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After the Exercises: Translation and Transformation

By Diana Owen

A growing number of faculty, staff, and students on Jesuit campuses have undertaken the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, often through a retreat in daily life offered over the course of an academic year. For many, the experience is profound, even life-changing. People who have gone through the Exercises develop habits rooted in prayer, meditation, and contemplation of Scripture. They practice the Examen, a prayerful review of their day's thoughts and activities. They discern where the interior movements of the heart are leading. They are set on a path of awakening, discovery, and renewal. The Exercises provide a mechanism for responding to God's invitation to make reasoned decisions, to move from contemplation to action, and to serve others.

The transformative power of the Exercises is uniquely manifested for each individual, yet deeply seated in the importance of community. The Exercises radically reshaped my relationship to Georgetown as I became acutely aware of the Jesuit values that underpinned the institution. I was filled with gratitude for being at a school where "women and men for others" is not a slogan but a call to action. I sought to discern how I might embrace the university's mission in my teaching, schol-

arship, and service. I felt empowered to "come out" as a Catholic on campus and to reinvigorate my faith commitment; at the same time I became more attuned to the splendor of other faith traditions. Still, the translation of the lessons of the Exercises into action did not happen quickly for me, and it remains a work in progress.

When I was making the Exercises, I initially placed pressure on myself to discern my calling and then respond by the end of the retreat. My spiritual director wisely pointed out that the Exercises offer a structure and foundation for making choices and that there is no expiration date on the call to serve alongside Christ. Kevin O'Brien, S.J., reinforces the notion that we hear and answer the call on our own terms, in our own time. He states in *An Ignatian Prayer Adventure*, "we don't have to make any offering or commitment if we're not ready. For now, we just want to be open enough to hear the call and to get excited about Christ's engaging vision for us and the world." Similarly, Dean Brackley, S.J., who labored among

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the poor and oppressed in El Salvador, observed in *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times* that recognizing and answering the call is something that may take time and patience. It can come to us in a “still small voice” – a whisper, a nudge, a barely perceptible thought.

Jesuit institutions offer a variety of opportunities for keeping people’s encounter with the Exercises alive as they continue their journey and listen for the call of that “still small voice.” Some schools provide spiritual directors who guide people as they delve further into the revelations of the Exercises. In fact, after making the Exercises some people are called to become spiritual directors themselves. There is an increasing need for trained spiritual directors on our campuses to accompany faculty, staff, and students as they embark on the Exercises as well as to guide people as they engage their faith and prayer life more generally. Programs in spiritual direction that range from noncredit seminars to certificate and degree programs are offered through many of our Jesuit schools.

Other resources on our campuses also encourage a sustained commitment to the Exercises. Speakers who present perspectives on Ignatian spirituality and the Jesuit mission can invigorate discernment. All of our schools have rich retreat programs that allow participants to reconnect with the Exercises and to have time for peaceful reflection and renewal. Online retreats also are available, like the one offered by Creighton University (see following story). Faculty and staff members can participate in programs and retreats that allow them to relate what they have gained through the Exercises to their work life, such as the Ignatian Colleagues Program, the AJCU Seminar for Leadership in Higher Education, the MAGIS program of the Jesuit Collaborative, and the Ignatian Leadership for Mission Retreat. Some universities offer pilgrimages where participants walk in the footsteps of St. Ignatius in Spain and Rome. Schools also sponsor domestic and international immersion experiences where participants encounter poverty and injustice firsthand and can engage in service activities. Travel to places like Kenya, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Appalachia, and the U.S./Mexico border can be transformative as people consider their life choices in light of the Exercises.

The support of a community of people who share the gift of the Exercises can be instrumental in helping individuals maintain their connection to Ignatian spirituality over the long haul. Holding sem-

inars where people meet regularly to pray and dig more deeply into the meaning and practice of the Exercises is one way to create community. The seminar may be focused around a book, videos, or other materials that provide a starting point for discussion. In addition to the O’Brien and Brackley works cited above, *God’s Voice Within* by Mark E. Thibodeaux, S.J., and *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* by James Martin, S.J., are examples of texts that work well in this context. The primary purpose of these seminars, though, is not to cover the material but to bring people together for fellowship and conversation. Small, less formal groups that take place over breakfast or lunch may be inviting to people who are more comfortable in a relaxed setting. Groups can provide a safe haven for those who wish to engage in deep faith sharing. A strong sense of trust and camaraderie can build in these communities that ultimately can translate to greater harmony and cooperation in the workplace.

The Exercises provide a foundation for people in diverse roles to work on behalf of a common mission and to put into practice the spiritual values that animate Jesuit universities. For people who are used to individual endeavors, which is common among faculty and staff, this collaborative work can be challenging. As part of the community doing God’s work, illuminated by the Exercises, we can follow our hearts as we listen, learn, and act in concert. ■

Resources

Quality online resources are available to acquaint people with the Spiritual Exercises and to help people continue on their journey after making the Exercises.

Creighton University Online retreats
<http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/online.html>

The Spiritual Exercises, Loyola Press
<http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/>

The Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius Loyola: Renewal and Dynamics, Institute of Jesuit Sources (video series)
<http://www.georgetown.edu/content/1242663501852.html>

Introduction to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, Sylvester Tan, S.J., at Loyola University, New Orleans (video lecture)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeysvzF8EJg>