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# The Spiritual Exercises as a Foundation for Jesuit Education

By Kevin O'Brien, S.J.

**T**he Spiritual Exercises began not as a book, but as an experience.

The story is familiar. In 1521, at about the age of 30, Iñigo López de Loyola got hurt in a meaningless battle at Pamplona defending the honor of the Spanish crown. He spent six months convalescing at his family castle. For one of the few interludes in his life, the passionate, active Iñigo settled down and listened. He noticed movements of his soul that he was previously too distracted to notice: feelings, attractions, passions, ambitions, and dreams. Like any Basque, Iñigo was a religious man, but not very spiritual. But during this time, he explored the depths of his soul. Reading Ludolph of Saxony's *Life of Christ* and a version of the lives of the saints, the young knight started to imagine a life different than one serving at court. Like the saints he was reading about, he too could serve Christ, as an itinerant teacher and servant of the poor.

Wisely, Iñigo decided to test these newly discovered desires. Once recuperated, he hit the road, intending to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. After an all-night vigil at the Benedictine mountaintop shrine at Montserrat, Iñigo, ever the romantic, laid his sword before the altar of Our Lady and donned the sackcloth of a beggar, signaling his change in life. Next, he stopped in the nearby town of Manresa. Intending to stay only a few days, he remained there for about ten months. He fell into a routine of prayer, fasting, spiritual conversation, and service to the sick and poor. Iñigo's conversion was deepening.

These were intense months for Iñigo. He experienced heights of consolation in intimacy with God and depths of desolation, even despair. He reckoned with profound regrets from his former life in pursuit of riches, honors, and worldly glory, yet he came to know a God who was deeply and personally invested in him, in his words, like a school teacher instructing a pupil. He battled temptations of various sorts, and savored moments of profound interior freedom,

even enjoying several mystical visions. His soul, in short, was being exercised.

All the while, Iñigo took notes, recording insights and subtle movements of his soul. He shared these experiences with spiritual counselors, refining his notes along the way. Iñigo began this spiritual record because he thought his insights and experiences could help him to help others. This journal was the beginning of the manual of prayer we now know as the Spiritual Exercises.

While main parts of the Exercises were composed before Iñigo left Manresa, they remained a work in progress as he gave the Exercises to various people on his travels and during his formal studies. Other directors too relied on his recordings as they gave the Exercises. For the most part, the text was completed by 1541, when Ignatius (the Latinized form of his name) had settled in Rome and the Society of Jesus had been instituted. Ignatius wrote the original version of the Exercises in Spanish and executed a Latin translation while studying in Paris about 1534. With papal approval in 1548, the Exercises were published in Latin, the version most widely used in the decades to follow.

Ignatius gave the Church the Spiritual Exercises as a testament to God's gentle, persistent laboring in his life. Over his lifetime, Ignatius became convinced that the Exercises could help other people draw closer to God and discern God's call in their lives, much as they had helped him. The Exercises have never been for Jesuits alone. Ignatius crafted the Exercises mostly as a layman, without any formal theological training, and he intended them to benefit the entire Church.

Unlike the spiritual classics of John of the Cross, Thérèse de Lisieux, Thomas Merton, or Dorothy Day, the Exercises make for very dry reading. They read more like a cookbook

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or instruction manual because Ignatius intended the book as a manual for those directing others through the Exercises. In one sense, there is nothing new in the Exercises: Ignatius relied on prayer forms and spiritual traditions deeply rooted in the Church. What is distinctive is how Ignatius artfully wove them together and how much he emphasized the experiential in the life of prayer.

Thus, the purpose of the Exercises is very practical: to grow in union with God, who frees us to “help souls,” as Ignatius often wrote, and to make good decisions about our lives. Ignatius invites us into an intimate encounter with God, revealed in Jesus Christ, so that we can learn to think and act more like Jesus. The Exercises help us grow in interior freedom from disordered attachments so that we can respond more generously to God’s call in our life. The Exercises demand much of us, engaging our intellect and emotions, our memory and will. The first Jesuits rightly called the Exercises a school of prayer, essential to the reform of the Church. The Exercises engage both head and heart and ground praying in the concrete realities of both the Scripture and one’s life. Making the Spiritual Exercises can be both exhilarating and exhausting, which explains why Ignatius compared making the Exercises to doing physical exercise.

