



IN IGNATIUS' STEPS

(AN INITIATION TO IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY)

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THE PILGRIM'S JOURNEY

An aged Ignatius dictated the memories of his youth and conversion story to his secretary Fr. Louis: they are an astonishing map of his spirituality as fruit of his personal experience.

St. Ignatius was a man of action, not an intellectual. His writings are few and marked by practical purposes. Only the book of the Spiritual Exercises which is actually a handbook for directors, his many letters to his Jesuits sons scattered in the whole world, and certainly much in the Jesuit Constitutions make up his whole production.

That is why it is of utmost importance what is commonly called his autobiography, which is made up of the memories the aged Ignatius shared with his secretary Fr. Louis Gonzalez. This short collection of reminiscences of his youth and conversion story contains the seminal pattern of the whole Ignatian spirituality.

For the glory of God

The origin of the prolonged interview which lasted, off and on, for about two years, is explained by Fr. Louis in the preface of the Autobiography: "In the year 1553, one Friday morning, August 4, the eve of the feast of Our Lady of the Snows, while St. Ignatius was in the garden, I began to give him an account of my soul, and, among other things, I spoke to him of how I was tempted by vain glory.

The spiritual advice he gave me was this: "Refer everything that you do to God and thank Him for it." The advice given to me on this occasion was so consoling to me that I could not refrain from tears. St. Ignatius then related to me that for two years he had struggled against vain glory.

An hour or two later we went to dinner, and, while Master Polancus and I were dining with him, St. Ignatius said that many of the Society had often asked him to give a narrative of his life, but he had never as yet decided to do so. On this occasion, however, after I had spoken to him, he reflected upon it alone. He was favorably inclined toward it. From the way he spoke, it was evident God had enlightened him to apply to himself the advice he had given to me and to give glory to God.

At that time St. Ignatius was in very feeble health. Fr. Luis jotted down the conversations in Spanish and then produced a fair copy in Latin. It is titled: "The

Pilgrim's Journey". It gives an insight into the spiritual life of Saint Ignatius. Few works in ascetical literature, except the writing of Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Augustine, impart such a knowledge of the soul. The following year 1556, Saint Ignatius died.

A practical man

Saint Ignatius of Loyola was a man who saw above and beyond his century, a man of vision and calm hope, who could step comfortably into our era and the Church of our time and show us how to draw closer to Christ. Ignatius' autobiography span eighteen very important years of this saint's 65-years life, from his conversion to his university studies and his journey to Rome in order to place his followers and himself at the disposal of the Pope.

These critical years reveal the incredible transformation and spiritual growth in the soul of a great saint and the events that helped to bring about that change in his life. Saint Ignatius was a pragmatic man in all things and initially steeped in his own desire for vainglory. His quest for success and personal glory led to his near fatal injury at the battle of Pamplona (1521) which in turn led to his conversion and then his setting aside his quest of glory in order to seek the greater glory of God.

During his convalescence he received the gift of discernment and developed his ability to understand the value and core of his thoughts and desires, to distinguish the "goodness" or "badness" of any impulse or action. His gift of discernment let him garner a direction from God and the resulting Spiritual Exercises became a catalyst for driving faith home for countless numbers of souls over the next five hundred years.

Experiential Knowledge

After discerning God's will for himself, he resolutely set out to do it. He amended his life. Left his military career. Returned to school. Gathered his friends together. Put himself at the disposal of God and the Pope. He organized, led and inspired what he called his "least" society of Jesus.

Even though it was often interpreted in rigid ways, authentic Ignatian spirituality is marked by his typical reference for flexibility. His is a spirituality of discernment of choices, both everyday and lifelong. His advice is to find "whatever is most helpful and fruitful". In our response lies our growth and freedom.

We always think of the saints as “perfect people” but really their stories tell us how they struggled with their imperfections to follow their faith. We all have that opportunity and Saint Ignatius worked hard to share ways we can follow in bringing our own faith to fulfillment.

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GOD'S CHAMPIONSHIP

The book of the Spiritual Exercises is a manual for Directors who guide people in the exciting discovery of their true selves in the light of God's will as it emerges in prayer during a desert period in which they choose to be alone with God.

The Spiritual Exercises are a compilation of meditations, prayers, and contemplative practices developed by St. Ignatius Loyola to help people deepen their relationship with God. They were composed with the intention of helping participants in religious retreats to discern the will of God in their lives, leading to a personal commitment to follow Jesus whatever the cost.

For centuries the Exercises were most commonly given as a “long retreat” of about 30 days in solitude and silence. The most common beneficiaries were clergy and religious, although it was not so in origin. Although the *Exercises* were designed to be carried out while under the guidance of a spiritual director, they were never meant only for monks or priests.

Ignatius gave the *Exercises* for 15 years before he was ordained, and years before the Society of Jesus was founded. He saw them as an instrument for bringing about a conversion or change of heart, in the Reformation times in which he lived. After the Society of Jesus was formed, the *Exercises* became the central component of its training program.

