

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES A MINISTRY OF JESUITS AND LAY COLLEAGUES

Precis: The author presented this to the Rome Consultation on "Exercises and Partners". He took part in the rediscovery of Exercises in the Lowlands in the mid-seventies. His own experience grew from the preached retreat through use of the Bible to authentic directed Exercises. A seminar continues sharing, publishing, and guiding Exercises during a month in a new way. The influence of laity has transformed the practice of Exercises and also whom they reach. Christian Life Community offers more than ordinary opportunities. Partnership requires transforming effort of both lay and Jesuit, and questions remain. Now other groups are adapting ignatian spirituality and the dialogue has grown larger.

I am asked to tell you how in the region where I am living and working we — jesuits and lay-people together — have developed the ministry of the Exercises. The region about which I am speaking is the Lowlands of Europe, that means The Netherlands and the Northern or Flemish part of Belgium.

First I will say something about what happened in that region in the last twenty-five years around the Exercises.

Then I will try to reflect on my own experience of the developments in this ministry and especially on the growing involvement of lay colleagues in it.

Thirdly I will propose to you some questions and some points that in my opinion request special attention.

History

The start of a new phase in our ministry of the Exercises, we find in the years 1974-1976. In 1974 we had our first experience with the individual guided retreat, the Exercises done without introductions or “points” but in a one-to-one situation; each member of a group doing it together had his or her own personal guide. If I remember correctly, this first experience was brought to The Netherlands by Fr Alex Lefrank, here present.

This experience motivated a group of Flemish and Dutch Jesuits in 1976 to start a seminar on the Exercises which was to meet twice a year in the common novitiate of the Dutch and Flemish provinces in Brussels. Very soon the first lay women—one of them Mary Blickman, also here present—and some women religious became participants in this seminar. The goal was to exchange our experiences and ideas on how to give the Exercises and to deepen knowledge of the Exercises by study and reflection. After a few years, the group became too big, and ever since we have had two such seminars of Flemish and Dutch Jesuits and others. I myself became a member of this seminar in 1983.

In 1978, this seminar took the first step to organize Exercises at Godsheide, the retreat house in Hasselt, Belgium, in the following way: A team of guides, jesuits and lay colleagues, was available during a whole month to give individually guided retreats of thirty or (mostly) eight days, but also of five and three days. The model for this retreat: The Exercises are done in a group, but there are no introductions. Every participant has his or her own personal guide, Jesuit or lay or woman religious, who is available to help the retreatant and to accompany him or her in this process by a daily talk. The most important thing is not this talk but the times of personal prayer, in which everybody is looking for the way which God will go with him or her. Therefore this retreat is done in silence. Four times every day the group meets: for a simple morning prayer, the Eucharist, one hour of praying together in silence, and short prayer at the end of the day.

Important for the guides (and also for what I have to tell you) is one other element of this retreat: Every day the guides come together to share experiences and to speak about a question or difficulty (never about the

concrete persons doing the Exercises). One of the guides proposes something, always concerning the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius or its interpretation. Doing this every day and year after year is one of the specific ways in which Jesuits and their lay colleagues are learning very much from each other and together develop new ways of doing the Exercises.

This initiative in Godsheide not only goes on till this day, but also it was started in the same way in Drongen in 1982, some years later in Deventer (The Netherlands), and in 2001 also in Torhout (Belgium).

The many exchanges in the seminars and the experiences during the individual guided retreats spontaneously raised the question how this treasure of knowledge and exchange could be made available for others. Also there was a growing need for other guides. These two things together were the reason that the idea was born of a session for the formation of guides of the Spiritual Exercises. This session of one week and four weekends, organized, directed, and given by a team of Jesuits and a layperson was meant as a formation-course for women and men, laypersons, priests, and religious, and also Jesuits (but not for them in the first place!), both Flemish and Dutch.

A first session was held in 1983, a second one in 1987 and a third one (between 1996 and 1999), this time exclusively for Flemish and Dutch scholastics and young priests. The result was that there were more non-Jesuits than before who had formation to guide the Exercises. Some of them, indeed, also became members of one of the teams in Godsheide or Drongen, mostly beginning with guiding only one or two people under the supervision of a more experienced member of the team. Nevertheless it must be said that the bigger part of the participants of the sessions never became guides, for many reasons: having formation but not feeling themselves capable to be a guide; or not finding a place in one of the teams; or finding a place but not finding people to do the Exercises.

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The introductions, held during this session, were collected in the so-called “Green Book” (a second edition was made last year) and this was and is a help in other courses of formation. For instance, in The Netherlands there is now a third formation course specially for lay persons to become guides of the Exercises.

