

An Experiment in Retreats.

Address to the Members of the Church Service Society at its Annual Meeting, 28th May, 1935, by the Right Reverend Richard Roberts, D.D., Moderator of the United Church of Canada.

.

AN invitation to address this Society is an honour to which I have no title, and to have accepted the invitation was an act of foolish temerity on my part. To make matters worse, since the day on which I accepted the invitation until I came to this City, I have been so preoccupied with the affairs to which a Moderator is condemned, that I have not found time to make the preparation which the occasion calls for. And I apologise beforehand for the hasty salad of platitudes which I shall set before you. The only qualification I have to address this Society is that for some eight or nine years I have served on a Committee which has produced a hymn book and a book of Order, both of which have been pronounced, by persons competent to pass judgment, to be not unworthy achievements of a young Church which is still in process of finding itself. We were faced with the problem of producing books of praise and prayer for a Church in which three traditions had been incorporated that were far from being fused in a new synthesis. I am happy to say that throughout the process we were bound in a very generous fellowship, in which Methodists out-did Presbyterians in their eagerness to do justice to the metrical Psalms; and Presbyterians exceeded the zeal of Methodists in their care that the hymns of the Wesleys should have a place of proper honour in the book; while both Presbyterians and Methodists laboured together to produce a book in which our Congregationalist brethren might find themselves at home. I think that we of that Committee were enabled in our fellowship to realise beyond the rest of our brethren what The United Church might and, please God, will become. In preparing our Book of Order, we had to keep in view not only the traditions of the uniting Churches, but those also of our immigrant population who have come from lands where the Eastern

and other uses prevail, and who are entering into The United Church. In this task we did actually develop a catholicity of mind and spirit which we believe will in time become the note of the whole Church. Much of this result was due to the leadership, the tact, and the fine scholarship of a native of this city and a child of the Scottish Church, my dear friend, Dr Alexander MacMillan, who, I am happy to say, is with us here to-day ; and to whom the honour of this achievement chiefly belongs.

We have to make the admission that in the years preceding the Union all three of the uniting Churches had allowed their standard of public worship to decline somewhat seriously. This was, I believe, partly due to the influence of the tendency among our neighbours to the south to resort to sensational methods of attracting congregations—an evil from which we are still far from free. I think that it was also helped by the misconceived democratic notion that worship should be free and easy and familiar, and should therefore be bare of anything that seemed to be tinged with ceremony or formality. There was also the inherently healthy, but in practice exaggerated, emphasis upon a social Gospel which tended to undervalue the elements of mystery and that sense of the Holy which are the essential presuppositions of noble and living worship. There are, however, signs of a change for the better in this matter. We are finding a more or less general, if as yet not very powerful, feeling in favour of liturgical elements in the public worship of God. In my present congregation, which was formerly Methodist, we have had for the last few years a morning service which is largely liturgical and which has become entirely acceptable to the people. I believe that a number of other ministers have had a similar experience.

I believe, however, that the problem confronting us in Canada has to be faced at a deeper level than the introduction of forms of worship, however fine and fitting. You have largely escaped on this island, I think, a trouble that has overtaken us on the North American Continent, namely, a certain decay of reverence, both in spirit and in habit, which is to be attributed to the levelling effect of egalitarian democracy. Some competent person should make an exhaustive study of the effect of political ideas upon theological thought, all down the ages. Undoubtedly the mediaeval doctrine of sovereignty left its mark on Calvin's Institutes. And there is more than a humorous sally in Francis Thompson's saying that in these times we

have degraded the Deity into a constitutional monarchy with certain state grants of worship, but with no control over public affairs. In North America, where monarchy has either disappeared or is not so immediately obvious and apprehended as it is here, we have gone farther than the point described by Francis Thompson. In its extreme form, in that neo-humanism which claims to be the only possible Christianity for these sophisticated times, God has been compelled to abdicate ; and we are left to worship ourselves in the mass, so to speak—if we worship anything at all. The God of a logical and thorough-going democracy is at the best the glorified President of a Republic, *primus inter pares*—one of ourselves, and concerning whom we are apt to think in Omar Khayyam's terms, "Pish, he's a good fellow, and 'twill all be well."

It would of course be absurd to say that this sort of view has gained any wide conscious acceptance among ordinary folk, but it does represent the extreme form of a tendency which is widespread. It is obvious that under these circumstances the spirit and the form of reverence have some difficulty in maintaining their proper place in the scheme of life.

