

## IN A JUDGE'S CHAMBERS

### Exercises in Daily Life: An Interview

*Precis: For years, Fr Bernard J. Bush of California worked in the area of faith and justice. Recently, he joined a province task force to promote Ignatian spirituality among the colleagues of Jesuit institutions. He grew particularly interested in Exercises in Daily Life. This led him to interview Judge Francisco Firmat.*

*First, Judge Firmat, thanks for taking this time to tell about your ministry of the 19th annotation retreats. Our task force feels there is much in what you are doing that would be useful for us to learn. We want to encourage others to do what you are doing. Before I ask my questions, though, perhaps you could introduce yourself?*

My name is Francisco Firmat. I am a Cuban American who came to the United States as a Cuban refugee at the age of eleven. I am presently forty-eight years old, am married, and have two children. I am a judge in the Orange County (California) Superior Court. I have been a judge for the last thirteen years. All during the past eight years I've worked with a local retreat house as part of a team facilitating workshops on contemplation. I also have training and experience in spiritual direction.

*How were you introduced to the Exercises, and in particular the nineteenth annotation?*

Six years ago, I completed the nineteenth annotation Exercises. They made a great impact in my life. Sister Jeanne Fallen in Orange, California,

facilitated the Exercises. She invited me to participate in the Exercises after she and I had worked together for several years facilitating workshops on bio-spiritual focusing (contemplation) at the Center for Spiritual Development in Orange, a retreat house operated by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

*How did you decide to give them to other people?*

In May of 1997 I felt a hunger, a longing to do the Exercises again. I spoke with Sister Jeanne. She told me that she would not be facilitating a group in 1997-1998, but that I could facilitate a group and be a participant at the same time. I told her I was not qualified. She replied by giving me a copy of the Tetlow workbook, *Choosing Christ in the World*, and told me to look at it before making up my mind. The workbook could have been subtitled "How to facilitate the Spiritual Exercises—for the complete idiot who has previously experienced the Exercises." After reviewing the workbook, I decided to facilitate a group so that I could be a participant in the group dynamic of the Exercises.

*How did you recruit people to make the Exercises?*

In selecting my companions for the journey, I made a list of people who I thought might be interested. And for the next thirty days, I spent some time in prayer, asking for discernment as to whom to invite. Over that time, it became clear that certain people should be invited. I recruited fellow workers at the courthouse, lawyers and judges I had met through the Thomas More Society of Catholic lawyers and through Daniel's Inn, a non-denominational Christian group of lawyers and judges. I added a few other friends. I handed out a couple of typed sheets telling what the exercise entailed and included one of the exercises from Tetlow's workbook.

*What format did you use?*

The format I used was the one in the workbook. I made some minor changes—for instance, giving them a couple added handouts on contemplation and prayer where I felt something was lacking—being careful not to drown them in paper.

*How often did you meet with your retreatants? How much prayer time did you ask them to pledge to do?*

We met once a week, from 12:15 to 1:15—bring your own lunch—in my chambers at the courthouse. We met for thirty-five weeks, starting in September of 1997. They each pledged to spend at least one hour a day in prayer, to keep a prayer journal, to share with each other during our weekly meeting their experience of prayer, to keep confidentiality, and to pray for the companions on a regular basis. I asked them to meet as companions, not as teachers, guides, or saviours to each other, and to meet with me about once a month for individual spiritual direction.

I might mention that I gave them some guidelines from a book by Rose Mary Dougherty on group spiritual direction. She makes suggestions like these: We should refrain from stating the first thing that comes to mind. Instead of giving advice, we should wait and sense and respond to the movement of the Holy Spirit, allowing responses to surface. We are not seeking problem solving or analysis, or an intellectual exercise. It is up to the Holy Spirit to bring issues to a ripeness. A reverent silence sometimes is more helpful than words. If we speak, let's be sure that we are stating what the other person needs to hear rather than what I (or my ego) needs to talk about.

*How many did you have going at any one time?*

I had two groups of six persons each, one group meeting on Tuesdays at lunch time and the other group meeting on Thursdays at lunch time. My intent originally was to have one single group of four or five at the most. After spending some time in prayer and discernment, I invited a total of ten people thinking that I'd be lucky to have a total of three accept. To my surprise (and temporary dismay) seven accepted. At that point I was left with a decision of either turning away one or two of those who had accepted or starting a second group. I felt that turning some away simply was not an alternative. So I started the second group. I invited a couple more people to complete two small groups. Then others started coming uninvited, referred by that small group who knew what I was about to do.

Let me share with you the story of the last two people who came on board, unsought, the week before the Exercises began. The first man (call

him John Doe), I met over a three-way lunch, introduced by a friend of mine who is a Protestant missionary whom I had invited to participate in the Exercises but who declined. The missionary left our lunch meeting early and John and I stayed talking and sharing our faith. He expressed an interest in the Spiritual Exercises, having been briefed by our mutual friend. I told him that I could put him on a waiting list and see if someone dropped out. At one point in the meeting, while we were sharing our faith, John started weeping. He said that this is something that happened to him often when he feels a love/longing for God, from God. At about the same time in the conversation, my heart started burning, which I recognize as my felt-sense experience of the presence of God. This was the first time that it had ever happened to me that another person and myself both physically, simultaneously, in our bodies, experienced the presence of God. I told John that I would phone him later, but that I felt that after that joint experience that I could not exclude him from the Exercises. That evening I phoned him confirming that he was in.

