

THOUGHTS ON YOUTH AND THE IGNATIAN METHOD

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES FOR LIFE CHOICES

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An open invitation

After many years working in schools and youth ministry, I came to mission at a Jesuit retreat house. It's a good one. Many people make yearly retreats here. But I found it curious that the average age for retreatants is about sixty-two. Many are considerably older. I thought perhaps this was only because there are a lot of satisfied customers who come back year after year, and they have gotten older, as people tend to do. But there are photos of the first retreats, from long ago, and there is no one under fifty in those pictures, either.

I had rarely given the *Exercises* to anyone much older than about twenty-six, so I had to recalibrate my scope for the local crowd. But it occurred to me that our house could offer at least one retreat especially for young men and women. It was taken as a very novel idea. Not that the younger crowd were ever unwelcome, but they were the exception: someone already on their way to religious life, or the son or grandson of one of "the regulars".

In Chile, where I received my formation, Father Alberto Hurtado gave the *Exercises* to large groups of university students. It was considered unorthodox, but then, he was *el Padre Hurtado*. Father Edwin Hodgson quietly gave them to high school students. This would have raised eyebrows, except that no one ever realized that he was doing it, until after his death, when several of them entered the

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Society. They discovered that he had started them all on their quest to serve the Lord with the *Exercises*.

Despite these experiences, something in the conventional wisdom today says that the *Exercises* are not for everyone, that you have to be mature, educated and settled before you can delve into their mystery. They are also expensive. So, with the exception of Jesuit novices, only a privileged minority, proven over the years, and therefore, older, ever get the opportunity. The *Exercises* have become a specialty, given by experts, to those seemingly predestined few, with special talents, from whom we expect greatness.

How has this happened? What does it mean? What was the original target group for the *Exercises*? Who would get the most out of them? In this essay, we will explore some of these questions, and see how we might get back to the original intention of Ignatius: a process of vocational discernment for young men and women.

The crossroads of a lifetime

When I was twenty, my father was forty, and he used to get after me for spending so much time with books, writing, and music. He would urge me to do something productive. When he got to be sixty, and I was productively being forty, he slowed down a bit, and started reading. He even looked at some of my old books.

People who only knew him in that stage of his life remember him for a question he would often ask, after dinner or over a beer, *So, what are you going to do with the rest of your life?* It's something he asked of himself, as he saw the years remaining dwindle away. But he would ask it rather urgently of young men and women, who had most of their lives ahead of them and many choices to be made. They now thank him for pushing them to reflect and choose, early on.

His generation was governed by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which dictated that basic necessities must be met before one could dedicate time and energy to artistic, philosophical and spiritual considerations.¹ Self-actualization was reserved for the tropical island leisure of the extremely wealthy, or to the golden years of retirement. They obeyed those rules, and did what they were told, without questioning it. It was the ideology of the time.

There was a picture over my father's bed when he died, an original oil painting of a mule in traces pulling a cart. It wasn't an unhappy mule, really, and my father died happy, I think, surrounded by people who loved him. He also made lots of money pulling his cart, and, in the end, he had earned the leisure required for a spiritual life, according to the theory. But before he turned sixty, he never asked himself if pulling that cart in that way was all there was.

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Erik Erikson would say that late adulthood is marked by the struggle between integrity and despair. It is a quest for wisdom. That might be a good reason to make the *Exercises*. Dad would have enjoyed them.

But, Erikson would also affirm that a determining factor in the challenge that faces seniors is their psychological history. The older person reaps the harvest of his own struggles as a young adult, between intimacy and loneliness, between solidarity and isolation. Young adulthood seeks love and affiliation. Youth is when identity is consolidated.² If that is so, when might one properly attempt to encounter Lord and King, and decide how best to follow him?

Our retreat efforts seem to be pointed particularly at the last stage, as a way of making one's peace with God over a life well-spent, or repenting over days wasted. How would it be if we put some thought into the earlier stage, when roads are chosen and commitments made?

A life can be determined by four or five decisions taken between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. Sometimes, these are well-considered choices. Other times, there are terrible accidents or mistakes. What if we let God participate? What if we gave the *Exercises* early on, so that discernment might be an integral part of that vital decision process, and not just an afterthought?

