

PRESENTING THE TWO STANDARDS, II

By BRIAN GROGAN

THE PREPARATION of the giver of the exercise is important. This is so of course for the Spiritual Exercises in general, but it may be well to focus on the issue here, because beginners especially can find difficulty in presenting the Two Standards. The deceits of the rebel chief can be directed not only at the exercitant but at the giver of the exercise: the subtle temptation is to focus primarily on how to present the exercise; illuminative texts are gathered and stored in one's arsenal, commentaries are consulted, difficulties are anticipated and discussed. All of this can be good: the giver of the Exercises is obliged to prepare well for the work. But the primary preparation must be prayer: the more fully the giver of the exercise is won over to the way of Christ — which is the point of the Two Standards — the more helpful she will be to the exercitant. We communicate what we are. Paul puts it tersely if uncomfortably: 'Take me for your model, as I take Christ' (1 Cor 11,1). Musing on the life of Mary Ward in this fourth centenary of her birth, I wonder what heightened quality would be present if I could give this exercise with a soul 'wholly God's' as hers was! If exercitants sometimes complain that this exercise seems complicated, the remedy lies with the giver becoming ever more clearly focussed on the way of Christ, more won over to the way of Christ, through prayerful reflection.

The *goal* of the exercise — the graced attraction of the exercitant to Christ and his way as being best — must then be kept clearly in mind. Brilliant analyses of how the contemporary world, secular and ecclesiastical, is being duped by satanic illusions may simply lead the exercitant into 'head-tripping'. The mature exercitant may only have to advert to the content of the nine o'clock news to get a feel for the 'snares and chains' which shackle the desire for good which is in all people's hearts. The Exercises are all about desires: the desires of God to liberate us by drawing us to his Son, and the ambiguous desires in our hearts both for God and for

what the world holds as important. The exercitant needs to acknowledge the deceptive attractiveness of the latter, and be encouraged to pray intensely that his/her graced desire for God be strengthened, so that the desires come more and more into harmony with God's desires.

Struggle may be anticipated and is a good sign that the heart, the affectivity, is being engaged; if it is not, there will be little change, little conversion. To quote Lonergan: 'Without (these) feelings our knowing and deciding would be paper thin. Because of our feelings . . . we are orientated massively and dynamically in a world meditated by meaning'.¹ Conversion in us means moving out of, or being torn out of one mind-set and being placed in another; the first is that of fallen humanness, the second is divine. A retreatant put it crisply: 'I have a mind of my own; I revolt at having to put on the mind of Christ!' He knew what the struggle would involve: 'a copernican shift' was his phrase. Day followed painful day; prayer was hard, with only occasional glimmers of light and joy. At the end of the retreat he felt he was beginning to see and surrender: the marvel was what had kept him going through the dark days. I became aware of the strength of the drawing of God, of deep calling on deep beyond this man's knowing.

There is no *earthly* reason why an exercitant should prefer poverty and insults to riches and honours. B. Kiely has written that:

there is certainly some part of us . . . that would prefer riches to poverty, a good name to disrepute, comfort to labour, receiving to giving, doing one's own sweet will to obeying, sexual gratification to chastity . . . Such (in part at least) is the exercitant initially. He has many inordinate attachments . . . The question is whether they will prevail or whether they will be overcome by stronger attachments of a better kind.²

The 'stronger attachments of a better kind' are born in us, often with all the pains of childbirth, by falling in love with the person of Jesus. This process can be quite gentle and unnoticed and the quiet fruit of a good upbringing: it is in the Two Standards that the painful implications of the relationship are starkly unfolded. One may feel trapped: 'I never realized that discipleship could mean this!' One desires Christ but fears the demands of being with him; 'stronger attachments of a better kind' will come from

steady prayer for the grace to imitate Christ. Yielding to the attractiveness of Christ makes it possible to yield to the non-attractiveness of his way of poverty and insults. It can help to recall Augustine's account of the attractiveness of 'the austere beauty of continence, serene and indeed joyous' who smiled on him and invited him to stop his ears against those voices which told him of delights, but not of such delights as the Lord tells (*Confessions* VIII, xi).

Indicators of readiness. The Two Standards is seen by many guides as the parting of the ways. This, however, may only be clear in retrospect. Thus most exercitants are given the exercise, but with some it does not 'take' and the remainder of the retreat is worked through in a lower key. The less robust retreatant can be upset and disorientated by the content of the colloquy and even be led to a feeling of hopelessness before so high an ideal. It would be good then, to note some indicators of readiness for this exercise.

The guide looks for solid love of Christ and for basic freedom and generosity, that is, a willingness and an ability to dispose of oneself. If trust in God is still fragile and precarious, it will hardly bear the weighty demand that one place all hope of future good in the way of Christ, because the colloquy of the Two Standards requires the highest degree of trust in Christ's way as being best.

