

INTRODUCING THE FIRST SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

WHAT IS AN IGNATIAN SPIRITUAL EXERCISE?

In the words of St. Ignatius, a spiritual exercise is “every way of examining one’s conscience, meditating, contemplating, praying vocally, praying mentally and other spiritual activities” (*Spiritual Exercises* 1). The “other spiritual activities” include exercises for love, freedom, and decision making. Ignatian Spiritual Exercises employ many forms of prayer to engage me through different ways of knowing and feeling. Some call upon my imagination and memory, others on my wise and keen intellect, others still on my heartfelt understanding. Most will awaken in me deep feelings, such as love, sorrow, joy, generosity, and inner peace. They all value my life experience, gently opening it, just as they open the life of Jesus. They knit both stories together where they belong, in the one weave of the living kingdom of God.

In practice, each spiritual exercise is a holy desire, a sacred seed. The Spirit, working through the exercise, ploughs and turns the earth of my life to make me ready for God. I plant the seed, the Lord grows it in secret, and the Creator brings forth a hundredfold harvest (see Mt 13:24–30, 36–43).

This means a spiritual exercise is a structured way to bring me into relationship with God. Making the Sign of the Cross, bathing a child, using a personal gift for good, helping a vulnerable person, praying the Our Father, or serving in a soup kitchen can all be spiritual exercises; indeed, any exercise of faith, hope, or love that moves me toward God and service of neighbor is a spiritual exercise. Certainly I have been doing, and doing well, a great number of spiritual exercises all of my life.

Ignatian Spiritual Exercises are real “exercises” in the sense that they require work, repetition, trust, patience, and a strong desire to see them through to the end. Although each exercise is different, the underlying purpose of all of them is freedom and openness—freedom from disorder, openness to God’s grace. Thus Ignatius describes a spiritual exercise as

every way of preparing and making ourselves ready to get rid of all disordered affections so that, once rid of them, one might seek and find the divine will in regard to the disposition of one's life for the salvation of the soul. (*Spiritual Exercises* 1, 21, 63)

Some understanding of ordered and disordered affections will help me to better understand this important description. Disordered affections are fears and desires that entangle or imprison me. Like slavers, they take me captive, bind me, and march me away from life. Disturbing and unsettling, they are deep habitual desires that remove me from God and my humanity.³ They spawn their own children and make me a “disaffected” person. The end result of all this is a disordered love that can grow through me like a weed in a wheat field (see Lk 8:1–8).

Ordered affections move me in the opposite direction. They are expressions of my true self. They tug me toward wholeness, integrity, and service.⁴ It is for this that I was created. Naturally seeking communion, they orientate me toward others. They give me the perspective to see the good in my life—the gifts, the promise, the wheat ready for harvesting.

When I move forward in harmony with my holy desires, I experience peace and energy in my life.⁵ In this movement the Spirit has greater room to breathe in me. I discover largeness, depth, and beauty in myself. My life becomes fully alive because I am making decisions about it with greater freedom. I worry less about the things that do not matter. As Jesus keeps telling me, it is the Father's good pleasure to give me his kingdom, to give me everything I need for life (see Lk 12:22–32). This living, generous energy is the heart and soul of an Ignatian spiritual exercise.

WHAT ARE THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES?

The Spiritual Exercises are a set of structured spiritual exercises woven with a particular dynamic into a retreat by St. Ignatius. They are not a loose collection of prayers. Rather, they are integrated exercises that work powerfully together—each day builds on the next, and each week is crafted as a thematic whole. Similarly, each week builds on the previous so that the whole four-week retreat is a single, progressive, and powerful experience of grace.

The Spiritual Exercises began life as the prayer journal of St. Ignatius. In the beginning this journal charted his reflections, graces, questions, feelings, favorite scripture texts, and prayer notes. Later it took shape as an instruction manual when he discovered that others, with similar

desires, could receive similar graces when he led them through similar exercises.

