

# THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES: FORMING LAY PEOPLE SHAPING PARTNERS IN MINISTRY

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When I was a 38 year old wife, mother and busy career woman, God sent me an invitation. This gentle and loving call would transform every part of my life, including my family and work, in ways I could not have imagined. The invitation tapped into my deep longing for a more intimate relationship with God and prepared me to be a partner in mission in a Jesuit-sponsored ministry. The invitation came in the form of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.

Since Ignatius of Loyola first shared his masterpiece 500 years ago, the Spiritual Exercises have changed the lives of clergy, religious and laypeople. His remarkable book guides directors who accompany those who seek “God’s grace of spiritual freedom for the complete gift of oneself in service to others, in companionship with Jesus, the one whose mission from the Lord we share.”<sup>1</sup>

The end result is a powerful school for prayer, discernment and a desire to serve.

Following the pattern of St. Ignatius’ own experience, retreatants grow in a deeply personal relationship with God. The dynamics of these Exercises lead to the realization that we are totally loved and called by God in the midst of our sinfulness.

The response is often a greater freedom in the choices we make in our lives. It results in a desire to conform our

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lives more closely to the life of Jesus. It touches us with a gratitude that shapes our lives as it echoes Psalm 116: What return can I make to the Lord for all God's goodness to me? This gratitude places the retreatant with Jesus on mission from "the eternal Father." and leads to a growing desire to know Jesus, to love him and then to follow him, imitating his pattern of response.

These Exercises have been a means for forming laypersons who have been drawn closer to the Lord and have experienced the call to some form of ministry. The Spiritual Exercises are a gift to the whole Church, shaping the lives of those who work in parishes, Catholic schools, retreat centers, social advocacy organizations and other faith-based ministries.

Over the last century, as more laity have taken on active roles in the Church, more have also become a vital part of Jesuit-sponsored ministries.

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As the Society of Jesus looks to the future of its works, it seems apparent that the Spiritual Exercises are an appropriate path to transform hearts and prepare almost anyone to be better at serving the mission of these ministries.<sup>2</sup> Both Jesuit and lay partners in mission are becoming more conscious of the need to prepare for their

roles in these ministries. The Exercises are now seen as "an apt apostolic tool" of formation in Ignatian spirituality encouraging lay partners to be "co-responsible" for the life of the Church<sup>3</sup> and the future of these ministries.

***A Gift Ignatius Shared with his Lay Friends***

Although Ignatius was a co-founder of a religious order, he never lost touch with the life of the layperson. He wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* as a layperson and offered a spirituality that doesn't remove us from the world but calls us to be contemplatives in the midst of active and busy lives.

The heart of his ministry began when the nobleman, Iñigo López de Loyola, had an encounter with God that changed his life. The roots of this conversion lie at the time of his recovery from the wounds he received in a heroic but foolish battle at Pamplona. At his family home in Loyola, Ignatius became aware of various movements in his soul and found an awareness of God working actively and intimately in his life. The fruits of

his deep and passionate prayer during his 11 months at Manresa are the beginnings of the Spiritual Exercises.

In the years that followed that critical time, he shared what he learned from his own powerful prayer experiences by offering to guide others through them. In his passion for imitating Christ in “saving souls,” he paid little attention to the necessities of his own life, often neglecting his physical care. His lay friends were inspired by him, fed and clothed him, nursed him when he was sick, and not only supported his work but also introduced him to others who would support his ministries.

He repaid them by offering them his love and friendship and the great treasure of his Spiritual Exercises, which he urged them to share with others. He was bold in his search for those who could most benefit from the Exercises, inviting into the experience bishops, merchants and those with leadership potential. He was persistent in his invitations and in one story, he repeatedly invited a man to make the Exercises. Finally, Ignatius challenged the reluctant retreatant to a game of billiards. If Ignatius won, the man would take the time out of his life to do the Exercises. Ignatius won.

We get an insight into Ignatius’ regard for laypersons by noticing how he not only invited them into his spirituality but also invited them into his earliest ministries. From the beginning, Ignatius recognized laypersons who had been touched by an experience of God in prayer as effective instruments in extending the ministry of the early Society. When he founded the House of St. Martha in Rome, a refuge for those fleeing prostitution, he also began the Confraternity of Grace, a group of lay people who supported the institution. Later, Ignatius turned over the House of St. Martha to the confraternity and moved on to other ministries. These were some of the roots of his practice of relying on lay support and eventual leadership.

