

The *Spiritual Exercises* were born in the spiritual experience of Ignatius Loyola, first in his reflections on how God was engaged in his own life, and then in his experiences of guiding others in their spiritual lives. Ignatius' spiritual journey began during a long convalescence at his family home at Loyola from wounds that had almost ended his life. This long convalescence provided a graced setting in which he was able to open himself to God and to God's action in his life. When he was well enough to travel, he made a pilgrimage across Spain to the monastery of Montserrat near Barcelona before proceeding to the nearby town of Manresa. He planned to spend simply a few days at Manresa to record some reflections in his journal. As events unfolded, however, he remained there almost eleven months during which he experienced some of the most illuminative mystical experiences of his life. He began to record notes on his experiences, perhaps simply to clarify his thoughts, but through his conversations with others and through guiding others, he discovered that these notes could be beneficial to them as well. He continued to refine these notes over the course of the next fifteen years, yet by the time he left Manresa in February 1523, his notebook held the structure of what we know today as the *Spiritual Exercises*.

The Spiritual Exercises are usually presented in some quiet, secluded place: a 'retreat' from the busyness of one's everyday life. Thus, the experience of making the Exercises is usually called a 'retreat' with a 'retreat director' guiding one or more 'retreatants.' Ignatius, however, never spoke of a 'retreat director' or a 'retreatant,' but rather 'the one who gives the Exercises' and 'the one who receives or makes the Exercises.' Ignatius believed that the activity of the one giving the Exercises and of the one making the Exercises had to be related, above all, to the activity of God, who is ultimately the Director (big 'D') of the experience. The role of the one who gives the Exercises – the so-called 'director' (small 'd') – is simply to facilitate the conversation between the retreatant and God.

Ignatius makes it clear that his directives must be adapted to the specific needs of the retreatant. In fact, he felt that there was no such thing as giving or making "the pure Exercises," in the sense of employing the text literally. Adaptation is key to the Ignatian dynamic. Since the true director of the retreat is God alone, the human director must strive to remain God's instrument. He/she does this by listening carefully to the retreatant in the review of her prayer and then proceeding carefully to follow the Spirit's lead as best as he/she can by suggesting exercises and/or ways of proceeding to further this movement. Thus, the human director must not get caught up in a lock-step presentation of a text.

An annotation is a note added to a text by way of commentary or explanation. In the *Spiritual Exercises* the Annotations describe the nature and purpose of the Exercises, explain terminology, offer guidance, and describe adaptations to the Exercises. It is important to be attentive not only to the general sense of any annotation but also to words or phrases that add important nuance.

- [1] the nature and purpose of the Exercises
- [2-3] general guidelines
- [4] division and duration of the Exercises
- [5] the basic dispositions required in the retreatant
- [6-17] guidelines for the director in dealing with the retreatant
- [18-20] adaptations of the Exercises to different classes of retreatants

1. "...so is the name spiritual exercises given to any means of preparing and disposing one's soul to rid itself of all disordered affections and then, after their removal, in seeking and finding God's will in the ordering of one's life for the salvation of one's soul."

any means or preparing and disposing one's soul: the retreat embraces not only the retreatant's formal prayer, but all her activities. It embraces:

what the retreatant does through her own efforts (Annotation 7) and

what the retreatant allows God to do in her (Annotation 15).

disordered affections (I prefer “disordered desires”): refers not to an isolated reaction but rather a persistent and abiding orientation; what is needed is a conversion of one’s affectivity – feelings, emotions, desires, drives, compulsions, etc. (The sometimes-used term “disordered attachments” doesn’t really express this.)

seeking and finding God’s will: for the retreatant, the Exercises are a journey to find God because it is finding God that she finds God’s will and ultimately finds herself. On this topic, it’s interesting to note that the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* contains many adjectival references to God – God’s grace, God’s goodness, God’s will and such – yet the stand-alone noun ‘God’ is rarely used. What we find, rather, are numerous references to ‘God our Lord’ and, less frequently, to the ‘Creator and Lord’, expressions which, while alluding to the triune God, refer almost exclusively to the person of Christ. The Trinity is mentioned at the Incarnation [102, 106-109], the Father in the Triple Colloquies [63, 147f, 156, 168], and the Holy Spirit is at the Baptism at the Jordan and during the post-Resurrection appearances [273, 304, 307, 312], yet the Spiritual Exercises are inherently Christocentric. In fact, Jesus Christ is central to the entire dynamic. In brief, the Spiritual Exercises are meant to promote a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Thus, when Ignatius speaks of God’s will, he’s referring not so much to the triune God but to Jesus Christ.

