

# The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius and Shifts in Images of God and Self: The Experience of Two South African Women

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## Abstract

This article explores shifts in image of God and image of self in women in the South African context making the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola in the form of the Nineteenth Annotation Retreat. The women reported significant shifts towards more positively experienced self and God-representations and a marked lessening in defensive processes. These shifts appear to be facilitated by imaginal and dialogical processes in the Spiritual Exercises, in particular the use of imaginative contemplation. This article examines these shifts in God-image and self-image with particular reference to the experience of two of the women who reported a new sense of freedom from what they had experienced as oppressive aspects of their respective cultures.

## Introduction

In ten years as director of an Ignatian Spirituality Centre in South Africa (now part of the Jesuit Institute-South Africa), I observed that women making the Spiritual Exercises<sup>1</sup> of St Ignatius in daily life were reporting significant shifts in their images of God and self. Positive<sup>2</sup> shifts in their sense of identify and self-image seemed to be a significant outcome of the retreat for many and seemed integrally connected with a shift in their image of God. As a psychologist I noticed that these shifts in relation to an increase in self-worth and confidence tended to happen much more quickly in the process of the Spiritual Exercises than

they might typically in psychotherapy, and that they appeared to be sustained. A qualitative study was done in which women who had been through the process were interviewed in-depth about their experience. This paper highlights some of the results of the study focusing on the psychological processes of the Dialogical Self and on how dialogical and imaginal processes in the Spiritual Exercises may facilitate shifts in images of God and self.<sup>3</sup> The young women discussed in the case studies described these shifts in images of God and self with reference to a sense of freedom from what they experienced as oppressive aspects of their respective cultures.

### **What are the Spiritual Exercises?<sup>4</sup>**

The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius<sup>5</sup> are a structured retreat process developed nearly 500 years ago by St Ignatius of Loyola which follows a particular "dynamic." This dynamic unfolds through the sequence of desires expressed in the graces which the retreatant is invited to pray for using both scriptural and non-scriptural meditations and contemplations. The purpose of the Exercises is to lead the person to greater spiritual freedom and a deeper relationship with God, expressed in some clear commitment to living that out in the world.

The Exercises were traditionally made by Jesuits (and some other Roman Catholic religious) as a key process in their spiritual formation. Over the past sixty years the Exercises have been made significantly more available to men and women, clerical and lay, of all Christian denominations. In South Africa this includes Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists and members of the Dutch Reformed Church. They can be made residentially as a silent 30-day retreat or as a "Nineteenth Annotation" retreat. In the latter format the retreat takes place in daily life and usually takes between nine months and a year to complete. The person making the retreat (the retreatant) prays intensively for an hour each day and meets weekly with a spiritual director to talk about what took place during the time of prayer and to be given the material for the following week's prayer.<sup>6</sup>

The Exercises engage the retreatant in praying through specific material. It is divided into four stages which are termed "Weeks." These do not relate to chronological weeks. The First Week begins with The Principle and Foundation, a key meditation which focuses on the purpose for which human beings are created and on their desire to be free enough to be open to whatever will most draw them into a closer relationship with God. Tetlow describes the Principle and Foundation as "a profound, felt awareness of being created momentarily by our God and Lord in all our concrete particulars" (1989: 7). It is also about growing in freedom from those inordinate attachments which might limit the retreatant's capacity to choose in each situation what will best lead to a

deepening relationship with the Lord. As the retreatant becomes more aware of God's creative and unconditional love, this leads to a realisation of her own lack of response to that love, which is sin. The subsequent meditations of the First Week on sin then lead the retreatant to experience that though she is a sinner, she is loved unconditionally by God. The Second Week begins with a meditation on the call of Christ. It continues with praying the mysteries of the life of Jesus from his birth through his ministry using imaginative contemplation in which she engages imaginatively as a participant in the Gospel scene. There are also several non-scriptural meditations which seek to help the retreatant come to a place of inner freedom to make a fundamental choice for Christ. As she seeks the grace to come to know, love and follow Jesus better, this usually involves making a key decision in her personal life, called the Election.<sup>7</sup> The Third Week of the Exercises involves accompanying Jesus in his passion and death in imaginative contemplation and facing the cost of discipleship. In the Fourth Week the retreatant ultimately shares in the joy of Christ's resurrection through imaginatively praying the resurrection stories. The Fourth Week ends with the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love, a prayer of profound gratitude for all God's gifts.

Two of the methods of prayer used extensively in the Exercises are imaginative contemplation and colloquy. Both involve dialogue and the use of the imagination. Imaginative contemplation involves entering a Gospel scene using the senses and imagination and engaging in dialogue with the story and the characters including the person of Jesus. Colloquy is the heart-to-heart familiar conversation with God (or Jesus – and on occasion Mary) which takes place at specific key moments in the Exercises and also usually as the conclusion to every period of imaginative prayer. The imaginal and dialogical nature of these forms of prayer plays a significant role in facilitating shifts in images of God and self and will be further discussed below.

## Methodology of the Study

Nineteen women were interviewed in in-depth unstructured interviews of approximately two and a half hours each. Fifteen were interviewed anything from six months to ten years after having made the Spiritual Exercises while the other four were interviewed during the First Week and towards the end of the Second Week. Sixteen were white and three were black. Their ages at the time of making the Exercises ranged from twenty-four to sixty-five with the majority falling between the ages of thirty-five and fifty. The women came from a variety of Christian denominations.<sup>8</sup> The study was limited to women who had made or who were in the process of making the Exercises in the form of the Nineteenth Annotation retreat. None of the women approached declined to be interviewed.

