

## THE IGNATIAN CIRCLE

*Précis: A conversation about the “Notes for the One Giving Exercises” (review #94) led to this report about a special partnership. In Manila, laity, religious, and Jesuits of “The Ignatian Circle” have been meeting since 1997 to talk about the Exercises and to continue asking one another the important questions about giving and making them. The group systematically deals with the Weeks and the major issues, usually beginning with a text, in the year reported on here, from this review. This partnership could be imitated in Jesuit institutions in order to deepen their Ignatian charism.*

### Introduction

Jesuits in retreat houses often get a chance to discuss the Exercises and their experiences in staff meetings. However, there are many Jesuits involved in other apostolates, such as education, also active in giving the Exercises. They commonly have no opportunity to discuss the Exercises and their experiences. There are also many others – priests, religious, and laity – involved in giving the Spiritual Exercises, eager to be able to share their insights and experiences, especially with Jesuits. The realization of all this helped in the establishment of the Ignatian Circle.

What is this Ignatian Circle, and how did it come about? From 29 to 31 August 1997, a Colloquium of Retreat Directors of the Philippine Province met on the campus of the Ateneo de Manila University at the Center for Ignatian Spirituality to discuss the current state of affairs in the retreat apostolate. There were twenty-seven participants from throughout the Philippines: Jesuits, religious sisters, Christian Life Community members, and other lay people. Several resolutions were passed as a follow-up to this

meeting. I was tasked with organizing an Ignatian Circle: a regular meeting of those in the Metro-Manila area interested in sharing their experiences in giving the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Since then, we have been meeting on a regular basis once every two months during the school year, five times a year. We usually have between ten and sixteen attending: Jesuits, other priests, religious, CLC members, and lay people active in the retreat apostolate. It is a very enriching experience to discuss matters arising from the *Spiritual Exercises* with those who have had many years of experience. The first year, we focused on several articles on Ignatian spirituality. The second year, we focused on a book by Jean Laplace, S.J., *An Experience of Life in the Spirit*. The third year, we discussed articles from the *Review of Ignatian Spirituality*, which we are also doing as I write this during the fourth year.

Just to give an idea of our discussions, allow me to choose some of the topics we reflected on when we discussed Laplace's book. First, about preliminaries, prayer, and the Principle and Foundation, we asked, How do you prepare the retreatant for the *Spiritual Exercises*? How do you structure the retreat? How do you teach someone to pray who is not well versed in prayer? Do you allow someone to make a retreat who does know how to pray? Or do you use the retreat to teach them how to pray? How many hours of prayer do you ask of the retreatant? How do you give the retreat conference? How long does it take you to present your points? Do you base your presentation on Scripture? How do you facilitate the dialogue, sharing, and spiritual direction during the retreat?

How do you give the Principle and Foundation? How do you present God's creating and sustaining love, God's loving presence through all of life? How do you help someone to see God manifesting His love through the gifts of people in his or her life? What is to be the response in the face of such a love?

### **First Stage: the Call to Conversion**

In meditating on sin in the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises, Laplace brought us to see, the retreatant is called to objectify what is enslaving him

or her, to bring this darkness to the light. The experience is ultimately one of liberation into the freedom of a fullness of life. A deep experience of the First Week is already a deep experience of the Paschal Mystery, of dying to self and rising to Christ. The retreatant has a deep experience of the saving power of Jesus Christ. One realizes that one cannot save oneself; it is Jesus Christ who saves us. This brought us to the question of how you present the colloquy with Christ our Lord on the Cross.

How do you present sin? We wondered whether retreatants today have a sense of sin. How do you help them come to a deep experience of sin in their lives? The experience of sin must always be in the context of God's love, we reminded ourselves, for sin is ultimately a refusal of love. How do you present some of the Ignatian meditations on sin whose images and language do not seem to speak to people of today? How do you bring in social sin? Some have commented that some retreatants have a deep awareness of social sin. They deal with it in their professional lives. They realize—at least we find here in the Philippines—the need of the help of others to combat it. They can not combat it alone; they need community. They realize the need of the saving power of Jesus Christ.