His love of the world and the people in it was extraordinary. It led him to approach ministry as an enthusiastic engagement with the world, rather than a flight from it. By doing his ministry in the marketplace and the center of cities, Ignatius signaled a new way of dialogue and ministry in the midst of busy lives.

Sharing the Spiritual Exercises with his lay friends was one of his earliest ministries. From the beginning, he saw offering the Exercises to laypeople as a key ministry of the Society because he believed the Spiritual Exercises were a key formational tool that would transform the lives of laypeople as much as they did for his companions in the Society. He saw

his Spiritual Exercises as “every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies, and, after it is rid, to seek and find the Divine Will as to the management of one’s life for the salvation of the soul.” [SpEx 2]

*Revitalizing the Church and the Exercises*

The power of the Exercises was re-energized in the last century in response to the Second Vatican Council, a watershed moment in the Church for clergy and religious orders as well as the laity. *Lumen Gentium*<sup>4</sup> invited laypersons into a new way of considering their roles and the responsibilities that come with baptism. They were not to be observers but were called to be actively engaged in the church and the ministry of Christ. “...the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God.” A deeper perception of the role of the laity began to emerge with the realization that “all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his own way...”<sup>5</sup>

At the time, many laypeople did not consider themselves as having a particular calling in the church. *Lumen Gentium* invited all the baptized into ministry in the church because of their “very vocation.” That invitation opened the ears and hearts of the laity around the world. Because the laity “are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer.”<sup>6</sup> Beyond that, the “holy people of God” were invited to share in Christ’s prophetic office and be a “living witness” to him with the way they lived their lives.<sup>7</sup>

Vatican II renewed the spirit of the lay apostolate, recognizing it as a “life led in the midst of the world,” with a direct call from God to make of that apostolate, “through the vigor of the Christian spirit, a leaven in the world.”<sup>8</sup> This seems particularly compatible with the Spiritual Exercises, where retreatants are invited to consider God’s presence in everything on earth, from plants and animals to the people around us and finally to ourselves, with God dwelling in us “making a temple of me since I am created as a likeness and image of the Divine Majesty.” [SpEx 235].

Just as the Second Vatican Council gave the hearts of the laity a renewed mission and zeal, it also sought to rekindle the fire of the founding

charisms in religious orders. In the decree “*Perfectae Caritatis*”<sup>9</sup> the council urged religious orders to renew themselves by returning to the spirit and traditions of their founders.

Within the Society of Jesus, that renewal meant, among other things, a soul-searching look at the role the Spiritual Exercises play at the center of Ignatian Spirituality. It also led to revisiting the various ways the Exercises were given. At the Thirty-First General Congregation, the first to meet after Vatican II, the Society reaffirmed the central role of the Exercises: “The Spiritual Exercises of our father St. Ignatius are both the heritage of our spirituality and the school of our prayer. They indeed open the way through which we may penetrate ever deeper into the mystery of salvation which in turn feeds our lives as apostles in the world.”<sup>10</sup> The Congregation called for a “reworking” of the Exercises “to unfold their spiritual riches” to everyone in the Church.<sup>11</sup>

In the years that followed the renewal of GC 31, centers were formed to train people to give the Spiritual Exercises. Often connected with Jesuit universities or retreat houses, these institutions at first served mostly priests and religious.

By 1995, the time of the Thirty Fourth General Congregation, the changes that were taking place among Jesuits and their lay partners were energizing both sides of the partnership. Decree 13 of GC 34, “Cooperating with the Laity in Mission,” recognized that “increasing numbers of lay people have responded to the call to ministry flowing from the grace received in baptism.”<sup>12</sup> A new way of imagining Jesuits and the laity working together was articulated: “The Society of Jesus places itself at the service of this mission of the laity by offering what we are and have received: our spiritual and apostolic inheritance....”<sup>13</sup> Within a few years after GC 34, many of the students training to give the Exercises, were laypeople.

### ***A Personal Look at the Transforming Power of the Exercises***

This history became personal for me in 1992, the Ignatian Year. I was never a member of a well-established Christian Life Community group which had been through a formation process many years earlier. Someone asked: “Should we do the Spiritual Exercises as a group?” Since I had joined only in recent years, I had only a vague idea of the Spiritual Exercises.

