

# THE PRINCIPLE AND FOUNDATION AND IMAGES OF GOD

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FINDING GOD IN everything is hampered in a variety of ways — not least by blocks within ourselves. St Ignatius conceived the Spiritual Exercises as a context where God's grace could erode obstacles to growth and could heal the disharmony at the centre of a person in a progressive movement towards spiritual freedom. However, there are certain basics which must be present in the retreatant before the Exercises can become that context. Do I really believe in a God who actually communicates? Do I believe that he may be met personally and that this relationship can be the centre of my life? And do I really desire this, whatever blocks there may be to its fulfilment? Everybody comes to the Exercises with certain images of God operative in his or her life. There is a sense in which none of these can be perfectly correct. Clearly God is always beyond my capacity to define, to control or have within my grasp. Yet images are neither invalid nor useless. We all have them; we all need them as we seek to order our experience. Some are more helpful and creative and others less so, or even fundamentally destructive. In embarking on the Exercises we accept that there will be, for all of us, a refinement of images, for to cling to them would be idolatry and would constitute a serious block to further movement. However, what of those people who have images of God which are negative or dangerously destructive? Most directors will have met such people and realize the damage that can be done during the difficult meditations of the First Week if they are not radically changed. In this context, the Foundation (Exx 23) is a vital period of prayer during which the director hopes that the retreatant will reach those dispositions necessary to proceed further.

## *What is the Principle and Foundation?*

We could spend a great deal of time arguing whether the Foundation is integral to the text of the Exercises but it seems to me that, although St Ignatius did not assign to it any specific prayer periods, it is none the less part of the dynamic of the Exercises in that it summarizes the dispositions necessary to commence the First Week. To say that, in St Ignatius's time, the Foundation was no more than a brief consideration on the first evening

is to miss the point that he certainly presupposed a lengthy period of preparation before he allowed anyone to undertake the full Exercises.

The rather antiquated scholastic statements of the Foundation about our relationship with God, self and the world may lead some to underestimate their importance. Ignatius's own experience was that no progress was possible unless these basics were firmly grounded in the person. And 'firmly grounded' is not a matter of intellectual reasoning. The only way we can appropriate the sentiments of the Foundation is by faith through putting ourselves in God's hands and progressing in what Ignatius calls 'interior knowledge'. It points to an attitude of mind and heart arising from the *experience* of being accepted and loved and which disposes me to express my love in return. True, the Foundation may sound like a form of dialectic but we should bear in mind Ignatius's own very firm view that the process of the Exercises could take place only through an immediate contact between the retreatant and God. In his introduction he says: 'Let the Creator deal immediately with the creature and the creature with his Creator and Lord' (Annotation 15). It is not 'much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth' (Annotation 2). The notion of 'relish' underlines the difference between grasping the Foundation as a statement of truth and accepting God as person just as he accepts us. The Foundation grounds the entire movement of the Exercises in a *biblical* faith — that all reality is, by its very existence, within God's dynamic and creative love.

In this context, the Foundation is to help the retreatant realize God's personal love for him in creating him. There is a personal call to be open to God in order to be filled. I am convinced of his unending fidelity and so I am drawn to seek spiritual freedom (indifference) in order to surrender all my desires to his call, so that in every moment and action I may 'praise, reverence and serve him'. This focus is vital for, in the dynamic movement of the rest of the Exercises, the *id quod volo* (what I truly desire) is the crucial thing at every stage. It will be necessary to begin with the *reality* of God — not so much that he exists, but that he exists *for me*. The Foundation also suggests a mutuality of love. To respond in this way entails becoming indifferent — that is, a developing attitude of openness to the ways in which God wishes to give himself to me. But indifference and detachment is not the first movement. Awareness of God's love and faithfulness precedes response just as the father's love was already active in the pig-sty drawing the Prodigal Son home. Put another way, we cannot become detached unless we are more and more attached to something, someone else. God draws us out of ourselves by revealing himself to us. Hence the importance of that 'interior knowledge' of which Ignatius speaks. We come to love and trust the person we know. True love, built on true knowledge, enables us to allow the other to be himself. This is true of all relationships. And we have to let God be God; to let the Spirit expose our idols.

