

FOUR NEW EXERCISES FOR GIVING EXERCISES TODAY

Precis: The Exercises are meant for real people in all of their varied conditions. Those who give Exercises tend to look only for qualities of prayer and religiousness. They must begin rather seeing God at work in all the good people do. As Christ did, they must find the good and inflame it with the gospel. This is the "missionary" function of Exercises, begun by Ignatius. Finding God in self, the one who gives Exercises is continually converted by the graces given to the ones making them. Authentic ignatian Exercises begin with the subject who might make them.

The "today" regards, quite closely, the deeply rooted attitude of many believers towards the Church. Or, more properly, profound attitudes of the Church itself — that is, the attitudes of all of us who call ourselves the Church — towards the Church itself. I believe that I have been asked to give a small personal witness on what I do or aim at doing, or believe should be done, in working with the Exercises, so that the Church — the community of those who like us are being saved and, accordingly, are committed to help in saving others —, so that we become ever more the Church of Jesus. The complexity of this attempt is obvious. In practice, there are many ways, levels, rhythms of growth and maturation, or of discouragement and fear, in concrete individuals' awareness of the Church (including those of us who give Exercises). One might say that each of us has his own.

In a rash attempt at elementary classification, we might find ourselves today in the midst of a quadruple phenomenon and touched by it to varying degrees.

1) That of a diffuse religiosity, even seething, anxious, anguished,

eclectic, the expression of a subjective need to seek for salvation outside of ourselves and to catch hold of a plank, any plank, or even to fabricate one, just as we react to a shipwreck or a confounding catastrophe. Years ago His Holiness John Paul II referred to this phenomenon as being ambiguous or, what boils down to the same thing, calling for discernment.

While on the one hand people seem to be pursuing material prosperity and to be sinking ever deeper into consumerism and materialism, on the other hand we are witnessing a desperate search for meaning, the need for an inner life, and a desire to learn new forms and methods of meditation and prayer. Not only in cultures with strong religious elements, but also in secularized societies, the spiritual dimension of life is being sought after as an antidote to dehumanization. This phenomenon – the so-called “religious revival” – is not without ambiguity, but it also represents an opportunity. (*Redemptoris missio*, 1990, no.38)

2) On the opposite extreme: we are wracked inside and outside by a more or less nervous disaffection and a heading away from and putting a growing distance between ourselves and what somewhat improperly is called the “official” Church. Referring to Europe, the Pope described this recently as “the loss of Europe's Christian memory and heritage” (*Ecclesia in Europa*, 7).

3) In between is a great mass of good, indeed excellent people, at home in the Church and docile, easy to handle and influence, who reliably express enthusiasm on designated occasions, who nourish their faith with a religiosity of rites to which they remain faithful, in parallel or even in contrast with a life whose “values” clash with those of the Gospel. At times, in the face of important happenings in human affairs, they may surprise us with reactions and expressions of solidarity full of common sense and of the Gospel.

4) And finally, there is what might perhaps unjustly be called “the rest of Israel”, which attends, day by day, to its fidelity to the “covenant” with a committed faith – as is essential for faith – “which works by love” in the midst of a world resistant to being built precisely on the basis of such

charity (Gal. 5:6).

All of these show up in surprising mixtures and alternations which are occasionally extreme and break down the hardness of the human heart. And we continually find plenty living examples of them, to whom we devote ourselves today by giving Exercises. Including to those in church circles whom we call "the consecrated". In actual fact, everyone is consecrated. And this may put us on the track of what God is calling us to do, in order for the spiritual Exercises to constitute an "exceptional means."

First Exercise

It is clear that at the bottom of several of the situations, outlined in 1, 2, and 3, there is almost always a blameless ignorance. "They know not what they do" (1k 23: 34), Christ continues to say through us to the Father. But those of us who, through compassion, come to know "something" cannot conceal under the doormat "that which we have seen, heard and which our hands have handled of the Word of life" (1 Jn 1: 1-3). This is a first exercise which corresponds to the *subiecto* (the entire, mature and responsible person) of the giver of Exercises. If there can be a lack of *subiecto* in the one making them, this is even truer in the one giving them.

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This is an exercise (interior personal gymnastics) of *kenosis*, which Paul summed up in his "made all things to all men" (1 Cor 9, 19-23). If the overflowing emptying of the Son is the manner of revelation of the Father, then the emptying of the Christian as a servant will be its clearest, or its least incorrect, translation. The first exercise that Ignatius proposes to the giver of exercises, that of "these exercises have to be applied" [18], begins already with this *interior serving gymnastics*, which is quite irreplaceable. He will show his Christian maturity and responsibility by not being a person anchored to a text, either his own or that of Ignatius. Of course, he will not be able to do without the latter. He knows himself to be a

witness and servant in a relationship, “God-exercitant, exercitant-God”, which is beyond him, by means of a relationship, his own, with both. In this interchange, Ignatius's text is indispensable not as an external tool which is taken or left, out of convenience or because of a rule, but as a pedagogical process incorporated in his own person. A *way of being* that projects him outside, into his fellow, into a “way of proceeding” that he uses “to help” others, at the same time as he knows and feels himself “helped”: “And this I do for the gospel's sake” (1 Cor, 9,23). To give exercises is a conscious way of making them. And of allowing oneself to be exercised by them.

