

The Body in the Meditation on Hell and Prayer of the Senses

In the *Spiritual Exercises* taken as a 30-day retreat, the pattern of the *Contemplative Day*, which usually includes 5 periods of prayer, is designed to deepen the graces that God is offering. This pattern is adapted to span, say, a week in the Exercises in Daily Life (the so-called 19th Annotation retreat).

If we think of the pattern of prayer in the first week as being parallel with that of weeks 2, 3 & 4 (see table, *id quod volo* in italics), then the *Meditation on Hell* is a form of the *Prayer of the Senses* for the First Week¹.

First Week	Second Week
First Meditation on the first, second and third sin [45] <i>shame and confusion</i>	First Contemplation [101] <i>intimate knowledge of our Lord, who has become man for me, that I may love Him more and follow Him more closely</i>
Second Meditation on sin [55] <i>a growing and intense sorrow and tears for my sins</i>	Second Contemplation [110]
First Repetition [62]	First Repetition [118]
Second Repetition [64]	Second Repetition [120]
Meditation on Hell [65] <i>a deep sense of the pain which the lost suffer</i>	Prayer of the Senses [121]

In the first two periods, the exercitant prays upon two matters. After each, the affective and faith responses of spiritual consolation, desolation and spiritual insight [62 & 118] are noted [77]. It is these affective and faith responses that are brought to prayer in the two *Repetitions*.

Thus, the graces being offered by God, which are noticed in the first and second periods of prayer, are allowed to enter more deeply into the soul. In the language of a certain Christian tradition, there is a move from the prayer of the head to the prayer of the heart. There is a movement from scripture, memory, imagination, and sensation to affective and to faith responses.

It is my contention that in the *Meditation on Hell* and the *Prayer of the Senses* these graces are allowed in even more deeply, into the body, the viscera, of the one who prays². Thus I feel and root, with bodily sensations, the grace being offered and I allow my *body* to pray with the transforming power of the grace. It is letting God come ever closer to who I am (or, one might say, revealing, more and more, God at the depth of who I am).

It is also a movement from a then-and-there appreciation of sin (1st Week) and Jesus' life (2nd Week) to a here-and-now appropriation of the reality of sin and the Life of God in me.

The *Meditation on Hell* completes the movement from (a) thinking about and meditating upon sin in stories, my sin, and structural sin, to (b) affective and faith responses to that sin and God, to (c) experiencing in my body (the senses) the shiver of horror of the ultimate separation from God towards which sin tends and (d) the 'thanks to God or Lord that He has not put an end to my life ... [but] ... shown Himself so loving and merciful to me.' [71]

Imagine a man praying with the passage in which the blind man of Bethsaida is cured by Jesus (Mark 8.22-26). As he imagines Jesus taking him by the hand, he puts out his own hand and, unaccountably, is flooded with memories of his father, memories that are about love and safety and play to no purpose. Much of his childhood was not like this. He cries and spends many hours remembering his father. He sees that Jesus offers him these same qualities. At the end he sits, tired, cried out, no new insights. He feels his hand being held; he feels open on the surface of his skin because he is safe; in his chest he feels the love being offered to him. He simply sits with these sensations, letting them be, letting them in, letting them be reality.

If he were praying the *Meditation on Hell* he could withdraw his hand, allow himself to feel a life continuing without this simple contact, loveless, unsafe, with no purposeless play. He could feel his hand shrivel, his chest and skin close up, his defences reassert themselves around his body...; and then, once more put out his hand, in gratitude, in love and trust.

¹ Ivens, Michael *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Gracewing, 1998) p.62

² Ivens: *a concentrated sense-presence with a minimum of discursive thinking* (p.97)