STUDIES

IN
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

Desolation and the Struggle for Justice

MICHAEL D. BARBER, S.J.

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Desolation and the Struggle for Justice

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the first word

Senior moments seem to strike more frequently than they once did. They take many forms: a forgotten name, a noun that won't come, misplaced car keys, a momentary puzzlement about why we came into the room. To tell the truth, they're not really confined to seniors. Children readily excuse a missed homework assignment or a chore left undone by explaining, "I forgot." They probably did. Memory is a deceitful lover and a treacherous business partner. It constantly rewrites the past: if deliberately, it's a lie; if accidentally, it's a mistake; if progressively, it's merely human. How often have we been with Jesuits, or with family or friends, and heard a story about some shared event in the past. We want to shout: "That never happened. It wasn't like that at all." Modestly compels our silence. Perhaps the narrator holds a stronger purchase on reality than we do, and it's our recollection that is defective, not his. We're constantly reconstructing our memories, rewriting our autobiographies. Little wonder we sometimes get it wrong, or sometimes simply don't get it, period: the witty comeback we know we've made (or think we made, or wish we had); the personal slight of some superior now long dead; the friendship that soured for no reason on our part; the accomplishments that failed to bring the recognition they deserved. It must be part of the human condition to keep revisiting and reassembling the past, as though trying to make sense of the mad jumble of events and people that make a life.

Don't take my word for it. Two of the great novels of the past year explored these questions with great sensitivity and insight. Michael Ondaatje, whose novel *The English Patient* won the Man Booker award in 1992, returned to the best-seller list with *The Cat's Table*. As an adult coming off a failed marriage, the hero, Michael, reconstructs his boyhood voyage from Colombo, Sri Lanka, to a new life in London on the ocean liner, the Oronsay. Like his fictional hero, the author was born in Sri Lanka, and also like him, made the journey to England for schooling at the age of eleven. Although the shipboard events of the story emerge solely from the imagination of a talented novelist, elements of his own experience surely color his perceptions. The narrative merely provides

a vehicle for revisiting the psychic journey from one culture to another, and from childhood to the adult world. In the closed environment of this "ship of fools," the young traveler is assigned to "the cat's table," the dining area reserved for below-deck passengers. He and two other boys of similar age use this vantage point to observe the lives of the adults around them and learn the inescapable lessons of growing up.

Yet can one ever reach back through the decades and relive the past? Can the forty-year-old narrator really understand the perceptions of a child, or are the memories filtered and reconfigured through later adult experiences? As the boy and his shipmates scamper over the decks, see sights and overhear conversations they scarcely understand, they have their first taste of social-class structures and conflict, of love and betrayal, of swindlers, entertainers, and jewel thieves, of adult concerns like earning a living and protecting a family, and, yes, of death. They discover that a random, haphazard series of events may lead to unimaginable consequences. These experiences, now viewed through the prism of years, may well be distorted, but the narrator leaves little doubt that regardless of the accuracy of his recollections, they must have influenced perceptions and relationships that were to come in his later years. Or were they inconsequential? He can't be sure. As the adult relates the events of that long-ago voyage, he starts to question what those people actually did and said. Perhaps he made incorrect judgments and lived with the comfort of sure, but false, conclusions. Did these misperceptions actually shape his life? As an adult he tries to untangle the riddles, but finds he cannot.

Julian Barnes addresses many of the same questions in his stunning novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, this year's Man Booker Award recipient. His hero, Tony Webster, long separated from his second wife Margaret, has retired from his work in an art gallery. Leisure and loneliness blanket his days with a dull, colorless fog. The sudden arrival of a letter informing him that the mother of his first wife Veronica had inexplicably left him a small legacy: a few pounds and the diary of Adrian Finn, a boy he knew at school, who later married Veronica and then apparently took his own life. Why would she send him money? And why the diary? And how did she acquire it in the first place? This strange and thoroughly unexpected inheritance drives Tony to try to reconstruct the intersecting relationships that might provide some clue to this mystery and, of course, the larger mystery of his life.

The author provides a self-conscious reflection on the pitfalls of trying to comprehend the past. He recalls Adrian as the precocious new

boy in school, who artfully challenges and delights the faculty with insights far beyond his years. One day in class he asserts, "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation." He attributes the idea to the French philosopher Patrick Le Strange, who probably does not exist. He and his teacher engage in a scholarly debate as they apply their notions of historical method to the case of a boy in class who recently hanged himself. They have evidence, but no direct testimony from the deceased classmate. The note he left gives little information and may in fact be an attempt to mislead the survivors. Everyone knows the obvious explanation, that he had made a girl pregnant, yet no one can understand the complex motivations that drove him to the act. Perhaps the obvious only hides the actual reasons. The teacher trusts the facts as they know them and has less confidence in actual testimony. "Historians need to treat a participant's explanation of events with a certain skepticism," the teacher argues. The issue remains unresolved, and the narrator comments: "Was this their exact exchange? Almost certainly not. Still it is my best memory of their exchange."

In the final section, Tony feels that he is beginning to make progress in solving the mystery of the legacy. He recalls with horror a long-past hateful action on his part that might have been a catalyst for several tragic events, but as he struggles to understand the connections, he interrupts his narrative to discuss the merits of different thicknesses of sliced fried potatoes. Even at this point in the narrative of a mature man, he cannot separate the crucial from the trivial. Did decisions wise and foolish actually shape his life and the lives of those around him, or did he simply let his life happen to him? The precocious Adrian might be right. Without direct testimony, how can one separate the truly important events of life from the insignificant. The boys in history class chose to focus exclusively on the dead classmate; no one expressed curiosity about the girl or both their families. No one stopped to question whether the story was indeed true, and if it was, did she elect to keep the child or abort, raise it or give it up for adoption? In this historical project, many important questions remain unasked. Both novels end with an unresolved enigma. Did the boy hiding in a lifeboat on the Oronsay really witness a murder? Why was Adrian's diary actually left to Tony?

Both books struck me as having that murky, expressionistic feel of the great *films noirs* of the 1940s. These were, for the most part, obscure, low-budget B-features, but in recent years serious critics have unearthed treasures hidden in those characteristic dark shadows.

They've discovered layers of implied meaning beneath the surface of familiar images: the snub-nosed 38-caliber revolver, the snap-brim fedora, the bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, the overflowing ash tray. The films provide an extraordinary portrait of a world grappling with the casual amorality of war: Nanking, Auschwitz, Dresden, Hiroshima. How can one make sense of such a world? The hard-boiled detectives, like Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, may try, but their success will be limited. Evil remains pervasive and incomprehensible. They follow the clues through a menacing psychic landscape where good and evil coexist in a state of uneasy but sordid detente. The police may be as corrupt as the criminals they pursue. The obvious solution evaporates as new evidence becomes available, and in fact the detective may not even know precisely the nature of the crime he is investigating. People deliberately mislead him. The beautiful *femme noire* pretends to be in danger and comes to him for help, the spark of romance flickers for a moment, and then he discovers she wants to involve him in her own crimes. Everyone is suspect, because everyone is capable of deception. In the end, some criminals may go to jail, but just as often, they go free. In time, the detective returns to his office lights a cigarette and pours a drink from the bourbon bottle he keeps in his desk drawer. The many loose ends of the case bother him, but he knows a solution remains elusive in this world of shadows and illusions. The city, with its wet asphalt reflecting ineffective streetlights, continues as before. *The Naked City*, a noir classic of 1948, ends with deliciously quotable line: "There are eight million stories in the naked city; this has been one of them." Ondaatje and Barnes make us wonder if it's ever possible to understand any of them.

Would it be irreverent to suggest a similar conundrum in trying to piece together one's spiritual history? A relationship with God involves the same complex twists and turns as a relationship with another person, and is equally difficult to untangle. Several times in the past few years, students have interviewed me as an annual assignment for a journalism class. No doubt they find the idea of an aging priest who teaches movies a promising subject and scarcely imagine the dullness they will encounter. Inevitably they ask about vocation. The answer probably follows a similar track for most Jesuits of my vintage: strong Catholic family, Catholic schooling, the altar boys, several effective role models among the scholastics and priests in a Jesuit high school. Yet these same factors shaped the lives of hundreds, if not thousands of other boys at that time. Why did they converge in such a way in my life? Surely, God's grace led me through to the conclusion it did, but

why and how? If there was a moment of clear decision, I can't remember it. One could say that God and I engaged in a form of dialogue. God must have done all the talking, but I don't recall any of the lines.

