

THE MINISTRY OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES IN EUROPE TODAY

Précis: Fr Pedro Arrupe took initiatives to adapt the Spiritual Exercises and keep them authentic. Gratefully, forty years have seen a smooth unfolding from preaching retreats to giving Exercises. In Europe, the ministry of Exercises faces the erosion of religion, individualism, and a consequent diminishing interest in Exercises. A further issue: the Exercises's "saving one's soul," enhances individualism and has no social relevance. Yet from the Principle to the Contemplation, Master Ignatius keeps in balance God our Lord, all creation, and the person. Another issue is that the Exercises promote service within the Church, not attractive to Europeans today. Directors of Exercises, personally converted, will find the way in this ministry.

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At the outset, let me thank you for inviting me to this first European conference on the Spiritual Exercises. The participation of the European provinces in this encounter indicates recognition of its importance for the future of this typically Jesuit ministry at the service of our mission in an ageing continent in transition or crisis. It is not the first time that Jesuits from different countries come together to evaluate the past and ponder the future of this ministry. Already in 1965, Father Pedro Arrupe had called forty experts to Loyola to examine the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises* in the light of the Second Vatican Council (AR 14, 770). Close to a year later, two other meetings similar to some in other places were held in

Italy as a follow-up to the encounter at Loyola. In correspondence relating to these meetings, Father Arrupe raised some points that are still relevant to us today.

First, out of his awareness that the apostolate of the Exercises was going through troubled times, he expressed his conviction of the need to adapt constantly our practice to present circumstances (AR 17, 1105). To many, the Council's teaching appeared to put into question the traditional ways of presenting the *Exercises*. Also, there were Jesuits who no longer believed in them or retained the notion that any Jesuit could give them without some special training or formation. Father Arrupe encouraged renewal while at the same time circulating a letter from Paul VI to Cardinal Cushing, Archbishop of Boston, emphasizing that not all changes in the presentation of the *Exercises* were acceptable. Group dynamics, discussions and seminars on religious sociology, sharing in spirituality, all had their place, but not within an Ignatian retreat (AR 14, 704).

Father Arrupe agreed on the need to safeguard the essentials of an Ignatian retreat while noting the benefits that could be gained, in accordance with the Council's thought, by study of new theological and spiritual approaches, new developments in Scripture and in the liturgy, and new insights in psychology and pedagogy. These could greatly enrich the personal accompaniment of retreatants (AR 15, 157). Father Arrupe stressed, however, that renewal would come to nothing without the proper interior disposition of the retreat director. *Nemo dat quod non habet*. The director must incarnate fully in his own life the Paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord. In the words of the Loyola meeting, "Through the Exercises, Ignatius leads us along the same road that the Father traced for his Son". With reference to Luke 12:48, Father Arrupe reminded us that the Society has received in the *Spiritual Exercises* a great gift and that much will be asked of those who have much received.

The Smooth Development of the Ministry

In the present encounter, we can appreciate the fruits of this continued adaptation of the *Spiritual Exercises* to the service of our mission. We note with gratitude the changes of the recent decades, especially between the

Thirty-First and the Thirty-Fourth General Congregations, that have come about more by a relatively smooth process of spiritual development from within, helped by the vivifying grace of the Spirit, than by directives handed down from above. The preaching of retreats has gradually given way to a more personal accompaniment. The full *Spiritual Exercises* have become available to lay people, often in the form of the retreat in daily life. In the Society itself, the thirty days are no longer the preserve only of novices and tertians. The recommendation of Father Arrupe that attention be given as a priority to the formation of retreat directors has greatly increased the number of trained people able to conduct the Exercises. Not only those in formation but all Jesuits are encouraged to learn how to give the Exercises under the guidance of experienced directors. Thus the Complementary Norms state that “our members are to be trained to give the *Spiritual Exercises* in a true and correct way; others too among the diocesan and religious clergy, as well as lay women and men, are to be helped to do the same” (CN 271, §3). More is involved than becoming a good conference-giver or preacher, an animator or psychologist. Nor is it enough to be a deeply spiritual and prayerful man. In the words of John Paul II at the beginning of the Ignatian year, “We must learn from Saint Ignatius, who was not only a man of prayer but also an excellent guide to prayer, how to help others along the way to becoming contemplatives in action” (AR XX, 1990, 287).