This sheds important light on the expression ‘God’s will.’ I believe that the expression ‘God’s will’ carries a level of emotional baggage that grates on modern-day sensitivities. It seems to describe an uncaring intention based on solely intellectual grounds that, in one manner or another, includes a penalty for a failure to comply with it. In fact, it seems to describe the state of mind, not of a loving Person, but rather of a machine. When we understand God’s will to refer, not to a nebulous ‘God,’ but to the person of Jesus Christ, we understand it in terms not of obligation but of relationship. For this reason, I believe that Ignatius’ expression ‘God’s will’ really meant ‘God’s heartfelt desire’ or – better yet – ‘Christ’s heartfelt desire.’ It seems, then, that Ignatius is inviting the retreatant to enter into the mystery of the person of Christ, allow Christ to become the central figure in her life and – to get ahead of ourselves – be with Christ and labor with Christ in his mission [95].

2. “The person who gives to another the method and procedure for meditating or contemplating should accurately narrate the history contained in the contemplation, going over the points with only a brief or summary explanation. . . . It is not abundance of knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the inner sense and taste of things.”

“the person who gives”: Ignatius never uses the terms ‘director’ or ‘directee.’ Rather, he speaks only of ‘the one who gives the Exercises’ or ‘the one who makes/receives the Exercises.’ Ignatius understands the director to be God.

a brief or summary explanation: The retreatant will be taught much more by God than by the director. The director must explain a number of things, but always briefly and to the point. Annotation 15 will stress that it is important that the director stand back and allow God to work directly in the retreatant. The focus here is not scripture study but rather an interpersonal encounter with Jesus Christ.

the inner sense and taste (sentir y gustar) of things: *sentir*: felt-knowledge: an affective, intuitive knowing. For Ignatius, knowledge was not merely an intellectual grasping of abstract propositions, but rather a total human experience of understanding with all of its emotional resonance. This is a matter of being rather than a conscious judgment, an expression of the structure of one’s personal identity formed through his basic personal commitment. The Spiritual Exercises are a journey of the heart: it focuses on experiential felt-knowledge rather than intellectual (objective) knowledge.

3. “In all the following spiritual exercises we use the acts of the intellect in reasoning and of the will in eliciting acts of the affections ... we should note that when we are conversing with God our Lord..., greater reverence is demanded of us than when we are using the intellect to understand.”

acts of the intellect .. and of the will: the acts of the intellect (reasoning) prepare for the acts of the will (desires) in the form of affections. The Exercises are ultimately meant to foster, not simply intellectual knowing, but felt-knowing leading to an interpersonal relationship with Jesus Christ.

greater reverence: Since irreverence interferes with any interpersonal encounter, Ignatius cautions us about this right from the beginning. The external expression of reverence is culturally determined and thus diverse. But unless external reverence, in all its diversity, is rooted in a genuine reverence of the heart, it is worthless. Reverence was an essential element of Ignatius’ own daily encounter with God. Diego Laínez, one of Ignatius’ early companions, observed Ignatius at prayer. Ignatius had a habit of going up to the terrace where he could see the open sky. “He would stand there and take off his hat; without stirring he would fix his eyes on the heavens for a short while. Then, sinking to his knees, he would make a lowly gesture of reverence to God. After that he would sit on a bench, for his body’s weakness did not permit him to do otherwise. He sat there, head uncovered, tears trickling drop by drop, in such sweetness and silence, that no sob, no sigh, no noise, no movement of the body was noticed.” (*Fontes narrativi S.I.*, IV, 744-757, esp. 747)

4. The Spiritual Exercises are divided into four “weeks,” where each “week” represents a stage in the retreatant’s spiritual journey. There is an organic unity between each week and what follows, where each disposes the retreatant for what follows. Thus, she is meant to advance from one week to the next when she has achieved the grace she desired. (This ideal, however, is not always realized. She may receive the desired grace later or not at all.)