Second Exercise

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In the doing, this comes first. It is the exercise of a compassionate gaze on this world present in the man and woman exercitants, who are seeking God, and are sought by Him, who are already being encountered by Him. Wanting to make Exercises is a proof of having been encountered already. And an even greater proof of having been encountered are the upright dealings of his or her life, even ones not explicitly validated by the Gospel. A necessary complement of this gaze is the “self-emptying” servant of the first exercise.

The first gaze of the giver of exercises, like Christ's glances, must not be to see a lack of awareness of God in the one making them, but to see the reality of God already present and active in the other. In our present-day society – including in the Church – very often the signs of such a present God are not the expressions of religiosity, but of upright dealings. Compassion detects them, recognises them and serves them. For compassion is not only, not even mainly, a capacity for drawing a veil of piety over human hardships, but the intuition and skill for making people aware, in the works that they do, of God who inhabits those works (*Dives in misericordia*, 6).

The practical consequences of this “gaze” for the purpose of determining who has *subiecto*, or not, for making exercises and for what exercises, are innumerable. However, recent surveys on the conditions that we

consider necessary to determine if there is *subiecto* or not for making them, place the accent on whether the person has much, little, or no experience of prayer; on whether he has desires, vehement desires, “desires of desires”; on whether she is capable of committing herself to a discipline of prayer — examen, of confrontation, etc.

The most authentic expression of such “desires” do not have to be religious practices or signs, or ascetical practices, but blessings which have already germinated or which are beginning to germinate in their lives. Even in the depths of what may appear to be areligious and agnostic attitudes as described in figures 1) and 2) above – and despite numerous ambiguities, contradictions, and incoherences (the heritage of every human being) – the determined uprightness of their lives conceals a live and active desire, which the giver of exercises must forthwith light up and bring to the surface, as “set afire by God” (Ignatius of Loyola).

This is how Jesus acted. Otherwise, what is the meaning of his daring to affirm, in the midst of a “religious” people, that many of the “non-observers” will “go into the kingdom of God before you” (Mt. 21:31)? Why should we complain today that a certain type of person, above all, men, fail to address themselves to making Exercises, or only do so with considerable interior repugnance and a sort of ashamed self-consciousness? Why do we make a point of requiring the performance of a whole series of “religious” practices and observances by persons who in their “secular” forms of caring for their fellows are giving signs of already living out the Principle and Foundation and of having already begun to apply practically in their lives the Ignatian ideal “to divest oneself of self-love, self-will and self-interest” [189]?

Are we not at this moment – under the pretext of certifying the Exercises– running the risk of accommodating them and converting them into a sort of service of cosmetic surgery for a very special élite? Or are we not already feeling the need to save them from drifting towards a sort of “devotion,” a medicine for preventing or treating anything from a cold to

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a high fever? If they are a way which, as in the case of Ignatius, is destined to open us up to ongoing conversion (that is, the faith) to live as Jesus Christ lived, should we not strive to discover as fishing-grounds for exercitants those human groups which – even without knowing it – are already living out pages, and difficult pages, of the Gospel? Should we not revive the *missionary* force of the Exercises, measuring more and paying greater attention to what there is of *life* in a prospective exercitant, rather than of religiosity?

Third Exercise

Seeking out that *subiecto*. It is not enough to wait for it nor, of course, to welcome it with all the graciousness and availability in the world when it comes. It is obvious that this much has to be done. “That” *subiecto*. Here was Ignatius’ way of proceeding with Xavier, Nadal, and many others: a kind of prior “missionary” pursuit. It belongs to the very essence of the Exercises, given to the service of everyone in the Church and in the world, and the one giving exercises should incorporate it as his own.

This is the exercise of seeking out that *subiecto*, man or woman of visible areligiosity or not visible religiosity or, to be more exact, of a religiosity without forms, or with other forms, less concerned with the forms, and more concerned – looking at his or her works – with life. This is the person “suitable for helping others”, in the fortunate phrase of Ignatius. Even more suitable, if he is already “helping” in fact, starting off from the “interior law”, which projects him to his fellows, even to the detriment of self – the man or woman of upright dealings, solidarity, serving others by natural disposition, who fights for justice, who does not allow herself to be bought or sold, a maker of peace. In the cultural age of Ignatius such a subject was not very common. Today, yes. Starting him from the gospel which already marks out his life – even without conscious reference to it – recognising it in him and helping him to recognise it in himself is a new way of access as yet unexplored, an initiation to the Exercises, which clearly has its immediate consequences in their “applicability” – in innumerable forms of “light” Exercises.