And why would anyone persevere in such a life? A young family member recently asked me how long I had been a Jesuit. When I told him fifty-five years, he gasped. He should have. To a teenager this span represents several lifetimes. To think back on it, I should have gasped, too. How could anything be permanent in a world of unrelenting change? During the years of my theological studies and continuing through several years after ordination, the Society witnessed an enormous number of departures. Many of my best friends left, often to join a life companion. During those days, I recall having been blessed with the friendship of many wonderful women, both religious and lay. As I look back through the decades, the thought of marriage must have entered my mind, as it did so many of my classmates, but I don't remember a point of decision and resolution. Was I really in love then, or have the years made the relationship seem more serious than it actually was? Was the feeling mutual, or one sided? Was there regret that nothing developed from the friendship, or did we simply drift apart, busy about other things? Again, God's grace was surely active, and led to perseverance, but I don't know why or how. From this point in time, I can't put together any of the clues that led to a decision, or lack of one. Was it devotion to God, the priesthood, and the Society? Or was it fear of the unknown or simply inertia? Whatever it was, it worked, and I can take great joy in the outcome.

We all have our own particular ways of making sense out of our lives. Mystics probably have the easiest time of it, I would imagine. They seem to have direct access to Light and Truth—"direct testimony," as the precocious school boy Adrian would have it—and such insight puts the rest of the human enterprise into perspective. No mystic, surely, I need stories. For me the self-knowledge emerges from the symphony of metaphor and analogy that make up great literature or theater or film. Yes, I understand what that character thinks and feels, since similar thoughts and feelings have sculpted my own life. And seeing my own experiences out there on page or screen, objectified in a fictional character, I understand a bit more of my own humanity. Perhaps scientists, musicians, historians, and social workers have their own specific paths to understanding their own worlds. Let's assume they do.

The author of this current issue is a philosopher, and a very fine one. He uses the tools of reason to uncover the nature of the asymmetrical relationships that give direction to our lives. These relationships lead to a form of responsibility for the other, even when the other cannot or will not reciprocate. This asymmetry of relationships gives insight not only into our dedication to others, as we struggle together for justice, but it also provides an avenue for understanding God's relationship to us. Building of the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Michael Barber provides his own perspective on the connection between faith and justice. As we try to make sense of our Jesuit lives as works in progress, pulled in the apparently conflicting directions of prayer and activity, seeing the two polarities as united helps us make sense of the many of the clues that we recall as we try to articulate meaning in our Jesuit lives. Other puzzles remain, to be sure, but like Sam Spade at the end of a case, we can take satisfaction in knowing that thanks to Mike's careful analysis, we understand more about the people and events in our lives than we once did.

Richard A. Blake, S.J.

Editor

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Desolation and the Struggle for Justice

Recent congregations have encouraged commitment to social justice as a necessary manifestation of faith, while insisting on fostering a personal relationship to God through private prayer and the individually directed retreat. These twin goals can appear to lead in opposite directions. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas provides the concepts and language to help integrate and enrich both dimensions in the lives of individual Jesuits.

I. Introduction: Contemplation and Justice in Opposition

The crucial struggle of our time, according to the documents of General Congregation 32¸ is the "struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it includes,"[1] and the congregation insists that faith and justice are "inseparable" (no. 18 [p. 292]) that justice is an "absolute requirement" of the service of faith (48 ([98]), and

[1]*Decrees of the 32nd General Congregation*, in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 31st—35th General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (henceforth, *Jesuit Life*), edited by John W. Padberg, S.J. (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009), no. 12 (p. 291).

that there is no genuine conversion to God's love without "conversion to the love of neighbor and, therefore, to the demands of justice" (77 [305]). All subsequent general congregations have reaffirmed this intimate linkage between faith and justice.[2]

But it might seem quite difficult to find this intimate bond between faith and justice in the retreats that Jesuits make annually, whether these retreats consist in the thirty-day Spiritual Exercises or some eight-day adaptation of them. Often those exercises can appear to involve a personal, private encounter with God that, it might seem, has little to do with the struggle for justice. After all, Ignatius himself recommends that the exercitant "withdraws from all friends and acquaintances, and from all worldly concerns,"[3] and one would think that any concentration on the injustices that others suffer might be just another distraction from the endeavor to meet God. Of course, one might object that this withdrawal that Ignatius calls for need not imply any opposition between retreat prayer and concern for justice, since questions of justice or, especially, the victims of injustice may become the *themes* of one's conversation with God in a retreat. It is certainly the case that such themes may become focal in an annual retreat; however, as one's prayer matures, it tends to be less a matter of reflection on themes, but more a seeking to find God and to rest in God's presence, and in this search for God, reflection and ratiocination can become obstacles to contemplative prayer. Such contemplative prayer, though, seems far removed from the concrete search for justice, the contact with the poor or oppressed, and the involvement with their lives that can become all-preoccupying. Furthermore, the search to find God and rest in God's presence is often accompanied by a degree of desolation, a sense of the absence of God, as Ignatius's "Rules for the Discernment of Spirits" show. To the extent that one can experience one's retreat prayer as a sometimes futile effort to find a God who seemingly withholds his presence, one feels further the gap between one's retreat prayer and practical, liberating activity on behalf of others—in which one could

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[2]*Decrees of the 33rd General Congregation,* in *Jesuit Life*, 33 (447); *Decrees of the Thirty-fourth General Congregation,* in *Jesuit Life*, 50 (530); *Decrees of the Thirty-fifth General Congregation,* in *Jesuit Life*, 56 (746).

[3]Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary by George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources 1992), 20.* Hereafter, *SpEx,* followed by the marginal number of the text cited.

feel the satisfaction of affecting the world positively. In sum, would it not be something of an irony if one of the major faith events of one's life each year, one's annual retreat, would be something that has nothing to do with the struggle for justice that the Jesuit documents claim is inseparable and absolutely required by faith?

In fact, feeling this tension between the contemplative search for God and the search for justice is not something that only private individuals experience in retreat, but it is a tension that runs through the whole Judeo-Christian tradition. The prophets in the Old Testament, for instance, considered a faith that ignored the victims of injustice to be false faith. Twentieth-century Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose view of ethics and justice underlies much of what I will say here, continues this prophetic tradition. Levinas refuses to consider God as the numinous that "burns the eyes that are lifted up to him,"[4] but rather God, who is desirable, "orders me to what is non-desirable, the undesirable par excellence, the other,"[5] the stranger, the widow, and the orphan—the ones society leaves out or tends to neglect. For Levinas, God is neither an object nor an interlocutor, but turns us toward those in need and in this way indirectly orients us toward God's self.[6] God, as Levinas put it, "does not fill me up with goods, but compels me to goodness."[7] Levinas insists that "God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men."[8]

Levinas's emphasis on ethical responsibility to and for the other person as the touchstone of authentic religion grows, not only out of the prophets and his Jewish heritage, but also out of his own bitter experience of the Holocaust, in which many of his family members perished.

[4]Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (henceforth, *Totality and Infinity*), trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 77.

[5]Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (henceforth, "God and Philosophy"), translated by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 164.

[6]Ibid., 165.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78.

Whereas within a retreat, a preoccupation with justice might seem to be a distraction from the direct pursuit of God, for Levinas it almost seems as though the direct pursuit of God could be seen as a distraction from the preoccupation with justice.

Levinas's emphasis on ethical responsibility to and for the other person as the touchstone of authentic religion grows, not only out of the prophets and his Jewish heritage, but also out of his own bitter experience of the Holocaust, in which many of his family members perished. That experience left Levinas with a suspicion of mystical fervor that can sweep people off their feet and blind them to the responsibilities to others, as occurred under Nazi tyranny. He obliquely refers to such mystification when he locates tyranny in "pagan 'moods,' in the enrootedness in the earth, in the adoration that enslaved men can devote to their masters."[9] Though Levinas's thought takes its start from his own Jewishness, the prophetic tradition, and the suffering of the Jewish people, its influence has spread worldwide, underpinning, for example, currents in the theology and philosophy of liberation. The Mexican philosopher of liberation, Enrique Dussel, embraced the thought of Levinas because it provides access to religious faith through the portal of ethics and justice, understood as based upon an ethical responsibility to and for other persons. Of course, the liberation intellectual tradition, too, has subjected to intense critical scrutiny privatized practices of spirituality, devoid of any commitment to social justice, after the fashion of the Jewish prophets in the Old Testament.

