

When Are Spiritual Exercises Ignatian Spiritual Exercises?

Précis: In his keynote address to the European Conference on the Spiritual Exercises, the author affirmed that adaptation is essential the Exercises. The Exercises are original in method because prayer is aimed at choosing a way to live. The ignatian meditations are original, not only in content, but in their contribution to choosing. The review of prayer, integral to discernment, reveals felt knowledge. Finally, on method, there are no Ignatian Exercises without a director. The content is original principally in the Exercises' emphasis on the risen Christ, rare for their time. Also original in some ways are the rules for discernment, and the insistence that the Exercises must go on while thinking along with the Church. The author ends with brief remarks on Annotations 18 and 19.

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I was asked to answer the question: When are spiritual exercises 'Ignatian' Spiritual Exercises? Are all the adaptations of the Spiritual Exercises real Ignatian exercises?

It is not so easy to give the right answer. The aim of my speech is to help your reflection, not to impose my views on you. I am not here to tell you what is the correct answer, the right one, the only one. I am afraid I don't have *the* right answer. But we have to avoid two extreme positions: on the one hand, only the thirty days retreat following the book of Ignatius is the real Ignatian retreat; on the other hand, all kinds of retreats, all kinds of spiritual exercises, are Ignatian exercises. Such extreme

positions remain too abstract. And specific to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius is not some idea about the Spiritual Exercises, but a process of giving and of doing the exercises. Exercises are something you have to do, something you have to put into practice.

A first statement can easily be formulated with great certitude: **'adaptation' is essential to the process of giving and doing the Spiritual Exercises.** He who gives the exercises has to adapt the book of Ignatius to the one who is doing the Exercises. Even when you give the Spiritual Exercises of thirty days, you have to adapt the text to this man, to this woman. To adapt the Exercises to this concrete man or woman who is doing the Exercises is one of the important ways of proceeding during the Exercises. In many places in the book of Ignatius, you will find the demand to adapt the Exercises to the person is doing the Exercises. Some examples:

[162] *The first note is that in the contemplations of this second week, according to the time each one wants to spend, or according as he gets profit, he can lengthen or shorten: if he lengthens, taking the mysteries of the Visitation of Our Lady to St. Elizabeth, the shepherds, the Circumcision of the child Jesus, and the three kings, and so of others; and if he shortens, he can even omit some of those which are set down. Because this is to give an introduction and way to contemplate better and more completely afterwards.*

[205] *According as age, disposition and physical condition help the person who is exercising himself, he will make each day the five exercises or fewer.*

[76] *Fourth addition. The fourth: To enter on the contemplation now on my knees, now prostrate on the earth, now lying face upwards, now seated, now standing, always intent on seeking what I want. We will attend to two things. The first is, that if I find what I want kneeling, I will not pass on; and if prostrate, likewise, etc. The second, in the point in which I find what I want, there I will rest, without being anxious to pass on, until I have found that which I desire.*

[89] *Third Note. The third: When the person who is exercising himself does not yet find what he desires - as tears, consolations, etc., - it often helps for him to make changes in food, in sleep and in other ways of doing penance, so that he changes himself, doing penance for two or three days, and for two or three others, not. For it suits some to do more penance and other less.*

[4] *Though four weeks, to correspond to this decision, are spent in the Exercises, it is not to be understood that each week has, of necessity, seven or eight days. For it happens that in the first week some are slower to find what they seek - namely, contrition, sorrow and tears for their sins - and in the same way some are more diligent than others, and more acted on or tried by different spirits; it is necessary sometimes to shorten the week, and at other times to lengthen it. The same is true of all the other subsequent weeks, seeking out the things according to the subject matter.*

The criterion of this kind of adaptation is always what helps the one who is doing the Exercises to find what he seeks, to find what he desires. So, adaptation is inherent to the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius. You could say, somewhat provocatively, that the director giving the Spiritual Exercises in a literal way, following the literal text of the book, is not Ignatian. You have to adapt the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