Because of the nature of the Nineteenth Annotation Retreat, taking place over nine months to a year, it is impossible to establish with any certainty how far perceived changes in image of God and self are solely the result of the Exercises process or the result of other factors within the retreatant's life situation over that period. The interviews thus asked the women about the shifts which they themselves attributed to the experience of making the Exercises. In order to address the disadvantages inherent in the process of retrospective interviews, four of the nineteen women were interviewed at various points during the process of making the Exercises. In addition, all but one of the women had kept a detailed daily journal of the retreat process which also mitigated against problems of accurate recall.

In line with the hermeneutical approach advocated by Schneiders (2005), the study first offers a "thick" description of the women's experiences, and critically analyses these to generate hypotheses in light of existing theory. The article examines emerging themes from a variety of spiritual and psychological perspectives. The focus of the analysis is on Dialogical Self theory in relation to the psychological shifts the women experienced in the two case studies.

### Shifts in Image of God

All but one woman reported experiencing positive shifts in image of God and self. The woman who did not report any shift in her image of self (though she reported some shift in her image of God) reported experiencing difficulty in engaging affectively with the imaginative and dialogical methods of prayer. For women who had had a more negative or ambivalent image of God prior to making the Exercises, the shift in image of God and image of self was most marked. For women who came into the Exercises with more positive images of God and self, the emphasis was less on a shift in image of God and more on the deepening of the relationship with Jesus. A strong trend was a movement from a transcendent image of God to one which was more immanent and finally to a closeness of relationship described in the language of intimacy.<sup>9</sup>

Along with shifts in image of self (discussed below), the women very often identified the shift in God-image as the most significant aspect of their experience. When asked "What was most significant for you in the experience of making the Exercises?", the women most frequently answered in terms of an increased sense of engagement in their relationship with God which they described in terms of a new level of intimacy. This was linked to, and I would argue was a direct consequence of, the sometimes dramatic shift in their image of God.

One woman said "for a long time I had the sense that I didn't really know God. I couldn't honestly say 'I love you' about God before I made the Exercises. I know it was the things we said in prayers and all the rest of it but it wasn't true for

me. I knew there has to be this something more and I didn't find it until then." In the Exercises she described meeting Jesus in the experience of Imaginative Contemplation: "... and so I met Jesus who I had never met before actually, and here was this real person; and, yes, I suppose one could say a love-affair began."

Another woman, in her fifties, described the new image of God in relational terms: "My Beloved and my Friend." Similarly a woman in the same age-group who had previously seen God as remote, described a new closeness: "It's like if I am with my husband: we don't have to say anything, we are just comfortable together. I feel kind of enfolded by love."

The remote, punitive and, in one case, helpless images of God, which the women had held to varying degrees prior to the Exercises had, to a large extent, precluded any possibility of them developing an intimate relationship with God. The shift they underwent was to a God who loves unconditionally and who desires each person's good. A woman who had seen God as brandishing a whip said,

With the Exercises I discovered that God loves me – he is not that horrible man who is just waiting for me to step out of line. He doesn't want to see me suffering – and I think of the scripture of Jeremiah where he says "I know the plans I have for you – plans for peace and not disaster, reserving for you a future and a hope." He wants me to be happy and prosperous – and by prosperous I don't mean money things.

The shift of this woman was especially potent, given her life-experience which included considerable suffering: her mother had died when she was nine and she was raised by an alcoholic father and an abusive step-mother. Her husband committed suicide, her sister died in a car accident and she lost her only daughter to AIDS.

### **Shifts in Image of Self**

The women interviewed also described a shift in self-image. Image of God and image of self were integrally connected and shifts in image of God and relationship with God appear to have facilitated shifts in the way the women experienced themselves. These shifts were often described as involving a sense of self-acceptance and a new self-confidence. For some women the shift was marked, whereas others described less dramatic shifts. One woman in her late forties said: "my image of myself did not change dramatically but what happened was that I was able to know myself better and accept myself and have confidence in myself. I had done self-help, self-growth stuff where this personal growth came up, but only in the Exercises was it sustainable."

The women described their self-image prior to making the Exercises very much as trying to please those around them and feeling that their worth was dependent on the approval of others. One woman explained it in the following way:

I think for me most of my life there had been the sense of not fully accepting who I am, always striving to be what I think other people wanted me to be. There was the sense of being a bit like a chameleon and frantically trying to fit the occasion and still feeling like you didn't fit in, whereas now I suppose that most of the time its OK to be who I am. I'm comfortable with who I am.

Strong defensive stances, which many of these women described, seem to have been rooted in early childhood experiences and had previously been resistant to change. One woman described two of her "inner selves" – her "good little girl" and her "inner rebel." She had previously only felt able to relate to God out of her "good little girl" self. Her realization in the process of the Exercises that God did not want her to feel inferior and that he did not need her to be good or right to be loved and accepted by him enabled her to allow other inner selves to have space.

I have changed primarily in recognizing that my feelings of inferiority are not of God, and only serve to take me away. I also recognize [that] my need to control, to "do right", comes from a need to be accepted and I do not [need to] do stuff to get God to say I am OK! I recognize my own internal conflict between my "good little girl" doing what is expected and my rebel, and somehow I took her with me after the Exercises!

The movement is towards greater autonomy and the ability to set appropriate boundaries in relationships.

### **A Lessening of Defensive Mechanisms**

For many of the women interviewed, the shift in image of self entailed in part a lessening of defensive processes. This God whom, as one woman described, she encountered "through the doorway of my imagination" is able to meet a woman's unmet emotional needs and therefore enables her to let go of previously entrenched defensive mechanisms for operating in the world.

