

THE FIRST WEEK: SOME NOTES ON THE TEXT

By MICHAEL IVENS

IGNATIUS himself does not seem to have regarded the First Week of the Exercises as calling for any remarkable degree of expertise on the part of the director. The text tends, however, to confront modern directors with formidable difficulties both of interpretation and presentation. In many ways Ignatius's approach does not at first sight commend itself to the twentieth-century outlook. The stories of the fall of the angels and the sin of Adam and Eve seem too remote to rouse the contemporary retreatant to a deep sense of the sin of the world. The accumulated points of the second exercise can appear an almost perversely circuituous route to the desired goal of 'tears and intense sorrow'. In general Ignatius's language and ideas come across as ill-suited to modern attitudes, let alone modern theology. And, of course, there is the sheer practical difficulty of explaining to one's exercitant the dense materials apparently to be worked through in a single day.

Clearly, all this points to the need to adapt the First Week exercises, and arguably it might be good to make more far-reaching adaptations than most directors are willing to envisage. But directors are rightly conscious that however extensively they adapt Ignatius's materials, it is their task to guide the exercitant according to Ignatius's spiritual genius and not to substitute their own approaches for his. Hence the first condition for adaptation is to possess as clear a grasp as possible of Ignatius's text. Understanding the text will not, to be sure, resolve all the difficulties of meeting the individual in his unique needs and situation; the text is not a kind of microdot, which if only it could be sufficiently blown up would reveal an exhaustive theoretical and practical guide to conversion. But without expecting the book of the Exercises to furnish assistance that Ignatius does not intend to offer, it is important for the director to proceed on the basis of a clear general idea of the meaning of the five meditations that comprise the exercises of the First Week.

Conversion of mind and heart

Ignatius begins by introducing the exercitant to a particular method of prayer: meditation according to the powers of the soul in which the understanding is employed to reason on the materials recalled by memory and the will to move the affections. More than simply a 'method', this procedure corresponds to the spiritual and psychological structure of conversion. For conversion is the re-orientation of the self on the level of mind and heart, or, to use more contemporary language, it is the response of spirit-given commitment to the spirit-given perception of a new realm of meaning.

The First Week includes, then, a graced mental or intellectual process, which consists in the meditative assimilation of a certain 'content'. But it is necessary to insist with the text of the Exercises and the Directories, that while intellect plays an indispensable role in the process of conversion it is also a potential obstacle to conversion. For in the Exercises the activity of the intellect is strictly ordered to the response of the affections, and there is no place in the First Week for the mere quest for knowledge or conceptual clarity. The content of the First Week, definite though it is, does not consist in new facts or ideas; as far as material is concerned, it is enough for the exercitant to draw upon his christian memory. He is converted in mind in the sense that what on one level he knows already he now appropriates at a new level of perception and clarity, in much the same way (even if not with the same mystical purity and intensity) as in the illumination of the Cardoner Ignatius experienced already known truths as 'altogether new'. In the First Week, as throughout the Exercises, knowledge is affective; we are always concerned with the 'interior understanding and relish of the truth' that Ignatius sets in opposition to merely quantitative knowledge. Certainly, no conversion of the whole person can come about without conversion on the level of meaning, and the second annotation offers no justification for neglecting the precise and pondered details that Ignatius proposes for the exercitant's prayerful consideration. But it was recognized from the beginning that there is a type of exercitant, abetted perhaps by a type of director, who must be put on guard against the temptation to turn the First Week Exercises into an intellectual safari:

The exercitant must avoid excessive intellectual speculation and see that he makes the Exercises on the level of the affections of the will and not of intellectual speculation. He must realize that the

understanding partly helps and partly impedes the activity of the will, which consist in the love of divine things'.¹