It is sometimes the case that the opening phrase of the Foundation: 'Man has been created to praise, reverence and serve God . . .' seems to point towards an ideal of duty however painful. Is it that God is so vain that he creates people in order to receive praise? This can reinforce doubtful images of God. The retreatant needs to realize that God creates in order to share his infinite love and that this phrase of the Foundation expresses the principle of attraction not imposition. If we can catch a glimpse of the real God, we cannot help but praise. Praise can only be a free act, and in this free act which expresses total dependence we do not become less than human. Indeed only in this dependence do we become fully ourselves.

*Images true and false.*

The Foundation always involves reinforcing helpful images of God but the real problems arise when we meet a person who has some thoroughly bad images which are strongly operative. Often when the director senses, at an early stage of a retreat, that the person is not able to allow God to influence deeper interior reactions (a feeling that someone is 'skating on the surface') this turns out to be because of false images — even if hardly conscious. These will usually be negative images: God as tyrant, manipulator, puppet-master, uninvolved, judge or false friend. They influence strongly the way a person listens to or avoids God's word. It is vital to take time to remove these images or at least to set the stage for their removal by enabling the retreatant to reach a degree of freedom and openness. We must be careful (as always during the Exercises) not to jump to conclusions, however, about the causes of 'praying on the surface' or lethargy. Sleepiness may not be avoidance but simply lack of exercise or arriving at the retreat desperately tired! We need to check the physical well-being of the retreatant before putting a 'spiritual' interpretation on things.

Assuming that there really are false images of God operative within the person, they may be quite difficult to diagnose particularly if they are buried deeply within the person. Very often such images go back to events in the person's life which still need to be acknowledged, accepted and healed. One retreatant whom I remember deeply resented her father (he seems to have been a thorough puritan). So many crucial decisions at the early part of her life had been influenced by her father's narrowness, interference and refusals, leading (she felt) to her remaining unmarried and and to an unsatisfactory career choice. Consequently her ability to relate to any idea of God as father was greatly complicated. And it is often the case that our relationship with God is determined by our intrahuman relationships. But again one has to be careful. Not all arid and stunted affectivity in prayer is rooted in negative experiences in life. If affectivity seems otherwise normal, there is probably a false image of prayer — that feelings do not count, for example.

The images of God presented in the scripture offered for prayer will

slowly reveal what images are operative in retreatants as the director monitors their reactions. At this point it is necessary to help the person to see how he or she is being affected by a particular image — for example does it bring fear or peace? Any feelings of discomfort need to be acknowledged and then expressed freely to God in prayer. The retreatant needs to see that there are no inappropriate feelings in prayer. God meets me where I am, is infinitely patient, and waits for me. This sense may well be reinforced by appropriate scripture passages. But in the end it is vital to get to the point of feeling that there is nothing I need hide. Then, it may be suggested, the person should ask the Lord to give light and ultimately to change images which are blocks to a more intimate relationship. Sometimes the person has to stay with this for some time. Sometimes the breakthrough may be quite dramatic. One retreatant had a whole range of negative images of God (to the point where she really *hated* him) and after four days of an eight-day retreat felt that there was no point in going on. Our daily interview was early morning and by the previous evening she had decided to tell me she was leaving. By bedtime the mood was so strong that she could not sleep and finally after some hours of struggle she ceased to fight and, as it were, said: 'Who are you, God?' In a way that is difficult to describe, God was able to get through and revealed himself to her for the first time as someone who did not threaten but could heal her. She decided not to leave and over the remaining days was able to pray with great peace and by the end was capable of saying 'yes' to the Foundation with some honesty. Obviously, however, the situation is rarely so dramatic and directors have to bear in mind that a fuller shift in attitudes and images may take place much later in the process of the Exercises or even after they have finished.

