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The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius

The Spiritual Exercises were created in the sixteenth century by St Ignatius Loyola as a form of retreat based on carefully ordered, scripture-based meditations and contemplations. His book is not for inspirational reading but is a practical handbook of guidance for a retreat. St Ignatius believed that the full Exercises needed extended time to unfold and that retreatants needed individual guidance. The dynamic of the Exercises should develop slowly and retreatants move at their own pace without pressure.

These days it is possible to make a variety of shorter Ignatian retreats based broadly on the spirituality of the Exercises. But the full Exercises happen in two ways. They can be done 'in everyday life' over several months (the 'Nineteenth Annotation Retreat'). For those who prefer to make a closed retreat away from everyday commitments there are a number of retreat houses, both Roman Catholic and Anglican, that offer the Exercises as part of their programme.

The Spiritual Exercises

The Exercises are divided into four sections known as 'weeks' - the timing is more fluid than this name suggests - separated by 'rest days'. In each 'week' the retreatant is invited to become more fully aware of an aspect of God's call, and to begin the process of co-operating with it. In the First Week a growing sense of a lack of wholeness (sinfulness), is juxtaposed with the realisation that all are called as sinners. In the Second Week retreatants deepen their

awareness of the reality of Christ's earthly life. Retreatants naturally become aware of the fundamental choice to be made or deepened: to ally themselves with, or to decide, against Christ. This leads in the Third Week to a realisation of the cost of discipleship: the Cross. In the Fourth Week, however, the retreatant ponders how God leads those who make this commitment through its costliness to glory and joy with Christ, and to Resurrection.

There is no one method of Ignatian prayer: Ignatius drew on a number of sources, and the Exercises contain perhaps ten different kinds of prayer. A readiness to pray with scripture is important, but there is opportunity for stillness too. Ignatius did not wish to force people into a spiritual straitjacket. The Spiritual Exercises involve a process whose aim is to help retreatants reach inner freedom in responding freely to the personal call of Christ to help build the Kingdom of God. They are orientated to mission, rooted in contemplation. The Exercises develop characteristics which then become part of daily life. Firstly, retreatants become better able to discern their inner desires and to see how God is working in their lives and in the world. Secondly, they learn how to bring together contemplation and action. And thirdly, they become increasingly aware of the presence and activity of God in all things.

Making the Spiritual Exercises in a retreat centre

There are variations in the way the retreat is presented, so it is wise to ask for details from the retreat house in advance. Commonly the retreat is preceded by a few days of preparation: time to get to know the retreat house and other retreatants, and to settle into a routine. Generally the Exercises are individually guided, following the practice of Ignatius. (Occasionally the Exercises are given to groups 'semi-guided',

with a mixture of addresses and individual guidance.) At the end of the retreat there are a few days to reflect on it.

To aid solitude, there are usually few shared structures. Meals are eaten together but without conversation, and a daily Eucharist is offered. Normally retreatants undertake four or five periods of personal prayer each day. They are recommended to spend a few minutes after each period of prayer reflecting on what happened and how they felt, and recording anything significant in a journal.

Each retreatant meets his or her retreat-giver in a confidential daily interview. This is an opportunity to reflect on prayer and other experiences since the last meeting, and to agree material and methods for the next 24 hours. Flexibility is central to the Exercises, and the guide, attuned to the needs of each retreatant, helps to establish an appropriate pattern of prayer and reflection.

Who should make the Exercises?

People of varied backgrounds and Christian traditions, and people who are active as well as those who are contemplative, have benefited from the Exercises. They are not exclusive. Nevertheless, the 30-day retreat is not for everyone. It is likely to be particularly rewarding at a time of serious choice or major life transition. It is not a way of problem-solving or a form of therapy, however, and some people will find other approaches more fruitful in addressing issues in their lives. It also demands a considerable commitment of time and energy.

So how should one decide?

Certainly not by reading the book in which the Exercises are recorded! Many people will find the Exercises most rewarding if they approach them without much prior knowledge, allowing the retreat to unfold under the direction of the Spirit. Talking to others who have made the retreat is not always helpful either, as each person's experience will be unique. What does

help is making a shorter Ignatian retreat (see below), which includes receiving guidance from a trained spiritual companion; or receiving such guidance in the course of daily life. Times of extended personal prayer and reflection can also be helpful, as can a conversation with a retreat-giver experienced in giving the Exercises. Those who apply to make the Exercises are usually offered questions as a means of preparation and discernment.

Making shorter retreats

Many retreat houses offer shorter individually guided Ignatian retreats, typically lasting for 8 days. These are not miniature versions of the Exercises, but do make use of the approaches to prayer and reflection. Anyone considering a 30-day retreat would be well advised to make an 8-day (or 6-day) retreat first.

Making the Spiritual Exercises in daily life

Not everyone is free to make a 30-day residential retreat, and in a note to retreat-givers (the '19th annotation') Ignatius indicated that busy people could make the retreat bit by bit in the course of their daily lives. A 19th annotation retreat is like the 30-day retreat in content and process, but is spread out over perhaps nine months or a year. Meetings with the retreat-giver take place every week or two. Retreatants make a commitment to daily prayer, and to reflection on this prayer and the keeping of a journal.