The women most often described themselves as previously having lived predominantly from the voiced positions of a "pleaser" (trying to do whatever

will make others happy), a performer or an achiever, or from that of a chameleon which changed to meet the needs of whoever she was with. The inner voices which insisted that the women please or perform in order to have value diminished in volume as the women entered imaginal encounters in which they experienced their acceptability as not contingent upon those conditional aspects of themselves. For example, for the women whose dominant images of God shifted from masculine to feminine, the "pleaser" and "achiever" voices, respectively, receded and a new voice of "being" was able to emerge. The women described the growing relationship with Jesus and their sense of being accepted by him as creating a new sense of self-acceptance. As one retreatant explained:

If I went back to the Exercises I think for me there was a definite sense of being passionately in love with God which was very different to anything I had ever experienced before. That probably brought a lot of the intimacy with it. So I suppose that does shift how you perceive yourself. And I think the whole way through ... there has been a deepening sense of acceptance of myself which has also involved an acceptance of being a woman.

As the relationship with God or with Jesus becomes increasingly significant, there was less need for the women to look for external validation of worth. Either the new relationship becomes the place where validation was sought or the women internalised the sense of acceptance experienced within that relationship.

### **Mechanisms of Change**

The interviews explored "how" the shifts in image of God and self took place. As image of God began to shift, the experience between the retreatant and God became increasingly relational. The shift in image of God seems to take place in one of two ways: it happens through an encounter (or series of encounters) which either replaces the former image of God with an image which is diametrically opposed to that of the pre-Exercises image of God, or in which a nascent positive image is affirmed and strengthened. Most of the women attributed the shift in image of God and relationship with God largely to the experience of Imaginative Contemplation and colloquy.

At the start of the Imaginative Contemplation the retreatant actively prays for a particular gift or grace. This is the movement of the person responding to God's initiative of an invitation to dialogue. The person's own situation is brought into the prayer dialogue both through the Gospel story and the characters in it, but also, more significantly, through God who, as an independent actor in the imaginative prayer, engages with the praying person, a person who has explicitly

opened herself up to that dialogue through the medium of the Gospel story. The Gospel story provides a containing frame for the encounter.

Many of the women described a process of coming to know Jesus as a “real” person. The sense of a transcendent God, with whom it is unimaginable to have a personal and close relationship, changed in the context of on-going imaginal encounters. When asked what happened for her in the imaginative prayer conversation, one woman said:

When it felt like I was really connected, there would be a definite sense of me talking, really dialoguing with Jesus or Mary or God, and there was a great sense of intimacy, a real sense of presence and just kind of closeness. I don’t know what else to say except that it feels very real.

Some women spoke of never really having taken Jesus’ humanity seriously prior to the Exercises and said that the experience of praying through the narratives of Jesus as infant and the events of his life were significant in enabling them to engage with the man Jesus.

### **Imaginative Contemplation and Imaginal Dialogue**

In the Imaginative Contemplation, the Exercises provide an unusually intensive opportunity for the revision of both a person’s image of God and the image of self through sustained engagement with her existing God-representations. Dialogical Self Theory provides a way of understanding why imaginative contemplation provides a particularly facilitative context for shifts in image of God and self. This relatively new psychological theory was initially developed by Hermans and Kempen (1993) and suggests that the self is made up of multiple “I-positions” or selves which are in dialogue with each other. On-going development of identity takes place in relationship both intrapsychically and interpersonally and often through so-called imaginal dialogue in which the other is not physically present. Hermans and Kempen (1993) draw on the work of Watkins (1986) who maintains that imaginal dialogue is an ubiquitous and important aspect of on-going identity development. We are constantly in dialogue, sometimes with aspects of ourselves which may be in disagreement with each other, at other times with our parents, whether alive or dead, a mentor or an absent friend. We are able to imagine their response. The inner dialogues are a significant part of what shapes our sense of self.

Hermans maintains that the self is both multifaceted and multivoiced:

... the dialogical self [i]s an imaginal space that is stretched between a variety of positions. The self ... is successively, or even simultaneously[,] located at different positions in



an imaginal landscape and is able to move between these positions. In short the self is a process of dialogical movements in an imaginal space. (Hermans 1996: 32)

This is exactly what is facilitated in the process of Imaginative Contemplation. In Imaginative Contemplation the retreatant is invited into a sustained process of imaginal dialogue in a unique space of possibility. This process happens both intrapsychically, as different inner selves identify with different characters in the Gospel story, and between the person and her image of God or Jesus which itself will change as a result of that imaginal dialogue. In Imaginative Contemplation the retreatant is able to engage with a new time and space, as, for example, Bethlehem just over 2000 years ago, while bringing her own story and life experience into dialogue with this new space.

A person can, in an imaginal space, move from the present to the past or to the future and back. When the person comes back, he or she has more or less been changed by the dialogical process itself ... The self has the capacity of multiple positioning with the possibility of an emergence of new knowledge as a result of dialogical interchange. (Hermans 1996: 33, 43)

This new imaginal landscape provides multiple opportunities for engaging with new people in the characters that appear in the different Gospel stories and with the person of Jesus in different situations. If, as Hermans and Kempen argue, each self or “I-position” exists in a particular time and space in relation to particular others, Imaginative Contemplation creates multiple opportunities for new “I-positions” to emerge or be strengthened. The process of engaging in Imaginative Contemplation highlights the movement between different “I” positions as the woman takes on different personas within a Gospel story. One woman, for example, described how she identified with Joseph and with Mary at different moments in the story of the nativity, and how she could even have taken on the position of the baby Jesus or could have been another person not mentioned in the text. She could take each of these characters as potential “I” positions.

