

THE
SPIRITUAL EXERCISES
OF
Saint
Ignatius

Translated and with Commentary by
PIERRE WOLFF



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Foreword

It would be impossible to measure the enormous impact which Ignatius Loyola has made on the Christian world over the past four centuries through the text of his Spiritual Exercises. Countless retreats have been shaped in one way or another according to that text, and God only knows how many men and women have matured spiritually under the impulse of those retreats. While the full four weeks of the Exercises have frequently been adapted in response to the backgrounds and circumstances of individual retreatants, Ignatius' charism has continued to attract and guide people through all those adaptations and modifications. One of Ignatius' first companions confidently observed that Pope Paul III's solemn approval of the text of the Exercises in 1548 was both a rare privilege and an extraordinary honor for an individual writing; the pronouncement bordered on being infallible! And one early adversary noted in his copy of the text that such papal approval was "astonishing." It was, he thought, theologically appalling that a text which came down so strongly on the side of the individual's direct experience of God should have won the endorsement of the Holy See.* Nevertheless, the efficacy of the Spiritual Exercises in everyday life had been confirmed over and over again. For many people, the Exercises had paved the way to deep holiness and union with God. As a result of making the Exercises, they had acquired the grace of finding God in all things.

Anyone wishing to understand both the Spiritual Exercises and

* See John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 302. Also Candido de Dalmases, *Ignatius of Loyola: Founder of the Jesuits* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 206.

the charism which lies beneath them would do well to read closely Ignatius' spiritual testament or "autobiography."^{*} There he reveals the intense religious experience which gave birth to the plan of the Exercises. Ignatius had discovered the way of the Spirit through trial and error. The will of God—God's ongoing project both in his own life and in the lives of others—was, he realized, the pearl of great price. Indeed, the history behind the Exercises is the story of one person's discovery of that great treasure of which the gospel speaks, for the sake of which one parts with absolutely everything (Mt 13:44).

Actually living the gospel, however, is neither simple nor easy. One soon finds oneself doing battle with all sorts of opposing forces and desires. Just as bodily exercise would be meaningless if our bodies encountered no physical resistance, so also we would not profit from exercises of the spirit if we never encountered tension and resistance of another sort. Not every desire leads to God, not every pious thought originates in the Spirit, and not every prayer is consoling. Sometimes the reality of God seems ever more remote, and the immediacy of earthly attractions ever more desirable. One learns that seeking and putting into practice the will of God requires daily attentiveness to the word of God revealed in the world and in one's life. It also requires learning to notice key movements within one's heart and soul, movements which often slip by because we have not learned how to discern the subtle yet ordinary disclosures of the divine mystery in daily life.

Living out the gospel, freely and joyfully, depends upon the ability to recognize the features of the crucified and risen Jesus in one's life and in our world. The legacy of Ignatius in the Spiritual Exercises has been that of leading a person through the dynamics of discipleship. Loving Jesus ardently and following him closely will be impeded unless one is also growing resolutely in humility and self-knowledge, which accounts for why the Ignatian view of discipleship places heavy stress on spiritual direction.

^{*} Several recent versions are available. For example: *A Pilgrim's Testament: The Memoirs of St. Ignatius Loyola*, trans. Parmananda Divarkar (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995). Also, *Reminiscences or Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola*, trans. Philip Endean, in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1996).

Ignatius was, it must not be forgotten, a man of his time. Anyone studying the text of the Spiritual Exercises at the close of the twentieth century will realize soon enough that we do not share at all points the same theological perspective as Ignatius. In fact, we probably do not share the same ascetical discipline at all points either. Nevertheless, the Exercises provide a way of entering into the world of the gospel and coming to the startling yet wonderful conclusion that, first, the world of the gospel is exactly where one wants to be and, second, that one cannot remain there forever. In the end, we must live in our own world and in our own times, and learn how to contemplate that world with gospel eyes. Ignatius once believed that it was God's will that he go to the Holy Land, and he believed further that it was God's will that he live and work there. But when he was ordered by ecclesiastical authority to leave the Holy Land, he recognized that instruction as coming from God; nor did he ever return. He had to imagine his own Galilee and recreate the Holy Land for himself.

