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# Fire for a weekend: An experience of the Spiritual Exercises

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## Fire for a Weekend

### *An Experience of the Spiritual Exercises*

#### INTRODUCTION

Over thirty years ago I preached my first retreat. Since then I have lost count of how many times I have preached and later directed the Spiritual Exercises, in full and in a condensed form. Essentially the experience has been the same, with more or less success; yet, surprisingly, over the years each retreat has been different. One particular kind of retreat has been most often repeated several times a year. This is the weekend, three-day, two-and-a-half-day, sometimes even two-day retreat experience, usually in some Jesuit retreat house. It is on this kind of retreat that the present essay concentrates.

Although I have directed the full thirty-day Exercises and three times experienced them myself and although I have even more often either directed or preached eight- and six-day retreats to men or women religious and occasionally to mixed groups, I feel it will be more of interest and help to some potential weekend-retreat director to confine my observations to the three-day retreat. I have had longer experience than most American Jesuits in preaching weekend retreats; from this, the experience I most want to share is the conviction that through such an opportunity many others can have the same deep satisfaction as I have had.

It used to be a kindly put-down that retreat centers catered to saving the already saved. Definitely, the retreat apostolate is not

simply preaching to the saved. Recently a younger Jesuit came by invitation to observe a weekend retreat. His own apostolate was to the alienated and unchurched. He was searching in various ways to seek out and invite back the lost sheep of Israel. It seems that he was discouraged by the small success he had had in his work, feeling the burden and antipathy throughout the marketplace where he had sought to serve.

The weekend he had accepted was an ordinary weekend at the retreat house. It was a men's retreat numbering about eighty men. The style and atmosphere had been set. Only the talks, given several times a day, along with the Liturgy, could be judged as more contemporary. Silence was kept except during evening recreation, although a few skipped this relaxation and remained quiet the entire two and a half days.

All the young Jesuit was asked to do was to be visible and available for consultation or confessions. At the end, moved by the grace of this ordinary weekend, he remarked, "In this one weekend I have had more reconciliations from estranged Catholics than I've experienced in my entire search outside."

This is typical week after week in the retreat experience of both men and women. Experiencing these weekend encounters soon produces evidence that the Spirit has called a large percentage of retreatants, whether regular attendants or first-timers, to genuine growth in the spiritual way or often, even more radically, to a complete change of heart.

This is what makes each weekend event both exciting and satisfying. I feel I become both an ear and a heart for the work of the Spirit, to listen and to touch another person who is ready to surrender to God. Who it will be I can never guess, but the touch of conversion happens week after week.

Although in this essay I am speaking in particular of adaptations of the Spiritual Exercises, my experience has also been in other retreat settings, both formal and informal. There are many other kinds of retreat approaches which are offered throughout the

country, and I have participated in many of them, sometimes as a member of a team, and other times as guest director for a specialized group. These include Marriage Encounter, retreats for alcoholics or co-dependents, and youth renewal weekends. I know the different graces that arise. All are valid; but I must say, in general, that on the average weekend at a silent retreat given over to more reflective sessions and private prayerfulness, the number of profound conversions and particularly fruitful confessions is always high.

And so, as mentioned at the beginning, for clarity I would like to confine my reflections in this issue of *Studies* to my personal story of learning more and more the unique value of the three-day retreat experience.

### GROWING UP WITH THE EXERCISES

These many years of either constantly leading others or being directed myself in the way of the Spiritual Exercises have been an ongoing discovery of the interior design and power of the Exercises. However, though it may be a personal prejudice, I feel that the common experience of many preached retreats during ten or more years of Jesuit formation left me and others with unspoken and troubling questions.

The official documents of the Society, renewed from time to time by various general congregations, all praise the power of the Exercises to transform lives. Why, then, did I feel so little interior power? In my own experience it always seemed there was a great abyss between my personal experience and the recorded experience of the saints. Initially, I accepted the distance. A young American, college-trained, very much a product of the shallow times, I judged I was not saintly material.

However, I did have ambitions. I wanted to be a good teacher. It was part of my adolescent fantasy life. I used to evaluate my teachers, thinking how I could do a better job than they in making the subject clearer. When I did encounter great teaching, I literally



sat at the teacher's feet and enthusiastically joined in class participation, simply because inspiration was evident in that classroom.

This was the kind of teacher I wanted to be. So when I learned that Jesuits also preached retreats or, as we said, "gave the Exercises," I wanted somehow to make that experience as vital as the brightest classroom event.

This was for me both a strong motive to keep searching the text of the Spiritual Exercises for enlightenment and also, without my knowing it in the beginning years, my major mistake. My mistake was to equate "giving the Spiritual Exercises" to "teaching the Spiritual Exercises." This mistaken attitude had grown slowly through the years, particularly during philosophy and theology.

For instance, several of us scholastics would go for long walks once a month to discuss one of the meditations in order to better understand its meaning. The concise text of St. Ignatius was not a problem. It actually offered a challenge to our inquiry. But what was the meaning for us today? I needed to know. Elsewhere, I read about seminars and international meetings on the Exercises which produced some fascinating insights and sometimes, as might be expected among Jesuits, strong divisions. All the time I kept as an intellectual hobby a collection of these clarifications on the various points or rules which St. Ignatius wrote. I even did my thesis during theology on the internal dynamics of the points in the meditation on the Three Kinds of Sins, offered during the First Week of the Exercises.

Through the years and through retreat after retreat, either one or other point or rule or technique or insight made some Ignatian statement clearer. I tried over and over to adapt each of these illuminations in my own preparation to preach the Exercises.

