"GRANT ME ONLY TO LOVE YOU:" THE CONTEMPLATION TO ATTAIN LOVE IN THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

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The Contemplation to Attain Love (Latin: *Contemplatio ad Amorem*) is found in the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola as part of the Fourth Week and as a fitting conclusion of the entire Exercises. Because the Exercises serve to free the exercitant from disordered attachments, introduce one to the Christ of the Gospels, awaken the exercitant to the Love of God, and elicit the exercitant's response to him in freedom and gratitude,[1] the *Contemplatio* can be considered as a synthesis of the whole retreat. For Ignatius, the movement of the Exercises and the entire Christian life is one of development, an ever-deeper movement of freedom into the Love of God. The *Contemplatio* is also developmental: it leads to freedom from the hold of sin in one's life, a deeper consciousness and experience of this Love in all things, and in doing so, respond to this Love with love.

The *Contemplatio* mirrors, on the one hand, the faith we profess as Christians and, on the other, the exercitant's own personal development in love. Faith, as in the exercises, is trust and surrender to the one who is the source of Love and the giver of love's gift, which can only be done in love. Indeed, in my own journey in the Exercises, I experienced the *Contemplatio* as the culmination of the love and freedom of the long retreat and my whole formation journey. In nearing the end of my stay in San

[1]The Exercises are composed of four Weeks, which consider, respectively, sin and mercy, Christ's life, his Passion, and his Resurrection, through which one is called to know Christ intimately and follow him in a deeper way.

Jose and gathering the fruits of my journey, I find more and more that this love in many places and through many people has its highest expression in my prayer of the *Contemplatio* – both in its aspect of consciousness and memory of this love, and of the begging of the grace to love God in return.

Love as Doing and as Sharing – The Grace I Beg For

Before the *Contemplatio*, Ignatius gives two points regarding love. First: "Love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than words." Second: "Love consists in a mutual sharing of goods."[2] It sets the tone for the entire *Contemplatio*, for Love is now defined as doing and sharing. God's Revelation can be seen in such terms, because Revelation is not simply the manifestation of God's decrees, but God's self-communication of himself and his saving plan for us. God desires to reveal himself to us because of his surpassing love, which invites us to friendship and to share in his divine life. Indeed, this Love is enfleshed in words and deeds; the mighty deeds of God attest to his faithful and saving love.[3] As love reveals not just the lover's deeds, but also who the lover is, so too does God's revelation in history show who he is, a God who is always "being-with" and "being-for" – in creation, in covenant, and in the person of his Son, who perfects revelation, showing us the face of the God who is love.[4]

Love is sharing and involves mutuality. God's revelation is not one-sided; it is done so that we might know and draw closer to him and come to the fullness of life. Our response to this gift is faith. This response is not only an assent and acceptance of

[2]Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis Puhl (Makati: Saint Paul's, 1987), no. 231.

[3]Cf. *Dei Verbum* 2. Hereafter *DV.*

[4]See *DV* 2-4.

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God's teachings as true. Instead, faith involves the entirety of the human person, involving entrusting one's self to God with the aid of the Spirit.[5] This faith allows us to enter into true freedom, for in allowing us to perceive Love, it is already the beginning of eternal life.[6]

Love as self-giving and mutuality can only be thus because God himself is Love. It is the Love of the Father and Son and Spirit, all mutually indwelling in each other, all giving of themselves to each other for all eternity. The love of the Trinity overflows into the world and us and draws us into this life through covenant and communion. Indeed, the *Contemplatio* mirrors the Trinity – the remembering and understanding of the working of love in us drives the will to love God in return – memory, understanding, will, and the image of the Trinity as perfect and eternal love.[7] It is why the grace begged for is the awareness and response to this eternal and mutual love: the interior knowledge of all graces received, "that in all things I may love and serve the Divine Majesty."[8]

The First Point: Love as Giving

> This is to recall to mind the blessings of creation and redemption and the special favors I have received. I will ponder with great affection how much God our Lord has done for me, and how much He has given me of what He possesses...[9]

[5]*DV* 5.

[6]Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), no. 163. Hereafter *CCC*.

[7]See Erich Przywara, *Deus Semper Maior: Theologie der Exerzitien*, vol. II (Vienna: Verlag Herold, 1964), 318.