There are 'spiritual exercises' and there are 'the' Spiritual Exercises

A second statement could be: there are 'spiritual exercises' and there are 'the' Spiritual Exercises. It is obvious that to understand the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius you need to look at the 'matrix', the Exercises of **thirty days**, the complete book of Ignatius. The different adaptations Ignatius is proposing in annotations [18] and [19] receive their meaning from the complete Exercises. When you do the Spiritual Exercises of thirty days helped by a good director, who gives you space for the necessary adaptation, you are certainly doing an Ignatian retreat. There is no doubt about this. But can you obtain what Ignatius expects from the

thirty days retreat in **eight days**? If so, why should you do a thirty days retreat?

So we can ask ourselves, Is every eight day retreat based on the *Spiritual Exercises* an Ignatian retreat? This is not so evident. What makes spiritual exercises *Ignatian Spiritual Exercises*? One way to tackle this question is to see what is original in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius. This helps us to discover what is Ignatian.

The Originality of the Method

There is not much singularity in the way Ignatius uses some forms of prayer of his time. He learned how to meditate, how to contemplate, reading the *Life of Christ* written by Ludolph the Carthusian. But Ignatius proposes to 'every good Christian' to contemplate the life of Christ in order to come to a good decision about his life, to take a good decision. The *Spiritual Exercises* are composed in order to lead to a choice. There is no other spiritual book in the sixteenth century, no other prayer book that shows us a way to come to a good decision, to a good choice by contemplating the life of Christ.

The Spiritual Exercises are composed in order to lead to a choice

Most of the individual elements of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* are not specifically Ignatian; Ignatius uses the spiritual items of his time. But the way he puts it all together is very Ignatian! To propose a process of four weeks – one week of conversion and three weeks to contemplate the life of Christ – to come to a good choice on how to manage your life, this is the originality of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Does this mean that a choice has to be made in every retreat, even in a eight-day retreat, to be Ignatian? Of course, it is always possible to make a choice in any kind of retreat. But the way Ignatius proposes is a process of four weeks with clear and important transitions. After the First Week there is the important contemplation of *The Call of the Temporal King* [91-100]; and during the Second Week there is the meditation on *Two Standards* [136-148; the meditation on *Three Pairs of Men* [149-157]; and the

consideration on *Three Kinds of Humility* [165-167]. Ignatius starts the Exercises with a *Principle and Foundation* [23] and he finishes with the *Contemplation to Gain Love* [230-237]. All these texts are composed by Ignatius but – this is a more important point – he also gave a very specific function to each of these during the full Exercises of thirty days.

I am not sure it makes much sense to integrate all these texts in a retreat of eight or of five days. Does it mean that when one of these texts is absent in a short retreat, we cannot call it an Ignatian retreat? I personally would not say this. There are other important aspects of the method that seem to me more important in allowing a retreat the label of 'Ignatian'.

Prayer, Reflection, and Discernment

The Spiritual Exercises are a school of prayer and of discernment. Two elements are important. First, the life of Christ is at the centre of our contemplation. The force of the Spiritual Exercises is not in the book, but in the prayer of the one who does the Exercises, in the sustained contemplation of the life of Christ, day after day. The most important aspect of the process of the *Spiritual Exercises* is to look at Jesus in the Gospel, to listen to the Word of God in the Scripture. Ignatius learned this from the book of Ludolph the Carthusian and from the Benedictines in Montserrat. He learned that to contemplate the Gospel involves the whole person: intelligence, memory, will, and affectivity.

The second important element is the **reflection** after meditation and contemplation. After having listened to the Word of God in the Gospel, Ignatius proposes that you listen to your own depth. What happened in you while you were contemplating a scene of the Gospel? What were the inner movements in you as you were contemplating Jesus giving food to so many people? Did you experience joy, peace, confidence, or consolation, or did you experience trouble, distrust, fear, or desolation? This kind of reflection is perhaps the most Ignatian part of the method of the *Spiritual Exercises*: to listen to the Word of God and listen to how this Word of God touches me in my deepest affectivity. Ignatius calls this *discernment of inner movements*.