The above quotation refers to the 'affections of the will'. To a modern reader, accustomed to think of affectivity as synonymous with 'emotion', the notion of 'affections of the will' may seem curious, and suggestive of an anti-emotional attitude. That the First Week is meant to be intensely emotional is of course clear from Ignatius's language. Ignatius would be using words in a perversely misleading sense if phrases like 'shame and confusion', 'growing and intense sorrow', 'tears', 'cry of wonder' and 'abhorrence of sin' did not denote something like an emotional crescendo. But there is emotion and emotion, and just as some retreatants are constitutionally prone to 'intellectualism' so others are constitutionally prone to the antithetical deviation of 'emotionalism'. To see how there can be an emotionalism which misses the point of the First Week Exercises, it is necessary to be aware of the wider sense in which the scholastics understood the concept of 'affect'. In scholastic terminology, the word serves to designate every capacity of the human person (from the 'lowest' faculties to the 'highest') to be drawn to or to enjoy an object in any way perceived as 'good', together with the correlative capacity to hate and recoil from objects in any way perceived as 'bad'. In its highest form this capacity is a quality of the will, which is not only the faculty of free choice but the 'rational appetite'; and it is this affectivity of the will that we identify in ordinary speech when we describe people as 'committed', 'highly motivated', 'having their heart' in some value. In essence, then, conversion is a graced commitment of the will to God with a correlative graced aversion of the will in regard to what is not of God.

This does not, however, mean that Ignatius stands lightly to the close interrelation between perception, commitment and emotion. But it is important to realize that when he would have the retreatant pray for feelings and actively seek to arouse them, he has in mind the overflow of the affections of the will into the sensible faculties, so that the one realm permeates the other, and emotion becomes an integral element in the response of the whole person to God and his love. When this is seen, it becomes clear that the First Week Exercises, precisely *because* they draw upon the whole gamut of human feeling, are open to the dangers of misusing or misinterpreting emotion. Graced emotion cannot be forced: the effort required of the exercitant is not, as one of the Directories puts it, 'like crushing an orange'.² Moreover, one must beware of confusing the graces of the First Week with

feelings that correspond only superficially to Ignatius's language. Not *any* tears, *any* shame, *any* feeling of abhorrence will do. It is always possible to work up emotions of this kind without any real faith commitment. Quite possibly such feelings might arise from morbid attitudes or false notions, such as attitudes of self-rejection or aberrant theological assumptions. It must always be borne in mind that the key to the feelings sought in the First Week lies in the concept of consolation, which is not just an 'experience' but a movement towards God and his will and a strengthening of dedication.

The content of the First Week. Ignatius's ideas of sin and mercy.

Behind the First Week meditations there is a theological meaning, a vision of the realities of sin and mercy. It is a wholly traditional view; but in certain respects Ignatius's standpoint is different from that of popular preaching and instruction on sin and conversion. Two details in particular may serve to illustrate the point. First, Ignatius plays down anything in the way of detailed examination of conscience, and insists that no thought should be given to confession until the end of the week. The exercitant needs, of course, to be aware of the specific and concrete sins of his life, and it was the early practice to introduce the examination of conscience between the Principle and Foundation and the meditations of the First Week proper.³ But the function of this is purely preparatory. Minute scrutiny of one's actions has no place in the First Week of the Exercises. Secondly, in the First Week Exercises Ignatius displays strikingly little interest in the distinction between degrees of sin that has so dominated catholic theology and catechesis. The term 'venial sin' is not used; if the concept is referred to at all it is only implicitly in the *desorden* of 63 and the *faltas* of 65. Yet the distinction was an integral part of Ignatius's teaching at Manresa; it appears elsewhere in the Exercises in the text on the Examen and the Rules for Scruples, and the latter contain an explicit warning against the tendency of over-conscientious people to detect mortal sin in everything. It can hardly be an accident that in the five meditations of the First Week Ignatius seems unconcerned with a distinction that he plainly considered important.

What, then, is the underlying concept of sin in the First Week Exercises? Ignatius is not primarily concerned with a moral view of sin (sin in relation to law), nor with a psychological view of sin (sin in relation to elements of real unfreedom in the psyche), but with a rigorously and explicitly theocentric view of sin. He would have the

exercitant reach a deeper level of awareness than that of the ordinary christian moral conscience. The Exercises are concerned not so much with sins as with the sin within the sins, not with the immediately obvious reality but with the hidden reality of the *mysterium iniquitatis*, 'the mystery of evil'.