In recent years, there has been a renewed emphasis on the Spiritual Exercises as a program for laypeople. The most common way of going through the Exercises now is a “retreat in daily life,” which involves a program of daily prayer and meetings with a spiritual director which lasts for several months.

Personal Experience

After recovering from a leg wound incurred during the Siege of Pamplona in 1521, Ignatius made a retreat with the Benedictine monks at their abbey high on Montserrat in Catalonia, northern Spain, where he hung up his sword before the statue of the Virgin of Montserrat. From Montserrat, he left for Barcelona but took a detour through the town of Manresa, where he eventually remained for several months, continuing his convalescence at a local hospital.

He also spent much of his time praying in a cave nearby, where he practiced rigorous asceticism. During this time Ignatius experienced a series of visions, and formulated the fundamentals of his *Spiritual Exercises*. He would later refine and complete the *Exercises* when he was a student in Paris. The *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius form the cornerstone of Ignatian Spirituality.

Stages of Spiritual Life

The original, complete form of the *Exercises* is a retreat of about 30 days in silence and solitude. The *Exercises* are divided into four "weeks" of varying length with four major themes: sin and God's mercy, episodes in the life of Jesus, the passion of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus together with a contemplation on God's love.

This last is often seen as the goal of Ignatian spirituality, to find God in all things. The "weeks" represent stages in a process of wholehearted commitment to the service of God.

Ignatius identified the various motives that lead a person to choose one course of action over another as "spirits". A major aim of the *Exercises* is the development of discernment (*discretio*), the ability to discern between good and evil spirits. A good "spirit" can bring love, joy, peace, but also desolation, to bring one to re-examine one's life.

An evil spirit usually brings confusion and doubt, but may also prompt contentment

to discourage change. The human soul is continually drawn in two directions: towards goodness but at the same time towards sinfulness.

"Discernment" is very important to Ignatian thought. Through the process of discernment, the believer is led toward a direct connection between one's thought and action and the grace of God. As such, discernment can be considered a movement toward mystical union with God, and it emphasizes the mystical experience of the believer.

This aspect of the *Spiritual Exercises* reflects the trend toward mysticism in Catholic thought which flourished during the time of the counter-reformation (e.g., with Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross and Francis de Sales).

Prayer Periods

Ignatius' book is not meant to be used by the retreatant but by a director or spiritual guide. Each day the exercitant uses the material proposed by the director for four or five hour-long periods, each followed by a review of how the period went.

The exercitant reports back to the spiritual director who helps interpret the exercitant's experiences and proposes material for the next day. Ignatius observes that God "deals directly" with the well-disposed person and the director should not give advice to the retreatant that might interfere with God's workings.

The *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola are considered a classic work of spiritual formation. Most retreat centers offer shorter retreats with some of the elements of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Retreats have been developed for specific groups of people, such as those who are married or engaged. Self-guided forms of the *Exercises* are also available, including online programs.

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AN ORIGINAL POINT OF DEPARTURE

The universal salvation history as it emerges from the Bible is fulfilled in each person's discovery of God's personal love expressed in his Law. This is Ignatius' Principle and Foundation which makes us heed the Call of the King.

The conclusion of the first week of Spiritual Exercises and its main fruit is The Principle and Foundation. The resulting attitude is "indifference", but it is important to notice that Ignatian indifference is more a point of departure for new horizons than the target of a process already undergone.

What precedes is the patrimony of the Old Testament: the heritage of the Law as the content of the covenant with God. The acquisitions of the Jewish Spirituality displayed in the Old Testament are the foundations of the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises.

The biblical concept of God who is good and the origin of all that is good, as in the account of creation in the book of Genesis, is the beginning of the very concrete experience of God in the Ignatian approach to prayer. The optimism of this concept of God, his personal call for relationship and encounter doesn't diminish the transcendence and mystery of the one whom Ignatius calls "His Majesty".

Not negotiable

The strong, positive sense of God goes together with a lively sense of sin, nourished by the contemplation of Jesus on the cross. The Ten Commandments, in their negative formulation as prohibitions, embody and imply the victory over the inordinate attachments which results in the inner freedom ("indifference") necessary for the spiritual progress ahead.

The Ignatian indifference doesn't apply to God's Law which demands to be embraced passionately. The commandments are meant to be kept according to the teaching of Moral Theology. Saint Ignatius writes in the Principle and Foundation : "It is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it".

This makes it clear that the Ten Commandments of God are essential and not negotiable in their denial of the inordinate attachments that enslave the soul and put

This explains the setup of the meditations for the First Week of the Exercises that Saint Ignatius shows in the book itself: the meditation on sin and that on hell as well as the introduction of the General and Particular Examination of Conscience in view of a general Confession and the reception of the Holy Communion.