Tranquillity in the early contemplations of the Second Week is a good sign insofar as it indicates a willingness to let one's life be ruled by the Lord and that one is able to be caught out of oneself into the life of another. This is very difficult for many people; the contemplative stance is beyond them.

Tranquillity in the early contemplations is of a fundamental kind; if it were all-pervasive, one might doubt the realism of the prayer. It is to be expected that real resistances and aversions will appear, for example in the Nativity. Ignatius is writing for grown-ups in Exercises 116 — this is no child's Christmas scene where all is peace and gentleness; rather the exercitant is being prepared for a radical and demanding choice and his capacity for radical dispossession of self is being aired. Pain and death are involved; the exercitant must be free enough to acknowledge them and so come face to face with the 'cost of discipleship'. Only then can prayer be real. Tranquillity can remain in the face of all this; it is the fruit of knowing both one's dividedness of heart and one's need for the grace of God. John Donne's *Batter my heart* catches

the attitude one looks for, of wanting to be won over by grace and knowing that God is the only hope. A recent retreatant remarked that for days she went around saying: 'I know from my lengthy past that I'm always falling short of the ideals I should live by, so this time I won't pray the colloquy until or unless I know I can manage to live up to it!' The perceptive reader will understand what was going on in this situation.

Use of the text? This is a vexed question. But by this stage of the retreat the guide should know the reaction of the exercitant to the text and act appropriately here. On a recent retreat, the majority of the team gave a copy of the Exercises to their exercitants, suggesting that they look at the text as the retreat went along and if helped by doing so, well and good, and if not, that they might set it aside. This arrangement eased the problems usually associated with giving or not giving the text. If the text creates problems, it can be enough to give the content of the third prelude and of the colloquies, with suitable scripture, but not too much thereof. The exercise is a distillation of the whole of the New Testament: key texts can help, e.g. the temptations, the opposition of the Pharisees to Jesus, the clash of spirits given in Gal 5,13-26, the stark account of christian discipleship given in Mark 8-10. The way of poverty, insults and humility is illustrated in Lk 16,13-14; Mt 10,17-22; Mt 11, 29 and elsewhere.

The power of this exercise, however, is found to lie not in the text of Ignatius nor in the scriptural texts, but mostly in the dynamic interplay between the Father who steadily draws the exercitant to his Son (cf Jn 6,44), and the exercitant who, in all the welter of conflicting desires, most deeply wants the true and good and beautiful. In Merton's words:

At the centre of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak his name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond . . .³

The prayer of the exercitant must well up from that truth: he is

made for God, made for the way of the Son, he 'is what Christ is' as Hopkins puts it, and from being unconscious, this identification must become conscious and be ever more fully appropriated.

Learning from experience. Exercitants differ in their reactions to the Two Standards. We become better guides insofar as we reflect on our experience of giving the exercise: what went on? How did I respond? In hindsight, could I have helped more? I can think of the following cases, which may provoke the reader's own memories.

(a) The good novice in late teens. She had little difficulty and saw little problem. My efforts to provoke awareness of the dramatic but subtle conflict between good and evil were of little value, because her background was of a sheltered and untroubled home and school life. It would have been better to focus more simply on the person of Jesus and trust him to bring her over the years to a deeper understanding of the radical nature of discipleship.

(b) The university lecturer. Intelligent, articulate, she made the Exercises in daily life, full of energy and enthusiasm to do great things for God. The Two Standards dismayed and disconcerted her: she had never seriously reflected on the issue of Christ's preferred means in establishing his Father's kingdom. Steady concentration on the pattern of the gospels revealed to her that christian achievement relies not on human resources but on the weakness and foolishness of Christ. 1 Cor 1,17-31 (God chose what is foolish and weak . . .) became a major text for her.

(c) An ex-Provincial, one of nature's gentlemen, weary after a life in government and deeply aware that ambition and desire for security had shackled many a so-called exercise in discernment over the years. He needed no convincing that there *are* two standards and that the good religious is ripe for well-orchestrated temptation. His prayer was simple, wordless, deep — a humble yearning or cry of the heart to be won over to the way of Christ.

(d) A younger priest, widely read in liberation theology and defensive about it, involved in demanding enterprises in the cause of justice, and suspicious of his director who was not so involved. In several days on the Two Standards, he moved through the discouragement of realizing that in his labour for 'the rights of Christ's people' he had paid scant attention to the specific manner of Christ's approach to the liberation of humanity. 'I presumed that Christ's mind was my own!' He went on to ask humbly for light on how to work rightly for the transforming of unjust

structures, how to use influence and pressure while remaining critical and free of such means. He guessed that his choice of means would have to be a matter of ongoing discernment for the rest of his life. What was given him was a 'feel' for the mystery of God's ways as shown in Christ, for bringing about the final community of humankind. His reform of life centred on getting to know the Christ of the gospels better. In the year after the retreat he found himself able to be more deeply involved in his work than before, because he was no longer dogged by frustration and fear of failure; he was helping God rather than God helping him. C. Martini's analysis of the Two Standards in terms of misunderstanding the mystery of Christ and of the incarnation was helpful reading both during and after the retreat.⁴

Witnesses. We know that Ignatius multiplied examples to help his exercitants catch on, e.g. in regard to the Principle and Foundation. Perhaps we ignore his note at the opening of the Second Week about it being 'very profitable' to read from the lives of the saints. Examples stir the imagination and the affectivity; herewith a few.

