Unit 1.9 The Spiritual Exercises
THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

A. INTRODUCTION

Thus far you have gained an overview of Ignatian Spirituality, and you have a grasp of Ignatius’ life, both through his biography and autobiography. You know too that Ignatian spirituality is situated within the mainstream of Christian spirituality. We now move forward to consider the Spiritual Exercises, a book that ‘changed the world’ as Tellechea Idigoras remarks (Alone and on Foot, ch 60), and then the Spiritual Diary and the Letters. The Jesuit Constitutions will be dealt with in the Unit titled ‘Ignatian Spirituality as lived by Jesuits’. The common thread linking all of Ignatius’ writings is the desire to ‘find God’.

B. UNIT CONTENT

The Exercises

We all tend to keep notes and jottings of things that strike us as helpful. Ignatius did likewise. ‘Things that he used to find useful for himself, could, it seemed to him, be useful also for others, and so he used to write them down’ (Autobiography n.99). He started this practice in Manresa in 1522, and so began the book of Spiritual Exercises. However, it only saw the light of day in 1548, twenty-six years later. Ignatius composed the bulk of the Exercises as a layman between 1522 and 1537 and made additions and redacted the text after his ordination. Ideally the Exercises are made in the 30-day form where the retreating can be given over totally to them. However, the Exercises in Daily Life are popular: a day in the Exercises corresponds roughly to a week in the Exercises in Daily Life. Guide and retreatant meet weekly, and the total process may take from six months to a year. There are innumerable other forms of retreats based on the Exercises and they vary in length and style.

Like any set of physical exercises, the Spiritual Exercises are meant to be done rather than simply read or talked about. Thus the book of the Exercises is for the guide rather than for the person making the Exercises (‘exercitant’ ‘retreatant’ or ‘directee’): it is not a DIY manual! Given that context, we shall say something about the origin, structure and history of the Exercises. You will not be asked to read the text but to reflect on the connections between Ignatius’ own story and certain elements of the Exercises. While the Exercises are often made in group form, they were originally thought of as one-to-one experiences. Ignatius does not use the term ‘director’ but simply speaks of ‘the one
giving the Exercises’ which infers a humble role of helping rather than a dominant role of power.

**Goal:** The purpose of the Exercises is conversion to God, resulting in a new, divine direction in the retreatant’s life. The conversion is from disordered desires and blindesses that curtail a person’s availability to God’s project.

**Dynamic:** A one-to-one relationship develops between the person giving and the person receiving the Exercises. The giver is to be attentive to where the directee is being led by God, and is to follow the track of the Holy Spirit in guiding them. Ignatius believes that God wishes to deal directly with the retreatant, so the guide is to be unobtrusive. However, the guide should note the movements of consolation and desolation, which indicate how a person is moving toward or away from God. God is portrayed as **loving**, caring, interested, engaging: the Lover who wishes to give all to the beloved. The Exercises are Christo-centric: much is made of the ‘colloquy’ or **conversation** between the Lord and the retreatant, through the image of two friends in deep conversation with one another. And a great deal of time is spent in contemplating the mysteries of the Lord’s life, death and resurrection.

Much too is made of the **desires** of the retreatant: the more generous the heart, the greater the progress a retreatant can make. The desire to do great things for Christ gradually translates into an awareness of how God wishes to be served. ‘I will do this and that for you, Lord’ shifts to ‘Lord, what would you have me do?’ Ideally a retreatant is won over to the Lord, in mind and will, in heart and affectivity and emotion. He or she also becomes keenly aware of the subtle ways in which one can be drawn away from God. Ignatius speaks of himself in one of his letters as being a great obstacle to the calls of grace in his life.

As they end the retreat, retreatants show a high sense of gratitude for all that God has
done and is doing for them. What they now intend is to seek and find God in everything, especially in their decision-making. 'In all things to love and serve' is the goal.

**Structure:** The Exercises are divided into four stages or 'Weeks'. In the first, the goal of life is set out, leading to awareness of levels of personal sin and selfishness, over against which is set the limitless mercy of God.

In the second stage the retreatant, moved by repentant gratitude, contemplates the life of Jesus in order to love him more and grow in intimacy with him. Key Exercises give an inner awareness of the ways in which good persons can be deceived under the appearance of good. This sets the scene for making a wise choice of a way of life, or a reordering of one's current life. As with the whole of the Exercises, the choice is made in a relational framework: ‘What would you have me do?’ ‘How can I find you in my choices?’