At the same time, two things became clear. On the one hand, such a formation also opens the opportunity for the participants to give the Exercises in a way other than that at Godsheide and Drongen, e.g. according to the Annotation 19 or in weeks of prayer, or as a pilgrimage. On the other hand, there was a growing feeling that even after formation as a guide there is a need to remain in contact with other people doing the same.

For this reason, meetings were organized of Jesuits and lay colleagues to continue the exchange of experiences, two times a year. But because of the fact that there is a certain unclearness about the participation of these days (some are only interested in ignatian spirituality, others are really working with this spirituality and looking for companions), we now have the intention to have these days only with a well circumscribed group of people and to build a network of Jesuits and non-Jesuits, to consolidate their collaboration.

Other forms of collaboration between Jesuits and lay people around the Exercises were mostly activities which had the intention to support the described process. They were activities especially in the field of publication. So there was made a new translation of the Spiritual Exercises, according to the new insights we received in seminars and giving the Exercises. Mary Blickman translated the book of David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear*. In collaboration we translated – to give guidelines for the Exercises in daily life – *Place me with your Son* and later we made our own guidelines *Following Him (Hem achtema)* in a first and a second, revised edition. And last but not least, we have been publishing for more than twenty years a periodical for Ignatian spirituality, *Cardoner*.

To add it all up, one can say that a new discovery of the Exercises brought a growing involvement of lay people, both in giving and in doing the Exercises. The facts are there. But what do they tell us? That brings me to my second point.

Reflection

I spoke about a “rediscovery” of the Exercises. I think that is what really happened. At least that is my own experience. Like many Jesuits, I have my own history with the Exercises.

My first contact with the Exercises was during the retreat of three days in the last year of high-school. I did not know it at that time, but now I can say: that was an attempt to give the First Week in a very simple way for boys of eighteen. In my novitiate came the first real and conscious contact with the Exercises. I had the book in my hands and followed it. There were four introductions for prayer every day and also an instruction. Thirty days, and I was still eighteen. No personal direction, only a short talk every week with the novice master. Nevertheless, it was the beginning of prayer life for me, perhaps still in a very primitive form, more meditation than contemplation, but surely not only prayer with my head but also with my heart.

In the years after that first experience there was not much progress. My retreats as a scholastic were preached retreats. Perhaps the most important topic for the introductions was religious life. And Holy Scripture became more important than the book of the *Exercises*. One of the fruits of my study in theology was that the Bible became for me not a book of historical facts, but the story of God in search of men and men in search of God: testimony of the real relation between God and men. That opened for me the way to a new phase in prayer.

As a young priest there were no more preached retreats, but I did my own retreat, alone, without guidance, without the Exercises, but with the Bible. When I found some people with whom I could share what happened during these retreats – was this already an individual guided retreat of today? – and when I was invited to participate in one of the first seminars on the *Spiritual Exercises*, that was the beginning of a rediscovery not only of the Bible but also of the Exercises.

During the last twenty years, in this seminar, in guiding men and women doing the Exercises, in the sessions to form others to give the Exercises, in publishing activities, the insight grew more and more that also the Exercises are a testimony of an experience of the relation between God and men and that the Exercises are really a “way” to God for everybody who is willing to

surrender himself to it. For me this rediscovery changed my way of praying and also the relation between life and prayer. There was now more unity between these two. At last I was discovering what it means to *find God in everything*.

Reflecting now on this personal history with the Exercises, I must say that the rediscovery of the last twenty years has much to do with the opening of the inner circle of Jesuits, doing and giving the Exercises, to non-Jesuits, especially lay people. Their involvement made more and more clear to me that the Exercises are not only something for Jesuits, the heart of their spirituality, that indicates their way of life, but also for everybody who has the desire to meet God in his or her life, by way of prayer with the Bible and prayer with life itself. I am sure that this involvement of lay people was of exceeding importance not only for me but for the whole process of rediscovery of the Exercises in a much broader circle. I see this positive lay influence in the ministry of the Exercises mostly in two things.

First, in the fact that they became real partners and not only collaborators in giving the Exercises and guiding others, including Jesuits, priests, religious and other lay men and women. Being partners and participating in the teams of guides, they had and have great influence in the way we do this today, although at the same time it must be said that their number is still rather small. But it is very important that they make this contribution, precisely as lay colleagues. It is a proper contribution that gives the Exercises a context which is more oriented to the real and concrete life of men and women living here and now.

There is a second positive element in their involvement: their participation brings the people for whom the Exercises are also meant – all the souls that Ignatius asks us to help – nearer. The fact that there are more lay guides is broadening the public we reach with the ministry of the Exercises.

