of heart enlightened in the vision of the Two Standards then focuses the election, whether it be of a state

in life or something less comprehensive. As contemplative intimacy with Jesus grows and as we surrender to the attractiveness of God's loving way in Jesus, we can recognize, receive and choose the specific details, whatever they may be, of that way for us now. This recognition is not usually dramatic and instantaneous. Rather, it can be a gradual dawning carefully discerned. Nor is it restricted to the special time of retreat. In the midst of busy life, these specific invitations will be recognized. But one thing is sure: without this inner contemplative composure the particular vocation will be neither recognized nor followed with appropriate reverence and seriousness.

Conclusion

In summary, then, both the method of ignatian prayer in general and the specifics of contemplation in the Second Week of the Exercises are meant to facilitate the interpersonal encounter and union of a human person with God. Far beyond any earthly realization on our part, God is always labouring in every human heart to initiate the contemplative process of luring us into a whole new spirit of life and love in Jesus. Contemplation plays a major role in our acknowledging and living our true identity: a consoling companionship, not only in prayer but in all of life, with God lovingly faithful even on Calvary to and in Jesus, beyond any power of this world. What greater tragedy in life could there be than utter lack of awareness of this glory promised and available to each of us. Through contemplation we truly become whom we contemplate and whom we are all meant to be. For, whether we realize it or not, it is in God's love, and in our loving response in prayer and service, that we live and move and have our selves.

NOTES

¹ Whelan, Joseph: 'Jesuit apostolic prayer' in *Way Supplement*, 19 (1973), p 18. This whole article's brief, very concentrated treatment of ignatian method in prayer has been very provocative of my own development here.

² Johnston, William: *The inner eye of love* (San Francisco, 1978), p 29.

³ Da Câmara, Gonçalves, *Memoriale*, p 256, in *Scripta de Sancto Ignatio*, I, p 278.

⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, in the sonnet, 'As kingfishers catch fire'.

⁵ Rahner, Karl: *Spiritual Exercises* (New York, 1965), pp 114-115.

⁶ Peters, William: *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (Jersey City, 1968), pp 22-24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 35 and p 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 26.

⁹ Already displaced (she is from Nazareth) in the flight into Egypt the matthean theology will find her actually a refugee.

¹⁰ Whelan, Joseph: *art. cit.*, p 17.