It is only then that the full impact of the Principle and Foundation is understood with the attitude of indifference or inner freedom to heed the Call of the King. The complete journey of the people of God in the Old Testament becomes the foundation and the stepping stone of each person's individual call to holiness.

The goal of our life is to live with God forever. God, who loves us, gave us life. Our own response of love allows God's life to flow into us without limit. All the things in this world are gifts of God, presented to us so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily. As a result, we appreciate and use all these gifts of God insofar as they help us develop as loving persons. Our "indifference" (inner freedom) is availability to love.

The Principle and Foundation can be also seen as diagnostic. It explores whether a person has truly grasped at an interior level the experience of God's creative and sustaining love. Until people can claim that gift of God's love on a personal level, they cannot hear God's words of forgiveness or the call in freedom in the rest of the Exercises.

We have to affirm the goodness of the world. The first grace is to know that each one of us is a product of God's love. The Contemplation to Gain Divine Love which is the point of arrival of Saint Ignatius' spirituality starts already in what is presupposed in the beginning of the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises. &&&&&&&&&

THE PERSON'S PROGRESS WITH GOD

Mapping the person's progress in the individual journey to God is the purpose of the original way Saint Ignatius used the traditional spiritual tool: the Examination of Conscience.

Examination of conscience is a review of one's past thoughts, words, actions, and omissions for the purpose of ascertaining their conformity with, or deviation from, the moral law. Among Christians, this is generally a private review.

In the Catholic Church, penitents who wish to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation are encouraged to examine their conscience using the Ten Commandments as a guide, or the Beatitudes, or the virtues and vices.

Examination of conscience was commanded by the Apostle St. Paul to be performed by the faithful each time they received Holy Communion: "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks damnation to himself.... For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged." (*1 Corinthians* 11:28–31).

And, as the early Christians used to receive communion frequently, examination of conscience became a familiar exercise in their spiritual life. In many cases, it became a daily practice in the life of early members of the clergy and those living a monastic life. Saint Bernard wrote: "As a searching investigator of the integrity of your own conduct, submit your life to a daily examination".

"The excellence of this practice and its fruitfulness for Christian virtue," wrote Pope Pius X, "are clearly established by the teaching of the great masters of the spiritual life." St. Ignatius of Loyola considered the examination of conscience as the single most important spiritual exercise. In his *Spiritual Exercises* he presents different forms of it in the particular and general examination .

St. Ignatius of Loyola describes a five-point devotional examination method. In the first point, followers thank God for the benefits received; in the second, they ask grace to know and correct their faults; in the third, they pass in review the successive hours of the day, noting what faults they have committed in deed, word, thought, or omission; in the fourth, they ask God's pardon; in the fifth, they consider amendment.

Conscience and Consciousness

Of the general examination Saint Ignatius writes: "The first point is to give thanks to God our Lord for the favors received". This point has become a highly developed part of Ignatian spirituality in modern times, and has led to many more positive practices, generally called examen of consciousness.

In it one might review the ways God has been present through one to others, and to oneself through others, and how one has responded, and to proceed in one's day with gratitude, more aware of the presence of God in one's life.

In general, there is a distinction between the particular examen, which aims to change one particular feature or defect in one's behavior, and the examen of consciousness, which is a more nuanced reflection, and the general examination of conscience as used before the sacrament of penance.

Discernment as a way of life is the fruitful encounter between two very original elements of Ignatian spirituality: the attitude of discernment and the examination of consciousness. Discernment as a way of life is the process of listening attentively to myself, others, the world, Scripture, to all created realities so that I can catch the voice of God calling me to him.

Every circumstance of our life is an opportunity to meet the Lord. Discernment as a way of life is the fruit of a deeper yes to God in the here and now; it helps to find God's word for me here and now and to say yes. It embraces not only the present, but also the past, the healing of memories, and aims at acquiring the same feeling of Jesus in all circumstances according to the Latin motto: "*Sentire cum Jesu*".

An application of our willpower

Mapping the person's progress in the individual journey to God is the purpose of the original way Saint Ignatius uses the traditional spiritual tool: *the Examination of Conscience*. The spiritual battle engages the most central energy of the person: one's will power.

Ignatius doesn't stand cowardice or fear: his military mentality challenges the person to apply the will power to vigilance negatively against sin and inordinate affections and positively in the practice of the Christian virtues.

At the same time, the importance Ignatius gives to our feelings justifies the development of what we call examination of consciousness that we have mentioned above.

Looking daily into the refined conscience gives concrete efficiency to Christian asceticism. More deeply, it becomes a search for the signs of the presence of God in

the emotional movements and nuances of feelings in our consciousness: a constant, loving search for God's loving presence to console us and attract us into the depths of his life. It is the call to contemplate God in everything.

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ESSENTIAL OPENING TO LOVE

The fruit of the first week of the Spiritual Exercises is named by Ignatius as Indifference. The meaning is not lack of interest but inner spiritual freedom.