It may be said that the rediscovery of the Exercises is inextricably bound with the involvement of lay-colleagues in this ministry. We are grateful for this contribution. My question today is: are we doing enough with this contribution and with this partnership? Are there other and more possibilities to extend and to consolidate this partnership? But before we try to answer these questions, it seems good to propose to you also some other points that perhaps ask for our attention. The involvement of lay-people in the ministry

of the Exercises has given me also some other experiences. Therefore my third point.

Areas for Specific Attention

Keep in mind that I speak of the situation in the Lowlands of Europe. The situation of the Church and of the whole faith-life there is such that the group we are reaching with the ministry of the Exercises in the form I have described is not so big. I am convinced that the Exercises are an answer exactly to the situation we live in: there is a need for spirituality. But more and more – when we see that the number of people coming to do the Exercises is diminishing – the question arises, if it is necessary after the rediscovery of the Exercises, which was very fruitfull, to take another step and to look for other and new ways to give the Exercises. I know that already in many places this is the case, but this development is not without questions regarding who can give the Exercises and which formation therefore is needed.

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One of the places where Exercises and lay men and women come together are the Christian Life Communities. CLC and Exercises are very close. The spirituality of the CLC is the spirituality of the Exercises. But does that mean that people can only become a member of CLC, having done the Exercises? In what form? Are the possibilities to adapt the Exercises unlimited or are there some criteria? What are these criteria? What is still a true form of the Exercises and what not? What is still CLC and what is another way of living the Christian faith? I can ask this question also in this way: how thorough is the involvement of lay people in the process of the Exercises and what is the CLC way concerning laity bringing us? This is not meant as a critical or anxious question, rather as a curious one.

By the way, the lay movement of the CLC is for me also connected with another question. The CLC in The Netherlands is in distress. Lay men and women are asking for spirituality, but when it comes to an engagement, it is

difficult to find people who are willing to give their time and energy. They are saying on the one hand: this must be a real lay movement; on the other hand, they not only (and rightly) ask for Jesuit assistance but also leave it to this assistant (when we have one and that is not easy) to activate and realize the different groups. The result is that not much happens. Nevertheless the CLC could be an opportunity for partnership of Jesuits and lay colleagues, not in the ministry of Exercises but in both groups living the Exercises. Why do we not succeed in finding a way for that?

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A comparable question I see concerning the days for spirituality we organize twice a year and which we will now give another perspective: the building of a network of Jesuits and non-Jesuits to consolidate our collaboration in the field of Ignatian spirituality. Will there be a real engagement – not only the desire many times expressed – and who will be the driving force?

This is a question equally for lay people and Jesuits. Sometimes I am asking myself what engagement we can expect from lay colleagues, when it is so difficult to find Jesuits who are willing and capable to be real partners with non-Jesuits. What is the engagement of the Society? Partnership is a mutual engagement and there is a danger that we too easily think that only lay people become our partners and not the other way around.

This leads to a more practical and prosaic remark that regards money. When the partnership of Jesuits and lay colleagues is no longer a collaboration without obligations but a real engagement for which lay people give up a part of their life or more, it seems to be correct that this engagement should be rewarded. Too often this is not the case. There are situations in which our partners are paid or have a salary, and situations in which this is not the case, even though there is an extensive or longer engagement. The difficulty becomes still greater, when for the same activity or engagement one is paid and the other, not. I think that a more general policy is needed here.

To be honest I must add still another point. Now that more and more lay men and women live the Ignatian spirituality and try to pass on this spirituality to others – and we are very happy that this is the situation – it is not exceptional that there are groups or communities (and now I am not

referring to the CLC but to basic communities or people working together in a project or when a lay person is director of a Jesuit Center for Spirituality) which more or less independent and apart from the Society, model the ignatian spirituality and their activities based on it according to their own ideas. I think this can be a good thing.

But it means that more and more of our partners are not only lay individuals but also lay collectives. There is a danger that such partnership becomes a relation of opponents: Ignatian spirituality belongs to nobody. The question is not only how we can become partners but also — and the time has now come — how we can make fruitful this new development. I am afraid that there are too many occasions where Jesuits are a little bit on the defensive regarding their spirituality. Do we realize and accept that the Holy Spirit is equally working in all who share this spirituality? This acceptance must come from both sides and should create a new relation between Jesuits and their partners. In my opinion in some concrete situations this is still a task we have to perform.

Most remarkable is that all these questions can no longer be answered by Jesuits only. They are from now on collective questions, for Jesuits and their lay colleagues. We are here gathered together not only to speak about partnership, but also to be a group of partners, together looking for what the Spirit is offering and asking today. May that become more and more clear. I hope my observations will be a help for that.