The clue to this concept of sin is to be found in Ignatius's idea of God and of God's relationship to the human person. God is infinite majesty, divine goodness and the creator and lord of all things. The human being, as body-spirit and in his natural involvement in the world, exists for the praise, reverence and service of God, while everything else exists to help him to live for this purpose. The meaning of human life consists in loving reverence in relation to the Divine Majesty and infinite goodness, a loving reverence worked out through fidelity to God's will, and to conduct one's life on this basis is to exist in harmony with all things. Sins turn this theology upside down. It is the refusal of reverence. It is ingratitude towards the divine goodness (the key to the shame and confusion of the first exercise). And it is man's 'no' to the ultimate meaning of creation. Sin is, therefore, both an enormity and a catastrophe. It is the enormity of irreverence and ingratitude; it is a catastrophe not only because it incurs the punishments of God, but also because the destruction of man's relationship to God is the destruction of his relationship with himself, with other people and with the material world, a destruction which reaches its ultimate completion in damnation. It is the destructive, though often hidden, effects of sin in people and the world that Ignatius seeks to bring out in a series of images that appear at first sight exaggerated and a little morbid: the exile imprisoned in himself and cast out among beasts, the 'great corruption of the human race', the vileness of the body. Such language, which stands in striking contrast to that of the Fourth Week and the *Contemplatio ad amorem*, does not of course express Ignatius's idea of the human condition. It describes our condition in so far as we are sinful: the condition from which we are called and empowered to move progressively to a life of harmony, with the world in which 'in all things God works and labours for me'. But what one must do at the beginning of the Exercises is to take real cognizance of oneself as sinful.

But while the vision set out in the *Contemplatio ad amorem* lies below the horizon in the First Week, the First Week is not primarily about sin but about mercy. What heals and transforms a person in his deepest affectivity is not the naked recognition of sin, but the

recognition that God's mercy is literally 'wonderful' and the exercitant must enter deeply into the mystery of sin because only the person whose mind has been opened to sin is capable of really knowing mercy.

To appreciate the First Week Exercises as a discovery of God's mercy, two points in particular need to be borne in mind. First, while the exercitant is led to perceive and respond to mercy in new ways and at new depths, he knows from the outset that God is a merciful God, just as he knows from the outset that he himself is a sinner. From the beginning, the First Week Exercises proceed in a trustful confidence in mercy, and it is an interesting point that Ignatius never requires the exercitant to ask for mercy, only to open his mind and heart to the mercy proffered him.

But secondly, the exercitant must realize that this mercy is proffered gratuitously. As Karl Rahner puts it, 'sin does not demand grace', and it is not a trick of God's love that he uses to show us our poverty and creaturehood so that he can then show us how merciful he is.⁴ Our sinful existence is really exposed to the ultimate consequences of sin, and implicit in the love, gratitude and wonder that characterize an authentic response to mercy there is the recognition that mercy is an act not of divine necessity but of God's gracious and loving freedom. All this, admittedly, Ignatius approaches in a way that poses serious difficulties for people today, for he quite explicitly asks the exercitant to start by comparing God's predilection in regard to himself with the justice executed upon the damned. This, of course, assumes the certain existence of the damned, and Ignatius shared with his age a firm belief that Hell was a densely populated place. But if we remember that the Exercises in the last analysis are not about other sinners but about one sinner in particular, the exercitant; and that they are not about condemnation but about mercy, it becomes clear that the effectiveness of the first meditation does not depend on whether or not 'countless people' have in fact been 'lost for a single mortal sin'. The essential point is that between the individual exercitant and the possible consequences of sin there stands God's gratuitous, but absolutely trustworthy, saving initiative offered to his freedom.

The five meditations

In the five meditations of the First Week the theology outlined above is embodied in certain materials and these in turn are set forth in a distinctive order, an order which is pedagogical and

experiential rather than logical. The director is not, of course, tied to the material as it stands; in giving the First Week over a period of several days, he will most certainly wish to propose themes and scripture texts not contained in the five meditations.⁵ But the choice of additional materials should respect the purposes behind Ignatius's own materials and in any case to adapt Ignatius's matter does not mean abandoning the order, the distinctive dynamic, of the five meditations. If adaptation is to be faithful to Ignatius's mind it must remain based on the materials and sequence of the five meditations.