The outcome of the first week of the Spiritual Exercises, which embraces the Old Testament spirituality of the faithfulness to the Covenant with God, expressed by the purification from sin, is named by Ignatius as Indifference. The meaning is not lack of interest but inner spiritual freedom.

It can also be identified with the Gospel poverty of spirit or childlike attitude which Jesus tells us that it makes us enter the kingdom of God. It is because of this inner spiritual freedom that the personal encounter with the Christian Mystery in the remaining three weeks of the Spiritual Exercises becomes possible and fruitful.

Ignatius urges us to seek the freedom of detachment or indifference. Neither of these words carries weight in today's language or culture. Both sound cold and uncaring, which is far from the spirit in which Ignatius used them. A better word might be *inner freedom*

Bees and flowers

In his *First Principle and Foundation*, Ignatius talks about “making use of those things that help to bring us closer to God and leaving aside those things that don’t.” We can visualize the wisdom of this attitude if we observe the bees going from flower to flower and selecting the pollen they need for their purpose.

Although the bees choose some flowers and disregard other plants growing in the courtyard, other insects seek their nourishment from different sources. In choosing

what is exactly right for them, they are not only receiving their own nourishment but are also playing an essential role in the fruitfulness of their environment.

And in choosing one plant rather than another, they are in no way rejecting or denigrating the others. The secret of this harmonious, cooperative life seems to lie in each creature's being true to its own essential nature. Each gains what it needed for survival and growth from the source that is right for it, and it does so without harm either to itself or to the flowers. In fact, after each encounter, both insect and flower are left in a richer state than before: the insect has been nourished and the flower has been pollinated.

This picture is a very vivid illustration of what it might mean to "make use of what leads to life" and to leave aside what, for each individual, does not lead to life. It is a truly creative kind of "detachment." It helps us to understand what God might be calling us to when he asks us to let go of our attachments. The bees make no attempt to "possess" the flowers, nor do the flowers attempt to trap and hold the bees. This is a free interchange, perfectly fulfilling the needs of the bees, the flowers, and the wider circle of creation around them.

Poverty of spirit

The evangelical counsels or imperatives are conditions that Jesus puts to those who want to be in his following. Jesus chose not to marry and he praised the eunuchs for the Kingdom of God. He loved single mindedly and with undivided heart his Father and us, his brethren.

Jesus emptied himself in order to share our condition and chose to be poor to make us rich. He came to accomplish the Father's will : his food and his drink was to do the will of his Father. This will was for Jesus to save us from everlasting death, to redeem us from the slavery of sin and to unite us with God, sharing God's life as adopted sons and daughters of the Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus and temple of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' example is the only real reason of the existence of every vocation. Poverty is the door to the radical following of Jesus. This is why Saint Francis of Assisi took "Lady Poverty" as his lover and wife. This is the poetical interpretation of the exemplary vocation of Saint Francis of Assisi in the famous literary masterpiece "The Divine Comedy" of Dante Alighieri.

Lady Poverty was on the Cross with Jesus. But after Jesus, Lady Poverty was neglected and nobody took a real interest in her until Francis came and fell in love

with her. He wanted to fulfill the Gospel “*sine glossa*” (without comment or compromise), the pure Gospel. He wanted to follow Jesus in a radical way. And “poverty of spirit”, the first of the Beatitudes, is the door to it: an essential opening to love.

Poverty proclaims that God is our only treasure. Poverty states that being is more important than having, people are more important than things and whatever we have is not ours. Poverty means to want less and to thank more. Poverty is availability to love. This is the Indifference that Saint Ignatius requires from those who are preparing to follow Jesus in prayer along the mysteries of his life and death out of love in the following weeks of the Spiritual Exercises.

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THE WAY OF DISCERNMENT

Discernment aims at giving a direction to the journey of the soul searching for God's will. The doctrine of the Discernment of Spirits is a precious legacy of the Ignatian spirituality.

The military will power of the young Ignatius needed to find its object in order not to fight in vain. To this purpose Ignatius has developed what was already present in the Bible: the principle of the discernment of spirits: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are of God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

This is how Ignatius tells us of his great discovery in the Autobiography: “As Ignatius had a love for fiction, when he found himself out of danger he asked for some romances to pass away the time. In that house there was no book of the kind. They gave him, instead, “The Life of Christ,” by Rudolph, the Carthusian, and another book called the “Flowers of the Saints,” both in Spanish.

“By frequent reading of these books he began to get some love for spiritual things.

This reading led his mind to meditate on holy things, yet sometimes it wandered to thoughts which he had been accustomed to dwell upon before, like he pictured to himself what he should do in honor of an illustrious lady, and what manner of exploits he should perform to please her.

“In the meantime the divine mercy was at work substituting for these thoughts others suggested by his recent readings. While perusing the life of Our Lord and the saints, he began to reflect, saying to himself: “What if I should do what St. Francis did?” “What if I should act like St. Dominic?”