The intention of Ignatius

For whom were the *Exercises* originally intended? We know that Ignatius himself made them shortly after his injury, when he was twenty-

six. We know that he gave them to poor young students, like Peter Favre, and to rich mature men, like Francis Borgia. We also know that he postponed Francis Xavier's experience, until he was ready. So, there is a right time in one's life, and a right spiritual or emotional predisposition, but no predetermined age, or social class.³

Ignatius was not selective in the same way that we are today. Are our resources more limited than his were? Or have we simply slipped into elitism? The principle of the greater good seems to call us to give the *Exercises* to those with broad influence in worldly affairs. That would be older people with friends in high places, or those with money to donate to worthy causes. What about those who have nothing to give but their lives?

In the first *Annotation*, we find that the purpose of the process is to rid oneself of disordered attachments, and discover God's will, with regard to the disposition of one's life, [1].⁴ Personal attachments, cultural values and ideological presuppositions are put under the microscope. Some are found to be contrary to the ways of Jesus. Others subtly condition choices, sometimes creating obstacles. The young person defines identity by embracing certain motivations and overcoming others. Then he can decide which path to follow. Unhampered by prior commitments, she can give it all back to God. The high rollers in our current target group are older, and rarely have that kind of freedom.

This retreat ripped the blindfold off my eyes, and allowed me to see the beauty around me, that I wasn't seeing, because I gave all my attention to secondary things. I learned to put the Lord first. He owns my life, now. Paola, 25 years old

We see that the retreatant is urged, if possible, for honor's sake, to offer himself to the Lord, in *such a life or state*, [98]. While supposing a radical choice of greater service, in poverty and sacrifice, Ignatius never actually tells us *what life or state* that might be. The director is forbidden from tipping the balance, and yet should encourage the retreatant to move toward the greater commitment [14-15]. The retreatant should envision pouring out her life before the Lord in the various possible ways that have occurred to her in prayer, and decide, based on consolations and desolations associated with each option, [175-178].

We understand *life or state* to mean a trade or profession; single or married; and religious, clerical, or laity. This key piece in the whole process is clearly tailored to the young adult who is making those decisions.

In the *Preamble for considering a way of life*, at the beginning of the *Second Week*, Ignatius calls on the retreatant to weigh the options, seeing the world, and asking for the Lord's guidance, while at the same time, contemplating the life of Jesus, the *young man*, who is then searching for *the best way to serve his Eternal Father* [135]. This is, of course, a young person's prayer.

In the *Preamble for making decisions* [169], Ignatius warns us that, very frequently, ends are confused with means. The retreatant must choose a *life⁵ or state* for the praise and service of God, if possible, rather than just praise and serve God in the some life already chosen.⁶ Often, the second option is all that is feasible for an older person, because life commitments have been decided long ago. The optimum time for this question is *before* choosing. Except for young religious who are considering their vows, most retreatants today come to the *Exercises* after their choices have been made, which is unfortunate.

The young go where the road leads them, without looking back, because they can

Ignatius warns that the retreatant can only change what is changeable. Immutable commitments, like marriage, paternity or priesthood, are not to be reconsidered, [171], but any life is subject to reform, [189]. We must assume that *Exercises* made later in life are authentic. There is no limit to God's love. He welcomes every sinner home. Any life can be salvaged, no matter what the flood or train wreck. Moreover, everyone, no matter how good, can aspire to a life of greater holiness.

But what if we could give the *Exercises* to young men and women *before* their vocational options are taken? What if God could get into their hearts prior to the establishment of their intimate commitments? Would they not be better able to offer themselves to the loving service of Lord and King? Would they not be freer to commit their lives to the good of others? The young go where the road leads them, without looking back, because they can.

The youthful quest for meaning

Modern thought in the west puts a high price on individuality. It also treasures the separation between religious and secular spheres, and frowns upon outside involvement in personal decisions. These are the ideological suppositions of our time. But, they are not universal human qualities. Care must be taken to discover cultural nuance in young retreatants, and so, find the stalk onto which the fruitful branch might be grafted. For modern youth, the Ignatian adventure will probably be a first experience of unconditional connectedness. Putting on the Lord's colors, one is no longer an individual.

*[to] explore our way
through our prayer time*

Pre-moderns don't call themselves *individuals*, except in a pejorative way, as if to say, selfish or self-involved. To the south and east, a subject exists primarily for the good of the community. Honor, more than personal satisfaction, dictates appropriate personal options. In some ways, that makes the person more open to making a lifelong allegiance. He was going to do that anyway. The *Exercises* propose that the allegiance be to the *Eternal King*.

Ignatius was accused of brainwashing the young. They would do the *Exercises*, and as often as not, break with expectations. They would choose a different life, because their new alliance with the Lord would override submission to traditional authority. Then, Ignatius would go before the Inquisition.

