

THE EXERCISES IN DAILY LIFE

An Experience in the Town of Castres

Castres is a town in a district of no great importance in the province of Tarn [South-eastern France]. Prosperous at one time, the town was hard hit by the economic crisis of its region. It is making something of a comeback today, with initiatives in information technology and electronic communications (the internet) that link it with other nearby towns like Mazamet and La Bruguière.

There used to be a Jesuit residence in Castres, and many of the townspeople used to follow the spiritual events which the Jesuits organized for them. When the residence was closed about forty years ago, the Christian Life Communities more or less took over offering what people had come looking for in those spiritual events. Many people evidently follow ignatian spirituality, lay people as well as clergy. A number of them went regularly to the spirituality center near Toulouse, Notre-Dame des Coteaux. Then, when that center was closed, a community of religious of the Blessed Sacrament of Lyons and some lay people of the Christian Life Community, supported by two priests of the Groupe Evangile et Mission, organized themselves to offer several formation modules: a school of prayer, formation for spiritual companionship, Christian reflection on society's problems,

and others. This is how some people came to want to make the Exercises in Daily Life.

The people in Castres then called on the Jesuits of Coteaux-Païs [based in Toulouse, not far off]. Responding to that specific request required some carefully structured organizing. This is how the team of prayer companions came to be put together. Among them were two priests of Castres (one of them, the Dean), two religious, a good number of lay men and women, and a Jesuit of Coteaux-Païs who traveled from Toulouse every three weeks to supervise the team of prayer companions.

Beginning in the first year, there have been around twenty requests to make the Exercises in Daily Life. Only after one or several preliminary meetings will many of them commit themselves to the adventure, and others are carried along in the wake. The experience has gone on for three years now. Each year, about fifteen people make the Exercises; each prayer companion handles between one and four exercitants.

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At regularly scheduled times, the prayer companions met with the supervisor, both individually and as a group, to check the procedures and the authenticity of the Exercises. These have been times of enthusiastic and productive discussions. And too, when the supervisor was there, the retreatants also gathered. They had the chance of sharing in small groups and of hearing presentations on this or that point.

At the end of this experience, the third year in a row, there was the usual group review of what they had experienced. Here are a few of the things that were brought out:

A wonderful discovery in the Scriptures – I would not have thought that the Old Testament could throw so much light on my life.

The companioning and the sharing were a valuable help for me; I would never have believed that they would be able to help me to know myself better and to live such an experience of freedom. It was tough, but nonetheless terrific.

I take away from the retreat a deep-felt desire to keep on out there in the world. Really! The Christian is nothing like alienated.

Continue to deepen my desire through prayer and spiritual combat.

What completely unbinged me was the discovery of a loving God. The companioning was for me an experience of fraternity and truth.

The experience was rough, but the companioning helped me keep my head. I would like to keep on with spiritual companioning; it is a source of strength.

During the year of 2000/2001, the experience has been suspended for the preparation of a new development. It will be replaced by an "Invitation to Prayer," which will offer six sessions during the year, animated by Fr Jean Althabegoity and the Team of Blessed Sacrament.

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