“This succession of thoughts occupied him for a long while, those about God alternating with those about the world. But in these thoughts there was this difference. When he thought of worldly things it gave him great pleasure, but afterward he found himself dry and sad. But when he thought of journeying to Jerusalem, and of living only on herbs, and practicing austerities, he found pleasure not only while thinking of them, but also when he had ceased”.

Understanding the difference

“This difference he did not notice or value, until one day the eyes of his soul were opened and he began to inquire the reason of the difference. He learned by experience that one train of thought left him sad, the other joyful. This was his first reasoning on spiritual matters.

Gradually he recognized the different spirits by which he was moved, one, the spirit of God, the other, the devil. Afterward, when he began the Spiritual Exercises, he was enlightened, and understood what he afterward taught his children about the discernment of spirits”.

We human beings are moved by a complexity of motives, both in the things we do from day to day and in our big decisions. Master Ignatius learned to think about those dense complexes of motives—images, ideas, attractions, revulsions—as “spirits.”

He noted that these motives and energies take on two configurations, which he identified with consolation and desolation. He discovered that both consolation and desolation can move you toward God or pull you away from God. Then he noted that sometimes consolation comes from a good spirit and sometimes from a bad spirit, and he noted the same thing about desolation.

Deliberation and way of life

The attitude of discernment helps us to distinguish the spirits, to follow the good spirits and to avoid falling in the clutches of the evil spirit. The doctrine of the Discernment of Spirits is now a precious legacy of the Ignatian spirituality. Discernment aims at giving a direction to the attitude of inner freedom or indifference so that the journey of the soul searching for God's will may start and be on the way.

The method of discernment which is more renowned is aimed at reaching a decision on one's state in life. It is a process of deliberation and it comes once in life. The most momentous choice requires a valid and sure method so that the important choice of a lifetime may be successful.

But there is also a type of discernment which enlightens the way already chosen, a discernment which becomes a way of life. Although not present in its formality in the book of the Exercises it is a welcomed development which greatly enriches the pursue of daily holiness and perfection of love.

There is a good deal more to Ignatian discernment. It is not, however, a merely human discipline. “Now instead of the spirit of the world, we have received the Spirit that comes from God, to teach us to understand the gifts that he has given us” (1 Corinthians 2:12). Serious disciples cherish this gift and put it to good use.

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A PRACTICAL APPROACH

In the text of the Spiritual Exercises we have “Annotations” and “Additions”. The key rule is that “it is not knowing much, but realizing and relishing things interiorly that contents and satisfies the soul”.

Relying on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the journey of prayer doesn't mean for Saint Ignatius to ignore the practical approach, fruit of Ignatius' very experience and sign of ingenuity and serious commitment. This is why in the text of the Spiritual Exercises we have "Annotations": "to give some understanding of the Spiritual

Exercises and enable the director and the retreatant to help themselves”. They deal mainly with the very Ignatian concepts of consolation and desolation.

The Annotations are twenty and each is the result of the experience of giving the exercises to people. The key rule is that “it is no knowing much, but realizing and relishing things interiorly that contents and satisfy the soul”.

The “Fundamental Option”

In Ignatius’s rules for the discernment of spirits, his first piece of advice is to ascertain the orientation of one’s life: Am I straying from the right path, or am I trying to live a decent Christian life? It is what is known as the “fundamental option”. To this concept, Saint Ignatius links the play of spiritual attitudes which he calls consolation and desolation.

What, exactly, is consolation? Consolation refers to any experience of desire for God, of distaste for one’s past sins, or of sympathy for Jesus or any other suffering person. It refers, in other words, to “every increase in hope, faith, and charity, and every interior joy which calls and attracts one toward heavenly things and to the salvation of one’s soul, by bringing it tranquility and peace in its Creator and Lord” (*The Spiritual Exercises*, n. 316).

Paul’s letter to the Galatians lists the fruit of the Spirit as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (5:22-23). When you experience one or more of these movements in your being, you can be relatively sure that God’s Spirit is moving you.

Consolation and Desolation

Ignatius believed that God wants us to be happy and fulfilled and that the way to be happy and fulfilled is to be in tune with God’s dream for the world and for us. The way to be happy and fulfilled is to accept God’s offer of friendship and to live in accordance with that friendship. If we are trying to do this, according to Ignatius, “consolation” is the order of the day. This does not mean that life will be without pain and suffering; it means that God wants to be a consoling presence to us even in the inevitable pains and sufferings of life.

Desolation is the opposite of consolation. Ignatius gives these examples: Obtuseness of soul, turmoil within it, an impulsive motion toward low and earthly things, or

STEPPING STONES

The second week brings the typical Ignatian meditations: The Call of the King, the Two Standards and the Three Types of Persons: they are stepping stones for the soul to face the planning of the future in God's sight.