There will always be the person who, despite the director's efforts, uses whatever is said or the scripture suggests to reinforce his or her false images. Even healing passages throw such retreatants back on their own sin and hopelessness. Sometimes one simply has to accept that this will not be solved in prayer alone and that what is needed is some kind of psychological counselling.

Frequently the sentiments of the Foundation will reveal problems with the 'will of God'. The sense that God's will is 'unknowable' may have less to do with bemusement than with inner freedom. To 'know' the will of God at the deepest level is to have realized that it and my best interests in fact intersect. Things like 'the end for which I was created' and 'making ourselves indifferent to all created things' strike a false note if this realization is not present at least in embryo. God is to blame for my bad choices and mistakes. He seems to block every promising avenue in life. God asks too much — he is arbitrary. This sometimes emerges in a mild form when a retreatant takes the side of the young man who approaches Jesus to ask what more he must do to inherit eternal life. 'He's a good,

sincere person. Why did you ask the impossible?' The will of God can seem to be a kind of heavenly version of the great foot which crushed unsuspecting people in the satirical british TV series *Monty Python*.

Sometimes the problem with God's will is less associated with the past than with fears about the future. The idea that I am being called to take on Christ's yoke may simply seem an unmanageable burden. I cannot afford to get too close because 'you never know what God is going to ask of you'. This is sometimes manifested in a retreatant by a kind of stubborn cheerfulness. Prayer is always a 'beautiful experience' without challenge because it cannot afford to be anything else. God's will is an eternal blueprint, already packaged and quite extrinsic to my desires. It is vital for retreatants to get in touch with this attitude and to allow God to show them that they can allow themselves to let go. For unless they come to *desire* God's will in their very roots (and not merely reluctantly accept it) they cannot be wholehearted in their prayer or action. For this reason Ignatius emphasizes the word 'desire' in the Foundation: 'My one desire and choice should be. . . .' Maybe the person needs to hear those words of Jesus to the Baptist's disciples in John's Gospel: 'What do you seek . . . what are you looking for?' (Jn 1,35-39). What are *my* desires?

There are other less radically damaging images which are still important. I may find, for example, that as I pray the Foundation I seek to be God and implicitly refuse creaturehood in many areas of my life. Or I may lack sufficient gratitude for his gifts. Maybe on the other hand there is a degree of self-doubt which can be touched by an awareness of God's loving kindness. 'Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you. See, I have branded you on the palm of my hands. . . .' (Isai 49,14-16). I can accept myself as lovable and become ever more aware that even if nobody else were to love me, God certainly does. Perhaps, again, my God is too pure. He cannot possibly be involved with a person like me, or be found in this place or situation. Many people feel that God is elusive — that it is they who have to do all the chasing. This can be eroded by scripture such as Psalm 139 in which God continually searches for me in the corridors of my life, or the shepherd who seeks out the one sheep (Lk 15,4-7), or the husband in Hosea who seeks out the unfaithful wife to bring her home, or perhaps the risen Christ who penetrates the fearful defences of the apostles in the upper room (Jn 20).

Finally it is worth noting that in imaginative contemplation not all images that emerge give truth about God although they may well reveal a kind of truth about ourselves because they are projections of our own limitations. One person imagined Jesus meeting him on the road and saying: 'I'm not going to love you until you love me better'. Take the retreatant back through the experience. 'When Jesus said this, what did you feel . . . what did it do to you?' Maybe the person can list these reactions and write them down. Aspects of the Rules for Discernment may

then help. What an image does to a person indicates where it comes from: 'Then it is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul . . . ' (Exx 315).