### **Integrating Previously Subjugated Voices: Expanding the Self**

Hermans and Kempen (1993) maintain that the dialogical process is transformative and that as a person takes on different “I” positions, the self is expanded through dialogical interaction between the different “I” positions. This enables a richer constellation of the self. Similarly, Ulanov asserts that “one

effect of meditation on God is just this enlargement of self" (Ulanov 2001:33).

A retreatant does not develop all voices or "I" positions equally strongly. Imaginative Contemplation may present an alternative imaginal landscape in which the self is able to experience and integrate previously silenced, subjugated or dormant inner voices. Each of the people in the Gospel story allows an indirect possibility for one of these selves to emerge. Hermans maintains that,

[a] voice may be dominant for a long time, but suddenly a phase transition may take place, that is, a competing voice that was hitherto dormant may awake and cause a transformation of one's view. A particular voice, often disagreeing with other voices[,], emerges from obscurity and proclaims itself an active member of the community of selves. (Hermans 1996: 35)

The retreatant enters into sustained imaginal dialogue with the person of Jesus whom, through the experience of sustained imaginative prayer, they come to know in different contexts. The women in the study talked about getting to know Jesus as a real person and entering into an intimate relationship with him. This seems to elicit previously subjugated selves because the way in which the women experienced Jesus looking at them and relating to them was often very different from their dominant experience in relationships.

## Case Studies

The significance of the shifts is most vividly seen when tracking and exploring the experiences of individual women. I have chosen two young women, one a black Sotho-speaking woman in her early thirties who grew up between township and rural areas. She is Roman Catholic and holds an undergraduate degree. The other is a twenty-eight year old Afrikaans-speaking white woman from a Dutch Reformed background, and engaged in postgraduate studies.

### Nthabiseng<sup>10</sup>

Nthabiseng was interviewed on several occasions after completing the Exercises. She came into the Exercises process grappling with what it means to be a black woman in a patriarchal culture. She wanted to discover who God was for her and to pray about the issue of marriage. She had reached her mid-thirties and was experiencing strong cultural pressure from her family and community to get married and have children. On beginning the Exercises she described herself as having a very strong desire for God. "I was at a time in my life when I was truly, truly searching for God." She was also very depressed, having experienced the deaths of two people with whom she had had significant and close relationships.

She had always prayed spontaneously. Colloquy was already a part of her way of engaging with God. She had completed a university degree and was struggling to find employment. During that time she baked cakes which she sold in the streets.

She said,

[a]nd I went out and I would pray each time I was selling and I would speak to Mary and we would talk – you know, have a conversation of prayer, and we would also have a conversation of prayer with Jesus and I also had a conversation with my grandmother who had died. She was, I would say, an ancestor and I would say: “Grandma, you cannot leave me to struggle ... let me have money and let me be successful in this business.” It is a small one but it can be grown one day.

#### *Shifts in Images of God and Self*

Nthabiseng’s pre-Exercises image of God was mixed. One strand was of a punitive God from whom one could expect retribution: “the Ten Commandments as a child when explained, they were quite powerful and threatening,” and the sense she was given was that if she did something wrong, then “God was watching me and God can kick.”

Concurrent with the negative image of a punitive God, Nthabiseng also had a significant and positive sense of Jesus, Mary and the saints as people to whom one could confide everyday concerns and troubles. This seems to be linked with her experience of her grandmother, a significant figure in her early life, who had since died and who, as an ancestor, was someone to whom she could appeal for help. Her relationship with her grandmother seems to have contributed a caring, protective aspect to her image of God. Both her relationship with her grandmother and her internal representations of her grandmother seem to have made a more positive image of God available to her on an unconscious level.

Nthabiseng described that she entered into the Spiritual Exercises with a strong desire to experience God in a positive and intimate way:

Somebody else won’t understand me but I wanted the God of freedom, the God of love. The God of touching, the God who understands where I am with the self, and my own communication with the ancestors.

She described the shift that begins to take place at the start of the Exercises as being about being seen by God and this experience – of God *seeing her* – shifted how she saw and experienced herself. In this manner, she discovered her own beauty and specialness. She said,

I found that God is saying I am beautiful and that's what I never knew, that in God's eyes I am beautiful – so I was searching for that beauty, you know just to be told that you are beautiful and you are loved and you are special to God.

As she began to see herself as looked at in love by God, she saw God's eyes mirroring for her a sense of trust and self-confidence. Her way of seeing herself was transformed in the relation to the experience of being seen and trusted. God acted as a "private audience"<sup>11</sup> whose regard transformed her image of herself.

When I was praying the Principle and Foundation, I wanted to gain trust in myself and in God, that God loves me and that he does trust me in the whole situation; and what I saw was his eyes that were trusting in me and so it was [about] gaining trust. There was confidence. The prayer gave me confidence in myself – the things that I was lacking. Trust and confidence and the love of God and it is a relaxing prayer for me ... I was not confident in myself and the eyes of God came directly looking at me and from there I started feeling confident that God is looking at me.

For Nthabiseng, the Principle and Foundation opened the image of God as a Father who cares for all his children and his creation:

This is what the Principle and Foundation did for me. I didn't really struggle with colour or race. I grew up not knowing about race – not knowing what is white, Indian or black. I knew that we are all people of God. But at school, what I would hear about was about colour, but I never stayed with that in my heart. But in praying the Principle and Foundation, God was so clear with me – more like a good foundation from home – that he is not into race or into women or men, but I [God] am looking at all my children. You know, we sort of grew up knowing that the most people who are faced with poverty and illness are African and the white people are getting all, and just to pray and to find that God is not like that, God is for all of us. So for me, I really got deeper in.

