

The *Spiritual Exercises* were born in the spiritual experience of Ignatius Loyola, in his reflections on how God was working in his life, and in his experiences of guiding others in their spiritual journeys. If you were to pick up the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, as I did when I was a senior in high school, you would quickly discover that it is not a treatise on the spiritual life nor, for that matter, is it even meant to be read. It is more correctly a set of guidelines, much like a set of teacher's notes, intended for a person guiding another in 'making' the Exercises. They describe a process to assist a person in developing (1) attentiveness to God, (2) openness to God, and finally (3) the interior freedom to respond generously to what God is asking of her. But such words do little to communicate a sense of what really happens to a person making the Exercises. I believe that if Ignatius Loyola were writing the *Spiritual Exercises* today, he might preface the work with this reflection:

Nothing is more practical than finding God;  
that is, falling in love in a quite absolute, final way.  
What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.  
It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning,  
what you will do with your evenings, how you will spend your weekends,  
what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart,  
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.  
Fall in love; stay in love, and it will decide everything.  
– Joseph P. Whelan, S.J. –

For me, the *Spiritual Exercises* is best described as a process to help a person to fall in love – first with God who loves her beyond her wildest imagining and then, and more specifically, with Jesus, who she will get to know and love as well as any of his disciples. “Fall in love; stay in love, and it will decide everything.”

Ignatius Loyola began the *Spiritual Exercises* with 20 preliminary observations he called Annotations. In the last three of these he described three ways in which the *Spiritual Exercises* can be made. In the 20th Annotation he described the traditional manner of making the full *Spiritual Exercises*: retiring to some secluded place and spending four or five hours each day in prayer for thirty days – a wonderfully grace-filled experience, but one that is often beyond the means of most people. In the 18th Annotation he described an abbreviated version of the *Spiritual Exercises*, such as a weekend retreat based on the themes of the Exercises. But Ignatius recognized that many people wished to make the full *Spiritual Exercises*, but because of the demands of their day-to-day lives, they were unable to get away for 30 days of silence and prayer. He thus created the increasingly popular *Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life*, which he described in the 19th Annotation. In this form, the person continues with his or her everyday life and work while devoting an hour each day to prayer over the course of about nine months.

I must confess that as someone who has made the thirty-day retreat three times and experienced the life-changing transformation the Exercises afford, I had long equated the 'real' *Spiritual Exercises* with the 30-day retreat, and felt that the *Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life* was just a “budget” version that wasn't the “real” *Spiritual Exercises*. This was how I thought until I began to direct the *Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life*. I now feel that the *Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life* – the form which you will be making – offers what can be a far more profound experience. Why? In a 30-day retreat the retreatant can move through a critically important part very quickly and miss its real grace. But in the *Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life* the retreatant spends considerably more time on the same material and can thus experience the grace much more profoundly. Moreover, the 30-day retreat, for all its graces, has an element of unreality about it: it is done in silence away from home. When it ended, you would drive home, while

saying, “Well, back to the real world.” The very nature of the Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life – that it’s done in the ‘real world’ – helps integrate a person’s everyday life into the graces of the retreat.

The Spiritual Exercises are an invitation to grace, an invitation to encounter God and to allow oneself to be transformed by that experience. Making the full Spiritual Exercises demands great commitment, but it is important to recognize that there is nothing guaranteed; the result is entirely a gift of God. Ignatius points out, however, that the most important qualities in a person making the Exercises – that is to say, the most important qualities in you – are openness to the process, great-hearted desire, and generosity.

The Spiritual Exercises have often been described as a ‘school of prayer’; that is, the person making the Exercises grows a great deal in prayer. Now we may often think of prayer in terms of what we do – the words we say and the thoughts we have – but prayer is ultimately what we allow God to do in us, and it begins in listening and in being attentive to God and to God’s action in us.

The Spiritual Exercises outline a process to assist a person in developing the interior freedom to respond generously to what God is asking of her. The Spiritual Exercises draw the retreatant into a progressively deepening relationship with the person of Jesus – and it is in finding herself profoundly loved by Jesus and sensing within herself a growing desire to be with Jesus that she gradually discovers within herself the inner freedom and ultimately the desire to labor with Jesus.

The Spiritual Exercises are premised on the understanding that God deals directly with the individual person. This is the foundation or cornerstone of Ignatian spirituality. Everything in Ignatian spirituality is premised on the understanding that God is actively engaged in your life and in mine. Your Director (big ‘D’) during your individually-directed retreat will ultimately be God. The person with whom you will meet each week (your director with a small ‘d’) will be simply a companion on your journey. This person will ask clarifying questions, offer encouragement, and occasionally challenge you, but his/her primary role is simply to listen. Rarely will he/she offer answers; more often he/she will encourage you to ask questions. He/she will act as a mirror: helping you notice God’s actions in your life, understand them, savor them, and respond to them. The Spiritual Exercises are unique to each and every person. What happens to you during your retreat will be unique to you.

Believe me, you are about to embark upon something wonderful.