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This is the aim of the growing number of retreat houses and centers of Ignatian spirituality, which now number around two hundred and fifty. The staff in these houses are well aware that attraction to them is founded above all on the faithful offering of the *Spiritual Exercises*. They are made up of Jesuits and non-Jesuits, including women, who are involved in the common mission of accompanying and guiding people through the Exercises, as part of the pastoral, spiritual, and apostolic activity of the Church. The Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality, established thirty years ago by Father Arrupe, has coordinated this world-wide movement through publications and encounters. This office in Rome will again offer courses, which were temporarily

interrupted. It facilitates international exchange on ways of giving the *Exercises*, with a concentration on the retreat in daily life. The existence of the secretariat in Rome has prompted major superiors to name delegates at province and region level and to set up secretariats and commissions in support of the ministry of the *Spiritual Exercises* in their areas.

We need to offer a prayer of thanksgiving to the Spirit that renews the face of the earth for all that has been done in the sphere of the *Exercises* and for the work of those who give themselves to make them available to God's people. In this assembly, we are particularly concerned with this apostolate in the European situation which is still not homogeneous ecclesiastically or religiously. Christianity along the Mediterranean shores is different from that of western Europe and there are notable differences between East and West. Generally, however, all of the regions have in common a drop in church membership and religious practice, even in the practice of prayer and in belief in a personal God, paralleled with an increase in individualism and moral permissiveness. Yet a drop in church attendance and in other religious practice should not be equated with unbelief. For example, people believe in life after death, in the existence of a paradise, or in reincarnation. There exists a thirst for spirituality that exists by itself outside an ecclesial context or organized religion. It can have its source in an awareness of life's precariousness where nothing is sure or assured, of the transcendental within the self that can co-exist with a deep desire to be the master of one's life. There is value in a celebration or in a spiritual exercise which has a positive effect in one because of its communitarian, artistic, or symbolic nature. Religion is attractive in so far as it leaves room for free decision and offers guidance to one's existence. It repels when it is perceived as a yoke or an imposition.

A Europe Uninterested in Exercises

We consider now a second dimension which preoccupied Father Arrupe at the beginning of his generalate, the fact of the diminishing interest in the *Spiritual Exercises*. An enquiry throughout the whole Society led to the realization that retreat participation was declining. There were fewer groups, especially larger ones. Fewer members of the clergy were coming to the

retreats, which the new Canon Law no longer imposed, allowing sessions and study days to take their place. Also, during the years after the Council, the Society gradually lost access to the traditional sources of retreatants, such as parishes, religious congregations, and schools – even Jesuit, which annually as a matter of course had sent groups to the retreat houses or had invited retreat directors to themselves. Another enquiry, made towards the end of Father Arrupe's governance, confirmed the drop in numbers, now counterbalanced, however, by a better quality of retreatant, different from their predecessors. The introduction of the Exercises in daily life contributed to this development.

There was also a renewed awareness of the “pearl of great price” that were the Exercises and of the priority that should be given to this particular form of apostolate. We have here a mission. Let me quote these well-known words that Karl Rahner placed in the mouth of Saint Ignatius addressing himself to the present-day Jesuits: “Do you understand now that your principal mission, above all else, is to promote this gift of the Exercises?” Father Gilles Cusson comments: “For Rahner, the Exercises of Saint Ignatius are a privileged help offered to ordinary Christians to help them discover the potentialities of grace and the fact of the divine presence in them for the enrichment of their lives. It seems to me that, if we are convinced of this fact and come to know it first ourselves and see it happening in others whom we accompany in the Exercises, we will take care not to restrict them to certain chosen people for reasons that are not always founded in charity.” Here is delicately but clearly put the question of whether we should limit our services to a few well-chosen persons perceived as possible multipliers or also extend them to the ordinary person. Master Ignatius spent time giving Exercises to ordinary people, the *ejercicios leves* of Annotation 18, and the early Society reached many people whose need of basic spiritual nourishment and catechesis could be compared with today's. The Society now has problems reaching the ordinary person, who in Europe today may find no comfort in religion or, oppressed with activism, may not be able to make a thirty-day retreat.

Already at the Loyola meeting of 1965, the problem was posed, in reference to the Nineteenth Annotation, arising from the discovery of how Ignatius, with surprising originality and daring, made the Exercises available

to the most varied and busiest people of his time. It produced the following conclusion: "The formula of the full Exercises according to the 19th Annotation, seen by some as a poor alternative to the traditional way of doing the Exercises, reminds us of the gentle breeze in which the prophet recognizes God's presence before whom he veils his face."

