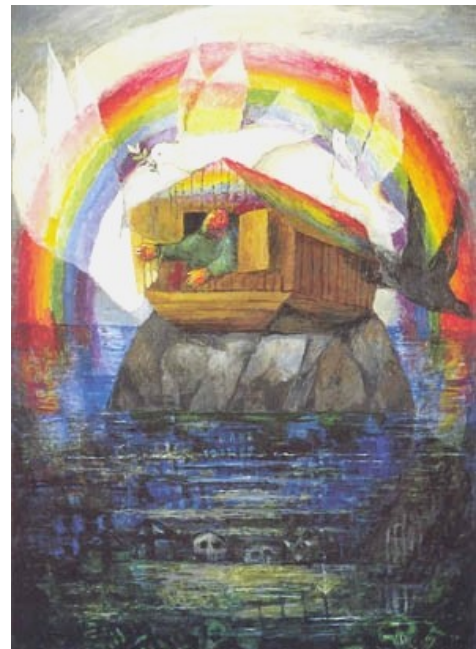


My Sabbatical

Roger Hagon, April 2009

For three months I have spent time in prayer with God and Inigo Lopez of Loyola (St. Ignatius), and in company with my family. This has been a Sabbath – that is, graced time, a gift from God received through the Diocese of Southwark and the generosity of many friends, colleagues, and grant-making societies. It has been described both as a ‘Sabbatical’ and as ‘Extended Study Leave’. How have I spent the time and the money?

First, during the thirty-day Ignatian “Spiritual Exercises”, I have prayed at St. Beuno’s Spirituality Centre in North Wales near Rhyl and overlooking Snowdonia. In the course of the retreat and contemplating various scripture passages, I have prayed with Moses at the burning bush, and with Jesus at various stages in his life - his birth, hidden years in Nazareth, the desert, at his healing miracles, the Last Supper, in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the Cross, and with Mary Magdalen and Peter at the Resurrection. This was a time of ‘coming home’ spiritually to the compassionate heart of God, a time of being drawn to Jesus’ love, humility, and joy, a deep sharing in Jesus’ brokenness and draining, a facing with Jesus of the Passion with his qualities of forgiveness, silence, and trust, and a future opening out in gentleness and trust. The whole retreat was summed up for me in a painting by the Belgium artist Sieger Koder called Noah’s Ark. Entering the retreat in desolation and needing a long period of stripping away of the spiritual ‘armour plating’ I had acquired to cope with parish problems (in Koder’s painting summed up in the graveyard of destruction), I became free in God’s love (drawn into the ‘ark’ of Beuno’s and brought by God’s grace into the rainbow area of the painting). From this place I went back to the Passion – ‘back into the graveyard’ but this time consciously with Jesus – and ended the retreat with the sense of God in all things. The gift of the olive leaf to Noah represents for me God’s gift of the future, the need to trust in God, and the understanding that it will be in humility that my future prayer life and ministry will be expressed.



The second major part of my time was my journey in Northern Spain, following in Inigo’s footsteps and based on his Autobiography. With Inigo as a growing child, I have prayed in the mountainous Viscayan countryside, by the river Urola, by the sea, in the family tower-house of Loyola, in the village of Azpeitia where he was baptized, and in the Eguibar house where he spent many years. With the vain-glorious Inigo I travelled to the city walls of Pamplona where he would have stood so superior in his defence of the Basque city against the invading French in 1521, and from which he returned home, carried this time as an invalid with his hopes and dreams shattered along with his broken legs as a result of cannon fire. In the Chapel of the Conversion in Loyola I prayed with Inigo, reflecting on hopes and dreams, realising that this was a place of healing for him, and that after reflecting on the ‘movements of different spirits’ within him, he decided to follow a new path. I next prayed on the mountain of Montserrat after a long and difficult journey south – but who was I to complain about the Spanish RENFE rail network’s 6 hour journey when Inigo had made the same trip by mule! With Inigo I visited the Black Madonna, Our Lady of Catalonia, and prayed in a quiet crypt chapel within the Benedictine basilica. Here I reflected on Inigo’s Act of Renunciation, marked by his laying on the altar symbols of his