[8]*Spiritual Exercises* no. 233.

[9]*Spiritual Exercises* no. 234.

In contemplating the first point, one calls to mind that God is the giver of every good gift. Thus, Love is manifested as giving and outpouring, not out of necessity or any return, but simply out of his loving will, which is the reason and foundation of self-giving.[10] In a personal way, I call to mind the many people whose love and generosity have helped me in my vocation: my family and friends, priests who served as witnesses to the priestly vocation, teachers who formed me intellectually and spiritually, and so many others. All of them are gifts of God to me; in them, I have experienced how God has wonderfully and lovingly made me and continues to remake me in his image and likeness.

Love as giving is manifested, especially in the gift of creation. For creation is not the product of random chance, on the one hand, or necessity, on the other. Creation can only stem from the overflowing self-giving of the Trinity, an outpouring of love into the created order. Creation is thus free because it is willed out of love, and continues to be sustained by love. It is good and orderly, coming from the goodness and solicitude of God. Hence, it is a gift.

Sin damages this gift. It is not simply breaking a rule that deserves punishment but the misuse of the great gift of creation and relationship. It breaks the mutuality of love that gives the beloved what one is and has and instead makes oneself the center and endpoint of all love. In sinning, one prefers oneself to God and desires to be like him *apart from him*. Thus, it damages the harmony of love with God and others, leading to more sin.[11]

[10]Przywara, *Deus Semper Maior*, 320.

[11]Cf. *CCC* nos. 398-401.

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Nevertheless, "how much more plentiful has been the grace of God..."[12] Despite our sins, God has not abandoned humanity to its own devices but has time and again offered himself to us in generous self-giving. In the history of Israel, he has shown that sin cannot be greater than grace; indeed, grace always abounds all the more. In continuing to guide his people, offering them his covenant, and making them his own people, God has shown that he is a God of grace, covenant faithfulness, and steadfast love: "I have loved you with an everlasting love, and so I still maintain my faithful love for you."[13] The self-giving of God always calls to conversion, to turning back to Him in Love.[14]

The many human and spiritual formation modules have helped me recognize my issues, failings, and sins and how deeply these have affected me and others. Yet, more than this, the recognition of the ever-deeper mercy of God in my prayer and spiritual direction has led me to a deeper understanding that sin is not the final word. I am led beyond my issues and failings precisely because this greater love of God draws me to Himself.

The Second Point: Love as Dwelling

> This is to reflect how God dwells in creatures... So He dwells in me and gives me being, life, sensation, intelligence; and makes a temple of me, since I am created in [his] likeness and image.[15]

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[12]Romans 5:15b (Revised New Jerusalem Bible)

[13]Jeremiah 31:3

[14]See *Spiritual Exercises* no. 60, the "cry of wonder" at God's mercy in spite of sin.

[15]Ibid., no. 235.

Love is not just giving but also "being with." The God of Love dwells in the created order and myself, created in his image and likeness. This indwelling in me is grace - God's gift of his life to me.[16] This grace is incarnated in the person of his Son, the eternal Word, who became flesh and made his dwelling among us.[17] In Jesus, we see the merciful face of the Father; in Jesus, God became like us to restore what was lost through sin and share his life with us. We are not the ones reaching out to God, but God is reaching out to us and inviting us to answer his call, the call to know him, love him, and follow him in a personal manner.[18] This friendship with Jesus is foundational – in my vocation, I have found that this is the one thing that matters, that the rest of my formation is hinged on this personal knowledge of Jesus as someone utterly close to me. Especially in the practice of examen and contemplation, I have found that Jesus dwells with me and in me, sharing in my life. He constantly calls me to a greater and deeper relationship with him, so much so that this familiarity is no longer abstract but concrete. The person of Jesus Christ, in whom God has shown his absolute nearness, becomes the anchor on which the meaning of my life and mission is based.

Indeed, the entire life of Jesus Christ is one of God's intimate closeness to humanity. In becoming like us in all things except sin, he came to bring the Good News. In inaugurating the Kingdom of God, he showed the face of the merciful God. In seeking the lost sheep, Jesus shows the extent of God's saving power. Christian love thus finds its meaning and source in this

[16]Cf. *CCC*, no. 1999.