This was my mistake, as I said, making achieving clarity my major thrust. I know clarity can be a great gift in any teaching experience, but it is not the primary point in spiritual exercising. Exercising spiritually is more than thinking about spiritual values.

Spiritual exercises involve mind, emotions, and the very center of the soul.

While this may seem perfectly evident at the present time, it was not evident in the style of presentation of the Exercises that I grew up with during formation years. At the end of community retreats, I shared approval of the retreat master for his stories, his humor, and, from time to time, his scholarship. Seldom did I wax enthusiastic over the "experience." Seldom did I hear anyone else express any interior dispositions.

My response during such a retreat was nearly always dutiful. I put in the time required; and, even when I passed beyond having the Exercises preached to me, my private retreats stayed primarily on the intellectual level. Years of making my yearly retreats produced, I am sure, a kind of spiritual discipline. However, unanswered—even unasked—was the question: Where was the fire of **mighty desire**? Why was I always more or less satisfied with renewed contentment for living the hidden life? Perhaps the age for saintly deeds in the manner of our founding fathers had passed long ago. My spiritual energy seemed channeled into endurance for long years in the "long black line." I felt that the boundaries within which I might make retreat resolutions was the burden of a daily cross within the works of the province.

Little did I suspect the upheaval that was coming during the post-Vatican II years. The explosion in both philosophy and theology had strong effects on the practice of what we liked to term "the common life." In that regard more and more emphasis came to be placed on individual, personal responsibility for spiritual growth. The personally directed retreat seemed a rediscovery of the earlier Ignatian approach and a key element in maintaining stability within the Society.

For years, then, I sought different directors. The sum total of these kinds of directed retreats was for me another enriching and, at times, puzzling experience. If I had fourteen directed retreats, I also experienced fourteen different approaches to the Exercises.

Among these approaches there has been the use of highly and ordered biblical passages adapted to the main themes of the Four Weeks in the Exercises. Another approach has been the almost non-directive "pick and choose" where the spirit of the moment might lead. Each retreat had the advantage of personal contact and review, but not always a review of the motions of the Spirit, not always a review of the light or particularly the dark within. The style of discernment varied from director to director year after year.

I am grateful for the varied approaches in all these retreats, and I feel they have made me more effective in my own apostolate as a retreat director. Moreover, the very length of time involved in making annual retreats through the years, as well as my involvement in the changing styles of presenting the retreat meditations, has taught me varied approaches which I think are worth sharing. I feel like the householder who had a treasure chest containing things both old and new.

Through the years both some of the old and some of the new insights seem to have continuing effectiveness. I believe I can use these experiences from past retreats and now bring a fresher approach to the particular experience of a preached three-day retreat.

### **WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE**

Here is my chief premise in this essay. **The material shared in a preached retreat must be the fruit of the speaker's own prayed experience.** It may seem so obvious, but in my experience it is frequently overlooked. The material shared in a preached retreat is not just points to be made clear. The points are not necessarily to be clothed in technical virtuosity, or even given with scholarly apparatus. Even a great collection of stories and examples does not make a good Ignatian retreat. The retreat director/preacher's own believing Ignatius's vision is the key to opening up the retreat listener. This is true for either a directed "one to one" experience or a group experience for a weekend or longer. Nearly always the per-



sonal conviction of the retreat master will be the channel for the graces of the Exercises.

The leap in faith in any dimension says "I will" from the heart, not from the head. Symbols are powerful. I submit that it is the inner call to holiness in service, symbolized by either scriptural or Ignatian figures, that really moves the retreatant. These signs or even a single sign actually moves to an active choice: the call of the King—who is Jesus—really sounds within. The potter—who is the Lord—forms His own, clay feet included. The vine really infuses its branches. The fire really ignites, and what does He will but that it be enkindled?

The retreat master can channel these possibilities. A group retreat allows a retreat director to say something of this nature which might be too personal in an individual session. Just as good books which are not written specifically for any particular individual still touch by the grace of the Spirit far beyond their printed message, so frequently the general meditations of Ignatius can do the same. How? one may ask, when there is so much more ground to cover in eight days: the First Week, the Kingdom, the Two Standards, prayer, dryness, plus rules to discern, eat, and distribute talents. A heavy load to choose from and a temptation to spend too much time intellectualizing.

However, the answer to the question of where the fire is in a retreat comes from Ignatius himself. **The fire is within what he calls the colloquy.** The colloquy is expected to be the prayer of the heart. The presentation of the Ignatian ideas will always be different if they are shaped with the expressions of the colloquy kept in mind.

The point to emphasize is that whatever material is presented needs to be designed to lead to prayer. Spontaneity is encouraged. In going through various hours of the Exercises, one is led to be spontaneously grateful, repentant, confused, or peaceful. The heart speaks to His heart, but the heart alone gives the fuller explanation



to the head. The style of praying is less important than the will to pray.

To extend this point further, let me say that the spoken, preached retreat should be so constructed that the intellectual content should help lead not so much to more reflection—the retreat master's ideas becoming the ideas of the retreatant through some kind of osmosis—but rather it should lead much more to a willingness on the part of the retreatant to fill the time left after the presentation with spontaneous prayer—even if that be a centering form of prayer. In fact, if the presentation has been unusually rich, the prayer of quiet and simple regard may be all that is possible.

My conviction is that this possibility should also be part of the presentation. The retreat master needs to share the Exercises as preparation for prayer far more than as any form of spiritual lectures. The points themselves are part of the creatures mentioned in the Foundation. As a retreat master, I use or set aside, choose and direct, particular Ignatian points insofar as they lead this particular group to private prayer.