The usual quotation from the *Spiritual Exercises* about the reflection is

this one: *After finishing the exercise, I will, during the space of a quarter of an hour, seated or walking leisurely, consider how it went with me in the contemplation or meditation; and if badly, I will look for the cause from which it proceeds, and having so seen it, will be sorry, in order to correct myself in future; and if well, I will give thanks to God our Lord and will act in like manner another time* [77].

But to understand it well we have to look also at what Ignatius says about 'repetition' – this other important element in Ignatian Exercises: *Third exercise. It is a repetition of the first and second exercise, making three colloquies. After the preparatory prayer and two preludes, it will be to repeat the first and second exercise, noting and dwelling on the points in which I have felt greater consolation or desolation, or greater spiritual feeling* [62].

I quote also the text on repetition as it is written in the second week: *After the preparatory prayer and the three preludes, the repetition of the first and second exercise will be made, noting always some more principal parts, where the person has felt some knowledge, consolation or desolation, making likewise one colloquy at the end, and saying an Our Father* [118].

To prepare a repetition one has to go through his reflection made after the exercise and look at what touched him during the exercise. In other words, the reflection is the place of spiritual discernment. The resonance in my deepest affectivity of the Word of God during my prayer can be seen as a movement of the Spirit in me. What the reflection is all about is the discernment of God's presence during my prayer. Of course, the reflection helps me to improve the ways which I use to pray, but the meaning of the reflection in the Spiritual Exercises is much deeper. It helps me to discern God's presence in my prayer.

This is very Ignatian. We find Ignatius has the same purpose in the examen of conscience. The most important aspect of the examen of conscience is not to see how I can improve in living the Gospel – even if this aspect is very present – but to see how God is present in all things. And this presence will help me to improve my life. During the reflection I am discerning the presence of God in my prayer; during the examen of

conscience I am discerning the presence of God in all that happened during this day. In his *Autobiography*, Ignatius is looking to the past not to tell us a nice story, but to discern the action of God in his life. Is this not the fruit of the *Spiritual Exercises*: to find God in all things?

I should say that this kind of spiritual discernment – listening to the Word of God and listening to the movements of the Spirit in my prayer – is fundamental to Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. Where this is not at all present, I should not speak of ‘Ignatian’ Spiritual Exercises. Some more words on this Ignatian spiritual discernment.

The Centrality of Discernment

◆ In the quotation on the repetition in the Second Week [118] we read: *...where the person has felt some knowledge, consolation or desolation...* ‘Sentir’ and ‘conocer’ are the words of Ignatius. Feelings and knowledge can go together. There are several places in the *Spiritual Exercises* where we find ‘sentir’ and ‘conocer’ together. As instances:

◆ The title of the rules for discernment of the spirits in the First Week [313] reads: *‘Reglas para en alguna manera sentir y conocer las varias mociones que en la ánima se causan...’* (Rules for feeling and knowing the different movements).

◆ The sixth rule for the discernment in the Second Week [334] reads, *When the enemy of human nature has been perceived (felt) and known by his serpent’s tail and the bad end to which he leads on, etc.*

◆ To another set of notes [345], Ignatius gives this title: *The following notes help to perceive and understand the scruples and persuasions of our enemy.* In the Spanish text, ‘sentir y entender’.

◆ In the triple colloquy in the First Week [62] we find: *The first colloquy to Our Lady, that she may obtain for me grace from her Son and Lord for three things: first, that I may feel interior knowledge of my sins and hatred of them.* In the Spanish text, ‘sentir interno conocimiento’.

◆ Finally, in the fourth rule [213] to order oneself for the future with regard to eating, we find this: *...because by so helping and disposing himself, he will many times experience more the interior knowledge, consolations, and divine inspirations to show him the mean which is*

proper for him. In the Spanish text, 'sentir más las internas noticias, consolaciones y divinas inspiraciones.'