In the discussion that night at CLC I never understood what the Exercises were but because the group seemed excited about it, I went

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along. As a group, we agreed to pray for 20 minutes each day using handouts from “Choosing Christ in the World”<sup>14</sup> by Joseph Tetlow, S.J. I had no idea that my casual assent would turn my life upside down as God offered me a new reality. At that point in my life, I was a wife and mother of two children, balancing my family life with a busy career in corporate public relations.

Week by week, I spent time each day praying: How I am loved by God; I am constantly being created by God; I consider my sinfulness before God; and Praying about the Kingdom of Christ.

I asked a Jesuit I barely knew if he would guide me in this retreat. He agreed. His first advice to this hard-driving retreatant was to relax. “I think you are trying too hard,” he said. I had to adjust to the idea that this was a different paradigm from my career world. I was not in charge of my

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own “progress” in this retreat – God was. Ignatius described his – and my - experience so well, saying God taught him as if he were a schoolboy.<sup>15</sup>

Prompted by Ignatius’ invitation to pray using imagination, one hot August morning, I went to the stable where the exhausted Mary and Joseph rested, and I held the baby. I was suddenly overwhelmed that Jesus was *real*, an infant whose neck I could nuzzle and whose cheeks I could smell as I had done with my own babies.

As I continued my journey through the Exercises, my family life and my prayer life became more interconnected. I began to see my husband and children as God’s gifts of love to me and to see my relationship with them as an expression of my love for God.

I became interested in the Christian Spirituality Program (CSP), a summer program at Creighton University which trains spiritual directors. Over and over, I took a brochure and brought it home. I studied it and longed for it. Then I would shake my head and realize that, in my current very busy, “very important, prestigious and well-paying” corporate job, no one would give me summer afternoons off to attend spirituality classes. It simply wasn’t for me.

However, in prayer, I felt God calling me into the CSP. The only way to follow that call was to give up my job and find something else that

would allow me to have the summers off which the classes required. The call grew stronger as I continued to grow in intimacy with Jesus.

My life had a new way of gauging success and finally, I had the courage to make the change. My loving husband was hesitant but supportive. The local Jesuit high school offered me an entry level public relations job and gave me eight weeks off each summer for CSP classes. I took a 50% cut in pay, but I had entered a new life.

I had no way of knowing that the Holy Spirit was preparing to reform me and call me to a new way of service. In the meditation on the Two Standards in the Spiritual Exercises, I was confronted with the temptation to be “successful” and to seek the approval of others. I kept being drawn to Jesus who invited me to be with him, even in poverty and sometimes looking foolish. As with each person making the Exercises, the grace is unique, but the call will always involve a spiritual freedom and a relationship with Jesus and his mission.

### *Following Ignatius onto the Internet*

At the end of the Christian Spirituality Program, I was hired by Creighton University in the Collaborative Ministry Office to work with a Jesuit priest<sup>16</sup> in supporting the Jesuit Catholic mission of the school. Part of our work was orienting new faculty and staff to the history and traditions of the Jesuit mission. As we described the central role of the Spiritual Exercises in this tradition, new employees often asked about them and we sensed the hunger many of them had for a deeper experience of God in their lives.

During Lent of 1998, we posted the seasonal scripture readings on a Creighton website. Almost as an after-thought, we decided to write brief reflections on each day’s readings for the six weeks of Lent. Within weeks we became aware that our ministry, designed by and for Creighton faculty and staff, was reaching people around the world. We decided to extend the reflections beyond Lent and the Daily Reflections website was born.<sup>17</sup>

We heard from people far from Creighton who were fed by this resource. The unexpected success of the Daily Reflections helped us realize that this technology had a powerful potential to respond to the desires we heard in e-mails from many people, including our own faculty and staff. We spent eight months reflecting and writing, creating an online retreat

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for busy people, based on the movements of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius.

This 34 week retreat was inspired by Ignatius' own flexible and innovative style. We wrote for those who might fall somewhere between a person of "little ability or little natural capacity, from whom not much fruit is to be hoped" [SpEx 18.8] and one "of education or ability who is taken up with public affairs or pressing occupations" but who had an hour and a half

each day for prayer. [SpEx 19.1] We wanted to make them available to people who were hungry for a deeper relationship with God, but who couldn't envision setting aside a lot of time for prayer each day

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because their hectic lives were filled with family life, jobs and impossible schedules.

It is as apparent to us, as it was to Ignatius, that laypeople, leading very busy lives, need the Exercises. They are a tool for prayer that can lead to a greater ability to find intimacy with God in the midst of the busiest of lives. In addition, they are a tool for forming hearts for apostolic service. The Spiritual Exercises were designed for those who have the most potential for making a difference in the world – and often those people are among the busiest.