I feel strongly that there is present an inbuilt dynamism whereby the Holy Spirit shapes and transforms both the retreatants and the director. Always the same and never the same are the weekends. Always in need and never unaffected come all different types to the retreat, men or women, either separately or as couples, or in specialized groupings. The makeup of each group always produces some persons in need of being healed, enlightened, and made spiritually whole.

Even though my own approach has improved and changed through the years, I have always experienced in the weekend retreats that the Spirit is more than the sum total of my words. Beyond any automatic response, there is the luminous experience of individual grace. But also there were my beginning experiences and sometimes the hard lessons that I learned from ill-chosen examples, such as an unconscious racist remark or perhaps a bit of tasteless humor which was roundly and rigidly criticized. These were pain-

ful learning experiences, but they never really impeded the work of conversion. I did improve in style and presentation through the years. I feel that ongoing experience in spiritual and personal contact made me a more sensitive, a better director. For this I am most grateful.

Just as in teaching so also in retreat directing, I had to grow. Rather than stagnate by saying the same thing each weekend, I learned to prepare more effectively by wide background reading and above all, by praying with the retreatants before and after each presentation. By allowing the Exercises to be prayerful in the presentation, I found an entirely new way to light an enthusiastic and lasting fire. Beyond the simply intellectual approach, such as might be used in a lecture, I found Ignatius led through the head all the way to the heart.

These later years in this apostolate have been filled with gratitude for all that has passed in countless retreats. The Spirit always was at work in the retreatants; but I did not realize that the Spirit was also working on my own way of proceeding as I shared—preached—the Exercises of St. Ignatius. To discover this in retreats preached to groups has been a gift of God to me. I am grateful for the gift, and so would like to share some practical applications that I feel are useful.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

In addition to the general truths about the Exercises that I learned through the years, a number of unique insights and applications emerged specific to the three-day adaptation, commonly called a weekend retreat.

## The Participants

First I learned about the quality of uniqueness of those who were making such a retreat. Even though there is some kind of screening of participants which comes through selective grouping by professions or, at times, by circumstances which bring together the grieving, the divorced, or, particularly, the addicted, nonetheless, the groups always seem to include those with unique and immediate needs. Their stories emerge in private counseling, in the anonymity of the confessional, or sometimes in a written question. Sometimes a retreatant can break open a deep-seated need which has long been ignored. At times, the moment to trust a hurt to healing through the prayer experience of the retreat touches and moves individuals in great depth. In fact, if no recognizable and shared moment of grace occurs after the midway point of the retreat, I begin to examine my approach and definitely bring the group to prayer, especially at Mass.

Weekend after weekend there are real miracles of grace. The only wonder is that there is some mysterious sense of divine humor which sometimes brings about a conversion in the oddest places or at the very last moments. One retreat preacher once observed to me that retreatants come, brought by providential circumstances, when they are ready for more honesty either with themselves or with God. For some this may mean simply to make a more thorough confession. For others the retreat provides time to face a decision with deep moral implications.

It has been a fairly common experience that only after a number of retreats does the social dimension of the Gospel make an impact. Growth is not limited to the professional religious person. Many Catholics, both nominal and truly committed, grow slowly, even painfully, to accept some social teaching of the Church only after numerous retreats. It takes time, sometimes as long as ten years, for some retreatants to translate private spirituality—Jesus and I—to more selfless service of one's neighbor. Christian ethics makes a slow entrance into the total personality. I am convinced,



however, that the spiritual conversion expressed so many times during a weekend retreat is a solid experience. It may be a first-time insight or it may be a return to faithful practice after years. The weekend-retreat experience is usually the best event to help an overinvolved business professional, lawyer, judge, teacher, or retired worker to make a return to more than religious practice. Through the Exercises, the seekers of today meet Christ personally, in His word, His work, His truth, and His life. It is the solid way to discover the social meaning of each one's vocation, even if it takes an individual ten years to surrender to the question, Am I my brother's keeper?

Seeds that were planted by teachers years before in the classroom or by individual counseling finally grow ready for harvesting. The weekend retreat frequently is the place for that first harvest. The Spirit seems to work overtime in bringing the seekers of their God, either known or unknown, to a moment of greater faith during the weekend. This is not just preaching to the saved; rather, it is reaching out to each retreatant's potential really to be holy.

The first call to translate one's life into service is frequently heard in a weekend retreat by so many who have had no time to listen in their heart. This I learned over and over. The action of the Spirit was in the hearts of the participants. The Exercises and my words interpreting them were only the instrument.

This ongoing miracle of providential timing in the lives of retreatants became my ongoing conviction and the first life-long lesson I gained from offering a preached retreat.

### **Spiritual Exercising**

The second lesson learned through the years came from the basic design of the four Weeks. These Weeks of prayer/meditations are really a practical experience of the Paschal mystery. The experience of a dying and a rising emerge through the progress of purifi-

cation to enlightenment, and then to some form of deeper union with God.

Each retreatant has a different call. Ignatius was even willing to dismiss some of his retreatants after the beginning exercises of the First Week. He did, though, send them home with some forms of prayer and examination of conscience. He helped them find God as they were capable. Others, of course, were invited to experience more enlightenment and to search for more generous service in the following Weeks.

Much of the same dynamic works for retreatants who come to attend a weekend retreat. For the most part, they need both the invitation to greater service and help to achieve such dedication. Frequently, this kind of service is first spelled out in the shared experience of a weekend retreat. One-to-one direction comes later. The first awakening experience for most retreatants is the preached retreat. In fact, those whom I have invited to make a personal retreat or those who most frequently have asked for more spiritual direction have been contacted or discovered during an earlier preached retreat.