The *knowledge* that is meant in these texts of the *Spiritual Exercises* is much more than knowing with our intellect. It is knowing with our heart, in which a person is totally involved, intellect, memory, will, and affectivity. To discern our inner movements we need not only great inner refinement, but also an experienced guide.

The One Giving the Exercises

This guide - he who gives the Exercises - is absolutely necessary in Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. You cannot do the Exercises if nobody is giving you the Exercises! This means more than giving the text of the next exercise - Ignatius never gave the text of the book to the one who was doing the Exercises. The guide of the person doing the Exercises has to know, as well as possible, the person he intends to help. The guide has to see how to adapt the book to this particular person. He who is doing the Exercises doesn't know the Exercises, so how could he adapt what he doesn't know?

*Ignatius seems to
be the first...*

The more the person enters into the process of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the more Ignatius gives him freedom to adapt what is asked by Ignatius in the book. Ignatius says in the Fourth Week [228]: *Though in all the contemplations a certain number of points were given - as three, or five, etc. - the person who is contemplating can set more or fewer points, according as he finds it better for him.* Ignatius supposes that the person has learned during the three Weeks before what is better for him and what not. The guide was his help in discerning inner movements [17].

But the guide has to know and to understand also the process of the *Spiritual Exercises*. He cannot use the book of Ignatius like a cookbook! In the book of Ignatius, you don't find recipes that have to be carefully

followed. The book of the *Spiritual Exercises* is more a map that helps the guide to see where the person is. It supposes that the guide has himself made the Spiritual Exercises, and that his practice of giving the Spiritual Exercises has made him a good guide for others.

His experience in spiritual discernment will help the person to learn, through trial and error, how to discern his inner movements of consolation and desolation. The guide must not discern for the person he guides, but he has to help the person to arrive slowly at the ability to discern his own inner movements. But because spiritual discernment is a very refined ability and because one can easily be deceived by one's own affectivity, it remains useful to have a good guide who can confirm (or not) what you find by yourself.

Originality in the Content?

As I said at the beginning, Ignatius fits into the spirituality of his time. The most important originality lies in the method, more than in the content. One can discuss if the specific texts composed by Ignatius himself (*Principle and Foundation*, *The Call of the Temporal King*, the meditation on *Two Standards*, the meditation on *Three Pairs*, the consideration on *Three Kinds of Humility*, and the *Contemplation to Gain Love*) are important because of what they say or because of their precise place in the process of the Spiritual Exercises. In my opinion, both are inseparable.

I repeat what I have said already: it makes no sense to put *all* these Ignatian texts in a retreat of five or eight or ten days. At the same time I would say that spiritual exercises can be truly Ignatian Exercises, even when some of these typical Ignatian texts are not used. The proper use of these texts supposes the whole process of the *Spiritual Exercises*, and this process supposes about thirty days.

*...who places a
strong emphasis
on the risen Lord*

If there is something new in the content of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, something one would not find in other spiritual writings of the

first twenty five years of the sixteenth century, it is the importance Ignatius gives to the presence of the risen Lord. During the twenties of the sixteenth century Spanish spirituality is still concentrated on the passion of Christ. Ignatius seems to be the first person – at least in written documents – who places a strong emphasis on the risen Lord. We know that in the practice of Ignatius as a guide, the Fourth Week was more important than the Third Week.

This is important too because in the Fourth Week Ignatius gives us the key to interpreting consolation, which can be present from the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises. The consolation one receives during his prayer while doing the Spiritual Exercises is the experience of the risen Lord: *The fifth point is to consider the office of consoling which Christ our Lord bears, and to compare how friends are accustomed to console friends* [224]. This confirms what I said on the importance of the discernment of inner movements as a real Ignatian label.