The Exercises, of course, are only an instrument for steeping oneself in the story of Jesus. But instruments of the spirit serve a valuable purpose. Not all those who profess to be Christian have actually embraced the gospel. For some people, and perhaps for too many, the gospel provides no more than the symbols and motifs of a reassuring religious mythology, a "sacred canopy." It offers them a framework within which they can interpret history and create meaningfulness within their own lives. As mythology, the gospel even makes comprehensible the great human drama of sin and grace. In the end, however, the gospel is not really their story; it is merely the story of Jesus: what he did, how he died, and the happy ending of his being raised from the dead. When reduced to mythology, the gospel never actually engages us directly and immediately. We welcome Jesus' moral example. We watch Jesus do his redemptive thing, as it were; he was born to suffer and die. We become grateful but passive spectators to the divine drama which once unfolded in our history.

But the gospel can become our story, too; this is what Ignatius discovered. The divine action in and through Jesus was not a one-time display, an event from a culturally and historically distant

age ever to be devoutly recalled and passively observed on our mental stages. One can really encounter and be with that Jesus of Nazareth in every time and place; such, of course, was the conviction of the evangelists themselves. Through the four weeks of the Exercises, Ignatius drew many others along the interior path God had shown him. Absolutely convinced that God had called him and placed him with his Son, Ignatius appears from behind the pages of his text to sound like the great apostle Paul as “one untimely born” (1 Cor 15:8), for Ignatius knew the risen Lord. Presumptuous as it sounds, Ignatius’ zeal and love for Christ would not have run second even to that of Paul himself. Yet Ignatius seems to have been convinced that this was the quintessential Christian grace intended for all of us: to be placed by the Father alongside the Son. And for what purpose? Was it merely a private consolation? No; for Ignatius the aim was always “to help souls.” Or as we might say, to share the grace of apostleship, to be companions of Jesus.

It is probably no coincidence that the enormous resurgence of interest in Ignatian retreats and spiritual direction which we have witnessed since Vatican II has been taking place at a time when there is such an intense desire to know more and more about the gospels and the person of Jesus. Modern biblical studies and research into every conceivable aspect of the New Testament records about Jesus point, I believe, to an extraordinary action of the Spirit in our time. Future generations will look back at this moment and marvel at our recovery of the human, historical Jesus.

Salvation obviously is not a matter of scholarship; we are not going to win eternal life on the basis of our intellectual accomplishments alone. Thus there needs to be an appropriation of the fruits of so much historical and textual research. Ignatius would have welcomed with delight the opportunity to read and study what is so readily available to us in biblical commentaries. But he would also have reminded us that the imagination has to steep itself in the gospel story, and that we need to give that story a chance to fill our senses. He knew quite well the risks involved when great stress is laid upon individual experience; enthusiasm could go wild and cause considerable spiritual and even bodily harm. Yet Ignatius trusted the power of the gospel story to work

its way through the whole of a person's life and to free that person to say yes to God's call in Christ.

In short, the Exercises represent Ignatius' deep love of the gospels and his desire to help others awaken to that same love. This splendid edition of the Spiritual Exercises and its wise, insightful commentary puts me in mind of the gospel text: "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Mt 13:52). The book you hold in your hands indeed comes from a scribe trained for the kingdom of God.

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First Week

[45]

FIRST EXERCISE

of meditating about the threefold sin,
with the three faculties of our soul

It comprises a preparatory prayer, two preludes, three principal points, and one colloquy.

[46] *The preparatory prayer* is the one in which we ask from the Lord the grace that all our energies and activities be sincerely directed to His glory and worship.