From these two convictions—that the Spirit truly leads individuals to the specific weekend which they attend, and that, during this encounter with the Paschal mystery expressed by the Exercises of St. Ignatius, they frequently surrender to a deeper conversion of their own—I have learned another approach which has made these weekends a conversion experience for me. The simple truth that turned me around was that Ignatius offered truths for consideration, but he expected these same truths to open up the heart for individual prayer. This was not vocal testimony offered to what happened to me in prayer. That would be more an evangelical prayer service. **I wanted to pray with my retreatants.**

It may seem perfectly obvious from hindsight to say this. The very simplicity of my expressing it can even appear banal. However, for all the possibility that it may be dismissed, I am still convinced that this fresher approach which I have adopted these past

eight or nine years has changed my effectiveness as a director of weekend retreats. Earlier I mentioned the long training and experience of other directed retreats. The undeclared assumption was that each retreat master would offer greater clarity for the Ignatian ideas. Stories and examples abounded, at times even long quotations from skilled authors, the saints, even the Scriptures. All of these presentations simply failed to lead me to the prayer of the heart. Slightly numbed, perhaps, by so much rich intellectuality, after the morning or evening conferences, I went back to my room to fill out the required hour of meditation, and ended simply in the prayer of repose. I know I slept a lot at my desk or kneeler.

The end of the time of meditation came to be the most important moment. This concluding time could actually be the entire amount of time after the input of the retreat director's words. Ignatius called this time a "colloquy," a speaking, a time to be heart-to-heart with Jesus, or His mother, or the apostles. Whatever way the Holy Spirit moved the individual retreatant was good, expected, and desired. This time of colloquy was true prayer.

This may seem so obvious that it was taken for granted. Along with many of my retreat directors, I frequently left time at the end of the conference to the retreatant's own prayerfulness. If I am to be honest, I also may have left some kind of overkill, or even boredom. A short glance at the retreatants who stayed on in chapel after my talk or a cursory glance at the numbers who seemed less engaged in reflection after my conferences gave me pause. Certainly, they may well have been reflecting and not visibly seeming to be in prayer.

Often deeply touching confessions followed later in the day. Grace of conversion was still bestowed, I am sure; but the colloquies I made led me in time to want to share more deeply, even on a preached retreat, my own prayerful reaction to the spiritual truths offered and my experience in prayer regarding them.

This desire and grace came as a transforming approach. My weekend retreats with my groups became an encounter, both indi-



vidual and shared, in finding the presence of God. I found an Ignatian way to share this presence of God both as a common and yet also as a highly individual experience.

Men and women are shaped and formed by so many conflicting pressures that it may seem even more difficult to show that spiritual values demonstrate any relevance today. This is why I have come to appreciate above all a prayerful attitude and a shared experience on a weekend retreat. This weekend should not, of course, be based only on the level of the emotions. Ignatius expects much more. These exercises are designed to call generous souls, even though burdened with heavy secular obligations, to a greater discovery of God Himself in their personal lives.

My task for the weekend, as I see it, is to select various considerations from the Spiritual Exercises and shape them to my groups. This colors the examples and thrust of the development. It allows for a great variety, which keeps my approach fresh and ever evolving. However, I strive to remain faithful to the basic dynamic of the Weeks: a settling in which opens to some purification, leading to enlightenment, more personal familiarity with Christ, and, finally, to a measure of union. All this is offered in the context of a prayerful atmosphere and summarized by a shared Liturgy.

In accomplishing this, I have found recent biblical studies most helpful, especially the insistence by many writers on the value of stories and symbols. Often a single symbol which first had touched me in my own prayer life would serve as a uniting theme. "He is the potter, we are the clay" is one symbol which comes to mind. Other extended stories or themes, such as creation or calling in the desert or the whisper of a gentle breeze, have served simply and directly to open inner meaning for the retreatants and myself. My feeling is that scriptural symbols and stories are well able to nourish a group during prayer time because they are part of the inspirational choice of the Spirit. Using these examples helps me and my retreatants to get closer to the original source and respond more clearly to God's invitation to hear His word.

## THE WEEKEND RETREAT

### Structure

The weekend retreat has both structure and flexibility. Let me describe one example of a structure which goes from a Friday to a Sunday. It is only an example, but it may be of help. Depending on the group, the number of formal conferences may vary. On an average, there is one introductory meeting/conference on Friday evening. On Saturday morning there are usually two meetings, and in the afternoon some kind of penitential service, with the possibility of another conference followed by the Liturgy.

Usually the retreat director for a preached retreat expects to speak no more than a half hour, possibly thirty-five minutes, and never more than forty. The Liturgy is frequently celebrated by another staff member, who offers the homily. I prefer to share in the Liturgy, because I feel more a part of the retreat community gathered for the weekend. It helps to pray for those most alienated. It also helps to witness to my belief in the presence of Christ in the group.

Saturday evening is often quite varied, either with a shared-faith experience or a more traditional question box or some devotional exercise, such as Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament with meditative Scripture readings. The rediscovery of the power of Benediction can be an involvement of the total person: sight, smell, sound, body position.

The question box, however traditional it may sound, is an opportunity to come to grips with some current and serious questions by inviting retreatants to propose questions and topics in writing. If the retreat has been spiritually sound, the questions will usually be quite challenging, though respectful in tone. Here, as in other conferences, some of the social questions and obligations the good Christian must face can often for the first time get a more open hearing. For example, Why do bishops write about nuclear arms?