In this essay, I hope to demonstrate how what goes on in the Exercises or adaptations of them fits very well with the struggle for justice. First, though, I will present Emmanuel Levinas's view of justice, with which I concur. For Levinas, the reciprocal relationships that ought to characterize just institutions are based in a fundamental asymmetry—in the fact that the other person summons me to responsibility to and for her before I respond and apart from expectations that the other will treat me reciprocally. If asymmetrical responsibility precedes and undergirds reciprocity (as I will show in section 2), a distinctive idea of what constitutes justice will emerge (section 3) in which expectations of equal treatment ultimately rest on my responsibility for the other person. After discussing this idea of justice, I will then turn to the *Spiritual*

[9]Ibid., 47.

Exercises and offer a novel interpretation of desolation as involving a kind of asymmetrical love, a responsibility toward God that God summons us to, analogous to the way in which human persons summon us to responsibility to and for them (section 4). In desolation, one feels as if he or she is loving God, responsible to God, even though God seems to withdraw from the relationship and not to reciprocate as one might expect, analogous to the way in which in human relationships the other can often summon me to responsibility without expectation of reciprocation. However, our own asymmetric love for God is ultimately derivative from a prior asymmetrical love of God for us insofar as God loves us first whether we reciprocate or not (section 5), as one often experiences in the Exercises. The reciprocal love between God and us rests then upon our love of God (which is experienced as asymmetrical when we are in desolation) and God's love for us, which is asymmetrical and precedes and makes possible our love for God. The Exercises are, as a result, a school for the kind of asymmetrical love that lies at the root of social justice, as Levinas depicts it (section 6). Consequently, the contemplative experience of the Exercises are, I hope to illustrate, closely related to the struggle for justice that faith calls for.

II. Asymmetric Responsibility

In common sense, we probably assume that all human relationships are reciprocal and we probably expect that others will treat us as humanely as we treat them, as the Golden Rule itself prescribes. And yet if we are attentive, we can discover a dimension in human relationships that is not so reciprocal but involves the other person's summoning us to responsibility to and for them without any regard for whether they will treat us reciprocally or not. According to Levinas, the other summons us asymmetrically, one-sidedly, as if we are put in the position of responsibility for him or her, without at first requiring that he or she be responsible for us. For instance, when we come upon another person injured in an accident, we find ourselves compelled to care for her, to call the police, to wait for the ambulance, to accompany her to the hospital, to let her displace the task we were engaged in when arriving upon the scene of the accident, even though we may never see her again and have no expectation that she would do the same for us. Levinas uses the example of two of us arriving at the door

at the same time, and my very "After you, sir"[10] in which I yield before the other, reveals in a very simple sense the precedence the other takes over me in an ethical sense—a precedence that the other's very presence leads me to recognize. Similarly, when I encounter a beggar in the street requesting money, this other has a kind of ethical hold on me—I feel obliged to give something or at least to explain why I cannot give anything or to refer him to a food pantry. Maybe I even resort to crossing the street to avoid the encounter because I know the ethical power his suffering face will exert on me.

Another example of this experience of the other evoking from me an asymmetrical responsibility can be found in those moments where another summons us to responsibility even though he or she is acting irresponsibly toward us. One can think of the enraged employee who has just been fired from a job and who returns to the job wielding a gun and thereby gives every indication that he is going to inflict violence and behave in the least reciprocal manner imaginable. However, after providing for the security of the employees, the police might go to great lengths to try to talk to him, to calm him, to persuade him to drop his weapon, as if this deranged individual still summons us to treat him with respect, dignity, and non-violence even at that moment when he gives no evidence that he would treat us that way. Though reciprocity can and should eventually be established, as we shall see, the other person at first commands me asymmetrically, and hence, as Levinas puts it, "The interlocutor is not a Thou, he is a You [*Vous*]; he reveals himself in his lordship."[11] The lordship here has nothing to do with unethical domination; those commanding in the examples above are in some

Out of this sense of ethical responsibility, one can appreciate Levinas's wariness about a detached and irresponsible mysticism, such as the "pagan 'moods'" that swept Nazi adherents into a fervor that led to the murder of innocent others.

[10]Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence* (henceforth, *Otherwise Than Being*), trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997), 117.

[11]Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 101.

sense actually quite powerless, but they are "lords" in that they evoke our ethical responsibility to and for them.

These examples are meant to lead one to insight into a basic feature of human relationships, namely, that the other person invites one to responsibility for him or her. But using examples meant to lead one to "see" a fundamental feature of human relationships, as we have just done, is different from running through a series of empirical examples to arrive at a generalization that could be overthrown by a counter example. It is not as though one examines a series of relationships and then, as one comes upon a new instance, one wonders whether the generalization will hold true, as if maybe in this next instance it might not be the case that the other solicits such responsibility.[12] If one has an insight into the asymmetric summons to responsibility that the presence of the other issues, the empirical fact that the Nazis did not recognize this summons from the Jewish people they treated so cruelly does not constitute a counter-example that disproves that the summons is there. It simply shows that Nazi executioners failed to recognize the summons that was there.

Levinas's experience of the Holocaust did not leave him with the naïve belief that it is always empirically the case that everyone recognizes the invitation to responsibility emerging in every relationship with another. Even when the murderer strikes down his helpless victim, he does not obliterate the summons, since even then the victim "looks at me as the eye that in the tomb shall look at Cain,"[13] despite the fact that there are murderers who may never pay any heed to the eye in the tomb that looks at them. In all kinds of relationships, in business, in friendship, in sexual relationships, in pedagogic relationships, it seems unimaginable that one would be in relationship with another person who would not by her very presence be inviting one to behave

[12] A common misunderstanding is that Levinas is describing how in fact people behave when in fact what is required is that one insightfully grasp an essential feature of human relationships: the summons to responsibility that the other issues. The same kind of insight is involved in logic or mathematics when one "sees" that 2 + 2 = 4 without any empirical testing that might take two objects and two different objects and put them together and count them to determine that they add up to four objects. One doesn't wonder if it will work out that 2 + 2 = 4 if one were to select two sets of different objects and then put them together.

[13] *Levinas, Totality and Infinity*, 233.

responsibly to and for her. I will attempt to illustrate later how this invitation to responsibility plays a role in our love for God, in the Exercises, and how God assumes responsibility for us.

This asymmetrical, ethical dimension in human relationships represents a primary and irreducible structure upon which other structures rest, in Levinas's opinion. Hence, God and religion cannot be understood apart from the ethical responsibility due others, as the prophets taught, and so God "rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men."[14] Out of this sense of ethical responsibility, one can appreciate Levinas's wariness about a detached and irresponsible mysticism, such as the "pagan 'moods'" that swept Nazi adherents into a fervor that led to the murder of innocent others. In addition, one's understanding of philosophical notions such as "freedom" should not be examined apart from the responsibility one owes another. Hence, the view of freedom that understands it as doing as one chooses without any sense of obligation to others is impoverished, since it ignores the ethical context in which all free choice is exercised. Likewise, ethical considerations of death might focus not on one's virile resistance to its decimating power, but rather on the death of the other to and for whom one is somehow accountable.

A figure like Archbishop Oscar Romero who was more concerned about the death of others, of innocent Salvadoran peasants, than he was about his own death, with which his military enemies continually threatened him, epitomizes the kind of change in thinking that takes place when one's asymmetrical responsibility to and for the other becomes the foundational structure through which one understands death. In addition, one could imagine history as a discipline undertaken from a sense of responsibility to others as opposed to a history that might merely focus on the "usurpation carried out by the conquerors, that is, by the survivors; it recounts enslavement, forgetting the life that struggles against slavery."[15]

In sexual or parental relationships, which Levinas also analyzes, ethical responsibility to the other ought never to recede from sight.[16]

[14]Ibid., 79.

