

Nine months ago, you began the Spiritual Exercises by prayerfully reflecting that God is love itself and that you are profoundly loved by God. The Preparation Weeks afforded a graced opportunity for you to develop the personal discipline demanded of prayer and to grow in your ability to pray. But along with this, you realized, perhaps for the first time in your lives, that you are profoundly loved by God, and this realization, although you may have been unaware of it at the time, was life-changing.

The Principle and Foundation opened you to the realization that God not only loved you into existence, but continuously pours all good things upon you so that you might know and love and respond to God. But what was central in this is that God creates because God loves. As Christians, we believe that God *is* love. God loves *us*, not because of anything we do or don't do, but because of who God is, because God is love itself – but this hardly begins to say all that needs to be said. God is more than simply love. God is continuously giving, continuously laboring to help us achieve the fullness of life God means for us. In other words, God is Love Loving. *This* is our Principle and Foundation.

The First Week undoubtedly highlighted the realization that you have not always responded with love to God's love, but that's not how the First Week began, nor does it describe what it was meant to achieve. You began the First Week by considering, not your own sin, but rather the mystery of sin. Sin is terrible ingratitude toward our all-loving God, the God who loved us into being and who continues to shower us with his graces. We may not think of sin as thoughtlessness, self-centeredness, and ingratitude, yet that is what sin really is. It's not simply breaking a law or some set of rules; it is a thoughtless, self-centered act that damages a relationship, our relationship with God. It's a failure to respond in a loving manner to the love with which God has so abundantly loved us. The First Week would have been false if it did not force you to confront the reality of sin in your own life, but like each of the Weeks, its ultimate goal was to foster a personal encounter with our all-loving God so that you might realize in the very depths of your being that you are not simply a sinner, but a loved and forgiven sinner.

The Call of the King began the Second Week and, in doing so, provided an important link between the First Week and all that was to follow. The Call of the King began with a parable in which you imagined yourself being invited by some great leader to join him or her in a great enterprise. The parable simply set the stage for a similar call which would soon follow; the thrill of being chosen by such a great leader, the difficulty of the enterprise to which you were being called, and the understanding that the enterprise would ultimately succeed. But along with this, you realized that you would get to know this great leader almost as no other, and that he or she would get to know you in the same way, and that a bond of great affection for one another would ultimately develop between you. Ignatius certainly caught the sense of this when he asked, "How would any generous person respond?"

The second part of this contemplation followed the same pattern, but with one important difference. The word *call* or *invitation* really doesn't express the quality of Christ's initiative. Jesus didn't issue a call or an invitation in which he had no personal feeling or involvement. He was *on fire* with his mission. He didn't simply call or invite; he *beckoned!* He put his whole self into it: beckoning you with his strong voice, inviting eyes, extended arms, and hands reaching out and drawing you in. Jesus *beckoned!* He wanted *you!* The Call of the King is ultimately about dreams. It reflects the dream that fired Ignatius, but it expresses the stuff of which our own dreams are made.

Ignatius Loyola was a man of great desires, and his Spiritual Exercises has been called a "school of great desires." There he continually urged the retreatant to give expression to what she most deeply desired so that this attitude of desire might be fostered and promoted. This path of desire was meant to eventually rise to spiritual freedom culminating in a decision to labor with Christ in the world. But what is remarkable was how Ignatius sought to achieve this: he invited the retreatant to imagine herself with Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem, with Jesus preaching on the Galilean hillside, with Jesus healing a leper, and so on. It was by means of her imaging herself *with Jesus* that Ignatius sought to evoke in her great desires.

This imaginative encounter with Jesus began for you as you entered into the Second Week. For the first few weeks, your prayer was little more than *being with* the infant and adolescent Jesus. Yet when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan and began his public ministry, you realized that you were no longer simply a friend or companion of Jesus; you were becoming his disciple. Ignatius now introduced three meditations that called you to ponder the meaning of such discipleship. In the Two Standards, you pondered the contrast between “riches,” which the world embraces, and poverty, which Jesus embraced. Yet Jesus’ poverty included not only fiscal poverty, but also the poverty of the ordinary and commonplace and the powerlessness that went with it. Then, in the Three Types of People, you pondered not just your readiness to respond to Jesus’ call, but even your freedom to do so. Lastly, in the Three Kinds of Humility, you encountered the most radical and spiritually challenging level of discipleship: that of the person who so deeply desires to be with Jesus that she desires to be poor with Jesus poor, insulted and humiliated with Jesus so treated, and even considered worthless and a fool as Jesus was – yet it is not the poverty, insults, and the rest that she desires. Rather, she desires simply to be *with Jesus in everything*. This, you realized, is the attitude of a person deeply in love with Jesus. And this attitude, even if not fully developed, was so very important as you moved into the Third Week.

As you entered the Third Week you entered a level of discipleship that was significantly different from what you had experienced during the Second Week. During the Second Week, you marveled in wonder and awe at the wisdom and understanding and compassion and power Jesus displayed, and you delighted simply in being with him, especially when his love and care and concern were directed toward you. But during the Third Week, when Jesus seemed powerless, alone, and so utterly human, you wondered what you should do. You wanted to run away, but you couldn’t; you most wanted to be with Jesus. When there was a crowd, it was easy; you were part of the crowd, and those were moments of great grace. But when Jesus was utterly alone, whether physically or psychically, you imaginatively *became Jesus* in his sufferings, and those were moments of even greater grace.

During the Fourth Week, when you imaginatively became one of those who had witnessed Jesus’ arrest, condemnation, crucifixion, and death – Mary Magdalene, or Peter, or John, or one of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus – in all their sorrow and loss at Jesus’ death, you encountered the risen Jesus and experienced the wondrous Joy he shared with you as he strengthened you, encouraged you, comforted you and, in ever so many ways, prepared you for your continued discipleship.

Finally, in the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love you contemplated *everything* – seeing and feeling and understanding it just as God might see and feel and understand it – looking upon it with an attitude of openness, acceptance, respect, reverence, and love. Then, after perceiving it in this way, you allowed all the affections associated with the experience to gradually rise within you and touch your deepest self. In this prayer, you carefully observed the manner in which God loves – finding God present and active everywhere – so that you might love in a similarly generous manner. And thus the Exercises ended.

I gave much thought to how I might conclude these reflections and finally decided to conclude with a poem by a Carmelite nun, who wrote using her baptismal name, Jessica Powers. I felt the poem speaks of each of you – that is to say, the person you have become. It is entitled “For a Child of God.”

*“Stir into flame the gift of God
that you have received...”*
(2 Timothy 1:6)

The saints and mystics had a name
for that deep inwardness of flame,
the height or depth or ground or goal
which is God’s dwelling in the soul...

think of that place of living light,
yours and within you and aglow
where only God and you can go...

But there are days when watching eyes
could guess that you hold Paradise.
Sometimes the shining overflows
and everyone around you knows.

All day and when you wake at night