

# IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AS A BASIS FOR CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

BY

A RELIGIOUS OF THE CENACLE



THE following ideas are thrown out in the hope that they may be useful to those who are attracted to the contemplative life, and who are looking for some kind of groundwork or training for it, either 'in' or 'out' of religious life.

Ideas of apprenticeship—beginning at the beginning to master the first principles of a subject—are foreign to modern thought, but are nevertheless indispensable to the life of the spirit.

Throughout the centuries, solitude and corporal austerities have always gone hand in hand with the contemplative life. Physical solitude is, however, an impossibility for many, and is, in any case, only a means to acquire the necessary solitude of heart—the precursor of contemplation,<sup>1</sup> while corporal austerities do not cover the whole field of asceticism, and may leave untouched the riot of confusion and disorder within the soul itself. Something more inclusive and positive in the way of preparation and training would seem to be needed to counteract the modern indiscipline of emotion and thought with its curious disdain of the 'grammar' of spirituality.

The Ignatian way is, of course, only one among many ways of wearing down the 'old man' and of curbing the tendency to self-centredness which is the curse of humanity since the fall. But it appears to be singularly well adapted to open the eyes of the neophyte to that spiritual egoism, the great obstacle to the contemplative life, which is God-centred life *par excellence*.

There is a noticeable tendency to overdo such words as 'balance' and 'integration', yet Ignatian spirituality does aim at restoring the poise of the faculties and works at producing a 'complete' personality, capable of distinguished service for Christ in an unreflecting world.

The first step towards the recovery—for since the fall it is always a *recovery* of wholeness and sanity—is to make, not read, the famous Spiritual Exercises.

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'contemplation' has been used in the strict and classical sense of the word, e.g., as employed by St John of the Cross, and not in the more limited Ignatian sense.

First, the intellect is shown the foundation truths which though fundamental are so little stressed in other forms of spirituality.

The End for which man was created: God.

The means for attaining that end.

The conforming of one's personal life in harmony with the end. Having captured the assent of the intellect, the Exercises proceed to put higher and higher motives before the will, enabling it to choose, with the help of divine grace, the best means to be taken for this particular person to attain his or her end.

A word might here be said about discursive meditation, because unfortunately the whole Ignatian system has been identified with it to the exclusion of other parts. In his meditations Ignatius certainly provides plenty of food for the mind to enable it to 'think' about God, but only in order that the soul may, arrested by some thought made luminous by the Holy Spirit, 'pause' and 'savour the matter internally and not pass on until satisfied'. It is that 'pause' which is the junction between discursive meditation and contemplation. Ignatius preludes each meditation with a direction too often ignored: 'Ask', he says, 'for what you *want!*' Here it will be 'the grace of compunction', and other 'spiritual joy', etc., but always with the accent on the 'wanting', which, as it increases and intensifies desire, leads on to that formless condition of 'wanting God' which is the habitual state of contemplative prayer.

Emerging from the Exercises the work of conquering oneself and ordering one's life anew achieves little by little the tranquillity of order that predisposes the soul for interior prayer. '*My house being now at rest*', says St John of the Cross, 'in anxious love went I forth', which is the true beginning of the prayer of obscure faith.

A salient point of Ignatian spirituality is obedience. Saint Ignatius greatly desired that each member of his Society should excel in it. Now the essence of supernatural obedience is faith. To see God and bow to his will in the persons and orders of Superiors is the open sesame to that intense and habitual preoccupation with the will of God which is God himself and is the hallmark of the true contemplative.

Another link in the chain is faithful perseverance in the rudiments of prayer. When prayer is difficult, remain five minutes longer, when it is easy, leave five minutes sooner, is useful discipline and prepares the soul to endure and persevere through the intolerable tediousness of the first stages of contemplation. Many turn back at this moment and become 'contemplatives manquées'.

The practice of the 'Particular Examen', too, has its bearing on contemplation, not only through the humbling experience of struggle

and constant failure over some tiny point of perfection, but also when one is occupied in labouring to correct some obstinate external defect, one is less likely to become interested in one's own state of prayer. It is the occupation with something objectively useful that is valuable, for God often chooses that time to infuse grace unknowingly into the soul and mould it to saintliness.

The art of contemplation lies in combining great esteem for prayer—judging it to be the essential of one's vocation—with a certain distaste for an undue interest in its mechanism. Directly the soul knows it is praying and stops to examine the fact, it ceases to pray.

Finally, 'training' for a life of contemplation never entirely ceases, because the soul has always need of *some* framework and it is not wise, as Fr Steuart says, 'to tear down the staircase because one has arrived at the top of the stairs'. On the other hand, according to Père Lallemand, 'we shall never make much progress in virtue or entirely rid ourselves of weaknesses and imperfections without contemplation—but with it we shall effect more, both for ourselves and others, in a month, than without it we should accomplish in ten years'.

The habit of contemplative prayer unifies little by little the whole personality, and the senses hitherto so difficult to order become deadened and finally submerged as in a sea.

It is in the transition from one kind of prayer to another that so many turn back; and so the above suggestions may help the soul to tide over the bad moment and establish itself in peace.



RELIGIEUX ET RELIGIEUSES. By J. Creusen, S.J. (L'Édition Universelle; Desclée de Brouwer; 135 Belgian francs.)

This is the sixth and revised edition of a most useful summary of the Church's law concerning religious. It comprises 320 large and well-stocked pages. It has already been translated into English, Dutch and Spanish and must be an indispensable handbook for anyone having the care of religious. Although brought up to date with reference to all the latest decrees of Rome, the author has not included the legislation regarding Secular Institutes as their members are not technically religious in the canonical sense of the term.

C.P.