First Exercise. The approach is historical and objective; conscious of his own 'numerous sins' (not necessarily 'mortal') the exercitant meditates on three objectively 'mortal' sins, and in the *effects* of these begins to penetrate the *meaning* of sin. This meaning is not set forth in a systematic fashion, but as well as dwelling upon sin as a violation of God's commandments, the exercitant perceives that all sin involves Christ, 'God our Lord'. (The sense of the apparently irrelevant reference to the 'plain of Damascus' is that traditionally a place of that name existed near Bethlehem.) But the first exercise is not the place to dwell directly on the nature of sin, but rather to meditate on the effects of sin — the most immediately accessible aspect — as a sign of the *mysterium iniquitatis* which in its fulness will always elude us. Meditating on the effects of sin, familiar phrases like 'irreverence and disobedience', 'violation of God's commands', 'gravity and malice', acquire a new and disturbing resonance.

Though objectivity is the key to this meditation, the exercitant must not adopt the stance of an outsider. It is a characteristic of Ignatius's methodology that he uses objectivity as a means of gaining clarity with regard to oneself (as in the rules for almsgiving and election). The exercitant recognizes, then, that he is involved. The sin of the angels, 'the refusal to use their freedom to reverence and obey their creator and Lord', is of the same nature as his own sin. His own sin ratifies and extends the effects of the original sin. And in the plight of the anonymous individual of the third point (reminiscent of the 'person I have never seen or known' of 185 and 339), he recognizes his own possible future.

Colloquy of the Cross. Though the exercise is entitled 'meditation on the three sins', consideration of the three sins does not stand by itself.

It is clear that they have the character of the premise of an argument that issues in Christ, and that they are not proposed as a subject of meditation in itself, to be dwelt on till exhausted.⁶

The colloquy of the cross, then, is not an appendage to the exercise, but its real point. Without it, the meditation of the three sins would serve only to leave the exercitant in a state of unresolved disturbance, and it is worth noting that the third point in particular only acquires its effect in the dynamic of the first exercise when the exercitant realizes that between his present and his possible future stands the figure of Christ crucified. It would of course, falsify the very notion of colloquy to try to tie down the meanings that the individual might find in it, but the text and the early sources offer certain guidelines as to the way in which the colloquy of the cross serves to culminate the first meditation:

(i) Having meditated on sin as an offence against the creator and as the destruction of creation, the exercitant contemplates the crucified Christ precisely as the 'Creator of the world'.

(ii) The cross is the ultimate revelation of the 'effects of sin'. 'The crucified Christ is the sinner's mirror, for my own sins appear in his sufferings and death'.⁷

(iii) There is a clear allusion in the colloquy of the cross to the christological hymn in Phil 2,6-11 (made explicit in the use of the vulgate verb *exinanivit* in the *versio prima*). Christ's humility is therefore set against our pride, his 'use of freedom' with ours.

(iv) The quotation from St Augustine in the 1599 Directory in connection with the passion clearly touches on the central point of the colloquy of the cross: 'He who gave the more, the blood of his only begotten Son, will also give what is assuredly the less, namely eternal glory'. The same text also lists the principal 'affections' of prayer on the passion: hatred of sin, knowledge of the goodness of God, confirmation of hope, love of God, the desire for imitation.⁸

Second Exercise. The focus of the first exercise was on the effects of sin in the world and on the exercitant's involvement in these. The second is concerned with the meaning of sin in itself. The exercise begins with a reality already considered obliquely, 'my many sins'. Each individual has his personal sinful history that constitutes a thread interwoven into the sinful history of the cosmos, and this he must now pass in review. But in doing so, the exercitant is not required to try to catalogue the sins of a lifetime; it is an overall impression and the emergence of dominant patterns that matter. The first point is merely preparatory, and when the Directories come to comment on it they display a remarkable insistence on the need for restraint. It is a 'general' rather than a 'particular examen', concerned with *gravia* rather than *subtilia*.⁹ The exercitant must avoid

a 'particular consideration of his sins and must confine himself to the level of the universal'.¹⁰ He must avoid the memory of past *voluptas*.¹¹ And he must not start preparing his confession.