The second man (call him Paul Doe) sits with me on an advisory board. After one board meeting, on the way to our cars, we started to chat. And he started to share with me that he was "looking for discernment," that he "needed to make a decision over the next nine months," and that he felt he needed to spend time in prayer over the decision. During the conversation, the words *discernment*, *decision*, and *nine months* seemed highlighted. Since I had just expanded the first group, I decided to invite Paul into the second group. I briefed him on the Exercises and the next evening he telephoned me to tell me that he wanted to participate. Now, if someone had told me in April 1997 that I would be facilitating the Exercises in September 1997, I would have told them I'd have to be nuts. Facilitating a total of twelve participants seems even nuttier in hindsight. Yet that was the direction the Holy Spirit led. There's something in St Paul about being a fool for Christ.

*What results are you seeing in your retreatants?*

The results vary. One man made the discernment in December of 1997 to become a full-time seminary student at Fuller Theological Seminary. In the past he had taken a seminary course out of curiosity and interest. Now,

he left a position as a self-employed consultant making \$70,000 a year and a nice home, to move with his wife into student housing and two part time jobs to support the seminary experience! His experience is the most dramatic. But all twelve that first year finished the Exercises. And all twelve came out with a deeper hunger to spend more time in prayer. The eight Catholics and four Protestants left with a mutual respect, and bonds of friendship and prayer. I sense a greater peace and humility in all of them. Nine of them have decided to continue meeting once every three weeks and are at this moment trying to develop a format for their meetings.

*Have any of them shown an interest in becoming directors themselves?*

Yes. Four of the participants have shown an interest in facilitating the Exercises in the future. I have told them to make sure that it's a prompting of the Holy Spirit rather than their ego that is pushing for that. If they felt led in that direction, I pledged them my assistance.

Also, one of the men I facilitated in the Annotation 19 Exercises decided to put on a four-evening workshop on prayer this past June and July at his parish, emphasizing Ignatian spirituality. He and his wife presented the first three sessions. I presented the fourth session. A total of about thirty-five people were in attendance. The people were so hungry for prayer and Ignatian spirituality that they asked to meet further, which ended up finally in a hunger to do the Annotation 19 Exercises. As a result 12 people from that parish have just begun them! Al's wife, having seen the change in her husband, is one of the retreatants. I'm facilitating two retreatants and Al is facilitating a small group of five. I think that a year from now that parish is going to be on fire. I thought you'd enjoy hearing this story of the work of the Holy Spirit in yuppie Orange County, California.

*Is there anything else you can think of that might be useful?*

I think you might find three remarks on sources interesting.

First. Last Christmastide a man in the Tuesday group came in with six copies of Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God* as gifts

for the companions. When we met next in January, they all agreed that the book was excellent, that it fit in very well with what Ignatius was trying to teach us. I then pulled down the text of the book from the internet at <<http://ccel.wheaton.edu>> and made copies for the participants in the second group.

Second. Tetlow's workbook is experientially somewhat lacking in the area of the Rules for Discernment. I scheduled an all day Saturday session to work on Ignatian discernment. I found a wonderful tool in the set of videotapes produced by the Institute for Contemporary Spirituality at the University of Scranton. The set is *Ignatian Spirituality and the Directed Retreat*, and Tape 12, "Role Plays for Rules for Discernment," does a wonderful job of bringing the Rules to the twentieth century.

Third. About eleven years, ago I learned bio-spiritual focusing (i.e. contemplation) from a couple of ex-Jesuits, Peter Campbell and Edwin McMahon. What they taught me, I have practiced for eleven years and taught for the last eight years. Ignatius talks about *sentirin* the Exercises. Bio-spiritual focusing is like *sentiras* it is described in a footnote in Jules Toner's *A Commentary on St Ignatius's Rules for Discernment of Spirits* (page 23): "In the process of discernment... *sentir* comes to mean above all a kind of 'felt knowledge'<sup>1</sup>, an affective, intuitive knowledge possessed through the reaction of human feelings to exterior and interior experience." I have offered to give a weekend course on bio-spiritual focusing contemplation to the twelve. Eight have accepted. I think that teaching them to contemplate what is real in their lives is a missing piece in teaching them ignatian spirituality. Not just to review the real events that took place this day, but also to contemplate the real feelings that are felt at the moment as I contemplate/review my day, as I deal with the joys, pains and challenges of life.

*Can you tell us—a new year is about to start—what happens now?*

In September of 1998 I started leading two more groups, for a total of twelve retreatants, in the nineteenth annotation Exercises. By December, I saw evidence of transformation. They report a greater sense of peace and calmness. Greater patience and joy-taking in small things. A hunger for prayer that coexists with a resistance to prayer. Also a sense of lack of

balance and impatience with others, at home and at work, when they have missed two consecutive nights of prayer!

I have placed greater emphasis this year on the fellow travelers' daily prayer for each other. Several of them have commented that the others' prayers are felt and deeply appreciated. Probably because of this, there is a greater sense of bonding at an earlier stage than last year and an earlier felt sense of the transformational power of the Holy Spirit. One of them has described the group as a straight-line camel caravan, some further ahead than others but all feeling the sense of traveling together in a non-competitive way that allows all to rejoice when one takes great strides forward.

All the members of one small group have e-mail addresses. I have encouraged them to send an e-mail to me and to other members of the group sharing the latest nugget coming out of their prayer. So far I've received about thirty-five pages of e-mail. The retreatants and I have been surprised at the joy and encouragement we feel when we receive one of these e-mails. At times the prayer experience has been dry for a participant but upon reading the e-mail from a fellow retreatant, something was triggered that somehow connected deep and congruent with the Exercises for that week, resulting in a nugget of spirituality.

*Thank you once again for telling us about the Exercises in your chambers. And blessings on the group that you ha<sup>e</sup>ve now gathered.* Well, I hope these short remarks are useful.