

FIRST THINGS

3

Ignatian as a Brand

To some, the topic of this review threatens to be a leaden bore. Haven't we had enough articles and books, scholarly and practical, to identify this brand, *ignatian*? Don't we know enough yet to know how to promote *Spiritual Exercises* and the spirituality that we call *ignatian*?

The argument on the "yes" side goes something like this. For half a century, historical and textual studies have been appearing in France's *Christus*, Spain's *Manresa*, and England's *The Way*. For some decades now, studies on the renewed Exercises – given instead of preached – have appeared in Germany's *Korrespondenz*, Brazil's *Itaici*, Italy's *Appunti di Spiritualità*, Canada's *Cahiers de spiritualité*. These publications began the work of enculturation which has matured in *Bulletins* – for instance, from France and Uruguay, and in *Cuadernos* (*Notebooks*), – for instance, from Chile and Peru. Along with the periodicals came books of commentary, beginning with Gilles Cusson's masterwork and still showing up, again for instance, in Michael Ivens's and Adrien Demoustier's works. Does anyone really need the essays in this review?

Moreover – adding weight to the argument that we've had enough – look at the topics we have exhausted, or that exhausted us. We have analyzed the election process back to its central place. We have torn open the role of desire in Exercises. We have disassembled and re-assembled discernment. We learned the "graces of the Weeks." We've heard who uses "Hell," and how, and the ignatian meditations on Two Standards and Three Degrees. We have heard that the Second Week leads to discipleship, and that the Third and Fourth Weeks together lead to union with God acting. Whatever could remain to be said?

To drag attention over to the work still to do, it helps to consider that *Spiritual Exercises* and *ignatian spirituality* are among the international brands. Brands – Nike, McDonald’s, Nestle, Absolut – are currently in disrepute. Nike disgracefully underpays child labor. McDonald’s is doing in local cuisine. And as a tribe, the international brands are causing the ills of globalization, dismantled local cultures, and egregiously harmful products. They seem immensely powerful.

Well, a brand may seem powerful, but like Coca-Cola can be threatened, and like TWA and Sabena, quashed. On the other hand, in their defense, brands ensure content and, generally, quality. One can be sure of the vodka in Absolut’s bottles and, if a bit less, of the beef in a Big Mac. Anyhow, brands guarantee that the buyer is getting what the buyer is used to. And if buyers don’t, then the owners of the brand can be checked out and pursued for villany.

Much of this, summoning the analogy of proper proportionality (ahem), applies to *Spiritual Exercises*. They bear a brand: *ignatian*. The brand ensures content: Four Weeks, continuity, an approach to affections and spirits, ways of reaching decision, conversion. The brand signifies fairly

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identifiable processes – the *what I want*, the colloquy, a review of prayer, for instance – and it guarantees a distinctive way of spiritual direction or companioning. It is meant to ensure serious spirituality and fidelity to basic Catholic beliefs. Interestingly, as worldwide brands have been forced to turn to social responsibility, *ignatian* has, too. All brands, never mind analogy, are still working that one out.

Now the question may be asked. Have we thought and talked enough about *Spiritual Exercises* to have firmly established *ignatian* as a brand? Read the articles in this review. They simply demolish any assurance that we’ve had enough. Fr General Kolvenbach probes the surprisingly smooth transition from preaching retreats to guiding *Exercises* between GC31 in 1965 and GC34 in 1995. Then he raises some lurking thorny issues. Mark Rotsaert expertly sifts out the “ignatian experience” from teeming current practices. And he says his sifting is tentative. Just how tentative it must be appeared in

the Council on Ignatian Spirituality's unique worldwide survey, "Notes for the One Giving Exercises" (Review, #94).

Philip Endean points to an astonishing disregard in our reading of the text: the meaning of *applicar*. He forces an important – it may prove epochal – shift in viewpoint on giving Exercises. We have thought we needed to *adapt* (*accommodate*) *the Exercises*, a viewpoint which focuses on the one making them. Mistake: we have to think of the work to *apply the Exercises*, a new viewpoint which focuses on the Exercises' powerful dynamic and the materials it makes available. His work includes a description of early Jesuit practice. It goes a long way to say how this 450-year-old handbook remains practicable.