It was intense and unlike anything I'd gone through before. It was simple and very real. I liked that you didn't make it flashy so it would seem cool. You told us just enough to let us explore our way through our prayer time, and then afterward, redirect, in case there were any problems. Tim, 24 years old

In our time, paranoia has made it dangerous to be involved with the young for any reason, especially to influence their personal decision processes. We must make it clear that the *Exercises* are not intended to manipulate. Retreat directors are not supposed to promote any particular cause or option, [15]. This is not a movement, not a fraternity, and not a

secret society. It is a method intended to open the heart to *the Lord's call*. It is the property of the Church, for the good of the faithful.

The young, of any culture, are just passionate enough to make the oblation gesture of the *Exercises*, pouring out their lives, in poverty, at risk of great suffering, to serve our Lord and King. For them, it is an adventure, an honor, a challenge to be met. For the older generation, taught to live by the rules, it is often taken on as a requirement. The kids really are better at this.

Even so, the youthful quest for meaning is at a crossroads. Modern boys and girls are often functional orphans. Broken homes provide shakier foundations. Emphasis on career and personal satisfaction in the parents' generation, have left them with minimal support or direction. The Church is afraid to deal with them. She often doesn't recognize them as full members,⁷ and she doesn't value what they have to offer. And there they are, as hungry as ever for a cause or a purpose. Contrary to Maslow, the young would happily go without food, water and security, in exchange for meaning.

In the absence of a guiding hand (whether to follow it, or rebel against it), contemporary young men and women are particularly vulnerable to totalitarian relationships with authority, religious and civil. There seems to be a growing sentiment of lost-ness, or just plain fear, as the global scenario becomes polarized, often with religious overtones. Many seem eager to submit to exacting disciplines, in which others make all their choices for them.

Fundamentalism has never found more fertile soil, even among the most devout Catholics. Spiritual leaders who dictate what people must do to be saved can really fill the pews and the collection baskets. We are seeing absolutist religious manipulation. Frighteningly, this is also a climate conducive to the formation of brown shirt brigades and storm troopers.

And yet, because we are the image and likeness of a God who freely loves, many young men and women are not swallowing the bait. They are pleading for help. They want to learn to love sincerely and give freely. Are we answering that call? Are we putting our treasure out there for them?

Going outside the walls

We say to ourselves, over and over, that the *Exercises* are not for everybody. True, one must freely commit to the process [5], and trust in it [22], to get anything out of it. Even so, as we pre-select the chosen few, and filter out those we don't want to bother with, are we being faithful to the spirit of Ignatius?

Our founder didn't invent the *Exercises*. They are part of the oral tradition of the Church, kept alive in the monasteries, and perhaps dating back to the second century. Ignatius took notes as he made them, thinking that others like himself might reap a similar benefit. He brought the direct experience of God, our inheritance as baptized sons and daughters, *outside the walls*. He made contemplative prayer available to ordinary people. His basic premise was this: *If I could do it, then you can do it*. That is his challenge to us.⁸

Over time, the *Exercises* have been pushed back into "the monastery". The Nineteenth century understood them as a silent ordeal for Jesuit novices, not really a spiritual journey at all, and not for anyone else.

*[The SpEx] are not for children,
but young people certainly qualify*

Contemporary thinking has made them a specialty, given by experts to an elite. In some venues, invitations are scarce. In others, cost filters out all but a small number. Who is to say that only a certain few should

get the opportunity? Who are we to select the favored ones? People surprise you. You never know who will really go deep.

Ignatius does warn that those of coarse or uncultured nature should not be pushed into the life decisions of the *Second Week*, [18]. This by no means excludes the young, the poor, or the uneducated.⁹ Spiritual coarseness is in fact prevalent among those who are schooled and comfortably settled in their ways.

The retreatant must have *subiecto*. We don't know for certain what that is. From the context [14,15, 18, 83, 84, 89], we suggest that it might mean something like *not* depressed, compulsive or obsessive; *not* otherwise mentally or emotionally impaired. The *Exercises* require self-possession,

good will and sincerity. They are not for children, but young people certainly qualify.

Some might think it safer to postpone the *Exercises*. Yes, it is, because commitment is always a risk. But then, safety is not a priority for the followers of Jesus.

I would suggest that the *Exercises* are primarily a vocational experience, in the broadest sense, to discover one's calling, whatever that might be. Those who have already chosen a path can still make them fruitfully, of course. But I think we reverse priorities, if we give the *Exercises* primarily to those who are already settled, and exceptionally, to those who are not.

When we offer the *Spiritual Exercises*, if we are to be faithful to the source, we must go outside the walls, to where the people are, and not expect them to come to us. Out there is where we will find the young adventurers.