[47] *The first prelude* consists of a certain mental re-creation of the place. It should be observed in this regard that during any meditation or contemplation of a corporal entity, for example of Christ, we shall see with a sort of imaginary vision a physical place representing what we are contemplating, for instance a temple or a mountain where we could find Christ Jesus or the Virgin Mary, and everything else that is related to the theme of our contemplation.

If, on the contrary, the pondered subject is an incorporeal entity, like the consideration on sin offered here, the composition of the place could be such that, through the imagination, we would perceive our soul chained in this corruptible body as if in prison, and man himself exiled, in this valley of miseries, among irrational animals.

[48] *The second prelude* will be to ask God for what I desire according to the subject of the suggested contemplation: That means that, if I am going to meditate on Christ's Resurrection, I should

ask for joy in order to rejoice with the rejoicing Christ; if, on the contrary, it is on the Passion, I should ask for tears, pain, and anguish in order to suffer with the suffering Christ. So, in this present meditation, I must beg for shame and confusion about myself, considering how many human beings, even for only one mortal sin, were damned, and that I have also merited damnation for sinning so many times.

[49] It must be noticed in connection with the above that the preparatory prayer and the two preludes must come before every meditation or contemplation; but, if the prayer is always made in the same manner, the two preludes are different according to the diversity of the topics.

[50] *The first point* will be to exercise my memory about the first of all sins, the one committed by the angels; applying immediately the discourse of the intellect, and moved by the instigation of the will, I will reflect upon and try to understand what will put all of me to shame and embarrassment, through the comparison of that single sin of the angels with the multiplicity of my own sins. Then it might be concluded that if they, for one single crime, had deserved hell, how much more often have I merited such a torment. Thus we say that it should be brought to memory how the angels, created at first in a state of grace, but (which was necessary for the achievement of happiness) unwilling through their free will to revere and obey their Creator, grew insolent against Him, were changed from grace to wickedness and thrown from heaven to hell. Thereafter, we should consider at length these things very carefully with the intellect, and at the same time strongly insist on rousing up all possible emotions of the will.

[51] *The second point* consists in exercising those same three faculties while considering the sin of our first parents (which we'll name the second sin), remembering what a long penance they suffered because of it, how much corruption penetrated within humankind, how many thousands of human beings were driven into hell. It should be clearly remembered how Adam was made of clay on the plain of Damascus and put in the earthly paradise, how Eve was made from one of his ribs, how they had been for-

bidden to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and how nevertheless, they ate it; how after that sin they were immediately thrown out of paradise; how, dressed in clothing made of skins and deprived of their original righteousness, they repented for the remaining time of their life in the greatest hardship and tribulation. As before, one should go over these recollections with the reasoning of the intellect and the affections of the will.

[52] *The third point* is for us to exercise the mind in a similar manner about a mortal and particular sin (we'll call this one the third sin, in order to distinguish it from the other two), considering that for such a sin, even when committed only once, many perhaps have been thrown down into hell; maybe an almost uncountable number are tortured with everlasting sufferings because of crimes that are less in number and gravity than mine. Therefore, memory should turn back to consider how great is the gravity and the wickedness of sin, which offends the Maker and Lord of all things. It should also be rationally considered that an eternal punishment is justly assigned to sin, inasmuch as it is committed against the infinite goodness of God. Finally, affections have to be aroused, as it has already been said.

[53] The colloquy will be made by imagining Jesus Christ in front of me, attached to the cross. Then I should look within myself for the reason why the infinite Creator Himself became a creature, and deemed it worthy to come from life eternal to a temporal death for my sins. Moreover, I will blame myself, questioning: What worthy of being mentioned have I done thus far for Christ? What will I do eventually, or what must I do? Looking at Him fixed on the cross, I will say all the things that my mind and heart will bring forth.

[54] Furthermore, the characteristic of the colloquy is to be like the conversation of a friend with a friend, or of a servant with his lord, at one time asking for a grace, at another accusing myself of a fault, sometimes communicating my own affairs and asking for counsel or help concerning them. At the end, the Our Father will be said.