Along with this problem, there is another which gives us some concern, namely, the decline of that quality in preaching which our fathers called, and which for that matter, the New Testament calls *power*. I have seen a distinction, I think it is De Quincey's, drawn between the literature that *instructs* and the literature that *moves*. The same distinction applies to preaching, with the difference that preaching, whether it instructs or exhorts, should always move ; and I use the word *move* here not merely or primarily as having reference to what we call emotion, but to the much more important matter of the movement of the will. But most of our preaching appears to fail in providing any very perceptible movement of any kind. What I mean by power is precisely the quality in preaching that provokes in the hearer a movement of the will. It is something not easily defined. Sir Joshua Reynolds once went to pay a visit to a friend who had recently bought a picture in which he took great pride. Sir Joshua was duly taken to see the picture and to give, as his friend hoped, a favourable judgment upon it. The great man did his best. "The composition is very good," he said, "the *chiaroscuro* is admirable, the colouring is excellent ; but . . . but . . .," and then with a snap of finger and thumb he

added, "Oh, but it lacks *that*!" And when I think of *power* in preaching, I mean just "*that*"!—the elusive unnameable thing that turns a sermon into a word of God, so that it convicts men of sin and moves them to repentance, or in some other fashion stirs them to seek and to find God. We have very good preaching in Canada, but for by far the greater part it belongs to the class of the picture of Sir Joshua Reynolds' friend. It has everything save that final secret which makes it a moving and living thing.

Now it is not necessary in this presence to demonstrate that the only remedy for these conditions—the decay of reverence, the loss of power in preaching—lies in a recovery both by preacher and people, of the practice of the presence of God. The final source of our disappearing reverence and of our powerless preaching lies in no external circumstance but in ourselves, in our own arid and unlit spirits. In this region, we have, I believe, initiated something that promises to be fruitful. In a company of friends, mostly ministers, representing all the Protestant Communions in the City of Toronto, the question was raised one day whether the time had not come when we should consider seriously the subject of spiritual "retreats." As a matter of fact, the point was raised in connection with the need of a general evangelistic effort; and it was generally agreed that no such effort was at all practicable apart from an important initial increment of spiritual power. It was agreed there and then that the company present should make itself responsible for inviting some thirty other ministers to join in an experimental retreat of three or four days.

We had had previously what had been described as retreats. But these had been actually conferences on matters relating to religious education, young people's work and the like; and in which prayer took hardly more than a formal and subordinate place. Of a retreat wholly given to prayer, none of us had any experience. As I happened to be the only person present who had any serious acquaintance with the literature of the subject, it was laid upon me to prepare for and to conduct the retreat. It was a case of the blind leading the blind. If what follows appears unduly personal, it is simply because that responsibility was laid on my shoulders.

As I began to reflect upon the task which was laid upon me, I realised that there were some serious difficulties to be faced. The fundamental difficulty had to do, as a matter of course, with the scheme and order of the retreat. It

would necessarily involve the exercise of modes of prayer to which the members of the company were unaccustomed. They were all, to be sure, familiar with the forms of ordinary prayer—confession, thanksgiving, intercession, and supplication, but the whole range of what is sometimes described as “interior prayer” was unknown territory to them. It is a singular circumstance that Protestantism has so largely neglected this aspect of the practice of prayer. It is probably due to this circumstance that the mystical and ascetic theology of the Church of Rome is largely a post-Reformation development, and that it received its chief impetus from St. Ignatius Loyola’s “Spiritual Exercises.” But this theology does provide an elaborate system of spiritual discipline, based upon the practice and the experience of the saints, to which Protestants should pay more attention than they have hitherto done. There is in it a wealth of suggestion for the cultivation of the inner life which we cannot afford to ignore—though there is also much in it to which most of us could yield no consent. Such a work for instance as the Abbé Poulain’s *Les Graces d’Oraison*, translated into English under the title of “*The Graces of Interior Prayer*,” is a mine out of which we may dig much treasure. My first task was to adapt the elements of interior prayer to the conditions of a short retreat for Protestant novices.

My second problem grew out of the circumstance that most of the persons who would join the retreat were unaccustomed to the long period of solitary prayer which form an important part of the Catholic retreat. How much in the way of solitary prayer should I provide for? For it was idle to ignore the fact that prescribed periods of solitude which were too frequent or too protracted might easily involve a strain that would probably defeat the intention of the retreat.

Then again, there was a question raised in my own mind relative to the psychological need of fellowship. It has always seemed to me that the Ignatian retreat loses something by not making provision for brief intervals in which the retreatants might quietly and intimately pool their experiences and so mutually encourage and help each other.

Finally, there was the question of dividing up the day. In a Catholic Retreat, the division is already determined by the daily offices from Prime to Compline. But we have no such traditional division to fall back upon. Yet it is clear that some alternative had to be found.

Let me summarise the outcome. The day was divided into three parts. We began in the evening, and that period was chiefly devoted to self-examination and confession. The morning period had to do mainly with meditation, and the afternoon was given to a diet of corporate silence, that is to say, a Quaker meeting. The rest was built up around the three hours thus devoted to solitary prayers in silence. The original time-table worked out as follows :—

Evening :	8.00—Opening Prayers and Instruction.
	8.30—9.30—Solitary self-examination and confession.
	9.30—Corporate Confession.
	10.00—Compline.
Morning :	7.30—Holy Communion.
	8.30—Breakfast.
	9.30—Morning Prayers and Instruction.
	10.00—11.00—Solitary Meditation.
	11.00—Intercession.
	11.30—12.30—Conversation.
Afternoon :	12.45—Lunch.
	3.30—4.30—Quaker Meeting.
	4.30—5.30—Thanksgiving and Intercession.