Some practical considerations

Ignatius advocated flexibility, making the appropriate adaptations, according to time, place and person, in order to achieve objectives.¹⁰ We often have difficulty adapting our retreat programs for a younger crowd because we have formed an inordinate attachment with our local notion of "the right way" to make or give the *Exercises*. If *the right way* means the way that older people or religious communities usually do them, then they will probably not be attractive, moving, or inspiring to young people.

The young don't need the creature comforts that older people do. They haven't come to rest or get away. Other details are important. Language, style and the kind of pictures or examples a director might use to explain the meditations are important. Even schedule, food and music should be considered. How can we create a simple environment conducive to *this* retreatant's quest for God?

There is a type of retreat readily available to the young, in conservative circles. It's vaguely reminiscent of the *Exercises* as given in the Nineteenth century. Retreatants listen to long detailed reviews of catechism, and an insistent call to feel guilty for their sins. It tends to be directive, telling young people specifically what to do with their lives.

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There is another type, common on college campuses, with group dynamics, psychology and holding hands, but no decisions, adventures or challenges.¹¹ Neither one can be called an Ignatian experience. We should follow the plan in the *Exercises*, no more, and no less.

I would by no means advocate a watered down version of the *Exercises* for the young. If they are ready for it at all, they can do the whole strenuous disciplined process. The idea that they should walk away with just a taste underestimates youthful passion, ability and skill.

The notion that the younger generation is audiovisual, and so, needs to watch something on television instead of praying, is seriously condescending. The substitution of the silent meditations in the *Exercises* for something light and fun that sort of touches on similar topics can often just prematurely burn out the possibility of ever getting serious about them.

There is an “Ignatian experience” available that seems to be based on the *Exercises* in some way, and it has spawned many spin-offs, all of them short, emotional and “secret”. But they are basically the same.¹² They are a conversion experience, with lots of special effects, and powerful testimony from peers. There is not much space for silent prayer. There is little, if any, follow up, and no mention of mission, vocation or service.

For most, it’s not enough. Thinking that’s all there is, they don’t come back. Others, particularly teenagers, seek powerful emotional experiences of other kinds, and end up finding them in all the wrong places.

I would recommend giving the *Exercises*, in a straightforward but appealing way. We often give too little, too late. Young people are good learners. They pick up new techniques in a hurry. Worksheets are helpful as training tools, but the assignment should not be confused with the experience of listening to the Lord. Because of practical limitations, we can’t usually give a thirty-day silent retreat. But we would hope to give young men and women enough that they walk away with all the tools they need for a respectable discernment process.

At times, I really did feel like I was exercising. It took some work and endurance. I really learned how to listen to God in prayer and silence. I liked the supplemental readings and comic strips. And I liked the music—it helped set things in. There were almost no instructions—just structure. I felt like I could do my own prayer and let God guide it as he wanted to. Emma, 21 years old

This means getting through the principle meditations of *First* and *Second Week*. Discernment and life choices, in the context of the contemplation of the life of Jesus, must be part of the itinerary. If we can give an eight-day retreat, this is easy enough.¹³ If that is not feasible, what can be done?

Some retreat givers insist that one must always start the process from the beginning. If we presuppose serious backsliding over time, then, yes, you would have to start over, each time. But if we must suppose that, perhaps we are wasting our time altogether.

A more practical strategy is to propose a series of long weekends in which the second picks up where the first left off, and the third picks up where the second left off, etc. This can become a program, adapted to time and place. In personalized retreats, directors can try to determine where a retreatant left off last time, and avoid boring him or her with the endless review.¹⁴

Group retreats have the advantage of creating momentum. The director often gives a better explanation to a group than to an individual. There is another advantage: coverage. We get to more people, at a lower cost. Care must be taken to provide for personal attention, as needed. We must also strive to speak briefly, so that retreatants listen more to the Lord than to the director, [2]. This is not a preached retreat, even when instructions are given to a group.

Personalized retreats have the advantage of flexibility. The pace can slow down or speed up as needed, as Ignatius prescribed, [4]. The disadvantage is that, for lack of trained or willing directors, they promote selectivity. We end up inviting the chosen favorites, or those *we* think might enter into religious life.

Personalized retreats, at this stage, can also create a dependence on the director. Youth is prone to that, and it's not the objective, at all. In a group, they have to tough it out with God, which is good. A good balance is to give open group retreats at the beginning, and then more personal attention at the later stages, when discernment comes into play.