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### Second Stage: From Conversion to Mission

The meditation on Christ the King and His Call seemed to us to be a good way to bring in the social responsibility of the followers of Christ. How do you present the Kingdom of God? How is one called to foster and proclaim it? Who ultimately brings about the Kingdom? Do you present the challenge of the prayer, “Eternal Lord and King of all creation,” to follow Christ to the point of “abuse and poverty”? What is important, we thought, is not merely to suffer “abuse and poverty”, but to experience this as part of our total

commitment in following Christ in discipleship, as a total giving in love. Do you see this prayer as an invitation to the key Ignatian meditations of the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises? What Christology do you present? How do you help the retreatant come into contact with the mystery of the humanity of Jesus, as well as with His divinity? How do you present the Christ of the Galilean ministry? How do you present Mary in the Exercises? She is the Mother of God, yet she is also the model of discipleship, showing us how to follow her Son. How do you emphasize the colloquies of the Second Week?

*Discernment.* One of our issues was how to get retreatants to move to the discerning process. How do you present the Ignatian Exercises like the Two Standards, the Three Types of Persons, and the Third Degree of Humility as essential movements to the heart of Jesus, to an authentic manner of discerning? In all this, the role of the Spiritual Director is to be a companion, to enable the retreatants to discern God's activity in their life. The director is not to impose his point of view, but to enable retreatants to see how God is acting, how God is calling them to be truly free to follow the call of Christ.

### **Third Stage: Christ Living in the Church**

This session dealt with Weeks Three and Four, the Passion and Death, the Resurrection, and the Contemplation on the Love of God. How do you present the Paschal Mystery as the central mystery of our faith? How do you enable retreatants to deal with the reality of the Cross in their lives, with suffering and pain? How do you show the relationship between the Cross and the Resurrection? They are parts of one mystery. Well, how do you enable retreatants to see that operative in life? The Contemplation of Divine Love leads to finding God in all things, to becoming contemplative in action and leading a life of discernment. "What can one give to the Lord for all that the Lord has given to ME?" The ultimate response at the completion of the Exercises is one of complete and utter gratitude for all that God has done for me.

### **Our Experience in Some Practical Matters**

In concluding, I would like to make some practical suggestions. The formation of groups like the Ignatian Circle should be encouraged. It would be easy to form such groups in large Jesuit university communities or in our high school communities where some Jesuits are involved in giving the Exercises. As our lay collaborators in these institutions make the Exercises and then get involved in giving them, they can also be invited to join the Circle (promoting the institution's ignatian charism). Besides forming the Ignatian Circle from one community or apostolate, Jesuits and their lay collaborators can come together from several communities and apostolates. Membership in these groups should be limited to those who have made the Exercises at least in an eight-day retreat or in Everyday Life and who are now involved in giving the Exercises. Gradually, more Jesuits and religious and lay collaborators will hear about it and come to the meetings. Some will drop out; others will join.

To have an effective discussion and sharing, the group should not go beyond fifteen. Once the group goes beyond fifteen, it would be good to divide it. Our Ignatian Circle met at a convenient time: Saturday afternoon from 4 to 6 p.m. We usually served snacks. Those who join are usually busy people, so we found it good to limit the number of meetings: once every two months, five a year, is satisfactory. What is essential for the formation and continuation of the group is a catalyst and organizer to get the material for the discussion and to send out invitations to the sessions. Finally, we found it helpful to have an established place to meet, and one conducive to meeting.

In the Metro-Manila region of the Philippines, the Ignatian Circle has been an opportunity for retreat givers to share their experiences in giving the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius. Of particular value has been the sharing not only among Jesuits but of Jesuits with other priests and religious and with the laity. In this diversity lies the richness of the group sharing.

In our Ignatian Circle, among the Jesuits are retreat givers, formators, spiritual directors, theologians, scripture professors, philosophers, scientists, and high school teachers. Among the non-Jesuits are a Columbian missionary priest with a doctorate in spirituality from a Jesuit institution who is in formation work, a diocesan priest preparing for seminary formation work, a businessman very active not only in his profession but also in giving the

*Spiritual Exercises*, Christian Life Community (CLC) formators who as lay persons dedicate their lives to forming CLC members and communities, college theology teachers who also give retreats, and a lay leader of a lay Ignatian spirituality organization in a Jesuit school.

The Ignatian Circle has been one of the efforts of the Center for Ignatian Spirituality of the Philippine Province to foster and promote the sharing and deepening of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius. Such a group organized in other Jesuit communities and apostolates throughout the world can foster and promote the Ignatian charism.