To speak positively, the most basic image necessary to the process of the Exercises is that of God as loving creator. Something like Isaiah 43 (vv 1-7) can often be a great help. To acknowledge God as creator is also to accept his merciful care: 'Fear not, I have redeemed you'. The call to become human, to take on an identity, precedes anything else that God asks: 'I have called you by your name. . . '. To be human is to know and to accept myself and thus to be capable of healthy relationships with others and of accepting responsibility. Part of the image of God as creator is that he creates by giving himself: 'I have called you by *my* name. . . '. To say that this creator-God is 'holy' is not merely to acknowledge that he is totally other, but also to realize that I cannot attribute my sense of human limitation to God: 'My ways are not your ways . . . ' (Isai 55,7-9). It is also worth noting that for the people of Israel the notion that God is creator is an assurance of his generosity; that the faithfulness of the past is a guarantee of God's fidelity tomorrow (Isai 49,14-15; 54,6 for example). Not that God's fidelity means that he guarantees lack of disturbance. This is not the peace which God gives. God is not an over-indulgent 'daddy'. To pass through fire and water reminds us that to be human is a risky business (Isai 43,2) but to accept those risks is to put one's trust in God's promise: 'I will be with you'. To acknowledge God as creator is to accept the invitation to live (Ezek 16,3-14). This relationship of creature to creator is fundamental to freedom and life. Unless one is convinced of this at a deep level (and not merely by lip-service) one cannot allow oneself to become dependent. Yet without this dependence and trust there is no progress.

The full force of God's attraction can only be felt in Christ. Some commentators on the Exercises argue that the phrase 'God Our Lord' in the Foundation is explicitly christological. Whatever the case it seems perfectly fair (and indeed important) to introduce the reality of Christ to the retreatant from the start. For Christ is *the* image of the unseen God (cf Heb 1,1; Col 1,15).

### *Preparation for the First Week*

Before a retreatant can look at sin in the fully ignatian sense a basic trust and experience of God's sustaining love has to be present. Otherwise the First Week becomes an unhealthy introspection or self-centred shame. The grace of the First Week is not to wallow in my own mess but a response of thanks to a God who loves so much. In other words, the retreatant must be sure of God before entering the First Week proper. This is the necessary safe and solid ground on which to stand before facing the hard truths about sin. The director has to be patient in order to let this awareness emerge.

Maybe at first there is resentment at limitation, at not being in control, or anger at the vagaries of life. As I suggested earlier we need to encourage the person to express these and ask God to give that enlightenment which is necessary to let God be God.

The Exercises are a way to freedom, but freedom is reached through truth. Truth is often hard and hence the need for that safe ground. The Foundation ensures that a person has a secure sense that freedom is, if not yet fully present, at least possible and believable. It also establishes the paradox that in order to be truly free one must give up control and be in the hands of God.

How long can we leave a person to pray the Foundation? Ignatius himself is very firm that not everyone will in fact proceed to the full Exercises (Annotation 18). The 19th annotation mode has the advantage that the prospective retreatant will normally spend some considerable time in a preparatory disposition period (maybe weeks, maybe months) during which it will emerge whether he or she ought to proceed beyond the material of the Foundation. With closed thirty-day retreats there are rather more constraints even if, in theory, we talk about people being free to proceed at their own pace. Nevertheless, within reason, it is vital not to feel rushed during the disposition days and the Foundation. With deeply rooted negative images, the retreatant needs a great deal of space and time. If, after some days, it becomes clear that the person is unlikely to be ready for the First Week in the foreseeable future, we will have to face the fact that he or she is not ready for the full Exercises. Whether retreatants are to leave or to remain for some kind of 'pre-Exercises' would obviously depend on the particular circumstances of the person (would for example going away be even more destructive?).

I do not believe that eight-day retreats are necessarily 'Exercises in miniature' during which it is vital to go through the essential meditations of the full retreat. Annotation 18 clearly indicates a great flexibility in the mind of Ignatius. The crucial thing is, it seems to me, to follow the 'natural flow' of the person even if this means that he or she focuses on the mood of the First Week or even the Foundation for the full eight days. This does not, of course, preclude directors offering scripture passages for prayer which in other circumstances might be considered material for later stages of the Exercises. The difference will be that the retreatant will approach them from his or her own (Foundation or First Week) perspective.