Why do they address the economy? Answers given during retreat can touch very deep-rooted attitudes. On one occasion, I remember, a man who disagreed very much with a moderate, middle-of-the-road position thanked me for not putting him down with the sort of contempt that he said he had received at other times for his far-right convictions. I felt that being respectful to him as a person was the only approach possible, and his gratitude was an opening of grace, able to lead him in time to more moderation.

There are other challenges from a wide spectrum, especially in the matter of sexuality. But if the atmosphere is prayerful and the priest-director is willing to listen to the cry of the heart, usually there will be grace to listen to the Church's teaching, difficult as it may seem, or impossible to follow. The struggle is never purely intellectual. This is why the willingness to be open to God is the first fruit of these exercises, even prior to the prayer experience itself. Hidden miracles of grace frequently occur within the weekend. The retreatant and the director, helped and opened by shared graces in the Exercises, experience the very presence of God.

I write as enthusiastically as I do because the surprises of grace no longer surprise me. God our Lord, as Ignatius writes, will not be outdone in bestowing His graces. The Spiritual Exercises, as long as they stay or become just that—spiritual exercising—will always have divine effect.

The effectiveness of the weekend frequently evidences itself particularly in the confessional. With the current option to meet face-to-face, the opportunities for counseling and subsequent absolution seem much easier for some. However, there is still a need to provide anonymity. Grace is powerful enough to get the reluctant retreatant into the confessional, but not always strong enough to overcome present embarrassment. Anonymity is a choice which can still be respected. Usually, such reconciliations take place around mid-Saturday. However, long experience has taught me that often the most profound confessions come on Sunday morning, or even at the last moment. One needs to be prepared and available on



steps, corridors, sacristy, or garden—anywhere; for the Spirit breathes at will, and usually unexpectedly.

Again on Sunday there will be two conferences in the morning and possibly a healing service; finally, a concluding conference and an expanded Liturgy on Sunday afternoon will bring the retreat to a conclusion. This is a generalized picture for conference retreats on a weekend.

Seven or eight conferences constitute the usual basic weekend-retreat program from Friday evening through part of Sunday. It will often include a healing service and, toward the end of the retreat, an expanded Liturgy. Other exercises of devotion are managed either by the retreat-house staff or the retreatants themselves. Other particular elements might characterize the various retreat centers. Some have shared a scriptural rosary while in procession about the grounds. Some feature either a private or communal stations of the cross. There is other input available through reading opportunities or sometimes through specially selected tapes played during mealtime. I try to fit into whatever structure is offered; and, whenever possible, I share in selecting the readings chosen for the Saturday Liturgy, as well as in discussing ahead of time the selection of the tapes played in the dining room. If I find that there seems to be just too much verbal input all day, I request taped music during meals.

In this format I try to walk with the retreatants in both thought and prayer responses to selected parts of the Exercises. Highly condensed as the experience seems, it produces not only remarkable conversions on a personal level but also, in time, conversions to the social teaching of the Church. The instrument is the dynamic of the Exercises.

## Content

To turn now from structure to content, here is an example of a typical weekend lineup, illustrated by one contemporary adaptation. My own practice is to give a new retreat each time with the same basic text. I can best exemplify this by giving a brief outline of a weekend retreat as I preach it and offering my reasons for my choices. It is this wide adaptability that I want to share.

The rhythm of the thirty-day experience is the basis for any adaptation: darkness into light. Whatever helps to move the retreatant through the Paschal mystery of dying and rising is valid spirituality. Even though an individual passage of growth may seem slight, the cumulative effect accomplished by repetition on a yearly basis will produce growth. Any change from selfishness, often recognized for the first time, to unselfishness is the sign of grace. Growing from immaturity to maturity may be painful; but, aided by the support of counseling, acceptance, absolution, and affirmation, the retreatant can make sure progress toward a deeper life in Christ. Going, then, from darkness to light is my first goal after presenting the opening exercises.

I begin with the group as it is, getting a feeling for its general background. Is it working-class or mixed-professional? Are there many non-Catholics present as our guests? What is the average number of retreat experiences? How many are at the retreat for the first time? Once this is established, a few directives are discussed. The Annotations or directives of St. Ignatius, selected according to the needs of the group, offer a good opening. I ask for silence, which respects the work of the Holy Spirit in each person; and I suggest that the retreatants offer this discipline of silence as a possible penance in reparation for sins of speech. I have sometimes suggested as an additional motive for keeping silence the prayer that our national leaders will also learn to listen to moral values and to speak with wisdom in international assemblies.

Then I suggest some Gospel or epistle for spiritual reading, trusting in the power of the Scripture itself to move within the soul.

I ask those who have made over fifteen retreats to read the Gospel of John; those who are in the middle years, Matthew or Luke; and to those who are first-timers or who have never read any Gospel, I recommend Mark. This distribution is not inflexible, nor is it arbitrary. Rather, it acknowledges the differences in the group and underlines my belief that this retreat is always a part of growth in coming to know Christ. I add to this some instruction on how better to read the gospel account, so as always to be willing to stop and savor any word of the Lord that has more meaning.

Finally, I ask for a willingness to give some thought to the matter of the conferences. This, I explain, will be more evident in the conclusion of each session when I will direct a short meditation, a centering into the truth, way, and life of Christ Himself. Thus, from the first encounter of the weekend, the spiritual and interior nature of the Exercises is quietly emphasized. There is no threatening of distant guns being brought up. Fire and brimstone are not waiting to be unleashed. Rather, the journey from darkness to light begins each time the spirit of the Exercises is respected.