From thousands of e-mails we have received, we see the power of God working. We read stories of lives transformed, decisions made in greater freedom and a sense that God has desires for the life of the retreatant.

The Online Retreat has made the graces of the Exercises available to thousands of people around the world who have no access to a director or a retreat house. One woman wrote from Saudi Arabia, where she had recently moved with her husband. As they entered the country, guards had confiscated illegal Christian items, including her rosary, crucifix and prayer book. She wrote in awed gratitude that she could make the Spiritual Exercises from a country where Christianity is illegal.

Some people have made the Online Retreat with a spiritual director, according to Annotation 19. Others have made it together with a support group.<sup>18</sup> Many thousands have made it alone, only sharing the graces they received on-line.



The online retreat is not a replacement for a 30-day or 8-day experience of the Exercises, but it is a format that offers people around the world a way to pray with the themes of the Exercises and to have their generous hearts transformed.

### *The Exercises for Partners in Ministry*

We witnessed that the Spiritual Exercises are an extraordinary formational tool for any layperson who desires greater spiritual growth. That formation will lead to a greater fidelity to the call of the Gospel and *Lumen Gentium* to be authentic followers of Jesus as persons baptized into his death, resurrection and mission. If we find ourselves drawn to be with him, it naturally leads to the desire to be like Jesus and place ourselves in the service of his mission.

Beyond forming laypersons for service in the world, the Exercises are also a wonderful means for forming partners in Jesuit sponsored ministries. The Thirty Fourth General Congregation, in its Decree 13, encouraged Jesuits to share their charism, the gift of the Exercises, with their lay partners.<sup>19</sup>

GC 34 signaled a change in perspective for Jesuit ministries as clearly as *Lumen Gentium* called for a new way of responsibility for all the baptized in the Church. Decree 13 articulated the new point of view: “When we speak of ‘our apostolates,’ we will mean something different by ‘our.’ It will signify a genuine Ignatian partnership of laity and Jesuits, each of us acting according to our proper vocation.”<sup>20</sup>

The document, addressed to Jesuits, continued: “Lay persons will rightly take on a greater role of responsibility and leadership within these works. Jesuits will be called on to support them in their initiative by Ignatian formation, the witness of our priestly and religious lives, and promotion of Jesuit apostolic values. If our service will be more humble, it will also be more challenging and creative, more in accord with the graces we have received. This actualization of the lay vocation can show more clearly the grace of our vocation.”<sup>21</sup> The document also calls for “all those engaged in the work” to exercise “co-responsibility” for it.<sup>22</sup>

Ten years after Decree 13 was issued, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, talked about its message and impact in a talk entitled, “Cooperating With Each Other in Mission.”

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He echoed *Lumen Gentium* in saying, that many of the lay partners in Jesuit ministries are “responding to the call of the gospel summoning the hearts of all the baptized. Jesuits and laity are called to answer in different ways, but it is clearly a call we share.”<sup>23</sup>

He said that seeing laypersons as partners in Jesuit ministry may require a paradigm shift, and that both Jesuits and lay partners will benefit from a new view of this ministry. He noted that at one time Jesuits “considered all of these talented lay partners as being here to help us with the activities to which we Jesuits were called by God” admitting that lay collaboration in the past was sometimes seen as “a necessary salvage operation in the face of our own declining numbers.”

He added that the word *our* could be inclusive or exclusive in referring to *our* parish and *our* school. He called for an inclusive use of the word saying, “It is ‘ours’ now, referring to a larger group, because it is a mission for which all of us – Jesuit and lay – are co-responsible.”

He suggested formation for both lay persons and Jesuits, saying that “those partners who freely choose” to accept the invitation, “can expect from us a specific formation in Ignatian values, help in discernment of apostolic priorities and objectives, and practical strategies for their realization.” He added that the “spiritual inheritance” Jesuits offer their partners is an “apt apostolic tool.” Those in partnership with Jesuits will share the experience of being able to “serve with greater freedom, to discern the ‘greater good’ . . . and to find an intimacy with God in the midst of his or her everyday life of service.”<sup>24</sup>

### *Expanding the Ministry of the Exercises*

Taking up Fr. Kolvenbach’s call, lay, religious and clergy partners in ministry, who have already made the Spiritual Exercises, owe it to their other partners in ministry to share this grace which animates the spirit of the Jesuit ministries. Freely offering them the Exercises, will support partners in ministry in exploring more deeply the roots of Ignatian spirituality and help them have a clearer understanding of the spirit and mission of these shared ministries.