Still on the level of the content of the *Spiritual Exercises*, there is another originality of Ignatius in his book. At the end of his book, Ignatius put together different sets of rules. The most important are the two sets of rules for the discernment of spirits, and the rules for having the true sentiments which we ought to have in the Church militant.

The rules for spiritual discernment are not specific to Ignatius. At the end of his *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*, Erasmus, the humanist of Rotterdam, gives a set of rules for discernment of spirits. We know Ignatius knew this book, even if he didn't like it. The formulation of Ignatius is very practical, more practical than theoretical. This fact and the fact that they are in the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, mean that the rules of Ignatius are well known. In the process of the *Spiritual Exercises* they are absolutely necessary.

More specific perhaps are his rules for thinking with the Church, even if they are very much dated in their concrete items. For Ignatius it is clear: the rules for spiritual discernment are only valid within the *communion* of the Church. The *Spiritual Exercises*, so much concentrated on what one as an individual has to live as Christian, make the link to the community of the Church explicitly in these rules for thinking with the Church. What one has discerned while making the Spiritual Exercises must be lived in

communion with the very concrete Church. If this interpretation is correct, I hope that all spiritual exercises and all retreats inspired by the *Spiritual Exercises* will have this ecclesial touch so fundamental for Ignatius.

Different Adaptations

Annotation 20. It is obvious that the long retreat of thirty days, in silence and individually done, is the matrix of all Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. And practice teaches us that during the Spiritual Exercises of one month, the person who does the Exercises goes through the process following his own inner dynamic! The *Spiritual Exercises* have to be adapted to this person doing them. The dynamics of the Gospel are not something one has to impose on a person. If it were necessary to do this, one would be better off not giving the Exercises to this person. Perhaps the person has to be better prepared by some adaptation of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Ignatius says in his letters and in the *Constitutions* that one has to give the full *Spiritual Exercises* only to those who are capable of receiving them. These, he suggests, are learned persons who are in search of a fundamental decision in the direction they should give to their lives, or persons capable of transmitting the fruit of their spiritual experience to others, the ‘multipliers’. For other people, one has to adapt more.

Annotation 19: A person of education or ability who is taken up with public affairs or suitable business, may take an hour and a half daily to exercise himself.

This nineteenth annotation was rediscovered in the early sixties of the last century, and it has become an adaptation that seems to be particularly suited to our modern times. In most of the Jesuit provinces, guidelines have been published to help people to give the full *Spiritual Exercises* in daily life. Of course, this adaptation of the *Spiritual Exercises* is very Ignatian, because the whole process is involved – method and content. And last but not least, Ignatius himself proposes this method of making Spiritual Exercises in daily life.

My experience is that one has to have a set of quite high criteria for who will do the Exercises in daily life. First, the normal requirements for doing the full *Spiritual Exercises*, but also some more specific conditions, because of the duration of the experience (6 to 12 months or more), and the practical environment of the person (family life, social commitments).

Annotation 18. The Spiritual Exercises have to be adapted to the dispositions of the persons who wish to receive them, that is, to their age, education or ability, in order not to give to one who is uneducated or of little intelligence things he cannot easily bear and profit by. Again, that should be given to each one by which, according to his wish to dispose himself and to profit.

Ignatius gives further in the eighteenth annotation different examples of how to adapt the *Spiritual Exercises*. The criterion is always what helps the person who shows a desire for spiritual growth or a more Christian lifestyle. The criterion for starting the Spiritual Exercises and for going on is this particular person. So, many adaptations are possible. The question Ignatius raises: Is this person helped in his desire to gain some spiritual profit?

Does this mean that every kind of adaptation, along the lines of Ignatius' eighteenth annotation, can be called 'Ignatian'? I am afraid not.

I hope I have given you some criteria to help you to discern what we may call 'Ignatian' Spiritual Exercises. And I finish with the observation I made at the beginning: Avoid two extremes: to say, only the thirty-day retreat is 'Ignatian', or to say, all kind of spiritual exercises are Ignatian.