(a) Ignatius to Isabel Roser, 1532:

. . . You speak of the enmities, the intrigues, the untruths which have been circulated about you. I am not at all surprised at this, not even if it were worse than it is. For just as soon as you determined to bend every effort to secure the praise, honour and service of God our Lord, you declared war against the world, and raised your standard in its face, and got ready to reject what is lofty by embracing what is lowly, to accept indifferently honour and dishonour, riches and poverty, affection and hatred, welcome and repulse, in a word, the glory of the world or all the wrongs it could inflict on you.

. . . If we wish absolutely to live in honour and to be held in esteem by our neighbours, we can never be solidly rooted in God our Lord, and it will be impossible for us to remain unscathed when we meet with affronts.⁵

(b) Winefrid Wigmore, writing of Mary Ward, c 1628:

What applause would she not have won, what friends would she have acquired and have made herself an object of admiration to the world, if she would have relented but a little on some points regarding the Institute. But she put herself aside, without regarding

what was agreeable or disagreeable, her only ambition being fidelity to God, which she desired so much that it did not appear difficult whatever she suffered in so doing — to lose friends and make enemies, to despise honours and embrace contempt, to reject riches and embrace poverty.⁶

(c) Dom Helder Camara to the non-violent but involved, 1974:

We must have no illusions. We must not be naive. If we listen to the voice of God, we make our choice, get out of ourselves and fight non-violently for a better world. We must not expect to find it easy; we shall not walk on roses, people will not throng to hear us and applaud, and we shall not always be aware of divine protection. If we are to be pilgrims for justice and peace, we must expect the desert.

The great and the powerful disappear, stop helping us and turn against us . . . And what is worse, those who are not powerful also avoid us . . .

There are times when we look about us and feel we are an awkward friend. People who welcome us are suspect. They want our friendship but are afraid of being compromised by our reputation.

. . . We reach the limits of endurance, desert all about us, desert within. We feel that the Father himself has abandoned us, 'Why hast thou forsaken me?'

We must not trust in our own strength, we must not give way to bitterness, we must stay humble knowing that we are in the hands of God, we must want only to share in the making of a better world. Then we shall not lose our courage or our hope. We shall feel the invisible protection of God our Father.⁷

NOTES

¹ Lonergan, B.: *Method in theology* (New York, 1973), pp 30-31.

² Kiely, B.: 'Consolation, desolation and the changing of symbols' in *The Spiritual Exercises in present-day application* (Rome, 1982), p 134.

³ Merton, T.: *Conjectures of a guilty bystander* (New York, 1968), p 158.

⁴ Martini, C.: *The ignatian exercises in the light of St John*, (Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, India, 1981), pp 158-66.

⁵ Cf *St Ignatius' own story*, trans. W. J. Young (Chicago, 1956), p 76.

⁶ Chambers, M. C. E.: *The life of Mary Ward* (London, 1882), vol 2, p 298.

⁷ Camara, H.: *The desert is fertile* (London, 1974), pp 17-19.

THE EIGHT-DAY RETREAT

By LAVINIA BYRNE

LATE NINETEENTH and early twentieth century ignatian retreat manuals convey a certainty of purpose and uniformity of practice remote from the open-ended definition with which Ignatius himself begins the *Spiritual Exercises*.

We call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the Will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul.¹

For Spiritual Exercises we now find 'retreat', for the soul who would rid itself of attachments we now find 'the retreatant himself', for seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life we now find something called 'apostolic sanctity'.

The retreat is defined as:

a time of rest from study and care, but also a time of exertion and prayer . . . yet we should avoid nervous strain, not work ourselves up into an unnatural or hysteric condition, for this time is 'an extraordinary divine favour'.²

'For the last twelve months', we read 'we have been employed in working for the good of others, and this work has been mostly temporal. Now we are to work for our own good, and that work will be entirely spiritual'.³

The retreat is 'most necessary, most salutary and most desirable', its efficacy 'invincible in changing the heart and remedying every spiritual evil as has been tested by innumerable authorities, the respectability of which cannot be questioned'.⁴

Sadly, the retreatant appears less respectable:

some religious do not seem to take the retreat seriously till the third or fourth day. Their mind and heart are so engrossed with pet creatures, recreation, study, classwork, business-matters, that