We recall the view of the theologians of the Rahnerian school that the Christian of the future will necessarily be a mystic. Without denying the specialness of the great mystics' experiences, they believe that people of our time cannot maintain a Christian existence in situations of permanent

controversy, continual change, and absence of fixed bearings without an experience of God. In his exhortation to the Church, at the beginning of the third millennium, John Paul II seems to have the European context in mind when he speaks of the religious mediocrity of our contemporaries. At the same time, he notes that, despite widespread secularization, there exists an undefined desire for spirituality and a

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yearning for prayer (*Tertio Millennio Ineunte*, 33). Is this not a sign of the times? The other religions, now firmly established in the areas of old Christianity, propose responses to this search that are often appealing. We who are blessed with belief in Christ, Revelation of the Father and Savior of the world, have the responsibility of revealing the richness of the relationship to which we are called. As with the Church we look to the future, we remind ourselves that, out of our knowledge of the experience of Ignatius as he recorded it in his book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, we are missioned to help – *ayudar* – those whom the Lord places on our path to gain their own experience of Christ, living and witnessing his love in the world. The Nineteenth Annotation encourages us to be creative and daring in finding innovative ways to make the Exercises accessible to people.

This effort to adapt the Exercises to the pastoral and religious circumstances of the mission the Lord has confided to us is in accord with the spirit of Ignatius who saw them as a time of grace that we experience ourselves each time we do them. Father Arrupe did not leave us a letter on the *Spiritual Exercises* but in his last talk to an Ignatian Course in the Center

of Ignatian Spirituality, he presented the work of retreat direction as a pedagogy of the purest love toward God and the neighbor, quoting the last words of the *Spiritual Exercises*: “We must esteem above else the service of God our Lord out of pure love.” He added that the words *glory* and *service* were interchangeable. One alone remains and that is *love*.

What Brings People to Make the Exercises

This aim of the Spiritual Exercises has not changed, but there are varied ways of attaining it or, to state it better, the accents and nuances will differ according to what one is seeking. As in the time of Ignatius and his companions, numerous are those who want to find the right state of life for themselves. Thus the “election”. Others make the Exercises as a way of discovering how better to live the vocation and the mission in which they are engaged. Communities and monasteries use the Exercises to rediscover their proper charism. Still others seek to find God's will for their spiritual growth. There are many who through conversation with a director and their colloquies with Christ, to whom they feel personally drawn, seek a more radical evangelical commitment.

The reasons for entering into the spiritual experience of the Exercises can vary, but it always remains a privileged time of encounter with the Lord, one-on-one, in the light of the Gospels. In prayer, we come to know better the reality of God's love, we experience the joy of coming to know his will and of responding to it, we grow in gratitude for his gifts, we learn to walk in the steps of Christ, making his choices and sentiments our own. At the very beginning, the first companions distinguished the Exercises from catechetical instruction and ongoing spiritual direction. In our day, the Exercises should not take the form of sessions or conferences, renewal programs or bible sharing, apostolic planning or group discernment encounters. These pastoral activities are good and should be offered where they “help souls,” and today they are often offered in order to prepare people to profit from the Exercises.

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But so that we may recognize the Lord who walks along the road with us, modern Emmaus pilgrims, the Exercises require silence and solitude enabling us to hear him “explaining the Scriptures” to us and breaking bread with us, “the greatest sign of his love” (*SpEx*, 289). Thus we are prepared to become witnesses, in “the state of life God our Lord may grant us to elect” (*SpEx*, 135), to the paschal mystery lived out in the human condition. Each person finds the appropriate prayer among those proposed by the Exercises, to which have been added, thanks to the ecumenical movement and interreligious dialogue, so many others like the Jesus prayer, prayer with icons, Asian and African prayers. Whatever the way of prayer, however, the Exercises retain their apostolic orientation. The contemplation of the mysteries of Christ’s life (*SpEx*, 262) help us to discern our personal and communitarian vocation “to better follow and imitate our Lord” (*SpEx*, 109).