Exercises in daily life, [19], sometimes called the *nineteenth annotation retreat*, usually won't fit into youthful schedules. They start, then, drop out. Unlike older people, though, they often have long breaks

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in their calendar, to go on silent retreats. *Going* on retreat, moreover, fits in with youthful intensity.

Another practical consideration for young people is cost. They have less money than adults. If the price is high, they won't go. There are cheaper alternatives on their "market". We need to provide funding, and we need to keep the cost down, even if it means moving to less comfortable facilities, often more of a concern for directors and organizers than for young retreatants themselves. Precarious conditions can even be an advantage, an *addition* for following Christ in poverty and humility.

The potter's hand

Who can give these retreats? Young directors can. Believability is a factor, and real youth adds to that. There are also older men and women attuned to youthful ways, who have the stamina to keep up, and the tolerance to put up with them. The young are exhausting and messy, really.

It's not that difficult. There is some feeling that the director of a retreat must be a highly trained expert. If he is, he probably will choose to direct a few carefully selected retreatants. He probably will not gamble on the young.

The retreat giver should, of course, have done the thirty-day experience. Many young religious have. If they have had a good experience, and are inclined to pass it on, they should be encouraged to do so. There is no reason for them to be afraid. A plan is important, but the Holy Spirit will do most of the work. After that, it's practice and flexibility. Evaluation is important, to continue with whatever worked, and to correct whatever didn't.

A mass-produced program, or a booklet without an experienced guide, won't work. You must know the territory if you want to lead others through it. It's about competence, but also, credibility. The young are sensitive to sincerity.

Older retreatants might sign up based on what they read in a brochure. For young people, it's all about relationships. If they know you, trust you, and believe you, they will let themselves be guided by you in that most profound adventure of knowing God, trusting him, and letting him get involved in their lives.

Preparation and follow up are important. This would argue for the *Exercises* as a component of other ongoing programs, rather than as isolated projects. The parishes, schools and campus ministries are there. The social service organizations and sports teams exist. If we want to offer the *Exercises*, we start by becoming a part of those structures. Rather than bring in a specialist, those who walk beside them in their daily affairs should be the ones to guide young men and women in their quest for the Lord.

*The point is to lead
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Life options will best be helped along by convincing models; people who could say, *I have let God into my life, and this is where he has brought me. Where might he take you?* The point is to lead the young to an ongoing relationship with God. That starts with a sincere yet detached relationship between a mentor and a disciple. We must be careful with that relationship, but we can't be afraid of it. It is the necessary mediation for God's loving action.

We close with a consideration of how our Creator molds young Adam out of clay. His loving hand gives form to his creature, making him grow in stature, wisdom and spirit, so that he might better love his Lord, and serve humankind. The potter never gives up. He will try again and again, even if all his efforts fail. The *Exercises* are an opportunity for the young to recognize the potter's hand, to allow that loving touch to shape them, so that they might become the loving image and likeness of the Father, and serve him all the days of their lives.

¹ Cf. Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (1968), *Motivation and Personality* (1970), and *The Further Reaches of Human Nature* (1971). In my opinion, Maslow has observed the end product of the Puritan work ethic.

² Erik Erikson, *Youth, Identity and Crisis* (1968)

³ Cf. John O'Malley sj, *The First Jesuits*, (1993), pp. 37-50, esp. p. 38, 40.

⁴ Numbers in brackets will refer to the *Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, according to the traditional numbering of paragraphs.

⁵ I shrink from saying *lifestyle*, because most of what we now call "alternative lifestyles" means, one way or another, living in mortal sin, and Cf. [170].

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⁶ Cf. [154]. The *Segundo binario* is a temptation for the young, but a reality for the more mature.

⁷ This is why service to youth is often considered “outreach”.

⁸ It might be noted that many pages of the *Exercises* are dedicated to summarizing Bible stories, so that the director can tell them in a simple way, for those retreatants who can't read.

⁹ Culture and formal schooling are two very different things.

¹⁰ Cf. *Constitutions*, [136].

¹¹ Young men tend to think that this kind of retreat is “for girls”, and they don't go.

¹² Kairos, *Eje*, Search, *Búsqueda*, *Encuentros*, *Jornada Juvenil*, *Cursillo*, Teen Acts...

¹³ It's hurried, but retreatants are encouraged to do repetitions as their daily prayer, when the retreat is over.

¹⁴ Cf. Alberto Hurtado, *Elección de Carrera* (1943). One young lady who was very serious about her annual retreat in CIC complained that every year, she was given the same three worksheets for her prayer. And she just tolerated it, until she discovered that there was something more.