[17]John 1:14

[18]*Spiritual Exercises*., no. 104.

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radical form of love.[19] In Jesus, Love becomes the meaning and truth of human existence.[20]

The dwelling of God in the world through his Son is not done by violating our freedom to accept or reject his love. God so respects human freedom that his saving plan hinges upon human cooperation – and thus, Mary's yes in the history of salvation is paramount. Mary, full of grace by virtue of her Son's saving action, cooperated in this plan of salvation with all her heart and being. She became the first of those who would accept God and follow him to the utmost, though it meant standing at the foot of the Cross and giving all up. In her *Suscipe*, Mary becomes the Mother of all those who, in following God in humble discipleship to the point of self-sacrifice, offer all up. In such a one, God indeed dwells.

The Third Point: Love as Labor

> This is to consider how God works and labors for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth, that is, He conducts Himself as one who labors... He gives being, conserves them, confers life and sensation, etc.[21]

God does not only create and dwell in his creation, for God is thoroughly involved and at work in the world. This is given a particular emphasis in the Third Point, for it shows Love as doing and suffering, a Love that labors.[22] On the Cross, Jesus is stretched out "to the end" of loving;[23] such a self-giving Love makes us whole again. The Triune Love of God is shown at its

[19]Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 12.

[20]Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 208.

[21]*Spiritual Exercises* no. 236

[22]Cf. Michael J. Buckley, "The Contemplation to Attain Love," *The Way* Supplement 24 (1975):102.

[23]Cf. John 13:1

utmost; God has given himself to the fullest extent of love, plunging into the depths of human suffering and pain. God has "entered into our loneliness and embraces us there with the outstretched arms of the Crucified."[24] Thus, on the Cross, what is revealed is God at his utmost, who is "not simply absolute power, but absolute love."[25] This love is our redemption precisely because it is God's absolute and overflowing love, a love that is total surrender.

The suffering love of God is something I experience not only for humanity, *pro multis*, but for my own good and salvation, *pro me*. It is personal and intimate, done out of love for me, so I may be led to a new life with him and come to love him, too. In experiencing the passion, I am strengthened to bear patiently and lovingly whatever sufferings I encounter because I know he has gone before me and that I can bear all out of love, just like him.

In experiencing the suffering love of God, I also recall my experiences of the suffering love of many people. I especially remember the families of patients in my hospital exposure during the SPFY. I saw God in the faces of the many family members who "co-suffered" with their suffering loved ones, taking care of them, finding financial support, praying, and hoping for better days. In this, I saw the cross of love and suffering and experienced the stretching out of love to its very end. If such is human love, how much more is God's love in Jesus Christ?

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[24]Karl Rahner, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Kenneth Baker (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 241.

[25]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 28.

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The Fourth Point: God, the Source of Love

> This is to consider all blessings and gifts as descending from above. Thus, my limited power comes from the supreme and infinite power above, and so, too, justice, goodness, mercy, etc., descend from above as the rays of light descend from the sun...[26]

The final point of the *Contemplatio* considers not just God's effects but God as the source. From the experience of Jesus in temporal history, the emphasis is now on the experience of Jesus, "who is now the Lord and Christ," who now abides with us through his Spirit.[27] And thus, everything that comes from him is not only good but an expression of his inner goodness and Love – there is a movement and development in the person from love because of God's gifts to love that rejoices "simply in who [God] is."[28] The person is drawn into God's very being.

The obedient and self-giving Love of Jesus does not end in death. In obedience to the point of death, Love proves itself stronger than pain and suffering, and in being raised by the Father, Jesus is shown to be victor over death. For us who await our own resurrection from our sins, pains, and suffering, the resurrection of Jesus is given as a promise: we too will be drawn back to the Source of all Love, and we too will pass over from death to new life, we too shall be raised, for Love has shown itself to be all-powerful.

The presence of the Risen Jesus continues in his Spirit, whom he promised to send to us to teach us and glorify him.[29] In the Spirit, the God who gives, who dwells, and who labors does not end his relationship with the world but continues to

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[26]*Spiritual Exercises* no. 237.