Nthabiseng experienced the insight that God loves all his children irrespective of gender or race as a powerful affirmation of self. As a black woman who grew up in the worst years of apartheid in South Africa, she discovered a loving

Father who treats everyone with equality as his children. Her experience in the Exercises affirmed what she had always fundamentally believed: that God loves each person equally irrespective of race.

She also experienced a shift in her image of God as father in her praying of the "Our Father" Prayer, one of the most fundamental prayers in Christianity. Her image shifted from seeing God as powerful and distant to seeing God as intimately involved with her most basic needs and concerns:

When I was doing the Exercises it [praying the "Our Father" prayer] became very different in such a way that I started moving slowly with it. The "hallowed be thy name" - if I stop there, I would stop and listen to what God is saying to me. If, for instance, one grew up in a family worried about whether there will be enough food for tomorrow, collecting food ... it [this line in the prayer] taught me that food is not prepared by me but is prepared by God ... It was looking at him, listening, being there for him and him also touching me, and just playing with that joy of being touched by God. Just knowing that he is the one preparing the food.

*Freedom from Oppressive Aspects of Culture*

Nthabiseng's experience of being a woman in her culture was a painful one for her. She said that, "being a woman in the African culture is not much joy." She explained that girls are not seen as important because they will not carry on the family name. They are only important insofar as they bear children. She resisted the sense that this was the way things are and that one simply had to accept it. Despite having questioned the patriarchy that affected her own life for many years, she grappled with different inner voices. There was the voice which asserted her own dignity and equality as a woman, but there were also other internalized voices from her cultural experience of exclusion and of being regarded as inferior to men:

Challenges are that you always have to be respectful as a woman, in your family, with your in-laws. Your husband can do anything and you have to bow down and respect him. And that was not my heart, my heart was not agreeing to that. I saw that we all do the same things, we eat and go to the toilet and drink water and I would think, what makes them different, what makes them higher than me? And that has been a struggle my whole life and even now.

The inner voice that believes she is equal to men was affirmed and strengthened

as Nthabiseng engaged with and tried on the voices of some of the women in the Gospel and connected with their interaction with Jesus:

The self grew very much. Grew in such a way that it was strengthening what I was feeling. It was saying, "Look at Christ with Mary Magdalene and look at Christ and Martha and Mary, the friendship they have." You know, I would look at Christ with the women he communicated with, and I also identified myself with some of these women and, really, this strengthened me.

Nthabiseng's family, and her mother in particular, did not understand her desire for solitude even as a young child, thinking it meant that she was upset or angry. Culturally, it was considered strange to want to spend so much time in solitude. In her experience of Imaginative Contemplation, Nthabiseng found validation and affirmation of her need for solitude in Jesus' taking time away from his disciples to pray. Her experience of the Exercises strengthened her capacity to resist what she experienced as oppressive aspects of her African culture.

#### *The Election and Imaginative Contemplation*

When Nthabiseng entered the Exercises, she was praying for a husband and family. As she entered into the infancy narratives, this aspect became focal. However, she was surprised and distressed to discover that when she entered into praying the nativity scene, she could not imagine herself married with a baby:

When I started the Exercises I was praying for a family ... In my imagination I wanted to put a father and children – to see those things. But it was clear there was not such a thing. There was no father and there were no children and I was disappointed and I had to pray again. I thought maybe I didn't pray so well the first time and it happened for many times that I prayed, but could not see a father and children in the prayer. I prayed focusing on Mary, and I saw her saying yes to the angel Gabriel and I was a bit jealous about that whole situation that Mary, already she is pregnant, and I am not going to be pregnant. And she moved in a few days to go and see Elizabeth and Elizabeth was pregnant and again there was that kind of jealousy and asking what is God doing to me? They both gave birth and when they gave birth I could not look at Jesus the child, I looked at Jesus as the preacher. I also could not accept the wise men and the shepherds coming to

give him or to give Mary the gifts. It was because I felt angry that I was not going to have a family.

Nthabiseng's prayer experience, in which it seemed that God was showing her that marriage and a family were not his desire for her, led her into a difficult time of searching to find her vocation. This struggle was also one of grappling with the part of herself that wanted to marry, as well as with not meeting the strong expectations of her family and community for marriage and children. This expectation, she explained, came out of the belief in her culture that a woman's worth is largely contingent upon her marrying and producing children. Without having children she could not become an ancestor:

And so I had to go and pray and redefine the whole situation and also see that a person can be single which is something which is not in my culture. What I knew was that you either become a priest or a nun or you get married and have children. Those are the only things I knew. But also I had to go and redefine what it meant for me not to get married. It was very difficult for me to accept those things and it was very difficult to look at Jesus as a child being given these gifts. It took me a long time to begin to know that you can be single and even make a vow to live as a celibate single person ... Eventually I could hold the child Jesus after I had come through my own struggle. And also it made me to go back to my own history of initiation and to redefine my own culture.