It is important to recognize that the Exercises are not just a program that is meant to be followed; they are a personal faith-journey of “seeking and finding.” As such, they involve an interplay between the prescribed and the personal, between the program, on the one hand, and the unpredictable needs, rate of progress, and varieties of experience of the retreatant, on the other. Therefore, the retreatant must be given the space she needs to seek and find the graces anticipated.

5. “The persons who make the Exercises will benefit greatly by entering into them with great spirit and generosity toward their Creator and Lord, and by offering all their desires and freedom to him so that His Divine Majesty can make use of their persons ...”

great spirit and generosity: critically important dispositions: the Exercises truly begin when the retreatant abandons herself to God (she should pray for the interior freedom that will allow her to do so, remain focused on the task at hand, and avoid distractions)

Creator and Lord: Ignatius understood Jesus Christ as both ‘Creator,’ the One who initiates the great action of God’s sending and gathering love, and ‘Lord,’ the goal towards which it is directed.

desires: the Spiritual Exercises are a “school of great desires”

freedom: the Spiritual Exercises are meant to promote interior freedom (“indifference”)

His Divine Majesty = God: a title which arose spontaneously from Ignatius’ heart; it spoke of the deep reverence and awe he felt for God (see Annotation 3)

6. When the director perceives that the retreatant is not experiencing any spiritual motions, the director should question the retreatant about the Exercises.

spiritual motions: thoughts, impulses, inclinations, urges, consolations, desolations, etc.

If the retreatant is truly engaged in prayer, there should be some interior movement. If she claims that “nothing” is happening, it is possible that something is happening, but she may lack the understanding and/or the words to describe it. The director needs to tread carefully here to assess what the retreatant is actually experiencing. If he/she ascertains that the retreatant is experiencing nothing in

her prayer, he/she should ask her how she prays, at what times she prays, where she prays and, in general, how she spends the day. “Nothing happening” may indicate a deeper resistance

7. If the director of the Exercises observes that the retreatant is in desolation and being tempted, he/she should not treat her ... kindly and gently.

kindly and gently: When retreatant is struggling, the director should treat her kindly and gently, encouraging and strengthening her by explaining the rules for the discernment of spirits and exposing the wiles of the enemy. (Such struggles are not uncommon during the First and Third Weeks.)

8. According to the need perceived in the retreatant with respect to desolations and temptations, the director may explain to her the rules for the discernment of spirits.

according to the need perceived: the director should explain the rules for the discernment of spirits only if he/she perceives a need for them in the retreatant.

9. The director should explain the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits for the First Week when the retreatant is new to spiritual things and is being tempted “openly and grossly.” This awareness comes through the review of the prayer. Explaining the Rules for the Second Week without sufficient need would be harmful for such a person because they are too subtle.

10. The director should explain the rules for the discernment of spirits for the Second Week when the retreatant is being tempted to evil under the “appearance” of good...

“illuminative life ...purgative life”: classical terms that refer to two of the three stages of spiritual growth – purgative, illuminative, unitive – that date from Pseudo-Dionysius (6th century); this is the only reference to them in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

11. “It is helpful for the person making the Exercises of the First Week to know nothing about what is to be done in the Second Week...”

The grace of the Exercises is always to be found in the present moment, even if the present moment is laborious.

“*Age quod agis*” = “Do what you are doing” (be attentive only to the present moment)

The retreatant should be cautioned against reading the text of the Spiritual Exercises or books about the Spiritual Exercises.

12. “The one giving the Exercises should insist strongly with the retreatant that he or she should remain for a full hour in each of the exercises or contemplations which will be made each day...”

The duration of the retreatant’s prayer must not be a function of her emotions or casual happenstance (a set duration should be determined and followed for each period of prayer).

a full hour: A full hour (60 minutes) may be considered an ideal and, as a general rule, should never be exceeded, but I believe the retreatant should be allowed some latitude in establishing the optimal duration of her prayer (45 - 60 minutes).