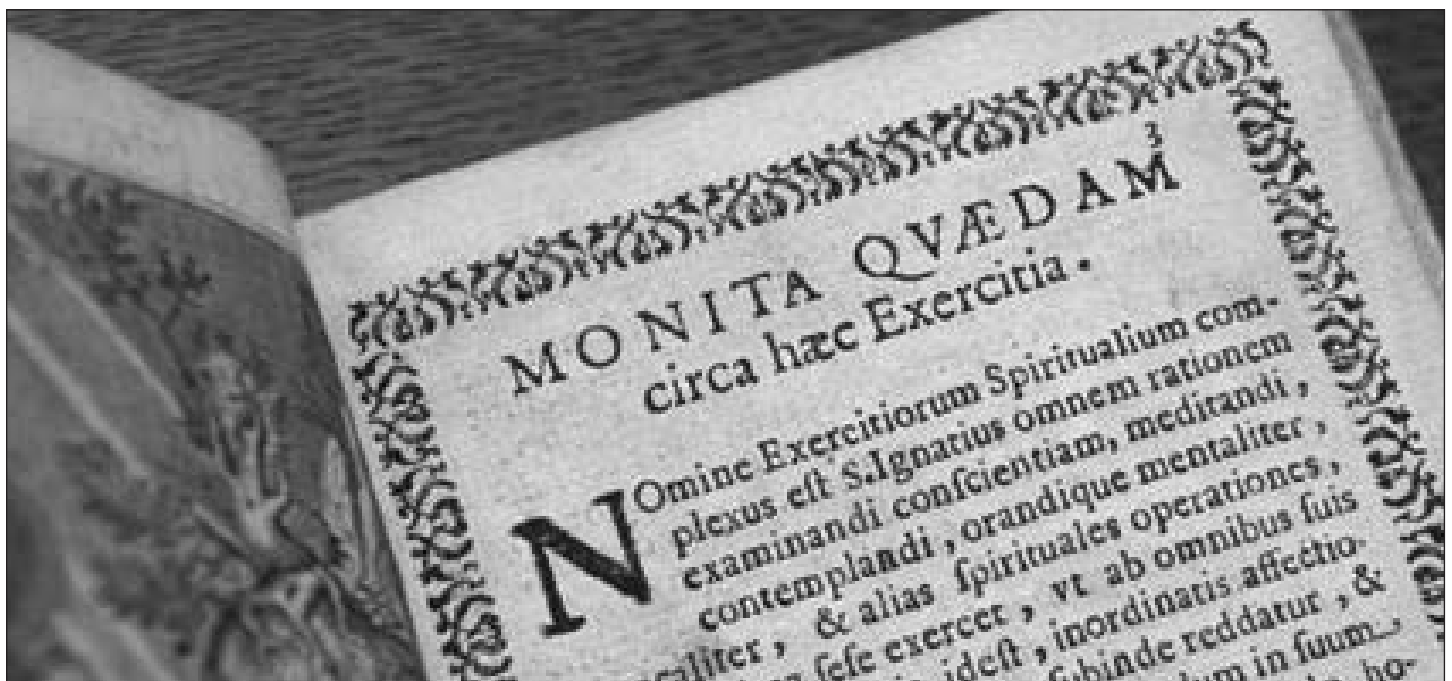
The Exercises have a natural rhythm. Ignatius divided them into four “weeks.” These are not calendar weeks but phases or movements felt within a person who is praying through the Exercises. The Exercises begin slowly and gently as we consider the gift of God’s ongoing creation in the world and in us. Having recognized God’s boundless generosity and unconditional love for us, we naturally face our own limited response. We let God reveal to us patterns of

sinfulness in our lives and our need for greater interior freedom. Having experienced God’s merciful love, we are moved to respond with greater generosity and to love and serve God and others more. As we pray through the life of Jesus Christ presented in the Gospels, we ask to know him more intimately so that we can love him more dearly and follow him more closely. We come to appreciate Jesus’ values and his vision of the world.

Such deeper intimacy leads us to want to accompany Jesus in his passion, the consummate expression of God’s faithfulness and love for us. Similarly, we walk with the Risen Lord in the joy of the resurrected life. We continue to learn from him as he consoles others. Finally, after savoring God’s love for us and our world throughout the Exercises, we pray to find God in all things, to love and serve God and others in concrete ways and with great generosity.

