



“ I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realise what we all are. And if only everybody could realise this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

Thomas Merton

Shining like the sun

A REFLECTION ON THE 30-DAY RETREAT

Words Nathan Rawlins

While an Ignatian 30-day silent retreat is probably not something that most people my age would have on their bucket list, I had been looking forward to undertaking the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola since my second year at the seminary.

I went for 30 days of prayer in silence, with no talking, phone, email, Netflix, Facebook. Nothing. That still manages to surprise many people who know me. To paraphrase Shrek, its not getting me to talk that's difficult, but getting me to shut up that's usually the trick!

With the release of the movie *Silence*, I read accompanying articles about how Andrew Garfield requested to undertake the Exercises, not only as part of his preparation for the film but for his own personal reasons, and how life-changing he found it. I became more and more excited. I knew it would be a powerful, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. After all, how many people are able to separate themselves from the world for a whole month to pray?

I went in to the Exercises with a very particular goal. For me, getting to know God through the intellect wasn't much of a difficulty; I was very happy with the academic rigour of theology and philosophy. and had what some would call a 'High Christology'. What was difficult for me was coming to know and relate to Jesus as fully human.

I did not (and to a certain extent still don't) like what I term sentimental Christianity—the love songs as hymns; the confusion of the emotions of the heart for the movements of the soul; the images of Jesus as fair-skinned and blond. For me, that wasn't Jesus. Above all, I loathed the phrase 'Jesus is my friend' because it seemed such a mundane, inadequate and somewhat profane description of the relationship.

Yet I knew that there was something wrong here. I could engage with God at the level of my head, but I seemed unable to engage with him as easily at the level of my heart. I have realised over time that since I was a sensitive and emotional child, as I got older and the world became crueller, I learned to filter the pain through my intellect—with my mind acting as a sort of quarantine—before filtering it down to my heart. I filtered people, events, news and other aspects of life from my heart to protect myself from being

hurt. Walls went up because safety became more and more important. Over the years and especially through formation in the seminary, many of these walls came down, but I was aware that some still remained. I wanted and felt that I desperately needed to engage with God at a heart level, not only at a head level.

Over the course of 30 days, I came to relate more and more to Jesus through the Scriptures. Usually each day for six hours, I would immerse myself in the Scriptures, following the Exercises and learning not only to suffer with Jesus, but also to laugh and rejoice with him. As that personal relationship with Jesus grew over the days of the retreat, I was able to contemplate and ask myself, 'What exactly is my relationship with this Jesus? Who is he to me?' This became clearer over time, helped by a part of the Exercises known as a Colloquy—a conversation, often with Mary, Jesus or God the Father, where I would speak 'heart to heart' and discuss whatever came up in the prayer. As a result, each day the relationship grew and this meant that changes had to be made in parts of my life.

One of these was learning self acceptance, especially coming to terms with my weaknesses. That was hard. I usually saw my weaknesses as problems I needed to fix for God in order to love and serve him better. Yet throughout the Exercises, when reflecting on God's love and experiencing it first hand, I soon realised that he loves me no matter what and that my weaknesses are opportunities for his grace. Slowly I realised that he doesn't want 'more', he just wants me—and it is God who will foster my growth into who I am rather than making me 'more' like someone else. Where I am weak, even then he will use it for the great work he wants to do through me, if I cooperate.

After the retreat, it's not uncommon to experience a slump. That's where I am now. Throughout the retreat your focus is upon this deeply intense experience of God's love—feeling the impact of the good and bad spirit, the experience of seeing yourself as you really are and knowing that God loves you anyway, that God wants your weaknesses as much as your strengths, and learning to love not only God in a new way but yourself as well, and so much more. Then you come back to the world and realise that while all this has happened inside you, not much has changed outside of you, except how you see it.

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