

THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

What are the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius?

The Spiritual Exercises are **an unfolding series of prayers, meditations, and reflections put together** by St. Ignatius of Loyola out of his own personal spiritual experience and those of others to whom he listened.

Ignatian spirituality has been described as a spirituality of finding God's will for better decision making. According to the famous spiritual theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, "choice" is the center of the Exercises. While the original objective of the Exercises was in regards to the question of choice for one's state of life, the Exercises are relevant for everyday decision making as well.

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola are a means of opening oneself to the work of God in one's life. Ignatius, a Basque nobleman of the late 15th and early 16th centuries underwent a powerful spiritual conversion in his late twenties. Recovering from a battle wound over the course of many months, Ignatius spent hours contemplating his life's purpose and the compelling examples set by saints such as Dominic and Francis. He determined to leave the life of privilege to which he had become accustomed, and commended himself and all of his energies to serving God. Ignatius' desire was to "help souls" and he engaged in spiritual conversation with almost anyone he met. The experience of his own conversion led Ignatius to share what he learned with others and, eventually, refine his personal prayer journal into what we now call the Spiritual Exercises.

When we speak of Ignatius "receiving" the Exercises from God, what we really mean is that he paid close attention to the way in which God led him, like a patient teacher, to growing faith and freedom. In reflecting on and writing about his spiritual journey, Ignatius became convinced that his experiences were to be shared for the good others -- and that, in fact, particular practices of prayer, imagination, and self-abnegation would lead others along a similar spiritual road toward God and a deep sense of joy. Over nearly five centuries, these same Exercises (i.e., guidance and instruction to retreat directors for helping another person make a spiritual retreat) have been passed down, person to person, in a chain of faith that has affected the lives of countless women and men.

There is a pattern to the Spiritual Exercises, consisting of four essential movements or "weeks," each with its own spiritual gifts (Ignatius called them "graces") and challenges. Ignatius originally conceptualized the retreat as a one-month experience, so these weeks were merely approximations of time, always to be adapted by the director. These are not rigid stages for a retreatant to follow. Rather, they represent a map for identifying one's spiritual place and progress. The movements marking each Week are, essentially:

First Week – Self-awareness

- Longing to be known and loved by God; seeking spiritual freedom from what hinders our relationship with God... however we name or call the Beloved.
- Experiencing God's deep and endless love for us, despite our failings and shortcomings
- Opening our heart to conversion – from a focus on what is important to us, to a focus on God's deep desires for our lives

Second Week – Self-giving

- Loving God intimately and grafting our life story to his. Traditionally Ignatius focus was on the Life of Christ. This experience, however, can be translated, for persons from all spiritual traditions.
- Praying with our mind, our heart, and all our senses – our whole self – and hearing the call of the Beloved in our lives
- Becoming aware of the choices before us and discerning which leads us to a closer relationship with the Beloved

Third Week – Self-sacrifice

- Traditionally, the focus of this week was to focus on the suffering and death of Jesus, and allowing him into our moments of suffering. Again, these exercises can be translated into other theological and spiritual language.
- Pondering and experiencing the depth of Divine Love.

Fourth Week – Self-understanding

- Understanding our indissoluble relationship to God and all of creation; living with a resurrected spirit of hope
- Revisiting the graces of the previous three weeks, including a “Contemplation on the love of God,” in which we stand in awe at the work of God in every dimension of our life
- Preparing to bring the graces of the retreat into the everyday world

The world in which Ignatius lived and wrote was centered in the Roman Catholic tradition. Today, there are many Christians of other denominations who find the retreat and its spirituality accessible and life-giving. Whether the Spiritual Exercises are an appropriate method of prayer for non-Christians has been a point of debate, since they were intended to be Christological (i.e., centered on an experiential understanding of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus). In this case the

human elements of the four weeks – radical honesty in light of a loving God, the desire to serve with generosity, a willingness to suffer for the good, and an acknowledgement of divine accompaniment in community – can certainly be shared and explored with non-Christians in other ways.

Deriving from the Spiritual Exercises is what is known as “Ignatian Spirituality,” which is commonly understood to mean the ways in which we incorporate the priorities and worldview of the Spiritual Exercises into our way of living. Thus an awareness of key themes from the retreat, particularly spiritual freedom and discernment, becomes part of our consciousness and affects our decisions. Among the most central practices of Ignatian spirituality is the Examination of Consciousness or “Examen.” This daily prayer period, during which we express gratitude to God, reflect on the experiences of our day and God’s activity in them, and ask for light in the future is the “bread and butter” of Ignatian spirituality. The practice was so essential to Ignatius of Loyola that he charged his fellow Jesuits with praying the Examen twice each day.

THE SUSCIPE or Prayer of St. Ignatius: **"Receive, O Lord, all my liberty.** Take my memory, understanding and entire will. Whatever I have or possess, You have given me; I restore it all to You, and surrender it wholly to be governed by Your will.