The discernment of spirits underlies the expanse of the Exercises. The one who discerns is like one who checks a compass to make sure one is heading in the right direction. In discernment of spirits, we, like Ignatius recovering from his battle wounds, notice the interior movements of our hearts, which include our thoughts, feelings, desires, attractions, and resistances. We determine where they are coming from and where they are leading us, and then we propose to act in a way that leads to greater faith, hope, and love.

This journey through the “weeks” of the Exercises is not necessarily linear. The director and one making the Exercises follow the lead of the Spirit, which can take them through different graces at different times. Ignatius’s own conversion taught him that God works with each person uniquely, so he insisted that the Exercises be adapted to meet the particular



needs of the one making them. The goal is drawing closer to God, not mechanically running through all of the exercises in order or in unison with others.

In keeping with this spirit of accommodation, the Exercises are given in a variety of forms. Some people can make the Exercises over 30 or more consecutive days, usually removed from regular life in a retreat house setting. Ignatius realized, however, that many do not have the luxury of time or resources to make a 30-day retreat. Thus, in what is called the 19th annotation retreat (because the adaptation is found in the 19th preliminary note that opens the Exercises), Ignatius described how a person may be directed through the entirety of the Exercises over an extended period of time, while continuing his or her daily affairs. Others, because of age, experience, life circumstance, or time constraints, cannot cover the full breadth of the Exercises. Instead, they pray through particular parts of the Exercises, such as during a weekend or weeklong retreat or a day of prayer.

As important as the role of the director is in navigating and adapting the retreat, Ignatius reminds us in the introductory notations that the chief spiritual director is God, who communicates with each person directly. Accordingly, the director should make every effort not to get in the way, respecting the autonomy of the person's unique relationship with God.

Inspired by the Second Vatican Council's call for religious orders to reclaim the sources of their original charism, the Society of Jesus has offered the Exercises in varied and creative ways to ever-increasing numbers of people. Making the Spiritual Exercises available to more people in different forms is especially important as laypersons assume more active roles in Jesuit colleges and universities. Such spiritual formation conveys the Jesuit mission and Ignatian character to faculty and other institutional leaders.

**A**daptation is critical to the Exercises, and this issue of *Conversations* describes some of these innovations. It is becoming increasingly challenging to persuade students and time-pressed faculty and staff to disconnect and spend a weekend, for example, at a retreat center. Thus, "Prayer in Daily Life" experiences on campus have grown in popularity. Here, retreatants integrate private prayer and spiritual conversation into their daily routine. Moreover, along with innovations in traditional classroom learning, some schools have applied new technologies to create online retreat and prayer experiences to reach even more students, faculty, staff, and alumni in their communities. The most time-and-resource intensive

adaptation is the 19th annotation retreat for faculty and staff, offered over the course of an academic year. When individually directed, such retreats are usually accompanied by regular group meetings with others making the retreat. Given the challenge of finding enough qualified spiritual directors, some Jesuit works have moved to offering the Exercises to groups, facilitated by one spiritual director.

These various experiences of the Exercises have a profound impact not only on the person but on campus culture. Those who have experienced the spiritual tradition of the Jesuits in this very intentional and personal way understand the mission more deeply and feel connected to a cohort of others similarly committed to mission.

There is great demand for the Exercises by our partners in ministry. They reflect the "great spirit and generosity" that Ignatius determined was essential for one making the Exercises. Such holy desires are expressed not only by Catholic colleagues and students but more and more by those who come from the Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, as well as secular humanists. Offering the Exercises to non-Christians and humanists is the next frontier in the ministry of the Exercises, to which Jesuit Superior General Adolfo Nicolás has called us. In the pages that follow, we explore the opportunities and challenges of offering the Exercises to new audiences.

Finally, if the Exercises are to animate the work of the university, they cannot be confined to campus ministry: they must inform academic and student life. In this issue, we explore these connections. The Exercises, a school of prayer, offer a certain pedagogy that can translate to higher education settings. They teach habits of reflection that help students and others integrate experience, understanding, and moral decision-making, whether in classrooms, laboratories, residence halls, athletic fields, or community service sites. The Exercises provide a time-tested and flexible method to form character and conviction, which is the concern of educators.

At the time of his conversion and even when founding the Society, Ignatius did not imagine opening schools. Yet, because more formal education was needed in the Church, Ignatius adapted and responded to the need as early as 1548. As we imagine how best to serve the needs of the world and the Church today, we can rely on Ignatius's legacy of the Exercises to meet the holy desires of our colleagues on campus and more deeply ingrain the Ignatian tradition in the rapidly changing landscape of Jesuit higher education. ■