It was understood that these hours should be religiously kept ; and they actually were. No attempt was made to impose a rule of silence during the interval between the engagements of the day, as it was feared it might involve an unnatural and therefore deleterious tension.

It will be observed that so far as it goes this order follows the traditional three-fold mystical way, that is, the first two movements, the purgative, and the illuminative. The third, the unitive way, hardly comes within the scope of a retreat. It is an experience rather than an exercise ; and it is only possible for those who have the aptitude and the time to enter into it.

The purgative way is the necessary preliminary. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” My own instruction to retreatants has been that there must be a systematic self-examination—not so much in respect of actual sins but of sinful dispositions ; and I have ordinarily suggested that this self-examination shall be conducted on the basis of a relevant passage of Scripture, usually Romans xii., or alternatively, the Beatitudes or 1 Corinthians xiii. I have also recommended that the retreatants should furnish themselves with paper and pencil, that they may make a record of their findings, and thus have a summary view of their condition.

But self-examination is to be followed by confession to God, with such particularity as the self-examination will have

indicated ; and with confession, so far as that is possible by an inferior act of will, and presupposing the assistance of grace, there must go a forthright repudiation of those dispositions and attitudes which separate us from God. The Catholic masters urge that the whole exercise should be clinched by a *resolution*, that is, to perform some simple act outside the normal course of duty as a token of sincerity and good faith.

The morning meditation follows the classical "three-point" meditation of the Catholic practice. The subject is appointed ; and in retreats for ministers, I have usually appointed the latter portion of 2 Corinthians v. But the subject for meditation may be anything that is appropriate, an attribute of God, an incident in the Gospels. The three points of meditation are, as you no doubt know, (1) the exercise of the imagination on the subject, (2) the exercise of the intellect, and (3) the exercise of the will. But it is, I think, in retreats well to leave the third point unemphasised, so that the process of meditation may be free to fall to the state of *contemplation*—the difference being that in meditation, we ourselves are chiefly active, whereas in contemplation we are held in the presence of God without perceptible effort on our own part. It is a condition of living passivity, a tranquil mood of receptivity—the moment at which God may communicate to us some specific gift of light or grace. Miss Underhill describes this state as "the point of insertion." Some persons arrive at this stage of contemplation much sooner than others ; and I have known of some, a few, who have had a real experience of it within the hour given to meditation in the retreat.

The corporate confession, intercession, and thanksgiving have been in the form of litanies borrowed from various sources. Our compline was a severe simplification of the Roman office.

The "conversation" provided for in the time-table was the concession made to the need of fellowship, and it was a spontaneous and intimate interchange of what discoveries and experiences had befallen us in the course of our meditation. But it proved valuable both in itself and in the relief it afforded from the tensions which as novices we experienced in our times of solitude. The Quaker meeting differed from the conversation in that in the latter, speech was regarded as the rule and silence was the exception, whereas in the former, silence was the rule and speech was the exception, not to be uttered save under the constraint of God's Spirit. That proved to be a very valuable ingredient in the total discipline.

Well, our first retreat was so blessed an experience that some men went away from it declaring it to be to them a unique and decisive experience, and those of us who were initially responsible for it have felt a definite obligation to promote the idea and the practice of retreats. The first retreat was held on a quiet lakeside when the Canadian autumn was at the height of its glory ; the second was in mid-winter, a day's retreat for ministers in Toronto ; and that proved to be a memorable occasion. Since that time—some eighteen months ago—our timid start has attained the dimensions of a small movement. Some of those who shared in the first retreat are now frequently called upon to conduct retreats, and the demand is growing. Within the last few months, I have conducted retreats for missionaries on furlough, for theological students, for a large group of young people, and I have held, with very promising results, a three-hour retreat with my own people on a week evening. My own particular service to the Church as Moderator has taken the form of four or five day missions in the strategic centres of population. The last day of these missions is given up to a retreat for ministers, and the day ends with a public service of self-rededication at the Lord's Table. You may gather something of the worth of these retreats when I tell you that at the end of the day's retreat at Hamilton, the ninety ministers present asked leave to make their own personal re-consecration to our Lord and His Kingdom together in a body and in the presence of the people, at the Communion Table. It was a memorable and moving experience to hear those ministers, as they knelt down together and repeated words in which they offered themselves anew, body and soul, to Jesus Christ our Lord. And that is but a single instance of the fruitage of these retreats. And more is to come.

Whither it will lead us, we cannot foresee. But for myself I am satisfied that we have found the key to our problems of worship and preaching ; and I have some grounds for believing that it will eventuate in a quiet renewal of spiritual life and fervour through the whole of the Evangelical Christianity of Canada.

RICHARD ROBERTS.

P. S.—Since this paper was read, I have, under the influence of Dom John Chapman's "Spiritual Letters," separated *meditation* and *contemplation*, prescribing a third period of solitude for contemplation during the day. R. R.