The imaginative contemplation on the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth was key in helping Nthabiseng to let go of the inner self that wanted to be married. It helped her discover a different part of herself that wanted to be single and in a vowed, celibate relationship with God, something foreign to her culture and family background. Interestingly, it is the relationship with two pregnant women, one very young, the other much older, which helped her. She connected with the way in which they had struggled in their own communities and they became two women with whom she could discuss her own situation. She explained it in the following way:

One of the contemplations which was good for me as a woman was looking at Mary and at Elizabeth and I was the third person in that. And Mary was very young; and I was thinking about, if you are at that age and an angel comes to tell you [that] you are pregnant – and I thought of myself at fifteen and it was just like impossible. I was so young – still

a child. I [would] have [had] to go back and ask my parents, "is this right?" But I learnt to discern with God and not with my community; and it was also difficult because I used to discern with my own community; but I had to learn to discern with my God. I learnt to say "who is God for me?" I grew up with the idea of who God is for the community and I am not against that, but in that understanding it is more an elderly person that is the one holding God. If you are young, you cannot ... lead a prayer. But making the Exercises made me aware that I could also do that, he is also God for you, you can also lead a prayer. And looking at Elizabeth we know she was very old when she got pregnant. You know I come from a community where on every corner people are standing and gossiping or just talking. And I said, "Oh, God, how much did they gossip about Elizabeth and about Mary? And here I stand and they might also gossip about me and say she is thirty-four or thirty-five and she is not married and does not have children." But God was saying to me, "Be strong; these are the two people I have given you to be examples for your life," and my envy was removed and I started loving Mary and Elizabeth more and more. They also helped me to discern, to discern my vocation. I have made this discernment through God.

Nthabiseng's upbringing had taught her that she as a woman and a younger person was not allowed to make the important decisions about her life. She was taught that the older people in the community had access to God but that she as a young unmarried woman did not. Through the Exercises she became aware that she could engage with God herself and discern his desires for her life. Engaging in dialogue and identifying with Mary and Elizabeth were significant in helping her find the freedom to make her election. A younger part of herself could identify with Mary whose call, like her own, was not one which would easily have been understood or accepted by her parents. Another part of herself, the part that knew that in not being married and having children at her age she would be judged negatively by her community, identified with Elizabeth. The intensive imaginal dialogue enabled her to strengthen previously subjugated inner voices or "I-positions." Nthabiseng's image of God changed to that of a nurturing provider and her image of self shifted to a sense of being beautiful and valuable. Out of that sense of herself as unconditionally loved by God she became free enough to be capable of making a decision which went against the external voices of her family and community.



**Lisa**<sup>12</sup>

Lisa, an Afrikaans-speaking, highly-educated woman from a Dutch Reformed background, was in her late twenties when making the Exercises. At the time of her first interview she was only six weeks into the Exercises process. The second interview took place about half-way through the process. She had, however, been in spiritual direction with the same director for the previous two years and had during that period been exposed to Ignatian methods of prayer, including imaginative prayer.

*Shifts in Image of God*

Prior to beginning her Spiritual Direction, Lisa had been struggling with not knowing how to connect with God: "I thought I want to connect with God but I have no idea how to and there was also just a lot of hurt between God and I." She spoke about a disconnection between what she knew intellectually or conceptually about God and what she experienced. She explained this in relation to her family and church background:

They would always say "your faith shouldn't be based on your feelings" and I guess what they meant was things like – just because you are feeling down doesn't mean that God does not love you. But the message I was getting was, your feelings aren't important; your feelings don't count. What you are feeling about God and your faith needs to be pushed aside because it is about faith and faith is about knowing. And so I knew God was love but I didn't *feel* God was love.

In the process of spiritual direction in preparation for the Exercises, Lisa described her image of God as having shifted. Whereas previously she had not been able to experience God as "kind and loving and gentle," something she intellectually knew God to be, she now began to experience God as being able to identify with her as a woman.

I had a dream once in which I was very angry. You know people say Jesus knows and understands everything you have ever been through, and I was angry. I thought how can Jesus know – Jesus was never a woman raped, for example. And I had this dream where I came into the room and there was a painting of a woman's body who had been raped and she was hanging on this cross and it was the iconic image of Jesus' face and it was almost as if he was saying to me, "I know what it is to be woman raped." And that was long before I started

on this Ignatian journey – maybe five or six years ago. But it was only during spiritual direction that I felt fully able to embrace that image.

Lisa described this experiencing of God as a woman as “very liberating.” It was only when she was given permission to embrace this image which had emerged for her in the dream and later in prayer that she could allow herself to do so. She had previously felt strongly that to image God as a woman was “not allowed” and also that it was not legitimate to experience God as having emotions: “I had always been taught that feelings are so bad and had to be suppressed and so I never imagined God was emotional, and that has really changed for me over the past two years.” Lisa had experienced the internal prohibition against a female image of God as very strong. She said, “I did not tell anybody. I was even a bit ashamed about it even though it was very powerful. I felt people wouldn’t understand. That they would think it was weird.”

Part of what helped Lisa in this shift of image of God was affirmation of the new image. Discovering that her spiritual director was accepting and affirming of her image of God as a woman and that other women had written of similar experiences of God imaged as a woman, enabled her to find different external validation for her experience in contrast to the judgment which she feared from her own religious community. Those external voices of her community were particularly strong and her father’s role as a leader in his church community contributed to the strength of those external voices which she had internalized:

Some of the images my director gave me to pray with were of women. And there is a poem she gave me of the Bakerwoman – and I found that I wasn’t the only one. There were others who experienced God as a woman.

Inner conflict or dissonance between her instinctive desire to relate to God in ways which included the feminine and the emotional life, and her family upbringing which presented God solely as masculine and intellectual, was intense and intolerable to her.

#### *Shifts in Image of Self*

Lisa described her sense of self as also having shifted substantially during the process. She spoke initially of a release of anger:

Prior to this process I had a tremendous amount of anger – and I have struggled with anger since I was eleven or twelve. I think most of it was to do with the fact that so much of what I felt and experienced was unexpressed and unaffirmed.