13. If the retreatant is tempted to shorten her pre-determined time of prayer, she should act against this temptation (“*agere contra*” = “to go against”) by actually lengthening her prayer. This is not simply teeth-gritted compulsiveness, but rather a matter of discernment: in time of desolation, the evil spirit distracts the retreatant by inducing sluggishness of spirit. What is needed here is honest interpretation and courageous response.

14. “If the one giving the Exercises sees that the retreatant is proceeding with consolation and great fervor, he or she should warn the person not to make some promise or vow which is unconsidered or hasty...”

To run ahead of grace is not generosity but foolishness. In his *Autobiography*, Ignatius speaks of the foolishness of three men whom he was directing in the Exercises during his studies in Paris: “They

underwent great changes and promptly gave all that they had to the poor, even their books, and began begging alms.”

15. “...it is more fitting and much better that the Creator and Lord himself should communicate himself to the devout soul, inflaming it with his love and praise, and disposing it for the way in which it will be better able to serve him...”

God is actively engaged in the life of each and every person – ‘laboring’ in them, Ignatius would say – to help them achieve the fullness of life for which God created them.

“Accordingly, the one giving the Exercises ought not to lean or incline in either direction but rather, while standing like the pointer of a scale in equilibrium, allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord.”

The Director is ultimately God. The director’s role is to accompany the retreatant in developing her relationship with God, but he/she should never get in the way of God’s action in the retreatant.

“There was one ‘doctrine’ that was fundamental to the Jesuits, one that gave orientation to all their ministries and to the way they led their lives. It was the basic premise of the *Exercises*, even though it was buried unobtrusively in the fifteenth ‘Preliminary Observation’: the Creator deals directly with the creature, and the creature deals directly with the Creator – heart to heart, one might say. Upon this teaching Jesuits based their more characteristic themes: indifference, discernment, and inner devotion or consolation.” (John W. O’Malley, *The First Jesuits* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993] p. 373)

16. “If the retreatant finds herself inclined to something in an ill-ordered way, it is helpful to strive with all possible effort for the contrary of that attachment.”

This is another example of “*agere contra*” (“to go against”). It is important to recognize, however, that conversion is not simply a matter of going against the “disorder” in our affections. It consists in allowing God to enter into our affections and direct them.

17. The retreatant is encouraged to be open with the director about the various interior movements and thoughts she experiences. The director, however, should respect the retreatant’s privacy and not inquire about her more personal thoughts or sins.

18. “The Spiritual Exercises should be adapted to the disposition of the persons who desire to make them...”

The adaptability displayed here and Annotation 19 is a testimony to Ignatius’ desire for the Exercises to help as many people as possible. Ignatius proposes a program of “light exercises” for people who are not yet ready for the full Exercises. Such programs, which include weekend retreats and eight-day retreats, are sometimes called “18th-annotation retreats.”

19. An adaptation of the full Exercises for those who desire to make the full Exercises but cannot withdraw from the responsibilities of daily life for a full month: an hour and a half of preparation, prayer, and reflection daily. The “19th-annotation retreat” should not be considered “second best.” In fact, because the retreat unfolds in the context of one’s daily life, there is an ongoing integration and reality factor that can be advantageous.

20. Ignatius proposed the full Spiritual Exercises to the person “who desires to make all the progress possible.” He thus speaks of the graced desire which lies at the foundation of the Exercises. The retreatant will benefit the more she withdraws herself not only from all friends and acquaintances (e.g., a different place) but also from all earthly concerns (i.e., distractions).

The original form of the full Spiritual Exercises, the “20th-annotation retreat,” is a 30-day silent retreat made in a secluded place. It includes 4-5 hours of meditative/contemplative prayer each day and a daily meeting with one’s director.

Texts of the *Spiritual Exercises*:

*The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, a translation and commentary by George E. Ganss (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992): \$11.95; available from Loyola Press

David L. Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996): \$25.95; available from the Institute of Jesuit Sources ([jesuitsources.bc.edu](http://jesuitsources.bc.edu)).