There are good grounds for claiming that more people are making Exercises than ever. A lot of them are not looking for a quick spiritual fix, either. They are looking for a way of life, what we now rather airily call *ignatian spirituality*. This, too, is a brand of sorts, and brands are a storehouse of trust. Getting a brand established and stable has gotten harder and harder. The *ignatian* brand is no exception. Item: anyone can give whatever and call it ignatian. Item: lots of folks are doing that. Item: many have set themselves up, from a hodgepodge of backgrounds, to train, form, and mentor others to give *Exercises*. All of this means that we have to keep on interpreting our own experience of Exercises, and the experiences of those we give them go. All of this begs for continued communication among scholars and practitioners. So, more articles and books, disks and tapes.

And then there is the fact that crowds show interest in Exercises and ignatian spirituality. Having this "brand" simplifies religious and spiritual choice. And this particular brand proves not only enriching but almost fun. In postmodernity, if that is where we are, the experience of Exercises and following ignatian spirituality provides some definition of belief in a relativising world. It helps define a person and lends some identity. It brands those who make them.

Anyhow, those really interested in *Exercises* show that they have not had enough talk and writing. They keep coming together and reading papers to one another. This is the source of the papers in this review: the first European Congress on the Spiritual Exercises. Organized by P. Chris Dyckhoff of Brussels with a committee of five, and sponsored by the European

Conference of Provincials, the congress was held in Rome in February this year. Two active Jesuits from each of some thirty European provinces attended. They heard the three major papers in this review.

Even listing a few other types of meetings, congresses, and seminars would take pages. Dedicated organizations: the Jesuit Retreat and Renewal Ministry, a North American organization, gathered more than a hundred colleagues, Jesuit, lay, and religious in April. They heard papers by James Bowler and David Fleming on the First Week. Ongoing seminars: the International Workshop for Guides of the Exercises, a six-week training program, will gather for the fifth time (see *At the Frontiers*) in Venezuela. And so on through bi-annual meetings, ignatian associates, lay-conducted programs. What draws these busy people to meet? What are they talking about? What have they found out about the inculturation of this continually applicable handbook, even in a postmodern world?

Some of what they talk about has to do with history – ho hum. But each of these gatherings trivializes the argument that there is a definitive interpretation of the text. There is none. And because of a paper read by Philippe Lécrivain at a meeting in 1995, we understand why. This text was never *closed* but has always remained *open*. It was never forgotten in library stacks; it never decayed in a cave. It has been open before men's faces all through the centuries. It is now open before women's faces, a new realm. Consequently, we do not go to the text today the way scholars go to scrolls of Qumran, to pry loose historical sense and meaning. We go to the text of *Exercises* the way we go to HELP on the computer's toolbar. The HELP pages took their shape in a lot of people's experiences. Now they shape ours.

Spiritual Exercises are the same. As everyone knows by now – unless they haven't been reading anything at all – *Exercises* took shape in and from the experiences of many people whom Ignatius helped. Any problem with that notion – that it was not only Ignatius' experiences that shaped the text – dissolves in the book's first paragraphs, the Annotations. The one making Exercises "produces greater spiritual relish and fruit" when the one giving them does not explain too much [2]. Some are slower than others "in attaining what is sought" [4]. Some want only some instruction [18]. More and more seclusion from friends and everyday life leads to greater progress – not in every single case, but "ordinarily" [20].

Each of these, and all the rest of the “directives,” remain current in today’s experience of giving and making Exercises. But they also raise new questions. What is too much explaining of the psychology of desire and choice? How do we re-create simple Exercises for adult formation and even catechesis? Does making Exercises in a group “ordinarily” lead to greater progress?

Lying under all of these is a nerve-end: What kind of person gives Exercises? We are giving all kinds of training and formation on using the book. We might have to look harder and broader. Here is Fr General’s challenge to the European Jesuits, which those who give Exercises everywhere need to face: “Are we in touch with the ways the Gospel teaching affects life in the concrete, with what the incarnate Lord is wont to ask of a lay person, a religious, a priest or a monk?” Not entirely. Not yet.

Two things have affected the giving and making of *Exercises* during the past generation. One is the big international meetings. The other is pivotal articles. Our fate is to keep reading.