... I felt like I had a pent-up bomb inside of me. And if I did sometimes express a little of it, it would be so much disapproved of and looked down on ... so just having all my feelings and emotions allowed and affirmed – even the angry ones [was helpful]. Being able to feel angry in God’s presence. The bitterness and hurt and disappointment could come out. I feel like a different person through this process. It is such a relief.

In the process, Lisa was enabled to bring repressed parts of herself (her emotional life and her anger which had been labelled as ‘bad’) into the relationship with God and to own and integrate them. She discovered there was space to accept her emotions and even to affirm them in the context of her shifting image of and relationship with God. She described herself as having experienced “an integration of parts of myself that I thought had to be suppressed or were bad and needed to be fixed. I can be free to be all those parts.” Asked whether she felt that her self had expanded, she said,

That’s actually a very helpful way of saying it and it is interesting that you say bigger. ... People around me ... say I used to be “little-Lisa” and now I’m becoming “big-Lisa”, and I can see that I take up more presence in a positive way. I used to feel like I had to fight for a voice but more and more I have a voice without having to fight for it.

#### *The “How” of the Shift*

A number of factors were significant in relation to the shift Lisa experienced in her images of God and self. She described the methods of prayer she was introduced to – including praying with pictures and Imaginative Contemplation – as taking her relationship with God from “a head process to a heart process.” This was significant for her because,

[b]efore, everything had been with my head and yet I am a person who experiences life through my heart. So there was this big disconnect happening all the time ... Whereas before I had always pushed my feelings aside, suddenly my feelings became the very centre of my prayer and that was incredibly relieving for me – to be able to pray my feelings and have them validated and affirmed and acknowledged by God.

Also significant was the director’s affirmation of what Lisa wanted to bring into her prayer but had been taught was not permissible: “My first thing was always

to say, 'Is it ok?' – like [something] I wanted to write in my prayer and I said to my director, 'Is it ok?' and she said, 'Of course, use what helps you.' So a lot of it was just affirming the things I was already doing." Lisa's sense that she could trust her director and that her experience would not be judged was critically important in allowing her to own previously disallowed parts of herself: "I think I have a lot of fears about what I am going to say. Is it allowed? ... Is it going to be judged or looked down on? ... And just to have it accepted so unconditionally is very significant."

Later, about half-way through the Exercises process, Lisa described that she was now able to embrace parts of herself that she had previously found difficult to accept and integrate:

Amongst other things I became aware of some complex parts of my "inner landscape" which I had rejected and [I] could [now] experience God loving all those complex parts of who I am and allowing me to love those and accept those as integrally part of myself. Integration has been a significant theme for me. Ignatian Spirituality seems, with increasing depth, to invite the integration of every part of the self. No part of myself is rejected or despised or thrown aside or suppressed. Every part is embraced and is seen as a possible means to move towards God.

In expressing the sense of change, she said:

I'm learning to accept all of me. And it has changed the way I interact with others. I still find it hard. There are so many critical voices, negative voices, voices saying I'm not good enough. These voices make me defensive and afraid and so I behave badly towards others, criticizing them, judging them. But as I begin to believe that God accepts me and learn to accept myself, I begin also to accept others more.

What is also evident is the beginning of a significant shift in the way Lisa experienced God. She was still vacillating between her former image of God and the new image which was growing through the process of spiritual direction and which seems to have intensified in making the Exercises. When asked about any further shifts in her image of God after the previous interview she said:

All the time! I keep being amazed at how little God seems to me in my experience to be that God of judgment, fear, guilt, exclusivity, etc., that I felt the church has been teaching.

Instead, he is just so abundant, so generous, so big, with so much to give. Verses that say, ask for anything, and God wants to give you all that you need, are suddenly standing out to me. I still sometimes fear that this is all a dream, and that I will wake up and find that God is that nasty God after all. But every part of me hopes – has faith – that he is all that I ever dreamed he would be.

In this description there is the sense of the process by which her image of God may begin to shift and how the shift is tentative and needs to be held onto and reaffirmed. Layers of new experiences of God begin to displace former less helpful images.

A pivotal experience for Lisa came at the end of her prayer in the Principle and Foundation when she had a day of retreat. She described an experience which facilitated a deep shift in the way she experienced herself:

I felt strongly drawn to paint but I didn't know what I wanted to paint. At the time I was ending off the creation part of the Exercises and had been looking at sort of an overview of my life so far, summing up all the many exercises that had allowed me to explore different parts of my creation story. I started to paint themes and ideas that had arisen out of a "summary poem" I had written. The painting process was hard as there were so many voices telling me that it wasn't good enough, that it looked stupid, that it was so badly painted that I should be ashamed of it ... Later, as I told my director about it and about how much I hated the painting and how stupid it was, she asked me to bring it to her, for her to see. I didn't want to at all, but I did. I placed it before us and sat in such a way that I wouldn't even have to look at it. As she looked at it she had tears in her eyes and said it was so, so beautiful. As she began to explore the painting, describing what she saw, I just began to cry and cry.

She asked that for the rest of the day I sit with the painting and ask it what it wanted, what it needed. I felt silly asking a badly painted piece of work what it needed! But as I sat with that question I sensed it was saying that it needed to be loved, to be embraced, to be accepted. As the day progressed I had a deeper and deeper sense of God loving that painting so much, and the girl I had painted in the painting, and through Him I began to love it, her too. Of course, it was myself I was

rejecting and myself I was learning to love and embrace and accept. This was only possible in the context of knowing I was so, so deeply loved and embraced and accepted by God. As I write, I experience again the absolute relief of knowing that all that stuff within me is held and loved by Him, and not judged or dismissed or despised by Him. And so nor do I need to judge or dismiss or despise any part of me (or any part of anyone else).