At the beginning of the second week comes the meditation: the Call of the King and in the middle of the second week, that of the Two Standards and the Three Types of Persons. In prayer, the imagination brings the soul under the standard of Jesus to ask the grace to choose what is more pleasing to his Divine Majesty, what is more to his glory and our personal salvation.

These contemplations are meant to understand what God wants from us in terms of in what life or state of life his Divine majesty wants to be served by us. Following the example of the teenager Jesus who not only obeyed his parents in Nazareth (soul who is happy in keeping the commandments), but disobeyed and left the adopted father and natural mother to attend to the pure service of his Eternal Father.

Jesus contrasted his way to the way of the world quite emphatically: "He who is not with me is against me" (Luke 11:23). Master Ignatius helps us apply this to ourselves in the key meditation called "The Two Standards"—a "standard" meaning a flag.

Under Jesus' banner

As his disciples we have to choose where we are going to stand—with Jesus or with the world. No matter what life the Spirit has drawn us to, once we are baptized and confirmed we are called to stand in Jesus' company under his flag.

We begin to move under Jesus' standard when we join him in the lively conviction that everything we have and are is God's gift. However much or little we have, we say gratefully, "Look at all God has given me." Then through a life of love and service, the Spirit leads us to live as meekly and humbly as the Lord lived.

So, the imagination brings us under the standard of Jesus, our King, and to which ideal Jesus calls his apostles and to which category of men do we belong: to see

ourselves as we stand before God, our Lord, and all his Saints and to desire and know what is more pleasing to his Divine Goodness. We are invited to ask for what we want: the grace to choose what is more pleasing to God, what is more to the glory of his divine Majesty and the salvation of our soul.

At the command of Jesus, our King

A true turning around of the heart is necessary in order to give ourselves to Jesus Christ as he is. It is a matter of losing one's life in order to save it, sacrificing oneself entirely through total self-giving. This is the paradoxical condition for the achievement of the Kingdom.

In the Bible, the Kingdom is neither a people nor a place but an event: the presence of the Holy One in our very midst in this world, in history, in people. The Kingdom has been won already through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Kingdom is within all human beings: the presence of the Spirit of the Risen Jesus.

To achieve the Kingdom is to labor with Christ, to bring all people to embrace the presence of Christ within them, in their behavior- in the way they relate to themselves, to the other persons, to the world, and to God.

That is why faith in the Kingdom cannot be separated from its behavioral expression in the life of individuals and communities and in the organization of social, political and economic structures and in the way we treat the world.

Saint Paul perfectly describes the mission to bring the Kingdom to be: "It is now my happiness to suffer for you... to deliver his message in full; to announce the secret hidden for long generations. The secret is this: Christ in you, the hope of the glory to come" (Col. 1:24-27).

What kind of person am I?

The ideal is clear in front of us: to heed the call Of Christ, our King, and to stand under his banner. It is now question of choosing our own stance. This is when our true nature will reveal itself and show to which category of people we belong. There are those who talk a lot about being with Jesus but take no action. Life runs out swiftly without them taking a decision.

There are others who busy themselves in doing every single detail but not the essential one. And then there are the doers of the word. We must pray that the grace of the Holy Spirit draws us to that type of choice. To choose Jesus and to stick to our choice.

To choose Jesus is to choose poverty, contempt and suffering with Christ rather than being well off, honored and respected. This is the third degree of humility, after the decision to avoid what is forbidden: mortal and venial sin. It is the way of holiness, the Christian way.

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THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

Saint Ignatius exhorts the people in the retreat to use their imagination in order to stand inside the Gospel narratives of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Second, third and fourth week: it is a call to meditate the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus: as somebody aptly said, “standing inside the mystery”. The more concrete, personal and emotional the encounter with Jesus is, the better will be the transforming power of our prayer.

The grace of the Holy Spirit wants to meet with our personal engagement. Saint Ignatius teaches us how to obtain that by means of his Ignatian Contemplation. Saint Ignatius speak very briefly and soberly of what has become his famous “Contemplation”. We find it in the preludes of the meditation about the Nativity, during the second week.

After mentioning the trip of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for the census, this is how he describes the “composition of place”: “It will be here to see with the sight of the imagination, the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem; considering the length and the breath, and whether such road is level or through valleys and over hills, Likewise, looking at place or cave of the Nativity, how large, how small, how low, how high and how it was prepared”.

Then we are invited to see the Persons, the actors of the scene, and making ourselves

part of the scene, “imagining ourselves present”: “looking at them and serving them in their needs with all possible respect and reverence”. Noticing what they are saying and what they are doing.... And from this exercise draw some spiritual profit. The contemplation is concluded with a colloquy so much spontaneous and lively the more the imagination with its power has made us stand inside the mystery that we contemplate.

Let us lose ourselves in the stor

Ignatius was convinced that God can speak to us as surely through our imagination as through our thoughts and memories. In the Saint’s tradition, praying with the imagination is called contemplation. In the Exercises, contemplation is a very active way of praying that engages the mind and heart and stirs up thoughts and emotions.