At the present time one could still apply words like those which Ignatius, twelve years before his death, wrote to Father Fulvio Androzzi,

urging him and motivating him in this search.

Your reverence knows that there is one outstanding means among those which of their nature are wont to be a help to people. I mean the Exercises. I remind you therefore that you should make use of this weapon, which is so much a familiar part of our Society. The first week could be given to many so as to include some method of prayer. But to give them exactly as they are, one should have retreatants capable and suitable for helping others after they themselves have been helped. Where this is not the case, they should not go beyond the first week. Your reverence should look about to see whether you can find some good prospects for the Lord's service, for whom there is no better way than the one I have indicated. The frequent reception of the sacraments is usually of much help to this end. (Letter of 18 July 1556).

The important basis of the search for this *subiecto* – the “look about to see whether you can find some good prospects” – which is this third exercise of the one giving Exercises, must be a personal relationship. It must be face-to-face, a journey of real rapprochement, of listening, of recognizing and supporting authentic evangelical values, of unmasking countervalues, of humbly accepting just criticisms of interventions, all the things that we givers of exercises represent, of patience, of waiting.... In this exercise, the one who gives them has, like Ignatius, to take great care not to “run out ahead of the Spirit”, but rather to “allow Him to lead and govern” (*MonNad.* IV, 687), to look him over and report where he is and what are his signs. He who, like the *subiecto* in front of him, may have felt himself to be the victim of “religious” coercions of different types, of impositions and rigidities, has to be treated essentially with immense respect, considering the immeasurable value of each human person by the mere fact of being such: He who holds God for us.

“To help” does not imply lumbering one's own experience on others, but bringing their own to the surface. And, when this has started, walking by their side, admiring, thanking, exchanging. Nothing is repeated, nothing is the same, in what God does. Rules, formulas and recipes – ours will never take the place of His initiatives that both the one giving exercises and the one making them has to discover every day, without

either speeding up or slowing down rhythms.

Fourth Exercise

That of believing (and believing is living) that truly “between Christ our Lord, the Bridegroom, and the Church, his Spouse, there is the one same Spirit who governs and guides us for the salvation of our souls” [365] and living the immediate consequence of the fact that we architects of this Church (and all Christians must be this) cannot lay on one side the “living stones” that the Holy Spirit is sculpting and preparing silently, in order to use those that we ourselves believe that we are carving in accordance with our patterns of building.

Constructing the humankind that God desires, by building the Church that Jesus laid down in history to build such humankind, will only be accomplished with “living stones,” workers of charity, not with artificial stones, the work of human hands. We have no right to exclude – however difficult to adjust according to our plans and patterns of building – persons that the Holy Spirit is mysteriously filling with the gospel, even if they do not know it and even if others do not recognise it in them. The fact that “they precede us into the kingdom”, as Jesus says of publicans, sinners and prostitutes, means that they precede us by already *building* the kingdom (see Mt. 21:32). They possess in themselves what is required to build it: “to receive” (that is, to believe in the Baptist) and “to transmit” (they set themselves to live it).

John Paul II described in the following way this “building” of the kingdom, speaking to women religious in Madrid (November 1982): “You live, like Mary, receiving and transmitting to your brothers the Holy Spirit and in this way building the Church.” Although the Spirit inundates us all (Rom. 5:5), there are those who do not receive it; there are those who receive it and take it for themselves, which is like not receiving it; and there are those who without getting to know much, receive it and begin to think of others and to live for them in their day-to-day lives. This is building.

“To receive, to transmit”. It is in the service of this respiratory exercise of the soul – for such is faith – that the Exercises occupy a place of their own. The itinerary between two such verbs has its equivalent in the

strong verbs in “Rules for Thinking with the Church” [352-370]: “praise” (become aware, recognise, receive) and “keep our minds disposed and ready to be obedient” (love, since this is the will of the Lord, and transmit it through the responsible obedience of mature and free sons and daughters).

An analysis of Annotation 18, made not on the basis of the pure text, as such, but starting off from the intention easily perceived in Ignatius when he writes it, will lead us to the conclusion that the objective here is not fidelity to a method and its variables, but fidelity to unrepeatable persons and to their pluralities, those that the Spirit is eliciting in them and they are living out. Each person is a potential subject of Exercises. The point is to be able to begin from the life that is already present in him or her, not based on their appearances. Nor on our prefabrications. He who gives exercises has to “exercise himself” to discover and deal with these carriers of life.

The whole concept could be summarised in the statement that “giving Exercises” is a ministry of active compassion and collaboration with the Spirit, “author and giver of life.” The orientative rule of this collaboration is that we begin by observing what is going on, without prejudice or prior programmes and with the whole of our capacity for surprise kept open. The exercitant then becomes for the one giving Exercises “he who goes before.” He will, in fact, with the Gospel that is already in him, free us from the temptation of trying to guide him with the Gospel that we think we own.