This account shows how the sense of God's acceptance of herself enabled a shift in Lisa's self-perception. When Lisa saw how her director was moved by the painting and found it beautiful, she was persuaded to allow herself to open up to look for that beauty in the painting of the girl who represents herself. Her experience in the prayer of being loved, embraced and accepted by God was one in which she became able to accept all of herself, even the parts which she had previously judged, dismissed or despised.

### **Observations on the Two Case Studies**

The Exercises are designed to lead a person to a place of the greatest possible spiritual freedom. In making the Exercises, women from very different cultural backgrounds also experienced a sense of liberation from aspects of their culture which did not fit for them. Nthabiseng discovered a sense of dignity as a black person and, through praying the Gospel stories, experienced herself affirmed as a woman. Beyond that she was able to embrace a vocation, as a celibate woman, which dramatically broke with her cultural norms and expectations. Lisa's experience of the Exercises strengthened the latent inner voices which went against the norms and expectations of her own cultural background. As a young Afrikaans woman brought up in a highly intellectual environment and in the Reformed church tradition, she had been taught to deny and suppress key aspects of her experience. The experience of Ignatian prayer and spiritual direction allowed those aspects – including the feminine and the emotional life – to have space. For both women their experience of seeing themselves as beautiful and cherished by God enabled them to embrace the aspects of themselves which they had previously not been able to integrate.

### **Conclusion**

All except one of the women interviewed described a positive shift in their image both of God and self through undergoing the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. For some the shift was slight, for others it was significant. Images of God which had previously been predominantly transcendent or ambivalent, shifted through

a process of engaging in imaginative prayer and through the support of the spiritual director so the women were able to engage with Jesus as a person with whom a relationship was possible. This involved a lessening need for defensive mechanisms. As women experienced themselves as unconditionally loved, the compulsion to please or perform in order to win or keep love diminished. At the same time, through the engagement in imaginative prayer and colloquy, the women were able to allow previously dormant or repressed parts of themselves to emerge as voices which deserve to be heard. Once in touch with their authentic desires as opposed to the "shoulds" and "oughts" of the external voices which they had integrated and which had dominated their lives, they were able to discern their personal vocation. The women were also able to revisit the "shoulds" of their cultures, as seen in the two case studies presented, as they experienced the emergence and strengthening of previously dormant or underdeveloped parts of themselves. This new sense of self, facilitated by the process of the Spiritual Exercises, allowed the women to challenge or let go of aspects of cultural experience which they experienced as oppressive and as an obstacle to their growth, both emotionally and spiritually.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> To date, very little of the literature on the Spiritual Exercises deals specifically with the experience of women. The work of psychologists and sociologists who focus on the development of women, including Gilligan (1982) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986), as well as that of some authors on spirituality, e.g. Ruffing (2000), suggests that women's psychological and spiritual development tends to unfold differently to the way it does in men and that this merits attention.
- <sup>2</sup> In this paper I shall use the terms "positive" and "negative" in describing images of God. I am aware that that such terminology may be considered theologically inappropriate by some. However, I am using these terms to describe the subjective experience of the women interviewed. My criteria for whether an image of God is positive or negative is the way it was experienced by the woman herself as either encouraging or hindering the development and deepening of her relationship with God. Though some may argue that the image of God as judge or similar images are important, the Feminist approach has shown that the image of a judgmental God has dominated theological discourse in such a way that it has been unhelpful and oppressive of women. As a result, I would argue, this image is very unlikely to facilitate the development of a deeper relationship of women with God (Daly 1983; Ruether 1983; Osiek 1988).
- <sup>3</sup> There are evidently profound theological reasons for the shifts which may be the subject of another paper. However, if one accepts the Thomistic theological principle that grace builds on nature, there is good reason also to pay attention to the psychological factors and processes through which God communicates God's self. The work of Rahner (1961;1964) and Meissner (1987) is particularly pertinent in this regard.

- <sup>4</sup> A full discussion of the Spiritual Exercises cannot be addressed in this article. Excellent sources on Ignatian Spirituality and the theology of the Exercises include Cusson (1988), Edean (2001) and Egan (1976). Texts which deal more specifically with how the Exercises are given by the spiritual director to the retreatant include Ivens (1998) and Veltri (1998). Some key works which deal specifically with women and the Spiritual Exercises include Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001) and Ruffing (2000).
- <sup>5</sup> There are several English translations of St Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. Frequently used translations are by Puhl (Ignatius of Loyola 1951), Fleming (Ignatius of Loyola 1996) and Ivens (Ignatius of Loyola 2004).
- <sup>6</sup> This option was originally proposed by Ignatius for those whose commitments would not allow them the preferred option of going away for 30-days. However, the advantages of this method are being increasingly recognised as more people choose to make the Spiritual Exercises in this way.
- <sup>7</sup> The Election is the usually significant decision a retreatant may make in the Exercises with regard to how she will live her life. The election is usually made during the Second Week of the Exercises.
- <sup>8</sup> Twelve were Roman Catholic, two were Anglican, one Baptist, two Methodist, one Dutch Reformed and one came from a non-denominational Christian Church.
- <sup>9</sup> This is in line with Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert (2001).
- <sup>10</sup> Not her real name.
- <sup>11</sup> The Dialogical Self approach draws on the concept of "The Private Audience" proposed by Baldwin and Holmes (1987) according to which a person always imagines the response of another. This imagined other acts as a private audience.
- <sup>12</sup> Not her real name.

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