Ignatian contemplation is suited especially for the Gospels. Let us visualize the Gospel events as if we were making a movie. Let us pay attention to the details: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings of the event. Let us lose ourselves in the story. At some point, let us place ourselves in the scene.

Contemplating a Gospel scene is not simply remembering it or going back in time. Through the act of contemplation, the Holy Spirit makes present a mystery of Jesus’ life in a way that is meaningful for us now. Let us use our imagination to dig deeper into the story so that God may communicate with us in a personal, evocative way.

Some people find imaginative prayer difficult. They may not be able to picture the scene easily, yet they may have some intuition or gut reaction to the story. Or they may hear or feel the story more than visualize it. In a spirit of generosity, let us pray as we are able; let us not try to force it. Let us rest assured that God will speak to us, whether through our memory, understanding, intellect, emotions, or imagination.

A colloquy is an intimate conversation between us and God the Father, between us and Jesus, or between us and Mary or one of the saints. It often occurs at the end of a prayer period, but it can take place at any time. Let this conversation naturally develop in our prayer.

Prayer as Colloquy

In the colloquy, we speak and listen as the Spirit moves us: expressing ourselves, for example, as a friend speaks to a friend, or as a person speaks to one whom he or she

has offended, or as a child speaks to a parent or mentor, or as a lover speaks to his or her beloved.

Whatever the context, we must be “real,” speaking from the heart. As in any meaningful conversation, we must make sure to leave times of silence for listening. In the meditations on sin, Ignatius suggests that we place ourselves before the cross and consider three questions that echo throughout the Exercises: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ?

We must return to these questions throughout the retreat. In one sense, they are not completely answerable during the retreat itself; we often lean into the answers as we continue our normal routines. By considering the questions, we realize how practical the Exercises are.

Just as our sin is reflected in concrete decisions and actions, so, too, does grace come to life in choices and deeds for the love of Christ and others. We encounter Christ not only in our prayer and in the sacraments but also in our relationships with the Body of Christ, living now as the church, the people of God, within that people and for them. Here is where prayer flows into life.

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SEEING GOD IN EVERYTHING

At the end of his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius invites us to ask God the grace of love and contemplation. It is a call to grow in contemplating God present in all things. It is contemplation in action.

Saint Ignatius' spirituality is very much a journey to God through his creatures: places, objects, happenings and people. It is a way to God by affirmation, a positive

way. We have seen this in the way Ignatius charges of meaning the different happenings of his existence, reading in them God's messages and making them stepping stones in the understanding of the way to God of our individual souls.

This affirmative, positive approach is evident in the way he teaches us to take to heart the mysteries of Christ's life through our imagination. At the end of his Spiritual Exercises, he exhorts us to pray for the grace of love and contemplation. His genius makes the Saint's most personal and deep experience of God become a simple but very concrete meditation.

For him, in his vision, God is like the sun which rises slowly over the hills and inundates the valleys with its rays. The rays of the rising sun rest in all objects: stones, flowers, animals and people. They draw them out of darkness, they give them their form, they are simply inducing them to existence. The rays of the sun symbolize the energies of the love of God, the Creator.

St. Ignatius invites us to the meditation to gain divine love, which is a call to grow in contemplating God present in all things. It is a vision of God's immanent and loving presence in all realities so that we may always live "planted in love and built on love".

God is in his gifts

These are the degrees of God's presence and our response in St. Ignatius' teaching. God is love. He is movement of self-communication. His creative and self-communicating action is expressed in several levels of self-giving or being present to us whom He loves.

First, God wishes to be present to us in the created gifts that he gives us. God is in his gifts. Our very life, our family, the talents God has graced on us, the places, times, relationships which make up our life : all are gift from God. Therefore, let us not take life for granted; let us not take anything for granted...Let our growing in age and maturity become an always greater awareness and appreciation of God's gifts. Let our response be gratitude and thanksgiving. The fruit of this gratefulness is joy and humility: nobody can be grateful and unhappy at the same time.

God is within his gifts

Moreover, God wishes to be even more present to us by being inside each gift. God's own presence in each gift is revealed by the fact that the creature's limited perfections reflect God's infinite perfection and flow from the goodness of God. This is what we read in the Bible: "God saw that everything was good" (*Genesis* 1). The response is reverence. Let us not rape the world!

Let us have the attitude which was proper of St. Francis of Assisi (“Brother Sun, Sister Moon”) who felt and expressed the sense of belonging to the same family with all the creatures...This will become ecological sensitivity and spirituality... Respect for creation. Let our virtue of sobriety or our vow of poverty be expressed in this way: to want less and to thank more.

God is in the heart of the world

God wishes still more to be present in us in his self-giving love. He is working constantly in each moment and in each creature to make us happy, to make us partake in the blessedness of his plan of salvation. “My Father goes on working and so do I”, says Jesus(*John 5:17*).

