

Study and Prayer Third Order SSF

Study Week 4 – 8 October 2010

Forty Days In Retreat

My forty day Ignatian retreat at St. Buenos, North Wales was an unforgettable and life changing experience which I give thanks for every day, was sometimes very painful but always, in the final analysis, joyful.

Although by the end of it I was the same person, I came back spiritually changed. I had deliberately avoided researching the Spiritual Exercises because I wanted to enter into the experience open and without any pre-conceived ideas.

St. Buenos was designed by Joseph Aloysius Hansom (of Hansom Cab fame) and the Jesuit Theolgate was founded in 1848. Gerald Manley Hopkins was a Theological student there from 1874-1879. He wrote 'Pied Beauty' in the summer of 1877.

The house is set in beautiful Welsh countryside, with sheep and cattle grazing on the hillside. The main chapel is very simple and beautiful with smaller chapels throughout the House, open for prayer and meditation day and night.

Everywhere in the house were things of beauty, all conducive to prayer. Painting, sculptures and books (there were some Richard Rohr titles there) all on display. Anything could be borrowed to be used to enhance meditation.

The forty days of the Retreat were broken down into five days orientation, thirty days silence (other than the forty minutes spent daily with a Spiritual Director) working our way through the exercises and the last five days the group spent together in relaxed discussions with the Spiritual Directors.

The spiritual exercises can be followed outside of a formal retreat over a much longer period of time with the guidance of a Spiritual Director.

I found the first five days to be very intensive and hard work. We looked at and experienced different ways and methods of prayer. Lectio Divina, use of paint and clay. The study of art and gospel contemplation.

We were given a fascinating lecture on St. Ignatius of Loyala (1491-1556) who had devised the main bulk of the Exercises (1522-1523) in Manresa when he had been severely wounded during the siege of Pampelina (1521). As a form of Retreat the Exercises are based on carefully ordered scripture, meditation and contemplation. The Exercises took us through the earthly life of Christ from the Nativity to the Resurrection which for me, acted like a mirror and sounding brass, reflecting my own life's journey back to me with as much truth as I could bear.

The Exercises are divided into four sections called 'weeks'. The length of the week would depend upon the Retreatant but the Exercises are completed in the thirty days, when the Retreatant is invited to listen to God's call and begin to co-operate with it.

The weeks were laid out:

Week One: A growing sense of the lack of wholeness but an awareness of being loved. To be able to recognise that all is a gift.

Week Two: A deepening awareness of Christ's early life.

Week Three: A realisation of the cost of discipleship.

Week Four: The Retreatant ponders how through this commitment leads to Joy with Christ and Resurrection.

There were daily five one hour prayer periods (which could be adjusted by the Retreatant) based upon different texts each period followed by a fifteen minute Review. Issues may come up which needed a further conversation with God (called Colloquy) or discussion with the Spiritual Director next day. I kept a journal which I found very useful. Without it I now realise that I would never have remembered small details which upon closer reading give me deeper insights.

As the weeks progressed 'Repetition' of some exercises would take place, in order to deepen the desire to be with Jesus. And the Ignatian contemplation exercise asked us to become a character in the scene of the set text and see our reaction within it.

Further on into my Retreat the 'Application of The Senses' exercise was applied. This would proceed from the Ignatian Contemplation Exercise,

going past a scene, seeing it and leaving it but would re-visit it by going from an overall view to a more specific one. From the external to the interior, from the head to the body and heart. The exercise is meant to enter into what I see and what I see enter into me. I let the words enter my inner ears. I feel, touch and taste as if I was present and part of the scene and take in what emerges.

The Examen is the last prayer session each day. To look at how God is drawing us to Himself in a unique and intimate way. This prayer of discernment clarified for me God's loving motivation that day for which I could only feel gratitude. I always asked for forgiveness and healing.

During the **first week** I went to ask God for freedom to be with Him and freedom from myself in order to have an awareness of being loved. Some old and very painful issues came up during this week and I became very aware of my responsibility in them and for them. I prayed on Psalm 139, Romans and Corinthians but the verse which really supported me during this week when I felt the weight of my sins was Psalm 139:12 *"Darkness is no darkness for Thee and night is luminous as day to Thee, both dark and light are one."* God was encouraging me all the time.

I saw that God was the source of life and my sin was a cause for death but through the grace of God, I was shown that where sin was forgiveness waited. The pain and truth of this week stripped away any illusion I may have had of self power, that all power lay with God and I was only left with choice. The questions began to come. What am I doing for Christ? What shall I do for Christ? And what have I done for Christ?

The **second week** centres on the life of Jesus, from the Incarnation through to his Public Ministry. At this stage we went into the 'Ignatian Contemplation'. This whole section felt very Franciscan. The call to surrender, obedience and poverty was not only made by what Jesus said but how he lived from the moment of the Incarnation until his Ascension and the glorious humility of his mother, Mary (Luke 1:26-38) a mere human being who is a constant inspiration to me.

Different things came up this week. A call from Jesus to 'Come As You Are' whilst validating me made me question my commitment to Him. And

during the praying on The Temptation of Christ (Math 4:1-11) when Jesus was fasting I was reminded of the different kinds of hunger. There is hunger for respect, affection and love to name a few. It was hard to look at my own hunger.

The **third week** was a real challenge because I went to ask God for the grace to allow me to enter into sorrow and shame, as I stay with Jesus in his suffering on my behalf and for my sins. I was asked to try to be *inside* The Passion, using the 'Application of The Senses' exercise, to see how Jesus was left helpless and human.

I went through this week, seeing Jesus at The Last Supper (Luke 22:14) looking so alone and vulnerable. At the same time accepting and obedient. I experienced deep grief for all the afflictions Jesus endured for me when he goes through his agony in the garden. Again his obedience. "*Yet not my will, but thou will be done*" (Luke 22:42) called me to him. The betrayal and desertion when he was arrested was terrible. Worse was to follow because at the Trial when he was standing alone, surrounded by enemies who believed him guilty, brought into sharp relief a traumatic experience I had had when I was young.

I felt as though God was breaking my heart, again and again. As though my heart was like a Russian doll, as one doll was broken open, so it followed the next doll was broken. There was lots of 'Repetition' and 'Appreciation of the Senses'. This week, I thought about the indignity, the actual pain and fear of this week but still there was forgiveness. "Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:33). To me the crucifixion has always been a symbol of obedience, forgiveness and victory through humility.

The **fourth week** – Resurrection. The joy of victory over death! The main contemplation for this week was 'The Love of God', Jesus as our Consoler now as well as then. Appearing to his disciples over a period of forty days to comfort and confirm his Resurrection.

Finally Resurrection! The joy of victory over death. The stone in front of the cave symbolised a barrier, even a prison, something I did not want to hide behind any longer. Wanting to give myself to God fully with trust. The empty tomb represented true freedom and that Christ had kept his

word. He was free but has not left us and with this full realisation I was free! The final Russian doll was broken.

The very structure of the exercises breathed with me, allowing me to range as far as I could whilst keeping me in a place of love and security at all times, no matter what I was experiencing. I discovered that optimism and hope can be found in the darkest places if I choose to look. I now understand obedience to God in a much deeper way and that our first loyalty is to Him. By His grace I know to the very depth of my soul, that I am truly forgiven and truly loved. Empowering and freeing me to come closer to God through Our Lord Jesus Christ by constantly turning to Him.

My prayer to God will always be;

“A te numquam, a te numquam separavi permittas”

(May I never, never, be permitted to be separated from You).

B Warren TSSF

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