Already in 1975, the Thirty-Second General Congregation was moved to express thanksgiving for “the remarkable renewal taking place today in the giving and the making of the Spiritual Exercises whose vivifying influence extends beyond the limits of the formal retreat into the daily life of prayer” [208], an encouraging development that has continued. It is worth noting that this same congregation, which emphasized so strongly the promotion of justice and the service of the poor, saw in the Exercises “a privileged means for achieving renovation and union in the Society and for revitalizing our apostolic mission” [242]. That the conclusions of this pivotal congregation might affect the practice of our lives, it was imperative, in the words of Father Arrupe, to strive after a deep personal conversion. Now as then, we cannot exercise a personal and community discernment, including at the level of the whole Society, on how to respond to present-day challenges unless we have attained the necessary interior freedom. “Our entire apostolic life,” the congregation insisted, “should be examined with the spiritual discernment proper to the Exercises, so that we might increasingly put into practice what God expects of us and purify the motivation of our lives” [238].

The Relevance of Exercises to Church and World

In this examination of the aim of the Exercises, we must consider two other points. No one believes that the Exercises promote a disincarnate

spirituality, but even as they produce abundant spiritual and apostolic fruit, we hear frequently the reproach that they encourage an individualism that the European situation hardly needs. Is this the inevitable result of an encounter that “allows the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord?” Is not the emphasis on “saving one's soul” (*SpEx*, 23) and on “ordering one's life” (21) an indication of the main aim of the *Spiritual Exercises*, leaving the world to its fate by discouraging people from working at changing it into a “civilization of love”, more just because more divine and human? True, the book reflects a time which was less preoccupied with the question of injustice and misery in the world, but are we justified in concluding that the *Spiritual Exercises* are less conducive, in this present time, to preparing and encouraging Christians to confront this reality?

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The *Exercises* themselves respond to this criticism. From the very beginning, in the Principle and Foundation [23], to the end, in the Contemplation to attain love [230], Saint Ignatius keeps a balance between God, the human person (the I), and creation, all three bound together in the dynamic of salvation. It is not with the intention of isolating us from the work of proclaiming Christ's justice and of denouncing injustice in the present world that Saint Ignatius insists on consideration of “all that I wish and desire” [98]. On the contrary, by insisting on personal introspection, Ignatius develops in the retreatant the awareness of his or her responsibility for this world on the road to perdition because of his or her connivance with sin [45 ff]. In the name of this same responsibility, the retreatant is invited to heed the call of Christ, in the here and now, to work at the world's salvation along with so many others, apostles and disciples chosen by him [145], to bring about a new earth and a new heaven with the Father of Jesus who works unceasingly in all created things on the face of the earth [236] for the salvation of the human race [107]. The healing of our planet begins with the total acquiescence (a personal “Yes”) to work with Jesus in transforming humanity from within, from the heart. The *Spiritual Exercises* have lost nothing of their ability to dispose people to interiorizing Christian values and to prepare them to take up the apostolic tasks of our time.

While we may accept that the spirituality of the Exercises is incarnate, there is a second question which is probably more debatable. Let us hear first Hans Urs von Balthasar's opinion of the aim of the Exercises: "The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius serve to prepare the retreatant for service to the Church, through the conversion experience of the first week and the accompaniment of Christ in the other weeks through contemplation of events of his life. The retreatant is helped to develop an attitude of 'feeling' with the Church." An article in the periodical *Christus* offers the different view that the present European context is not receptive to the idea of ecclesial service proposed as the goal of the contemplations of the mysteries of Christ's life and that it might prove an obstacle to attaining the fruits of the retreat to introduce the rules of feeling with and in the Church.

Whatever one might think of the issue, I believe that the retreat director should have a clear idea of the direction a committed Christian should take. No doubt he "ought to stand by like the pointer of a scale in equilibrium, to allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord" [15]. At the same time, he should worry when "the person making the Exercises is not being moved one way or another" or contrarily "is inclined to make some hasty or unconsidered promise or vow." 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? Under the pretext of allowing the Lord alone to act and making sure that our will does not intrude, do we hesitate too much in proposing in the name of the Lord vocation and mission orientations with their exigencies? Does not the Vatican Council remind us, as followers of Christ, of our duty to seek holiness? (*Lumen Gentium*, 42).

I thank you for this opportunity to put forward some thoughts on the *Spiritual Exercises* which invite a response, as Father Arrupe put it, to the love of God revealing itself in the Word that is beyond any word, a response that must be more than words.