The opening conferences seeking the goals of the First Week are oriented toward basic questions. I ask along with each retreatant for a further understanding as to why I was born. What evidence is there in my life that there is meaning reaching beyond the present moment? For myself, I find it helpful to take the Principle and Foundation of the Exercises in very personal terms. What I have found useful and reflective in more modern spiritual trends is to stay with the experience of the individual, rather than to present an abstract ideal of creation as my starting point. Basing my exposition on St. Paul's "I am in agony until Christ be brought to full stature in you," I translate the First Principle and Foundation to say that each of us is created in time and through time to bring Christ to full stature. This really contains the triad of praise, reverence, and service in order to save my soul; but it puts into contemporary biblical words the goal of living, to restore all things in Christ. The individual's part, of course, is to be Christ in that restoration to the fullest of each one's capacity. This always gives rise to concern in



retreatants, especially the more earnest ones. What is such maturity? As expressed in a fuller, complementary masculine/feminine dimension, it is recognized as a much-desired goal. Expanding on this makes excellent material for a first talk, or even for a second one that goes into more detail. But no matter where I am in offering some explanation of Ignatian ideas, I regard it as essential always to end with some kind of shared meditation.

In preface to this shared-meditation part of the exercise, I try to offer some symbol or image, particularly from Scripture, to act as a centering point for the prayer. Scriptural symbols are pregnant with meaning on several levels. I prefer such a scriptural symbol, but from time to time some symbol from nature may be helpful, especially if it is immediately present. At the White House in St. Louis, for example, the symbol of the Mississippi River is very helpful; one can meditate, as it were, on a raft as "Ole Man River"—now the river of life, the retreatant's life—keeps on rolling along! In general, some figure from one's own prayer, often enough from Scripture, such as the image of climbing a mountain or ascending steps or resting in the hollow of Abba's hand, will provide a first and unifying leitmotif throughout the weekend.

The next exercises lead to the darker side of retreatants' relationships with God. Though we are called to maturity in "Christ brought to full stature," the sad reality for all of us is usually a long list of missed opportunities. Sin, personal and crippling, needs to be faced. I give this question in various forms: "While others may have been condemned for less than I have done, why have I not been totally lost?" Answering this question plunges me into the recollection of past mercies and, for the present, the realization that not even my worst rebellion has kept His divine mercy from healing and saving my soul from eternal loss. In the Ignatian view, sin is never considered apart from God's mercy. The concluding personalized prayers in the First Week all emphasize the immediate intimate presence of sustaining forgiveness.

All the considerations on the mystery of sin turn during the Exercises on the present wonder at the forgiving love of God. For me, one of the best opportunities in the First Week to experience this is both to explain and then to share with the retreatants the exercise Ignatius presents at the close of the repetition on personal sins, the exercise he calls the Triple Colloquy.

Briefly, this colloquy calls upon Mary, as our concerned mother, upon Christ, her son in His role of mediator, and, finally, upon God, addressed directly as our Abba, our Father. Each is addressed separately and importuned to confer by intercession or direct gift of the Spirit three life-healing, lifetime graces. These graces may come within three minutes, three hours, or thirty years; when they come, however, they will be no threat or spiritual trauma. I explain that they are graces of profound healing. Sometimes I use nearly the entire conference time to cover the three petitions in preparation for actually using them at the end of the conference or using them during the Liturgy as part of the prayers of the faithful.

Writing about these petitions or even speaking about them may seem mechanical and overly structured. But the experience of praying them for myself with my listeners, those open enough to ask for these graces, has taught me otherwise. Time after time this has been spiritually liberating.

I ask first through our Lady, then again from her Son, and finally of my Father in heaven these gifts of the Spirit: first, to know my own sins, not just as categorical sins, but as personal offenses against God, so that I may more deeply experience personal forgiveness. Second, I ask to know as a grace my burden of sinfulness. I want to know my neurotic hang-ups--a personalized translation--in order that I may start to do something about bringing them under control. I want to begin, with the help of grace, to be healed of my primal faults and hidden compulsions. Finally, I ask to know my values and motivations, mixed as they may be, in order to come to greater honesty in all my choices for God. I want to know what makes me worldly and apart from the divine plan,

lest I do the "right thing for the wrong reason"; I want to make all my choices for God alone.

These are graces which bring the First Week of the Exercises into deeper focus and frequently lead within the weekend retreat to a much more effective experience in the sacrament of reconciliation. The lines outside the confessional move slowly, but no one seems to mind. This prayer of the colloquies is an experience for the retreatants which is deeply moving, and usually opens up opportunities for more enlightenment according to the work of the Second Week of the Exercises.

The conferences which follow late Saturday or Sunday morning are more centered on the humanity of Christ. The call of Christ, with gospel scenes selected to suit the group, make effective ways to meet Jesus in His humanity. For men I choose the camaraderie and slow maturing of the apostles as they hear and answer Christ's call to closer service and love. For women's groups I have a favorite survey of Christ and women in the Gospel. Rapid as these surveys seem to be, the retreatants are soon disposed to begin a search to make the Gospel more personal to themselves.

This, then, leads to further instruction on private prayer. I do not demand much of my groups, allowing them time to discover their individual style of meditation. I do more demanding on a one-to-one basis. Those who want more will find a way to ask. Many an instruction or encouraging word is given as the retreatants move about from chapel to room or out on the grounds. The Spirit breathes where it wills, and frequently in the most unexpected, sometimes humorous, situations.

The "Third and Fourth Week" meditations are usually more condensed in a retreat-weekend experience. I have often read that the graces of the Third Week are graces confirming the election which is made when the full month of the Spiritual Exercises is undertaken. I find, therefore, that identifying some single retreat resolution as "taking up the cross to follow Christ" is the best opportunity to come to grips with the week of Christ's Passion and



Death. To choose to follow Christ more intimately will cost some gift of oneself. To make possible this choice and the grace to persevere in it comes from a union with Jesus in His dying and rising.