[27]Buckley "The Contemplation to Attain Love," 103.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Cf. John 16:13-14.

animate his Church as the Source of Love, for "the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us."[30] Through the Spirit, we can know God as Love and love him in return, for the Spirit, in our weakness, aids us, and himself "intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words."[31]

"Grant Me Only to Love You"

After each point in the *Contemplatio,* Ignatius asks the exercitant to reflect and see what response one ought to have at the awareness and experience of such a great love. And then, the exercitant is invited to pray the *Suscipe*, the prayer of self-offering:

Take, Lord, all my freedom. Receive my whole memory, understanding, and will. Whatever I have or own, you have given me. I hand it all back to you, and surrender it entirely, to be governed by your will. Grant me only to love you, give me this grace. This, truly, is enough for me.[32]

The final line is often translated as "give me only your love and grace," but it can also be translated, as shown above, to mean that the exercitant begs not for love for his sake, but for God's love to love God in return.[33] The dynamics of the *Suscipe* is thus made clearer – in recognizing that God sustains all things, the exercitant surrenders all things to him, content that God's will in all things is Love, and that loving him in all things is the only thing that matters. The mutuality of love mentioned

[30]Romans 5:5.

[31]Romans 8:26 (Revised Standard Version).

[32]David Coffey, "The Ignatian *Suscipe* Prayer: Its Text and Meaning," *Journal of Jesuit Studies* Vol. 5 Issue 4 (Nov 2018), 529. https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-00504002.

[33]See Coffey, "The Ignatian *Suscipe* Prayer," 525-526.

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earlier becomes true, and the friend of Christ[34] is now drawn into the self-giving love of the Trinity. However, this *Suscipe* is not once-for-all but ever-new: each new act of recognition deepens this self-oblation and draws us nearer to this Love.

In this lifelong process and journey of faith, of an ever-new and ever-greater *Suscipe*, I have discovered that I am not alone. The faith I have received is indeed received, celebrated, and deepened in the context of a community, for Love shared with God cannot be shared with others. This community is not just San Jose but the entirety of Christ's Church, which is not only a human community but infused with Christ's presence through the Spirit of his Love. It is the "sacrament of salvation,"[35] continuing Christ's mission in the world. The Church exists for the sake of the mission, just as I, having experienced the love of God in its effects and in God myself, can commit myself to love and serve God in all things.

This Faith is celebrated in the worship of the Church, in which Jesus makes his loving action present. In offering himself to the Father in his Incarnation and most especially in the Paschal Mystery, Jesus inaugurated true worship to the Father: God, in Jesus Christ, reaches out to us in a definitive, final way. The worship of the Church is thus God's saving work, and this salvation is made present to us in a tangible, grace-filled manner.[36] And in turn, as in the *Suscipe*, we are involved in this self-giving love – we participate in that self-offering and true worship to the Father in offering our lives together with Jesus. Our lives thus become an offering of love to him whose love has enabled us to be children of the Father.

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[34]Cf. *Spiritual Exercises* no. 224. This is the first time the exercitant is referred to in this way. See Buckley, p. 104.

[35]*Lumen Gentium,* 48.

[36]Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7.

In the *Suscipe,* the human love of the exercitant, no matter how imperfect, is drawn into the eternal and ever-greater love of God, who holds everything in his hands. It is the hope of the Christian – a hope that, in the end, God will not just save him or her. Rather, Christian love which "hopes all things"[37], hopes for the salvation of the entire world, of the whole created order, not through our own efforts but through God's mercy. Such hope is not presumption but wholehearted trust in the Love of the One who has shown himself as a saving God. Our *Suscipe* on this earth is grounded on hope, and its fulfillment is in the eternal Love in heaven.

To Love in All Things

The Contemplation to Attain Love aims at the integration and unity of the love of God: in the person, in all things used in service to God, between God and the person, and in the whole of the Exercises. It reaches its purpose when this integration is such that the person can love God in all things.[38] "The giving of God evokes the giving of man, and in this mutual surrender, they become one in their love. They become interchangeably lover and beloved."[39] To love him in all things is a lifelong process of integration, assisted by grace, which culminates in the union of love with Love for all eternity. The *Contemplatio* thus becomes the lens by which one views the movement of one's life – including and especially one's Faith and vocation.