[15]Ibid., 228.

[16]It should be noted that there are many other dimensions to personal relationships besides asymmetrical responsibility to and for them, which this essay abstracts

Parents, for instance, know full well that their children are not adults, autonomous and equal to themselves, and so they do not expect their children to reciprocate in the way an adult might; nevertheless, parents never cease being responsible to and for them. One can further imagine how economic science, too, ought not to be conducted in oblivion of those on the fringes of the economic system whose impoverishment pleads for some rectification. The sense of responsibility for the other on which Levinas focuses ends up subverting the existentialist emphasis on the "I" who resists the system, since "It is not I who resist the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the other."[17] Later, I will suggest that there are moments in our prayer relationship with God in which God seems to summon us to responsibility for God without regard for the consolations we might desire, that is, in the experience of desolation—and in such moments we might feel ourselves to be called to love God analogously to the way in which Romero loved peasants or parents love their children—namely asymmetrically, without a demand for reciprocation.

There appears to be equality and reciprocity insofar as each person deserves a hearing, even though the final decision may favor one over another.

Finally, there is an asymmetry in relationships in that responsibility begins in the other person, not in my decision. Though I might decide not to be responsible for and to the other, that decision takes place in an interpersonal context in which I am already summoned. If that summons were not there first and if my responsibility for the other begins with my decision to be responsible, then my responsibility to the other would depend completely upon whether I decide or not to confer upon the other the status of deserving of my responsibility. Though many theoretical stances have advocated for this view, such as the contract theory that we will discuss below, this view runs counter to the ex-

out and focuses on as "a" dimension. Parents, then delight in their children, enjoy their playfulness, and intimate friends joyfully bask in each other's presence; nevertheless, there is dimension of responsibility present, however much it may be on the horizon of the relationship. I am indebted to Eleonore Stump for this insight.

[17]Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40.

periences described above which precede theorizing and which locate our choices in a relationship to another who has already invited us into responsibility.

III. Symmetric Justice

The asymmetry of responsibility in the relationship with the other pertains to a dyadic ethical relationship that is fundamental, but a series of modifications, Levinas believes, is needed if one is to make a transition to the relationship of justice among *many* people—a relationship that he finds exemplified in the ideal of the "egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled (and which is to be set up, and especially to be maintained)."[18] Justice then involves the relationship between many individuals, all of whom are treated respectfully, equally, reciprocally, and symmetrically. To understand such justice relationships between the many who make up a society, it helps if one adopts the perspective of citizens, who are on an equal footing with each other, "as before a court of justice,"[19] trying to arrive at political decisions. In this societal setting, one finds citizens often weighing competing options, such as those which arose recently in the states of Missouri and Illinois when the Mississippi River was recently so swollen that a choice had to be made whether to blow up a levee to protect houses in the city of Cairo, Illinois, or to keep the levee intact to protect the farmland on the Missouri side of the river. Though the governing bodies decided for the sake of owners of city houses to blow up the levee, they ought not in their deliberations to have neglected the impact of the decision on those farmers whose lands were ruined. Similarly, citizens can choose to vote to increase taxes to pay for social services for the needy, but they ought to take account of those whose taxes will be increased and the impact of these taxes on them. There appears to be equality and reciprocity insofar as each person deserves a hearing, even though the final decision may favor one over another.

In such typically democratic proceedings, symmetry between persons seems to govern because each person's point of view deserves to be heard equally and competing claims are to be weighed and evalu-

[18]Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 159.

[19]Ibid., 157.

ated fairly. Nevertheless, there is still an underlying sense of asymmetric responsibility that is pervasively at work insofar as each of the various persons, whose needs and desires are affected, have a hold on me and I find myself obligated to them and required to take their lot seriously, without first of all asking how they would treat me. It is as if I start out with them commanding me to treat them and their needs seriously. Even if, in weighing their interests against others, I decide against them, I do not lose that original sense of asymmetric responsibility to and for them. As a result, political decisions over scarce resources involve a kind of tragedy insofar as one cannot satisfy the demands or fulfill the needs of all. To the degree that such political decisions may leave losers in their wake, they are tinged with a sense of regret that not everyone's needs could be accommodated, just as one might feel regret that violence had to be used to stop the violence of an attacker (discussed earlier) and one would wish that things might have been otherwise. Levinas thus understands political symmetry and reciprocity, the balancing and weighing of one claim against others, as emerging out of the asymmetrical responsibility that each interlocutor evokes from me and that continues to be felt even after decisions are made.

It is due to the level of symmetry, which is generated by asymmetrical responsibility, that I think of myself as an equal among others, also. This sense of asymmetrical responsibility to the other and then to the many others, includes me—"'Thanks to God' I am another for others."[20] It is as if by living in society, where my obligation to many others is operative, that the sense of asymmetric responsibility that holds toward many others and not just the other whom I meet in dyadic relationships, subtly slips into applying to me, too. I, too, deserve the love, respect, and care that the other evokes from me: "my lot is important."[21] Consequently, Levinas argues that in the name of this responsibility to myself, I can be called upon to limit my responsibility to others for fear of destroying myself. It is as if the very care that I have for myself is derivative from the care that the other evokes from me, as if care for the other is implicitly embedded within my own care for myself.

[20]Ibid., 158.

[21]Ibid., 161.

But what is the point of seeking to establish these symmetrical requirements of justice on the basis of the sense of asymmetrical responsibility generated in the dyadic relationship? It would make a great deal of difference if the symmetrical requirements of justice derived from our fear of each other in dyadic relationships. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, thinks that we are related first of all as wolves to each other, each trying to protect himself against the other, and so we develop symmetrical rules that must be enforced by power so that we can live peacefully with each other. Given Hobbes's view, Levinas comments that it is extremely important to know if our social life together "proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all."[22] Should I look upon the other whom I meet as a wolf seeking to destroy me, as someone against whom I need to protect myself, or as another who invites me to responsibility? Is war the first event in the encounter with the other or "peace," understood as the non-allergic presence of the other eliciting my care and concern?[23] How one answers these fundamental questions will determine how one conceives the political organizations within which we live. That is, we can conceive such organizations as having for their principal purpose either protecting citizens against a possible attack by other "wolfish" citizens (and as fulfilling this purpose by sponsoring an effective police force) or as caring for those who are most vulnerable and promoting the well-being of citizens (which would include having an effective police force, without making police protection the sole purpose of the state). In this latter case, providing education for the young or Medicaid/Medicare for the impoverished ill would be re-

The summons of the other within our systems of relationships continually invites us to reflect upon the systems in which we live and creates in us a restlessness with regard to the omissions and negligence of those beyond our ken and with regard to the systemic injustices under which they labor and to which we are often oblivious.

[22]Ibid., 159.

[23]Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

quired. Clearly, Catholic social teaching envisions the state as fulfilling the latter functions also.[24]

In addition, the asymmetrical responsibility that lies of the root of political relationships stands in direct contrast to the contract theory of political justice. According to this theory, as it is generally understood, I only acquire responsibility to another and to political society when I freely commit myself in a contract to them. This view, of course, has important roots in the early-modern era that located in a state of nature certain rights that individuals possessed before they entered the state with others through an agreement usually conceived as a freely-entered-into contract. Since one would never contract to give up the rights possessed in the state of nature, one would never contract to enter into a state in which the king might arbitrarily take away these rights. Thus the contract theory stood as a bulwark against the divine right of kings to absolute power over citizens. A recent contract theorist in the area of ethics has extended this contract theory further, when he observed that the wealthy and poor might contract for an arrangement that would require each one to avoid hurting the other, but the wealthy would be more reluctant to enter into an agreement for mutual aid, in which, on a political level, a state might be allowed to tax the wealthy to provide welfare provisions for the poor.[25] Such a view rests on the earlier-described account that the human relationships on which political relationships are founded are those in which one person is a wolf to the other. The wealthy in this picture might tend to look upon the poor as wolves, conniving to use the political system to force the wealthy to share their resources with them. But, according to the contract theory, the wealthy would have no moral obligation to care for the poor unless they freely contract to do so. The contract theory, a bulwark against the king's unwarranted intrusions and against the beneficiaries of a welfare system, is fundamentally flawed since it makes my responsibility to the other depend on *my decision* to enter into a contract with the other. If I do not freely enter into such a contract, I owe the other nothing.