This is the element behind my choice for any particular meditation/conference on the Passion. I try to help the retreatants understand prayerfully that their resolutions are a way to share with Christ today His redeeming work, which of necessity will lead, through a kind of dying, to some greater union and, finally, to the life of the Resurrection.

All of this can be summarized in presenting the *Contemplatio*, more simply than is usual. After the preliminary observations on the nature of love, the retreat director can move directly into the dynamic of the *Contemplatio* with a simple approach. Rather than concentrate on the larger common gifts given to all the faithful, even though each such gift is in itself particular, I have learned to bring the focus to more personal intimacy. Rather than view a large bouquet, it is better to study and enjoy a single flower.

I ask the retreatants to look in their own lives for a gift that is unique to each of them, a gift in which the quality and the timing are perfectly harmonized. This will be the gift that they can examine and respond to on the deepest interior level. From many possibilities I give them a personal example which may clarify this approach. This gift that I recall happened to me in Rome several years ago.

I was part of a group returning from the Holy Land after making the Exercises for a month. We stopped in Rome. By mischance, we missed our scheduled audience with the Holy Father. I was disappointed. However, we also had tickets for a general audience. These led to a block of seats in an area fairly close to the papal chair. But the seats in our section were on a first-come, first-choice basis. As we arrived, the group and the others with us fanned out to take seats, all of us hoping for the best view possible. Somehow, I got to the first row; the priest ahead of me unaccountably turned into the second row, which allowed me to get boxed

into the corner seat in front. I did not know at the time that the pope would walk right by this corner as he greeted the pilgrims one by one. So it happened that I was able to meet John Paul II face to face, hand to hand. The section was crowded and others saw him only in general and at a distance. I had the chance for this singular, brief direct encounter. I really would not have wanted anything more. But this was a desire of mine, and it was fulfilled, I feel, as a unique gift from my Lord. This is the gift that I contemplate.

Such a gift, so exquisite in timing and personal value, is worth responding to in the only gift I can return, my own gift of myself, mind and heart, my *Suscipe*. And so examining this gift as an example of the indwelling of my Lord, my response continues to be "Take and receive me." The further examination of the gift recalls an extraordinary lineup of events to bring it about. Why that time? Why that ticket? Why that spot? Why that moment just to give me delight? I am in awe that such a personally small and charming moment came about. I am convinced that my Lord delights in the personalized gift, and He skillfully and delicately uses His power to make me realize our mutual love. Recognizing this in the gift and the gift giving, I came to some realization of how much God must love, and does love. He is love itself. My only response, but a completely grateful one, is the *Suscipe*.

In presenting the final contemplation this way by centering in on a unique gift, I can lead the retreatants to make the same response of love for love. They may choose anything as their gift: the choices are limitless. But in seeing the gift as personal and in exploring it with individual insight, they may more easily make the natural response: gift for gift, love for love. And, to return to my remarks earlier in this essay on the colloquy as the place wherein the fire of a retreat exists, as I have regularly encouraged the retreatants to speak in their own words to the Lord and have exemplified this by sharing with them my own prayer, so I have especially encouraged them to speak personally to the Lord, here and

now, and then daily, after they have left the retreat and gone back to their daily lives. Usually the retreat will end as these themes are both expressed and accomplished in a final Liturgy.

This selection of conferences for such a weekend retreat, condensed as it is, helps to repeat the great themes of the Exercises. By shaping the individual conferences to lead directly, first to some shared prayer and then to additional individual reflection, I feel that I have begun an experience for the majority of my listeners that will in time open them to greater spiritual living.

The search for more direction which is directly spiritual, rather than simply counseling, frequently starts with these first prayerful encounters with the Spiritual Exercises over an extended weekend.

This kind of approach to a weekend retreat has been developing over the past thirty years. There is great variety in the groups which attend and a growing challenge to meet the changes that have moved and shaped our living over the years, so I have never really been bored. Of necessity, I have had to grow with this experience myself. I have been taught much by my retreatants, either those attending for the first time or, often, those coming for spiritual nourishment on a yearly basis. They have sometimes criticized me, constructively for the most part; and they have continually challenged me to make the spiritual life in Christ relevant for today.

## **Prayer**

The last six or seven years of these retreats have been more and more directly prayerful. I would like to offer in conclusion a brief example which may demonstrate how I have been able to shape a conference preaching style to an experience of shared prayer.

After invoking the Spirit upon our time together, I present my conference remarks for about thirty to thirty-five minutes. Most



important, I always conclude those remarks with some guided and shared prayer lasting no more than three or four minutes. Here is where I suggest some symbol as a means to focus the prayers, and I bring it up as a recurring theme several times more during the retreat. An example can show how simple such an approach may be, both for myself as retreat director and, I trust, for those who listen and follow in their hearts.

"Please," I direct, "sit straight in your chairs with your feet flat on the floor. Allow your hands to rest comfortably in your lap in an open position. With your eyes closed or looking at some sacred object here, begin to breathe deeply and slowly. Take your time deliberately to relax." After a moment or so, I begin slowly to lead the retreatants into a receptive attitude for prayer. My intention is to bring the preceding conference into focus for personal prayer.