At Creighton University, my colleague, Andy Alexander, S.J., and I were moved by Fr. Kolvenbach’s words to share the Exercises in new ways. Although thousands of people had made the Exercises online, we saw most

clearly their power when we invited people on our own campus to make the Online Retreat. Inspired by Ignatius, we identified leaders on campus and invited faculty and staff to make the retreat, meeting in optional groups, weekly or monthly. About 90 people at the university accepted our offer. The response from those people demonstrates to us how clearly these partners in ministry were enriched spiritually and helped to serve the mission of the university with greater freedom and zeal. At the end of the academic year, retreatants reflected on their experience. One person remarked that the Online Retreat was “a real awakening for me.” Another commented that it has “enhanced my daily life enormously.” One busy retreatant said it was “useful in keeping the background of my life focused”; another said it “brought many life giving changes to me.” One retreat simply said, “I think I became kinder and gentler.”

### *Conclusion*

Can a layperson serve in a Jesuit ministry without having made the Spiritual Exercises? Yes, of course, and many do, offering both experienced and inspiring service without having made the Spiritual Exercises. However, Ignatius saw the wisdom of adapting the Exercises so that, according to the gifts and desires of the person, various prayer experiences might lead an individual to greater freedom, love of our Lord and a growing desire to serve with Him. Teachers, campus ministers, researchers, physicians, nurses, business or law professors who give themselves to the Exercises will be better prepared to bring their gifts to their work if they are on fire with the Kingdom. The same is true for those who serve in high schools, parishes, retreat houses, social ministries or research centers and missions around the world.

The spiritual freedom offered through the Exercises allows lay partners to dream, to give of themselves with a “holy boldness.” It allows them to collaborate in ministry without the ego or competition, greed or lust for power that can dominate the cultures around us.

The role of lay partners in ministry is, indeed “a grace of our day and a hope for the future.”<sup>25</sup> Many of us who have been touched by the graces of the Spiritual Exercises, hear a deep and compelling call today: a call to be renewed in gratitude for what we have received, and a call to share what we have received freely. Each of us, in our own way, with our

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unique gifts, can share the apostolic inspiration of the Exercises with a new generation of lay partners, preparing them for mission by sharing with them the treasure of the Spiritual Exercises.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.; “Cooperating with Each Other in Mission: Celebrating 125 years of Jesuit/Lay Partnership in Omaha”; Creighton University, October 7, 2004

[http://sjweb.info/documents/doc\\_show.cfm?PubTextID=2922](http://sjweb.info/documents/doc_show.cfm?PubTextID=2922)

<sup>2</sup> Besides lay persons, who often come from a variety of religious traditions, professed religious and clergy are among the partners with Jesuits in ministry. This article will focus on the Exercises as a means of forming lay persons.

<sup>3</sup> GC 34 [305.8]

<sup>4</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, [11] “The Light of Nations”; Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, November 21, 1964

<sup>5</sup> *Lumen Gentium* [11]

<sup>6</sup> *Lumen Gentium* [31]

<sup>7</sup> *Lumen Gentium* [12]

<sup>8</sup> Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People [1.2], Nov. 18, 1965

<sup>9</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis* – Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life”, [2b]

<sup>10</sup> GC 31 [212]

<sup>11</sup> GC 31 [494]

<sup>12</sup> GC 34 [331]

<sup>13</sup> GC 34 [337]

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Tetlow, S.J. (1989) *Choosing Christ in the World*, Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, MO

<sup>15</sup> Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola [27]

<sup>16</sup> Andy Alexander, S.J.

<sup>17</sup> That initial 1998 website and all the other resources that have been added are part of the Online Ministries at: [www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/online](http://www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/online).

<sup>18</sup> Some parishes have offered it to all of their members. One parish set up an electronic bulletin board for people to share the graces of the retreat. Another parish set up sharing groups which met at the church on a regular basis.

<sup>19</sup> GC 34 [338.8]

<sup>20</sup> GC 34 [354.20]

<sup>21</sup> GC 34 [354]

<sup>22</sup> GC 34 [343]

<sup>23</sup> Kolvenbach, “Cooperating with Each Other in Mission”, *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Kolvenbach, *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> GC 34 [331.1]