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[24]*Proclaiming Justice and Peace: Paper Documents from* Rerum novarum *through* "Centesimus annus," ed. Michael Walsh and Brian Davies (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 1991), 28-29, 30, 444, 470.

[25]Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *The Philosophical Review* 84 (1975): 12-13.

For Levinas, in contrast, my responsibility to the other *begins in the other* who summons me to it, and, in the face of that responsibility, I then have the choice to assume such responsibility or not.

Furthermore, by having the summons to asymmetric responsibility lying at the root of the symmetry and reciprocity of society, one provides an important counterpart to the inertia often characterizing institutions. Such institutions, like the State, the economy, and the bureaucratic system, whose symmetrical rules prescribe treating everyone uniformly, "are at every moment on the point of having their center of gravitation in themselves, and weighing on their own account."[26] The summons of the other within our systems of relationships continually invites us to reflect upon the systems in which we live and creates in us a restlessness with regard to the omissions and negligence of those beyond our ken and with regard to the systemic injustices under which they labor and to which we are often oblivious. The summons of God, too, keeps us faithful to prayer even in desolation, and, as the meditation on the Incarnation in the *Exercises* shows, our very brokenness as the human race summons God's commitment to us.

This concern for those on the fringe of our political, economic, or bureaucratic systems could be construed as a way of living out a "fundamental option for the poor." Levinas never uses this kind of language, though, perhaps because he realizes that *every* other I meet elicits my asymmetrical responsibility, whatever their race, religion, economic class, or degree of exclusion. Hence, he would oppose any fundamental option for the poor that would lead a group to harden their hearts against another group, such as the wealthy. Nevertheless, the breaking down of personal barriers, the dismantling of self-centeredness, that every other evokes from us leads logically to the undoing of every racial, religious, or economic chauvinism that excludes the poor and that the fundamental option for the poor is meant to correct. Moreover, on the symmetrical, political level on which we weigh competing claims, arguments can be developed as to why the suffering the poor undergo is more severe and so requires preferential action on their behalf.[27]

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[26]Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 159.

[27]I am indebted to Mark Bosco, S.J., for the suggestion to include this discussion of the fundamental option for the poor.

The asymmetry of responsibility lying at the root of societal reciprocity and symmetry also places in question a mode of thinking that I like to call "mean-spirited egalitarianism." An example of such mean-spiritedness became evident to me at a parish in which I celebrated the liturgy in Spanish for recent Mexican immigrants. There was another major ethnic group in the small town, and one woman from that group said to me, "When we came here as immigrants, no one celebrated Mass for us in our native language, so why should we have a special Mass in Spanish for them?" Equal treatment here meant everybody being treated the same, with no special treatment for others that would have been at odds with the treatment that everyone received, even if that treatment were quite shabby. Everybody is equal. How much more generous would it have been if that woman had allowed herself to be led by a sense of responsibility toward those Mexican immigrants, if she had been able to think that even though she and her ethnic group had not received such kind treatment, it might be good to give it to others, to give to others what she had not had herself, despite the asymmetry such treatment would have introduced. Would it not have been more generous if she had allowed the suffering she experienced upon recognizing that her immigrant group could have been better treated (for example, that Mass could have been celebrated in their vernacular) to open her to the plight of others? Instead of denying to others what she herself never received, she might have allowed her suffering to open her to others, might have allowed the suffering she experienced as an immigrant to lead her to seek relief for the similar suffering that other immigrant groups were undergoing.

Mean-spirited egalitarianism, though, involves no sense of responsibility for others, but simply a desire to evade any responsibility for others at all, a desire to not to have to contribute anything to help another.

Mean-spirited egalitarianism is often at work in diverse kinds of arguments. For example, a group will argue that they worked hard for their money and ask why they should be taxed to pay for social services for those who seem unable to work as hard as they have done. "Let them make their own money, let them take care of themselves, and do not tax us," this group might think and argue. To be sure, those who

emphasize equality of treatment might honestly be concerned that providing social services for others could prolong their dependence and damage their own autonomous functioning, and it is certainly correct that welfare provisions that enable others to be more active and autonomous and to rely no longer on welfare are to be preferred. However, if the group members are really concerned about the others' autonomy, they would not merely want to cut these others off from welfare provisions but would be willing to take many steps, including perhaps temporarily providing them with welfare assistance, in order to help them eventually realize their autonomy. In such a case, this group would in fact be seeking the others' good and willing to undertake asymmetric responsibility for them.

Mean-spirited egalitarianism, though, involves no sense of responsibility for others, but simply a desire to evade any responsibility for others at all, a desire to not to have to contribute anything to help another. The mean-spirited egalitarianism at play here lies in insisting in treating everyone the same, but the standard that rules in such a case is not derivative from my responsibility to and for the other, but rather it is a standard derived from myself. If *I* have worked hard for my living and never depended on government, no one else should. The alternative would be to take into account how the other's circumstances may be different from my own and how the other may need care that I did not need, care aimed at making the other independent and autonomous in the end. This latter alternative is, of course, based in an asymmetrical responsibility for others that will seek to produce in the end an egalitarian society of autonomous individuals. Because of this kind of responsibility, one will never give up striving for the development of all citizens, even though they may not be able to live up to the standards of independence and autonomy that one thinks would be for their own good. Such responsibility contrasts with a mean-spirited egalitarianism that simply wants to escape any responsibility for them at all.

The contemplative experience of God already contains within it in diverse manners the experience of asymmetrical responsibility for another that marks authentic social justice.

Another example of "mean-spirited egalitarianism" appeared recently when a woman whose brother had been murdered was infuriated because the murderer of her brother was taking courses in a College in Prison program sponsored by a Christian university. "He doesn't deserve a life," she was reported to have said. Of course, this is a particularly difficult situation, since who of us would not be prone to bitterness if someone had murdered someone close to us? Who of us, if we had lost a near relative would not be inclined to insist on the egalitarian requirement of retribution, that the state punish criminal at elast in proportion to what he or she has done to a victim? And yet, even the criminal appeals to our responsibility for him or her, for rehabilitation, healing, and maybe even forgiveness. Philosopher Max Scheler once remarked that a true sense of solidarity for the criminal would prompt us to think that we as a society had let the criminal down. If there had been more love and care in his life and less violence and hurt, if we had held him more accountable earlier, if we had done better by him, perhaps he would not have ended up in prison at all.[28]

What Levinas makes clear is that the asymmetrical responsibility to which the other person summons me lies at the root of a correct understanding of justice, the kind of reciprocal relationships that ought to maintain between the many people making up a state (or a world, for that matter). Without that asymmetrical foundation, justice, in my view, can deteriorate into mean-spirited egalitarianism. But this asymmetrical responsibility to the other, I hope now to clarify, lies at the root of our relationship with God in prayer, particularly in the Exercises. We experience a seeming asymmetrical responsibility toward God in desolation, but even more so, in the Exercises we continually rediscover God's asymmetrical responsibility for us that makes possible our love for God. The contemplative experience of God already contains within it in diverse manners the experience of asymmetrical responsibility for another that marks authentic social justice.

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[28] Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy,* trans. Peter Heath (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 162-65.

IV. Asymmetry and the Experience of the Exercises

Asymmetrical love pervades the Exercises. For instance, the preparatory prayer, which precedes every meditation in the Exercises, involves praying that "all my intentions, actions, and operations may be ordered purely to the praise and service of the Divine Majesty" (*SpEx* 46).[29] In other words, the entire context of prayer in the Exercises begins with a focus on serving God, the time of prayer is given to God, whatever may happen in the course of the prayer that follows. One's prayer is first and foremost a gift to God, regardless of whether or not one experiences in turn palpable gifts, for example, consolation, from God's hands. Since one gives to God whether God reciprocates or not, an asymmetrical sense of responsibility toward God can be said to underpin each and every meditation of the Exercises.