The second exercise is very much concerned, then, with the 'sin within the sins', and in insisting in the second point on the 'malice and turpitude that sin has in itself even if it were not forbidden', Ignatius is directing the exercitant to look beyond merely moral considerations to the recognition of sin in its essence. As a practical aid to rooting this second point in the exercitant's own sinful history, it can be useful to employ the traditional categories of the capital sins.¹²

The heart of the second exercise lies, however, in the consideration of the smallness of the creature in relation to the grandeur of God. Here the Exercises penetrate to the meaning of sin in its very depths, and invite the exercitant to the highest level of contrition based on the insight that sin in its essence is the refusal of loving reverence, the refusal, in short to allow God to be God. It is not surprising if at this stage the exercitant finds himself rather bereft, at a loss to respond affectively to what may seem rather abstract considerations. And it need hardly be emphasized that meditation on Ignatius's points can be no more than a patient co-operation in a divine work quite incommensurate with our own powers.

In the fifth point and the colloquy the exercise passes from the peak of contrition to the concluding hymn to God's mercy. Concerned, as always, with man in his environment and the need to find God in all things, Ignatius invites the exercitant to discover mercy written into the book of creatures, using language that echoes his own mystical experience. And in the end there is the response which is both effective and affective, the resolution to 'amend for the future with God's grace', a resolution that is the spontaneous outcome of a new and overwhelming discovery that God is good.

Third and fourth Exercises; repetitions and the Triple Colloquy. Since the general significance of these belongs to the study of the Exercises as a whole, it will suffice here to make a few observations in connection with their place in the First Week. Repetition is the time not only to relish and linger upon consolation but to work through the reactions of desolation experienced in relation to particular points. Such reactions are of crucial importance because they are the repercussion at the level of emotion of resistances within the self to the call to conversion. In the First Week, repetition is necessary, too, because the material of its nature is not easily assimilated, and until it becomes familiar the affections may be slow to arise:

It often happens that at first the novelty of the material arouses much intellectual curiosity with little interior taste of the will. Later, with the cessation of intellectual speculation and curiosity, there is room for the spiritual and interior affections.¹³

Moreover, so long as the parts of the First Week remain compartmentalized, something is lacking in the conversion of the mind, the formation of a renewed outlook, and with repetition a process of synthesis comes about in which, intuitively rather than speculatively, the parts are perceived in their interrelationships. Repetition is also process of simplification in which the exercitant's prayer shifts from a more meditative to a more contemplative mode.¹⁴

In the Triple Colloquy the general insights gained in the preceding exercises are brought to bear on the exercitant's own patterns of personal sinful behaviour and on the quite specific ways in which he has become involved in the sin of his world. But as in previous exercises, the emphasis is not on quantitative but qualitative or 'interior' knowledge, the knowledge which leads to affective response. Perhaps the only jarring note the modern reader will find in the text is the notion of 'abhorrence', used in each of the colloquies (*abhorrescimiento* — *aboresciendo* — *aboresciendo*) to designate the affective response for which the exercitant is required to pray. Since inevitably the word is liable to conjure up pictures of the more morbid aspects of religious conversion, (such as self-loathing or the hatred of the world), it is important to be clear that it is sin and not self that is the object of abhorrence and that abhorrence for the sinfulness of the world must be understood in the light of Ignatius's positive theology of creation. Nor is the notion of abhorrence a purely negative one, for while Ignatius is certainly emphasizing the necessary negative aspect of conversion (the *aversio ab* which is the corollary of *conversio ad*), the very notion of aversion only makes sense in the context of the Exercises' central themes: the conversion of affectivity, and especially by the affect of desire. A converted person does not lead his life in continual conflict with his deepest desires, for conversion is a transformation precisely at the level of desire. 'Abhorrence' then, is simply the antithesis of desire: for as the heart comes to desire God and his will, so the desires for what is not of God become changed into a deeply felt distaste. Obviously, this process of affective conversion is never complete. The alignment of the 'lower faculties to the higher' always goes on. But the Exercises are a moment when one may hope actually to experience the graces of a radically converted affectivity, to know what it feels like to desire

God with all one's heart, to see the deformity of God's work wrought in oneself and the world by sin, and to feel no taste for that deformity.