My journey in San Jose is also a journey in this integration. But it is not simply an integration of my interior self, but the integration of love mentioned above. In my seeking and understanding of God, the source of all Love, I have slowly moved

[37]1 Cor. 13:7 (Revised New Jerusalem Bible).

[38]Buckley "The Contemplation to Attain Love," 98.

[39]Ibid., 99.

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from seeing God in his effects on me to God as he is in himself. In San Jose, I have recognized and accepted not only God's gifts (and how hard it is to accept these!) and his dwelling and working in me, but also God who is himself goodness and love and draws me to himself because of this love.

Entering the seminary, I had many ideals for myself and my vocation, but I have found that I have often fallen short of these. I have relied on my power too often, trusted in my abilities, and too often, these have failed me. Looking back, I realize these were attempts, on the one hand, to control my own vocation and, on the other, to refrain from responding because of my feelings of unworthiness. But God's Love, manifested to me in San Jose, has shown me another way, indeed the only way. It is the way of openness to his grace. It is the awareness that everything comes to me as a gift, not out of my own worthiness, but simply because of God's goodness. It is the understanding that God continues to labor for and in me. And especially in the long retreat, it is ultimately the profound experience of being loved, saved, and called, simply because he is Love.

My self-offering to him every day and my commitment to him towards priestly ministry is rooted in this recognition of God's ever-present love; it is only in this love that my self-offering makes sense. In recognizing the giver instead of gifts, I can set aside the gifts and fling myself into his hands because I know he is Love. And in loving him, I can adequately use these gifts not for their own sake but to "praise, reverence, and serve God."[40]

This Love of God has taken flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son through whom God has saved the world and thus has shown us the fullness of love. To love God in

[40] *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 23.

all things is thus not a love of our own making but is anchored on God's love, which, through the weeks of the Exercises, has taught the person how to love and so evokes human love in turn.[41] Ultimately, this is the only thing that makes sense, the only thing that matters; in a love that is personal, self-giving, and self-sacrificing, all things can be understood and find fulfillment. Everything else shall pass away, yet "faith, hope, and love abide, the three of them, but the greatest of these is love."[42]

[41]Cf. Buckley, "The Contemplation to Attain Love," 95-96.

[42]1 Cor. 13.

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Appendix

Suscipe

Sa simula't sapul,
Ikaw na at Ikaw.

Minahal ako't inalagaan,
pinaligaya ang mga araw,
minasdan ang paglaki't pagkatuto
pinuspos ng pagpapalang sumasaibayo.

At malugmok man at mawala,
ang pag-ibig Mo ang mag-aadya,
hinango sa dilim ng kasalanan,
inako ang lahat-lahat sa pagmamahal.

Ikaw pa rin ang siyang tumawag,
marahang sininagan ng Iyong liwanag.
Ikaw nga't Ikaw ang pinagmulan,
Ikaw rin nawa ang kahihinatnan.

Ibinigay Mo'ng lahat, kaya't ano'ng ganti
kundi ang paghahandog ng aba kong sarili?
'Di man sasapat ang buo kong diwa,
tatanggapin Mo'ng lahat at ikatutuwa,
sapagkat ibinigay ng isang pusong
puspos ng pasasalamat sa pag-ibig Mo.

Muling tanggapin ang lahat ng galing sa 'Yo
at patnubayan ayon sa kalooban Mo.
Ang pagmamahal lamang ay ipagkaloob,
at ito na'y kayamanan kong lubos-lubos.

(Written during the Long Retreat in 2019)

Pag-aalay ng Sarili
(*Oblatio Sui*)

Kunin, Panginoon,
ang buo kong kalayaan.
Tanggapin ang gunita ko, at ang isip,
maging ang buong kalooban.
Anumang hawak at taglay,
gayun din ang inaangkin,
malugod mong bigay ang lahat sa akin.

Lahat din at buong-buo
ang ibabalik sa Iyo;
patnubayan mo na ang lahat
ayon sa loob Mo.

Ang ibigin ka -
tanging iyan lamang ang ipagkaloob,
'pagkat ang biyayang iyan
ay yaman ko nang lubos-lubos.

(Personal translation of the* Suscipe *in Filipino)