Of course, one feels this asymmetry in the Exercises most pointedly in moments of desolation when one persists in prayer with little experience of consolation or God's presence, but instead experiences, as Ignatius defines desolation, "obtuseness of soul, turmoil within it, an impulsive motion toward low and earthly things, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations. These move one toward lack of faith and leave one without hope and without love. One is completely listless, tepid, and unhappy, and feels separated from our Creator and Lord." (317). In such moments of desolation, one is inclined to revert to a demand for reciprocity. For instance, one might think, "I have done this for you, God, why do you leave me in aridity?" as if one's good deeds, one's fidelity to prayer placed a requirement on the other, here God, to respond in like kind.

Notwithstanding, desolation—in which God seems to refrain from giving us his "abundant fervor, augmented love, and intensive grace" (320)—is the quintessential place where we experience the demand to love asymmetrically. In those moments in which God might appear not to be loving, Ignatius urges that we "insist more upon prayer, meditation, earnest self-examination, and some suitable way of doing penance" (319). When God seems not to love, we are to re-

[29] Hereafter subsequent quotations from the *SpEx* will by cited by marginal numbers enclosed in parentheses.

double our efforts to love God. These very efforts to love God, one can imagine, might well exacerbate the very sense of asymmetry we are already experiencing.

In such desolation, though, we are far removed from that irrational enthusiasm of which Levinas is wary and from an intoxication in which we lose all sight of responsibility to and for another, as was instanced in the National Socialist absorption in "pagan 'moods,' in the enrootedness in the earth, in the adoration that enslaved men can devote to their masters."[30] Desolation, involving no intoxication but rather that staying with prayer for the sake of God, without consolation, represents a noble ethical act of being responsible toward God. Desolation, consequently, is the means by which Ignatian mysticism preserves and manifests a sense of ethical authenticity in contrast to intoxicating forms of mysticism, since one never loses sight of the dimension of asymmetrical responsibility in one's relationship to God. This willingness to love the other even when one feels oneself not to be compensated as one might deserve lies at the heart of any profound relationship of love for another—and so it should come as no surprise that it might be found in our relationship with God, in those moments of desolation in which we feel as if God is asking such love of us. At the same time, such love grows out of a primordial sense of responsibility that the other evokes in us and that lies at the root of our political, social, and economic relationships; I am responsible for my neighbor even if he or she does not live up to expectations or does not behave as reciprocally as I think he or she ought to.

Ignatius, in fact, conceives desolation as a kind of coring out of the self, that is, a removing from our heart those egocentric tendencies to exult in our own power without depending on God or to arrogate to ourselves as achievements what are really gifts from God. Desolation decenters the self, since it teaches us that we "cannot by ourselves bring on or retain great devotion, intense love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation; but that all these are a gift and grace from God our Lord" (322). Desolation makes us realize that we must not puff up "our minds with pride or vainglory through which we attribute to ourselves the devotion or other features of spiritual consolation." (322). A parallel kind of "coring out of the self" is to be found in the asymmetry that

[30]Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 47.

lies at the root of social justice, when the other calls upon one to assume responsibility for him or her, without regard to reciprocation or to what one will receive in return. In addition, the recognition that one's responsibility begins in the other's summons and not in one's decision takes away any sense of condescension that might accompany the idea that I deign to confer benefits on the other that the other would not deserve unless I decide out of the goodness of my heart to bestow them. The asymmetry involved in social justice and in asymmetrical loving in the midst of desolation in prayer core out the self, rendering it more and more generous.

Furthermore, the asymmetric love that the Exercises depends upon often involves a patient waiting for a revelatory word from God—a word that does not come immediately, and such waiting can frustrate the exercitant, and it demands great patience. Such a waiting is part of a striving to understand God, to be taught by God. In this waiting, the experience of God as very different from human interlocutors is intensified. One might sense that God's invisibility, untouchability, and inaudibility place God at a distance from us, and this distance appears to be accentuated when God seems to withhold any self-revelation—God appears in so many ways as a God whose ways are not ours (Isa. 55:9). And yet in such moments, when one continues to wait for a word from God, one's waiting bears a deep likeness to the quest for justice. Dussel, relying on Levinas, describes how the pursuit of social justice requires entrance into a pedagogic apprenticeship in which we must subject ourselves to tutelage at the hands of the other, the poor, the stranger, in whom we must trust as we wait. Insofar as the other pertains to a different class or a different culture or belongs to a world different from our own, we can often experience confusion and dismay in our efforts to understand them and hence we must wait upon their revelatory word, in much the way that in desolation we wait upon God.[31]

There are many examples of this pedagogic apprenticeship in which one must trust in the other. For instance, although the 1986 movie *The Mission* presents Jesuits as able to adjust easily to the Guaraní nation, the 1991 movie *Blackrobe* portrays a different picture. In that mov-

[31]Enrique Dussel, *Método para una Filosofía de la Liberación* (Guadalajara: Editorial Universidad de Guadalajara, 1974) 190-195.

ie, a seventeenth-century Jesuit priest struggles mightily to understand the Algonquin Indians among whom he lives, experiences enormous frustration at his own inabilities to understand their culture, and often feels out of place among them. And yet by remaining responsible toward them, staying with them, hoping in the possibility of a relationship with them, and continuing to try over and over again, he exhibits a kind of love analogous to that which one might show in remaining faithful to prayer when experiencing desolation.

Likewise, a few years ago, there was a racial-bias incident on our campus, and in repeated assemblies of students, staff, and faculty discussing racial relations, I, who am white, rediscovered what I have experienced many times: how little I understood African-American people and how different their experience of living in a society prejudiced against them was from mine. Although I experienced desolation in these assemblies, my attendance at these meetings was part of a pedagogic apprenticeship in which African-American students, staff, and faculty were able to instruct me. They were able to instruct me as long as I could place in abeyance my own self-flattering images of myself or our university and allow them to speak their revelatory word to me, much in the way that one must wait for God's self-revelation in the Exercises. This very waiting on God in prayer, conversely, tutors us in the social justice that faith requires. Of course, the desolation that African-Americans feel in facing repeated bias incidents that suggest that the long history of racial prejudice will never end exceeds any desolation I may have felt. Furthermore, their asymmetric willingness to begin again with those of us who are not African-Americans, to educate us, to try to make visible the chasm between us and them that racism creates, and to cross that chasm toward us, far surpasses any struggle on my part to await their revelatory word.

In the desolation of prayer, it is not so much that God is absent, but rather is present in a different way, not as consoling but as eliciting responsible, asymmetrical love.

If one, though, remains faithful to God in moments of desolation, it is not because one is doing a favor for God, but rather, at some level,

one feels God inviting responsibility, in much the way that one in the pedagogic apprenticeship with those excluded feels the summons to be responsible even in the midst of the disorientation and desolation she may feel in the presence of those she seems unable to understand. In the desolation of prayer, it is not so much that God is absent, but rather is present in a different way, not as consoling but as eliciting responsible, asymmetrical love.[32]

To some who emphasize the value of reciprocity and symmetry in relationships, the idea of asymmetry can seem offensive—a demeaning form of subjugation at the hand of another who seems not to reciprocate. Though in the next section, I will address this issue of reciprocity in our relationship with God, it seems that asymmetric elements are to be found, as I have already mentioned, in all profound loves, and these elements are found in a wide variety of relationships too. To be sure, a parents' love for their children is asymmetrical. Moreover, in that moment of tutelage to which one submits at the hand of the poor or the cultural other, of which Dussel writes, one can feel as if one is giving with little response and so feel as if one is loving asymmetrically (though often the benefits and reciprocal love eventually received in such relationships can more than balance any initial asymmetrical moments). But even in relationships that are widely recognized as mutual and reciprocal, there are moments when one must stay faithful to another even though the other does not respond or is unable to respond as one would wish, even though the other's love may seem at times unequal to one's own. In friendships, for example, there are moments when one is called upon to love without the love seemingly being returned in proportion to one's giving.

But the gift of God's love is experienced in the Exercises, not only when one, after a period of desolation, is given a consolation that one has not extorted from God. In fact, the Exercises are filled with moments where God's gift of love is given freely, not only because we have not extorted it from God, but also because we have been* positively undeserving *of it.

[32]I am indebted to Tomas Stegman, S.J., and Paul Janowiak, S.J., for conversations leading to this insight.