Our response should be: let us work ourselves and serve his holy will in all that we do. Praise, reverence and service to God constitute a continuous gift of ourselves in loving surrender back to God who gives himself so completely to us at all times. This is where love becomes contemplation. It will affect our every initiative and activity. Every vocation is a call to work for the building of the Kingdom of God.

Ordinary life, marriage and the family, economy, science and technology, visual arts and literature: everything will be like the stage on which the drama of our existence joins the immense creativity of God. Even politics has been defined as “the most sublime form of charity”.

Contemplation is therefore a state of being present to God in self-giving so that our whole being is constantly offering itself in love as a pleasing sacrifice to him. “In fact he is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live, and move, and have our existence” (*Acts 17:28*).



PERSONAL LOVE FOR CHRIST

The heart of the Spiritual Exercises is the love for the Blessed Humanity of Christ. Jesus is the Great King who calls us at his service, for the salvation of sinners. Everything happens between two key-prayers.

What is presented as point of arrival of the Spiritual Exercises is already present in the very first page of the book: it is in the traditional, devotional prayer of “*Anima Christi*” which saint Ignatius puts in the beginning of his book. In that prayer, the soul desires to assume the sentiments of Christ and his love to the point of sacrifice. It is an identification with Jesus our ideal.

For Jesus’ greater glory, we struggle and give ourselves always more to people for the love of him. That is the yearning which is included in the only prayer the Saint composed and remains as his summing up of the whole one full month of retreat: “*Suscipe*: Take, Lord, and receive”. It is Ignatius’ concluding prayer.

The *Suscipe* is not found in any of the four weeks of the Spiritual Exercises, but rather was included by Ignatius as additional material with the “contemplation for attaining love” at the end of the Exercises. In this section, Ignatius speaks of the immeasurable love of God that is bestowed upon all of creation, and then asks that he might offer himself to such a loving God.

The Blessed Humanity of Jesus

The object of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius to be attained by means of an imaginative and affectionate contemplation, is the life, passion, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ: The Christian Mystery. That is what makes the Spiritual Exercises so central and effective: it is the contemplation of the Incarnation, of the Blessed Humanity of Jesus.

The heart of the Spiritual Exercises is the love for the Blessed Humanity of Christ. Jesus is the Great King who calls us at his service, for the salvation of sinners. For his greater glory, we struggle and give ourselves always more for the love of him. The only prayer that Ignatius composed is an act of surrendering self: freedom, mind and will and everything in the awareness that all we have is a gift of God: what we ask is only God’s love and his grace: in this the soul finds its fulfillment and satisfaction and that is enough and more than enough.

Jesus is the bridegroom of the soul. This is why throughout the history of Christian spirituality the Saints have focused their attention on the Blessed Humanity of Jesus. In the Bible, the Risen Christ teaches the Apostles to understand him as the hinge keeping together the two Testaments, the hub or center of the Holy Scriptures. The preaching and mission comes as result of the experience of Jesus. This experience is meant to become our experience under the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Peter and Paul

The most wonderful example in the Gospels is that of the encounter/relationship of Jesus with Peter. Another beautiful example in the New Testament is that of Saint Paul. He did not know Jesus during Jesus' time on earth, but he was changed and transformed by his encounter with the Risen Christ on the way to Damascus, in the grace of the Holy Spirit.

So Jesus' story and mystery became his story and the depth of his personality: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (*Galatians 2:20*. Cf. *Philippians 3:7-16*).

The deep consciousness of Jesus as Savior/Mediator out of love is transmitted to the Apostles by the sign of the washing of the feet (*John 13:1-17*). The deepest statement of the need of this personal encounter with Jesus as point of arrival has its perfect expression in the sentence: "Abide with me/make your home in me" (*John 15:4*).

The Sacred Heart of Jesus

Throughout the centuries, this is the witness of the Saints: The Blessed Humanity of Jesus is the place where God meets with Humanity; the sacrament of our salvation; the model of our perfection and therefore it should be the object of our love and contemplation. The last expression of it is the image of the Divine Mercy that we find nowadays in almost all our churches. I like the beautiful figure of Jesus in his appealing humanity and the red and white rays that come from his chest.

"The Bridegroom's chest gives joy to her spouse", Saint Bernard tells us. The chest/bosom/heart signifies love and tenderness. The theme of the open side of the Crucified was introduced into this context. With his lance, the soldier opened the ineffable riches of glory and revealed the heart, the cleft in the rock where humanity finds its refuge. For the mystical writer, Saint Gertrude the Great, the transfixed Heart is the Ark of the Godhead, the place where the divine treasures are kept, and by that very fact, the place where we experience the secrets of God.

To this very heart of Jesus Saint Ignatius takes us with his Spiritual Exercises and with his whole spiritual approach and nothing will please him more than to see that we find in it our permanent abode.

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