old, romantic, and chivalrous dreams – his sword and dagger. I too laid a symbol on the altar, a 5 euro note - just as inappropriate, I guess, as a sword and dagger; for me this was a symbol of my renouncing a 'striving for success'. I next prayed in Manresa itself, where Inigo stayed for 11 months as a changing man. I prayed in the Santa Cova, the arched and cramped rough rock cave standing in stark contrast to the wealthy and spacious family tower-house in Loyola; clearly Inigo had embarked on a new path, his autobiographical notes commenting on how he had changed his appearance to reflect his inner change of direction. I also prayed as I walked along the banks of the River Cardoner, in the Cathedral, along the ancient paths of the city, and on top of the Pont Sell, the bridge on which Inigo would have first travelled to reach his cave. Here I understood that Inigo was truly 'the pilgrim', a man on a spiritual journey, in which the play of the good and bad spirits within him were to be mapped-out, written up into "Spiritual Exercises", and made available to his first companions, only to be re-discovered in their original dynamic in our own times. It was these very same "Spiritual Exercises" which I had made only a month earlier in North Wales!

Some things can only be learned whilst 'on the journey'. Standing one evening on the Pont Sell in the warm early-evening sunshine, the clouds moved in the north to reveal the distant but clearly identifiable saw-like mountainous landscape of Montserrat. Standing here, only a few metres from the Santa Cova, I realized that when Inigo was going through the hard times of his stay in Manresa, he would have been able to see Montserrat, no doubt God reminding him of his 'top of the mountain' experience, his Act of Renunciation, and the grace of that visit. This reminding would have helped him recall God in his story and maybe given him the strength to trust in the new direction of his life. Another insight was that in the Santa Cova, Inigo would have heard the splashing of the River Cardoner, maybe reminding him of his early years by the River Urola in Loyola. Again this could have been one of the ways God consoled him in this time, re-awakening the love of those years, for God, nature, and family. In addition, good weather with the sun breaking through cloud reminded me of the visions Inigo received at Manresa, great insights into the nature of the Trinity, Jesus, and the Eucharist, always accompanied by a bright inner light. This underlines the meaning of Inigo's 'consolations' and 'desolations', times 'in the light' and times 'out of the light' of God's love.

Finally on my journey I prayed in Barcelona at the church of St. Maria del Mar from where Inigo sailed alone to the Holy Land, trusting radically in God for the future. It was in Barcelona that Diana joined me for a few days holiday.

Travelling across Spain alone, staying in four hotels in San Sebastian, Pamplona, Manresa, and Barcelona and speaking no Spanish, has certainly been an experience in itself! Throughout this time I have kept a journal and each day spent time doing an 'Examen', the daily review of the day which Ignatius recommended in his Exercises.

This experience has revealed many significant things which I will take into my future ministry. Some of the things which have 'brought me life' and which I am most grateful for include the joy of discovering new things, the goodness of human nature along the way, the freedom I possess to respond well to those around me, the grace to ask for help, the joy of special moments of prayer, the reality of God's love in all moments, places, and people, the gift of the present moment, and the natural grieving of moving on and leaving behind places which have been so good.

On another level I have 'met' Inigo along the way, recognizing him in myself at various points, and in other people. A particular example of this was in Pamplona. Reflecting as I have said on Inigo's broken dreams, I met that evening at the hotel bar a man whose own



dreams were breaking there and then. He told me that in one sense he was a very successful entrepreneur working on a time-share development programme in Pamplona city, but in another sense that he faced collapse as his wife was splitting up with him and he reacted in hurt and anger as he faced the 'end of the road'. I shared the evening with him as I had shared Inigo's being 'carried home' from those castle walls – both men defeated and lost in that very same place, and wondering 'What next?'

I have returned from North Wales and Spain very enriched – not only with the experience outlined above, but with new resources for ministry. My journal tells its own story but suggests that God is God of the whole journey, not just God of the sabbatical! I return home with CDs, posters, booklets, icons, and even some Tom Wright biblical commentaries to use in parish and retreat ministry as well as in my own prayer. I have 200 photos for future Powerpoint presentations whenever they might be of use. I have the desire and the calling to pray every day in love, humility, and joy. I sense the need to trust in God constantly and to live out openly the many graces received.

So thank you –

Family

Friends

Colleagues

Parishes

Bishop Nick, Archdeacon Tony and Area Dean Christine

Ecclesiastical Insurance Group

Jane Steen from Southwark Diocese

Sion College

Society of Retreat Conductors

Fr. Roderic Ballantine my Supervisor

Fr. Brian McClorry SJ my Spiritual Director at Beuno's

Inigo 'the pilgrim'

and you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

for this graced Sabbath time.

May my whole life be lived as Sabbath time, full of love, humility and joy!