One married woman I know once informed me that no marriage would ever work if each party gave 50 percent and expected the other to give exactly 50 percent in return. Rather, each has to be determined to love 90 ninety percent and receive 10 percent in return, if the marriage is to work—and her relationship with her husband was happy, probably because each of them believed in being so generous to the other.

Of course, this is not to deny the possibility of an abusive relationship in which one partner constantly takes advantage of the one who gives 90 percent. In such relationships, the abused partner has every right to rebel and call the advantage taker to account—even for the sake of the advantage taker himself. One is responsible for helping him to be more responsible by not acceding to his irresponsible treatment.

However, in all these relationships, whether we are speaking of relationships with children, friends, the poor or the cultural other, or a married partner, it is often the case that those relationships are characterized predominantly by moments of wonderful mutuality and love and, in many such relationships, one can actually feel in them that one is being loved more than one has loved. In such moments, asymmetrical responsibility retreats to the horizon of the relationship and even seems to disappear. But at the root of such relationships there lies a dimension of responsibility to the other that can call upon one to love asymmetrically.

Given this moment of asymmetry that is so basic to many relationships, it should come as no surprise that there are moments in the Exercises in which one must approach God asymmetrically in a way that is analogous to the kind of loving characteristic of any profound love. Retreatants enter a retreat trusting that God will be there for them. They are willing to stay in the retreat even should God not seem to be there in return. In the preparatory prayer before every meditation, one seeks first the praise and glory of God, regardless of whether God permits the retreatant to feel God's presence during the prayer or not. Desolation constitutes a decisive moment of asymmetry, where one stays faithful to God even in God's felt absence and the seeming lack of any symmetrical return.

In such moments, one imitates the love of the three young men in the fiery furnace in the book of Daniel, who tell King Nebuchadnezzar that they are determined not to worship his idol even if in the end God

will not rescue them from the furnace (Dan. 3:18). Their love for God in no way requires that God return the favor. The reading about the three young men appears in the liturgical-reading cycle during the fifth week of Lent, and it anticipates Jesus' great act of asymmetric love for God manifested on the cross in his cry "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matt. 27:46). Though the cross involved a moment of felt asymmetry and desolation for Jesus, the Father, raising him from the dead, responded with an overwhelming love in return. And so it is with God for retreatants; our asymmetric love for God is never the final word. As a matter of fact, in the Exercises one discovers that God's asymmetrical love has always already been there for us, first, and even our ability to love God asymmetrically, to persevere in the midst of desolation, is itself God's gift.

V. God's Asymmetrical Reciprocation

As I suggested above in the case of a marriage partner who takes advantage of the 90 percent giver, the giver should not acquiesce in an abusive relationship since part of her responsibility to her spouse would include summoning him to responsibility. Likewise, part of the responsibility a friend of an alcoholic has toward the alcoholic is to call him to accountability, to not just accede asymmetrically to everything he wants and he does. As Levinas puts it so well, we are responsible for the other's responsibility.[33] Of course, God is a different case, since, although in the anguish of desolation one might find oneself calling God to accountability, for example, thinking that one has done all for God and it is incumbent on God to respond in kind, still one always knows at some level that the all-good God is never irresponsible. It is my experience that despite the moments of desolation in all my retreats and those of others, God never in the end fails to reciprocate.

But what one learns in moments of desolation—and this is indeed one of the central messages conveyed by the Exercises themselves—is that this reciprocity of God is never extorted from God by

[33]Lavinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 117.

our egotistical insistence, but that it is always given as a gift, given by God in God's time. Hence, Ignatius's comments on desolation ring true again: "we cannot by ourselves bring on or retain great devotion, intense love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation, but . . . all these are the gift and grace from God our Lord (322).

But the gift of God's love is experienced in the Exercises, not only when one, after a period of desolation, is given a consolation that one has not extorted from God. In fact, the Exercises are filled with moments where God's gift of love is given freely, not only because we have not extorted it from God, but also because we have been *positively undeserving* of it. Of course, Ignatius makes the retreatant aware of the gift of God's love from the very start, in the First Week, when he recalls how God "has come to make himself a human being . . . , and has passed from eternal life to death here in time, and to die in this way for our sins" (53); and he then prompts us to speak with the crucified Christ. Anticipating the "Contemplation to Attain the Love of God" with its passing in review all of creation, in the second meditation of the First Week after I have meditated on my own sins, Ignatius highlights the gift of the love of God "against whom I have sinned" (59) in the following words, which capture the gratitude one feels upon being so loved:

> This is an exclamation of wonder and surging emotion, uttered as I reflect on all creatures and wonder how they have allowed me to live and have preserved me in life. The angels: how is it that, although they are the swords of God's justice, they have borne with me, and prayed for me? The saints: How is it that they have interceded and prayed for me? Likewise, the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the elements; the fruits, birds, fishes, and animals. And the earth: How is it that it has not opened up and swallowed me, creating new hells for me to suffer in forever? (60)

In the colloquy that follows I extol the mercy of God our Lord and give thanks to God for having granted me life even while I was a sinner. At this point, though, what the retreatant is discovering is the *asymmetric love of God* for her—God loves us despite our lack of love for God.

Indeed, the Meditation on the Incarnation conveys even more this asymmetric love of God for us. The exercitants behold "all the peoples in such great blindness, and how they are dying and going down to hell" (106), just as the angel salutes Mary. In the face of our swearing at each other and blaspheming, the Divine persons say, "Let us work the redemption of the human race" (107). When the persons on the face of the earth "wound, kill, go to hell" (108), God works "the most holy Incarnation" (108), not treating us symmetrically, not rejecting us as we have rejected God, but reaching out in solidarity, joining himself with us, in such a way that the Incarnation itself appears as a great act of gratuity, pardon, and asymmetrical love.

The Third Week, too, accentuates God's gratuitous love for us since Christ "suffers all this for my sins" (197). Indeed, the Exercises conclude with this same focus in the "Contemplation to Attain the Love of God," when I consider the many blessings received from God, giving of God's self, dwelling in creatures, giving me life, sensation, and intelligence, making a temple of me, and working and laboring for me in all creatures on the face of the earth. Here there is hardly any allusion to my unworthiness of God's love, except perhaps when I compare my limitedness with God's supreme and infinite power in the fourth point; but the entire focus is on God's love for me, to which my response is one of gratitude and returning my liberty, memory, understanding, and entire will, all that I possess, back in response to the God who has loved me first.

Discovering the giftedness of everything also has the effect of "coring out" the self, decentering it, and it too can be seen in alliance with the concern for social justice. There is a tendency on our part to resist accepting gifts from God, perhaps because it might seem as if we are losing power over ourselves, as if we are allowing an unwanted intrusion from without, or as if we are permitting God to break down our defenses—parallel to the way in which the other's summons to responsibility breaks in upon us. Perhaps we resist receiving undeserved gifts because if the only gifts we receive are those we have earned, then it is we who control the situation, almost as if our worthiness to receive the gifts requires and compels God to give them. Consequently, there is a kind of emptying of self involved when we receive the love that God grants gratis. This yielding before God, this allowing God the primacy

of place to love us on God's own terms, is a most joyful experience, so joyful that it is hardly felt as asymmetry on our part at all. The fact that the "Contemplation to Attain the Love of God" makes so little reference to our unworthiness and simply focuses on God's love for us indicates that the turning away from self and toward God, a kind of self-decentration that is in league with the asymmetrical responsibility to and for the other lying at the root of true justice, has reached a kind of apex. Further, receiving God's unmerited pardon, the fruit of the First Week, involves yielding to God's vision of oneself and forsaking the self-focus on one's own unworthiness and guilt. Accepting pardon—something that Levinas is wary of since it might release one from responsibility and that he only occasionally allows for[34]—is actually an exercise in asymmetric love, a yielding before the other. It is of a piece with the struggle for justice and not its enemy.