The third phase brings the retreatant into the mystery of the Lord’s passion and death, and the fourth moves to the resurrection of Jesus. A final exercise recapitulates the goodness of God ‘in creation, redemption and particular gifts’, leading to great gratitude and the unrestricted desire ‘to love and serve in all things’. God is portrayed as the great Lover, who wishes to give himself to us, his beloveds. He is imaged as a God who labours in the same world as that to which the retreatant is now returning.

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**C. REFLECTION**

Reflect on the desire you have to serve God.

**D. RECOMMENDED READING**

The Penguin Classics edition of Ignatius’ *Personal Writings (2004)* by J Munitiz and P Endean, SJ, contains an Introduction to the *Exercises*


**E. LINKS**

**F. INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES**

- Understanding the origins of the Exercises
- Grasping what the Exercises are about

**G. ASSIGNMENT**

Write a page on why you would or would not wish to make the Exercises in some form
Select Bibliography on the Spiritual Exercises
(up to 1991)

The following bibliography is not intended to be daunting: it is included here only to indicate that no matter what aspect of the Exercises you might wish to read up, there is good material available.


GENERAL STUDIES

A classic but controversial study is:

A critical study from the perspective of liberation theology is:

Gilles Cusson, Biblical Theology and the Spiritual Exercises, translated by Mary Angela Roduit and George E. Ganss (St Louis, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1988). This is an authorized translation of Cusson's Pédagogie de l’expérience spirituelle personelle: Bible et Exercices Spirituels.

Other recent short studies and essays include:
Peter Schinneller, "The approaches to Christology and their use in the Spiritual Exercises", Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits 12, 4-5 (September/November 1980).

Although dated, a useful bibliography of works in English prior to 1981 is:

PRESENTING THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Three of the best-known general aids for retreat directors are:
John English, Spiritual Freedom (Guelph, Loyola House, 1982).
David L. Fleming (ed.), Notes on the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola (St Louis,

On presenting the 'Exercises in daily life' see:
John Veltri, Orientations, volumes 1 & 2 (Guelph, Loyola House, 1979 & 1981).
Joseph Tetlow, Choosing Christ in the World (St Louis, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1989).
Gilles Cusson, The Spiritual Exercises Made in Everyday Life: A Method and a Biblical Interpretation, translated by Mary Angela Roduit and George E. Ganns (St Louis, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1989). This is an authorized translation of Cusson’s Conduis-mois sur le chemin d'éternité.

Also essays in:

SPECIFIC ELEMENTS in THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES:

See the essays in Fleming, Notes, above. What follows is a selection of useful sources to complement the present volume:

Overall dynamic

Principle and Foundation
Andrew Hamilton, 'The right use of creatures' in The Way 26, 3 (July 1986).

First Week
Other essays in 'Presenting the First Week', The Way Supplement 48 (Autumn 1983).
Seamus Murphy, 'The mission to justice and giving the Exercises' in The Way Supplement 55 (Spring 1986).

The Kingdom
Robert L. Schmitt, 'Presenting the Call of the King' in The Way Supplement 52 (Spring 1985).

Second Week
Other essays in 'Aspects of the Second Week', in The Way Supplement 52 (Spring 1985).

The Two Standards
Aloysius Pieris, 'To be poor as Jesus was poor?' in The Way 24, 3 (July 1984).

Third and Fourth Weeks
Other essays in 'The Spiritual Exercises: Weeks Three and Four' The Way Supplement 58 (Spring 1987).
Brian McNamara, 'Prayer in Gethsemane' in The Way Supplement 27 (Spring 1976).
The Contemplatio

Prayer in the Exercises
And:
George Aschenbrenner, 'Becoming whom we contemplate' in The Way Supplement 52 (Spring 1985).
Philip Sheldrake, Imagination and Prayer, Ch. 8 in Images of Holiness (Darton, Longman and Tood, London/Ave Maria, Notre Dame, 1987).

Discernment, Election and Choice
The most comprehensive contemporary study is:

A recent attempt to reassess the origins of the Rules for Discernment is:

A readable introduction is:
Thomas Green, Weeds among the Wheat (Notre Dame, Ave Maria, 1983).

Other useful essays include:
Lavinia Byrne, 'Asking for the grace' in The Way Supplement 64 (Spring 1989).
Nicholas King, 'Ignatius Loyola and decision-making' in The Way Supplement 24 (Spring 1975).
Laurence Murphy, 'Psychological problems of Christian choice' in The Way Supplement 24 (Spring 1975).

Spiritual Direction and the Exercises
David Townsend, 'The counsellor, the director and the Annotations' in The Way Supplement 42 (Autumn 1981).

Contributions from 1991-2009 (to follow)

END OF MODULE ONE, UNIT NINE

Thank you!