Fifth Exercise. The final exercise consists in a kind of application of the senses, in which by means of the sensitive imagination and with no discursive activity of the intellect, the exercitant brings home to himself the ultimate consequences of sin, the radical negation of God-centred order. He does so in order to become aware not of the consequences of his past but of the implications of choices that await him in the future, and the purpose of the meditation is to equip him with the important, though secondary, affect of fear, a subject introduced at this point for the first time. Fear is certainly not the basis of the First Week conversion; while Ignatius believed that for some people the stimulus of servile fear is a necessary first step, it is not for these that the exercises of the First Week are intended. Here fear does not *precede* the discovery of mercy and the response of love; it *follows* them with the intention that, in Karl Rahner's phrase, a 'note of humility may be injected into our love'. The fifth exercise is concerned, then, not with 'servile fear' (the fear which is 'cast out' by love) but with the filial fear 'which is wholly pleasing and agreeable to God our Lord, since it is inseparably associated with love of him'.¹⁵ Such fear is never far from love and thanksgiving, and the movement of the fifth exercise goes from the note of fear in the second prelude to a conclusion in which the word fear simply disappears:

'I will thank him that up to this very moment he has shown himself so loving and merciful towards me'.

NOTES

¹ *MHSJ* 76, p 155 (Directory of Pereyra).

² *MHSJ* 76, p 546 (Directory of Cordeses).

³ *MHSJ* 76, p 82 (Ignatius), p 538 (Cordeses).

⁴ Rahner, Karl: *The Spiritual Exercises* (english trs, London, 1967), pp 32, 36.

⁵ The note in the Exercises on additional material was added to the text on Ignatius's instruction in 1548. Usage among the first generation of directors varies widely, but from the Directories two general impressions are clear: the use of additional materials was accepted, but directors should always remember that too varied a fare is no aid to affective digestion. The Directories naturally include many references to the two supplementary themes mentioned in the text of the Exercises: death and judgment. Ignatius himself suggests that these are valuable for those who may be slow to experience the effects of the First Week. (*MHSJ* 76, p 91); Miron (p 386) and Cordeses (p 541) propose them as supplements of the fourth and fifth meditations. Other scripture subjects recommended for meditation in the Directories include the flood (pp 208, 541), Sodom (p 208), David and Nathan (p 541), the sin of Solomon (p. 208), the Prodigal Son (to be given on the last day after confession (p 391).

⁶ Calveras, J.: *Práctica de los Ejercicios intensivos* (Barcelona, 1952), p 139.

⁷ Journal. Cf Cusson, G.: *Pédagogie des Exercices spirituels* (Bruges, 1968), p 177.

⁸ *MHSJ* 76, pp 728-31.

⁹ *MHSJ* 76, p 86 (Ignatius).

¹⁰ *MHSJ* 76, p 436.

¹¹ *MHSJ* 76, p 504. On the 'tale of sins', cf also pp 104, 298, 387, 539, 655.

¹² There is a good case for W. Peters's suggestion (*Spiritual Exercises*, New Jersey, p 60), that the phrase 'every mortal sin committed' should be read as referring to the 'capital' sins. Admittedly, the suggestion implies that Ignatius uses the term 'mortal sin' in two senses in as many pages (for in the first exercise the term certainly carries the ordinary sense). On the other hand, in the first method of prayer Ignatius designates the seven capital sins as *los siete peccados mortales* (Exx 244) and contemporary *confessionalia* use the term 'mortal sins' to designate the capital sins, whether 'grave' in the moral sense or not (*MHSJ* 76, p 54). In view of Ignatius's scant preoccupation in the first week with the 'mortal/venial' distinction, the question is perhaps relatively unimportant. Certainly, the use of the seven capital sins as a method, as suggested by Calveras (*op. cit.*, p 163), proves helpful in practice.

¹³ *MHSJ* 76, p 504 (Davila).

¹⁴ While Ignatius denotes the First Week Exercises as 'Meditations' he refers in Exx 64, in connection with the second repetition, to 'the things contemplated'. Similarly, in the Second Week the 'meditation' on the Two Standards becomes, with repetition, a 'contemplation' (Exx 156).

¹⁵ Rules for thinking with the Church (Exx 370).

The articles by Michael Ivens, Joseph Veale, William Broderick, Peter McVerry and John Coventry were originally papers given at the annual Spiritual Exercises Conference held at St Beuno's, North Wales, over the New Year 1982-83. Sr Oliver Byrne's report refers to the same conference.

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