Furthermore, the recognition that all is gift and the discovery of God's unbounded gift giving cast new light on whatever experiences of desolation one may have experienced during the retreat. Since everything is a gift from God, one's ability to persevere in such moments must also have been a grace, a gift of God's love. Our very asymmetrical love for God is itself a gift from the God who loves us and whose love for us is asymmetrical. It is as though every act of asymmetrical love for another, whether for God or for the human other, itself reflects the more basic, foundation asymmetrical love of God. God here becomes a paradigm of asymmetrical love from which all our asymmetrical love is derived. One discovers at the end of the Exercises that the reciprocal relationship we have with God in the Exercises, in which a generous step taken toward God is also reciprocated for by God—or by God going way beyond what would be reciprocal—actually depends on some asymmetrical loving from each

Living up to moral rules in which violations ought to elicit an appropriate punishment seems much at odds with the love that we find in the merciful God, made manifest in Jesus' sharing table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners.

[34]Lavinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 125; *id.*, *Totality and Infinity*, 231.

side. When we remain faithful in the midst of desolation, we love God asymmetrically, just as God faithfully loves us as fallen sinners, "even while we were still helpless in our sins," as St. Paul says (Rom. 5:8). It is as though the asymmetrical love for others (God included) at the base of justice is but the other side of divine mercy and pardon. The reciprocal love between us and God depends, then, upon the asymmetrical love of us for God and God for us—and, to be sure, our love for God in desolation comes from God, who is the model of asymmetrical loving. Our loving relationship with God resembles that of a marriage, which, as the married women mentioned above suggested, will only work if each partner is intent on giving 90 percent, instead of looking for the other person to give his or her 50 percent or calculating whether the anticipated return will justify the gift.

It must be said that, generally, we think of ethics and the spiritual life, at least for mature believers, as polar opposites. Living up to moral rules in which violations ought to elicit an appropriate punishment seems much at odds with the love that we find in the merciful God, made manifest in Jesus' sharing table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. Striving to live up to moral rules seems at odds with so many of Jesus' marvelous parables, such as that of the Prodigal Son, in which the loving father embraces his wayward son without even asking what he has done and then goes out to plead that his bitter older son enter the party. However, the Levinasian ethics that lies at the root of social justice is not a matter of keeping rules in which one can become morally satisfied with oneself, in which one can hold others accountable for treating oneself (reciprocally) as one treats them, and in which a mean-spirited reciprocity can hide and disguise itself as justice. Levinasian ethics, I think, points to a kind of asymmetric moment in love that is basic. All relationships take place in a context in which the other person evokes from me a sense of responsibility to and for her, as one dimension of that relationship, whether we are speaking of marital love, political justice, or our relationship with God. Whatever specific acts that responsibility might imply has to be determined in reflection and discernment—a reflection and discernment that are already beholden to the other insofar as such reflection already aims at doing the right thing for the other. Without that sense of responsibility for the other, relationships can easily degenerate into a kind of self-serving at the other's expense. Finally, the asymmetrical ethics about

which we are speaking here is not at odds with love, but lies at its base, and indeed wherever asymmetrical love emerges in our relationships, it is a reflection of God who always loves us asymmetrically. It is precisely God's way of loving that contrasts with the small-hearted insistence on rule-compliance that many people equate with ethics.

Levinas contrasts love with small-hearted rule following, which he describes in the following way:

> It is a strict book-keeping where nothing is lost or created. Freedom is compromised in this balance of accounts in an order where responsibilities correspond exactly to liberties taken, where they compensate for them, where time relaxes and then is tightened again after having allowed a decision in the interval opened up. Freedom in the genuine sense can only be a contestation of this book-keeping by a gratuity. This gratuity could be the absolute distraction of a play without consequences, without traces or memories, of a pure pardon. Or, it could be responsibility for another and expiation.[35]

VI. Conclusion: Faith and Justice

We began with the tension experienced between the general congregations' insistence that faith includes the struggle for justice and the experience of annual retreats in which the contemplative search for God seems remotely, if at all, connected with that struggle. Then we considered the notion of asymmetric responsibility for the other on which symmetric justice, the treatment due the equal members of a political society, is founded, according to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. We have seen what a difference founding symmetrical justice on asymmetric responsibility makes. An asymmetrically founded justice sees the other as someone for whom we are responsible and not someone first to be feared; it makes my responsibility to the other begin with the other's summons rather than in my decision to be responsible; it challenges institutional inertia; and it heads off "mean-spirited egalitarianism." Then we have seen how the Exercises, in the preparatory prayer and the experience of desola-

[35]Lavinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 125.

tion, school us in this asymmetric loving. Desolation, in which we stay at prayer without consolation, without the sense of God reciprocating our efforts, simply because God seems to ask of us that we be responsible to God, teaches us the very kind of asymmetrical responsibility for the other upon which all true justice rests. Finally, in the Exercises, we repeatedly encounter the asymmetric love of God for us in the First Week, in the meditation on the Incarnation, in the Third Week, and in the "Contemplation to attain the Love of God," in the yielding to God's gratuitous giving and God's vision of who we are as opposed to our own. It is God's asymmetric loving that lies at the root of our own asymmetric love. Throughout the Exercises we repeatedly find ourselves either summoned to asymmetric loving or to receiving asymmetric loving from God. The Exercises, then, tutor us in that same asymmetric loving that guarantees authentic justice. And so when one gives oneself over to God in one's annual retreat, the suspicion that one's pursuit of God is somehow unrelated to the search for justice is only a temptation to be avoided. In fact, in the Exercises, one immerses oneself in the kind of love and responsibility, given and received, that lie at the root of authentic justice.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Editor:

I enjoyed very much "The Life and Teachings of St. Alberto Hurtado, S.J.," in the winter issue (43/4). I would like to explain a connection to the U. S. Assistancy and the New York Province. Fr. Hurtado, as John Gavin noted, did ruffle feathers in his criticism of the Church and society in Chile in his book entitled *Is Chile a Catholic Country?* Then Fr. Gustave Weigel, a leading American theologian of the 1940s and 1950's came to his support. In the biography entitled *Alberto Hurtado, A Man after God's Own Heart* (Santiago: Fundacion Padre Alberto Hurtado, 2004) the author, Katherine Gilfeather, notes the importance of this support. She writes:

> Father Gustave Weigel, S.J., a member of the New York Province of the Society, had come to Chile in 1937 to work in the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University and was to serve as its Dean from 1942 to 1948. This brilliant scholar soon became a close lifetime friend and supporter of Hurtado's activities. The "Gringo" as he was affectionately called, identified strongly with Alberto's social consciousness and agreed completely with his assessment of the Chilean Church. He publicly declared Alberto Hurtado's book "theologically irreproachable" and reminded his readers that many Fathers of the Church had used far stronger language to criticize the vices and errors of their times and the sorry state of their churches. Some time later when Gus Weigel himself became the victim of painful criticism that finally brought about his removal from Chile, Alberto would write [in gratitude to Fr. Weigel]:
>
> "You have been my support in difficult moments. Whenever I felt sad and depressed, whatever the hour of day or night, your door was always open to me. In all the criticisms and attacks you were always the good friend who stood and delivered for me, your defense extended even to the press. You never refused help any time I asked you."

The reference can be found on the internet: http://www.padrealberto hurtado.cl/english/index.php?pp =legado2&qq=publicaciones&rr=pu bl_02_05

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America House
New York, NY

Editor:

In the concluding pages of his helpful study of St. Alberto Hurtado, John Gavin begins to connect Hurtado's justice and charity teachings with the "subsequent support in the Second Vatican Council, the general congregations of

the Society of Jesus, and recent papal teaching" (43, no. 4:36).

There follows a paragraph on the Second Vatican Council, a reference to Jean Baptiste Janssens and General Congregation 31, followed by a citation from the *Complementary Norms* of the Society (1996) and, finally Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in veritate* (2009).

What I had hoped for in this concluding synopsis would have been one or two paragraphs explaining the connections between Hurtado's teachings and General Congregations 32 and 34, both of which established a fundamental relationship, for all ministries of the Society, between faith and justice. As one new to Hurtado's life and teaching, I would have been glad to learn how his remarkable presence, primarily in Chile, was or was not part of the theological ferment that led to GC 32 as a breakthrough Congregation and GC 34 which consolidated two decades of subsequent Jesuit practice, as it re-articulated GC 32's original commitment.

That said, I am grateful to have learned about Hurtado and stand in the author's debt.

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