

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN IGNATIAN EXPERIENCE

The Case in Brief: What makes a retreat essentially "ignatian"? Many colleagues are giving Exercises in Italy, in every format, from Naples and Cagliari on Sardinia up to Bassano and Torino under the Alps. In the middle of all the activity, the Jesuit core group in Italy are drawing up "A Directory: One way of giving the Spiritual Exercises." Among all the kinds of exercises being given today, what makes some of them ignatian? The draft Directory sketches this answer.

One: Silence. Demanded by any serious retreat, not only ignatian, silence is a necessary characteristic of ignatian exercises. Silence in the external environment helps recollection, but the essential is interior silence which disposes one to hear the Word. This holds for all the types of Exercises as they are proposed by St Ignatius in Annotations 18, 19, and 20.

Two: The exercitant's personal prayer. Before anyone else, it is the exercitant who is, humanly speaking, responsible that the Exercises turn out well, even made in a group. This personal prayer, made in the various manners and rhythms of the different kinds of Exercises, has to be constantly submitted to discernment, as in the examen of prayer in the *Spiritual Exercises* [77] and to the spiritual conversation with the one who gives the Exercises.

Three: The spiritual conversation with the one who gives Exercises. It should be daily or at least frequent, according to the kind of Exercises and depending on the number of exercitants. This spiritual conversation differs from the conference of spiritual direction: It attends to the experience during prayer (and also during the day)-the spiritual movements of the heart. This is for the sake of discernment (for deeper union with the Lord, reform of life, particular choices, election), in the course of which the guide does not displace the exercitant but rather supports him or her by being there to discriminate and objectify.

Four: The points for meditation. In substance, these focus principally on the Word of God, "the solid foundation of facts" [*SpEx* 2]. The one who gives Exercises is called on to master the art of giving *points*, supplying suggestive paths for the prayer while avoiding extensive development of the materials and using, in place of an oratorical tone, the tone of a friendly conversation. Throughout, the guide keeps in mind the actual person or group doing Exercises. The guide adapts these proposals for meditation to the personal rhythm of the exercitant. When guiding a group, the one giving Exercises does well to get a feel for their spiritual situation, either through personal conversations or in some other way (serious sharing during the Eucharist or some form of journal written in the evenings, and so on). The guide can then adapt the points for meditation to the group's standard.

Five: The itinerary to follow. The organization of materials in the book of *Spiritual Exercises* suggests how to propose the dynamic unfolding of the course of prayer:

- recalling the foundational truths (Principle and Foundation)
- time of purification (First Week);
- the beginning of following the Lord Jesus (Second Week);
- the initiation into the paschal mystery of Christ (Third and Fourth Weeks).

This is the organic scheme to be followed, and it varies according to the kind of Exercises: for the "month" (meaning according to Annotation 19 or perhaps 20), the whole scheme is more or less required; but for the Exercises of a week and for the Annotation 18 Exercises, certain adaptations are required.

Christ is the center: this must be the basis for all of the points for meditation, beginning with the Principle and Foundation. Keeping Christ central means running no risk of presenting the Exercises as a series of themes in spirituality cut off from the Person of the Lord.

Six: The ecclesial context. St Ignatius does not talk much about this issue, because in his day it was a given. The whole structure of the book of *Exercises*, and not just the "Rules for Thinking with the Church" [352-70], is suffused with a feel for the church: The one who gives Exercises is a witness to the tradition of the Church, and has received and transmits an experience (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3). Encountering him or her is encountering a representative of the Church. The criteria for discernment are drawn from the tradition of the Fathers of the Church. Every option recommended in *Spiritual Exercises* as a guide for behavior is squared with God's will in the life of the Church.

Seven: The colloquies and the fundamental meditations of the *Exercises*. These can be proposed even outside of the "month," always in a suitable context. The colloquy before Jesus on the Cross must not be left out of any course of purification. Whether to use the rest of the colloquies and meditations, on the other hand, requires discernment about the readiness of the exercitant.

Eight: Participation in Mass and the sacraments. This accompanies and completes the way of progressive union with and conformity to Christ.

Nine: Link between the Exercises and life. This has to be watched carefully, since the Exercises are a strong experience along the journey of faith that was going on before it and will continue afterward it--now with a jump in the quality of prayer, in relationships, and in commitment in the Church.

Note: The more our way of giving Exercises embodies these characteristics, the more they are to be considered *ignatian*; the less our way embodies them, the further it moves from the ignatian method.