"As you are breathing slowly, allow yourself to feel the support of the chair down your back; settle into your seat knowing you are completely supported. Then slowly, quietly, by the power of your imagination, allow this chair support to become the hollow of your heavenly Father/Abba's hand. Rest here with the sure knowledge that you are safe in this hollow of His hand . . . From this point of quiet support, remember how many times His mercy has touched you directly . . . your childhood . . . your adolescence . . . your younger adult years . . . Just rest in the memories without questioning His mercy . . . Rest knowing His mercy is with you again at this moment. . . His mercy enfolds you just as you are . . . Breathe deeply and quietly, be grateful . . ."

Each conference ends in some kind of centering prayer such as this. Each conference ends in quiet reflection. Each conference seems directed more deeply by the Spirit who in this moment of prayer created an opportunity to hear the word of God.

Such an approach also allows me to summarize some teaching on daily mental prayer. I do not hesitate to accent even a minimal amount, but I offer it as a daily possibility, and I ask that for as

little as three minutes a day the retreatants think over whichever of the four Gospels they have chosen to read during the weekend retreat. Usually, most of them are willing to give this a try. I count on the action of the Spirit to make them hunger for more. This request does, however, focus on the more generously inclined members of the group. Meditation, even contemplation, after the weekend experience seems less foreign, and a more mature relationship with the Lord appears to them more than a possibility. They discover in their simple reflective praying a way to the treasures of the kingdom of God. They put all things in different perspective; they find themselves renewed; they find Christ true to His promises.

## CONCLUSION

In reading "Jesuits Praying," the one-hundredth issue of *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, I found that I identified in some part with practically each writer as he presented his own personal reflections on his own particular way of praying. A common denominator was a shared struggle to find through darkness some light, and eventually to meet Christ. Diverse as the approaches to their prayer seemed at first, the writers repeatedly found a path to God. It was a privilege to share such intimacy; and even more, it was an encouragement to me to continue praying both in the light that breaks in occasionally and, more often, in the dark. Profoundly I felt myself a brother helped by a brother in the Company of Jesus.

I would hope that we could at some time assemble another group of Jesuits who would share on the same level some of the enduring effects from the common experience of making the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius year after year. Most of us have experienced several different types of retreats. For example, recently I joined a group in Jerusalem to make the long retreat under individual direction. It was an unusual experience in itself, quite different from the long retreat either in the novitiate or later in tertianship two years after ordination. From my own pilgrim way, I would like

to share with other Jesuits more of our common treasure. We have among ourselves such a large and varied experience of that treasure.

I have written these remarks with the hope that during 1990 and 1991, as we celebrate the founding of the Society of Jesus and the birth of St. Ignatius, some more of my fellow Jesuits might come to see a personal opportunity to preach and share the Exercises with weekend retreatants during one or two weekends a year. This would make even more widespread the gift we now share. It would also be a step on a journey of discovery. Those whom we invite to discover the longer experience of the Exercises, or those whom we feel ready for a Nineteenth-Annnotation retreat have usually met the work of St. Ignatius for the first time in a shortened weekend retreat.

Great enterprises, even high sanctity, must begin with small steps. Each of us, schooled by Ignatius, can lead the way to Christ. In praying through the Spiritual Exercises with our retreatants in a weekend of prayer, we may help them (and ourselves) to experience in a growing way the gift of wholeness and holiness for the Church today and tomorrow.



## APPENDIX: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

*Shouldn't the emphasis in presenting the Exercises today be more on directed retreats?*

The directed retreat is the ideal. However, it takes time to bring an individual leader in the community to want to spend a week in silence and reflection. Most professionals have hardly any time to attend to spiritual matters. The weekend experience is the best entry into new perspectives. Once a spiritual life-style is under way, the desire for more direction will naturally arise.

*Is there much opposition between the work done in spirituality centers and that done in more traditional retreat houses?*

The apostolates of these two kinds of establishments are actually complementary to each other. Frequently, the introduction to Ignatian ideas begins with a weekend retreat. Later on, individuals who are searching for still more direction may begin a Nineteenth-Annotation-style retreat in either a retreat house or a spirituality center or wherever they can better get ongoing direction.

*In a group retreat, how is it possible to meet so many individual needs?*

Just as a teacher tries to shape his presentation to the needs of his class in general while leading its members as individuals one step at a time, so too does the retreat director. A group of retreatants all recognize a basic need for more faith, more trust, and more love of God. By leading the retreatants to Christ in individual, personal prayer, the director gives the individual and his needs to Christ, who will be for him the Way, one step at a time, to even more personal knowledge and love of the Lord.

*How do you adapt the general theme to special groups assembled on a weekend?*

The group itself often determines the particular thrust of the retreat, although the dynamics remain the same: setting, purification, enlightenment, and union. For instance, some very special groups are those whose members have suffered a recent loss: the grieving, the widowed. Here the pain needs to be directly addressed and shared, especially in the context of the points on the Passion, and definitely those on the Risen Life. For married couples, the examples chosen during the retreat can accent the need for both personal and mutual growth. Helping the couples to talk with each other on specific exercises is a good way to help them through the weekend experience.

A special group which is becoming more common these days are people in some form of twelve-step program, particularly Alcoholics Anonymous. There are several varieties here, too, such as Adult Children of Alcoholics and Al-anon (those who are linked in some way with an alcoholic) or groups dealing with other problems, such as Overeaters Anonymous. A priest doesn't have to have the disease or problem to be accepted and effective with these groups. I have had over twenty-five years' experience in counseling or offering the Exercises to such groups. I find the background to the twelve steps is the meeting ground. Members on retreat are hungry for spiritual instruction, and are extremely grateful whenever at the conclusion of my remarks I lead them in some form of centering prayer. Silence is not a value on these retreats for them as a group. But individual prayer and finding God as their higher power becomes the means of making a retreat full of spiritual attraction.

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