The giving of these exercises by Ignatius to others started with spiritual conversations and simple exercises at Loyola and Manresa in Spain. They continued in Barcelona, Alcalá, and Salamanca. With help from the Spirit, Ignatius began to sense the embrace of God's love and the pattern of the Lord's life in each person he was guiding. He structured these patterns into a retreat of some weeks. To this retreat were added useful teachings on the Christian faith and spiritual life. This took place from 1522 to 1527.

When he clarified the art of discernment and decision making, he added both of these to the book he now named *The Spiritual Exercises*. The Exercises were further shaped when he gave them, for over thirty days in seclusion, to his first companions in Paris and Venice. With significant revisions, they were finally completed in Rome between 1539 and 1541.

After making the Spiritual Exercises retreat, the first companions of Ignatius were profoundly affected and changed by them, both in their lives and in their spirituality. The Exercises ignited and confirmed their vocations. They wanted to share this channel of God's grace with others. So giving the Spiritual Exercises became a core ministry of their fledgling religious order—the Society of Jesus. To give them better they felt the need for an instruction manual. Ignatius published this at Rome in 1548. This manual for giving the Exercises is the text of the Spiritual Exercises in use today.

Yet, the Spiritual Exercises are more than a book text. They are an active relationship between myself, the Spirit, and the text, and, if possible, the one giving the Exercises to me. They are what I make or receive or enter into with God. I cannot do them by reading them. I can only do them by doing them. Because they are made in active relationship with God, their effects last for my life. They are about grace habitually rippling through the ecology of my desires, relationships, and actions.

WHAT ARE THE FIRST SPIRITUAL EXERCISES?

In the book of the Spiritual Exercises three forms of the Exercises are described in the twentieth, nineteenth, and eighteenth annotations or introductory notes. These are, respectively, the Full Spiritual Exercises given for thirty days in seclusion, the Full Spiritual Exercises given for

thirty weeks in daily life, and the First Spiritual Exercises given for four weeks in daily life.

What makes the latter, the Eighteenth Annotation Exercises, the “First” Spiritual Exercises? To begin with, they are first in the spiritual journey. They are the first spiritual exercises learned by the pilgrim Ignatius seeking God’s will. They are the first spiritual exercises he gave to others. They are the first exercises I might give to anyone who desires to make progress in their spiritual life today.

Second, they are first in content. They contain many “first” exercises: the first principle of Christian freedom, first Christian prayers, first virtues, first morning thoughts, first creation, first sin, first methods of prayer, first fruits of the Spirit, first steps of discernment, and so on.

Third, they are first in the order and dynamic of the Exercises. One of the First Spiritual Exercises retreats includes all of the first week of the Full Spiritual Exercises. These and other first exercises must be made first before all the rest.

Fourth, they are first in use. They are the first form of the Spiritual Exercises retreat ever given. Unlike the Full Exercises, they can be given immediately to everyone. They are a complete form of the Spiritual Exercises in their own right. And in Ignatian spirituality, they are not only an excellent place to begin, they are the only place to begin!

The Full Spiritual Exercises, enclosed or in daily life, are made as one retreat. The First Spiritual Exercises are more flexible; they are made as one of four retreats, selected according to one’s need. Each retreat responds to the fundamental desire for inner peace and a particular desire for love, service, forgiveness, healing, freedom, or divine friendship. The four retreats are:

1. Inner Peace in Divine Love.
2. Inner Peace in Darkness and Light.
3. Inner Peace in Friendship with Jesus.
4. Inner Peace in the Service of God.

Each retreat guides me in daily prayer through four weeks, Monday to Thursday, and includes Sunday Eucharist and a weekend exercise. I will also learn up to six methods of prayer, be taught up to four Examen prayers, and be introduced to the basic discernment of spirits. At the end, I will be invited to create a program for life for myself. All this happens in the flow of the retreat.

While the above elements are common to all four retreats, the desires, content, and dynamic of each retreat is different. The first retreat is built around a spiritual exercise in the Exercises called the “Contemplation for Attaining Divine Love.”⁶ To begin a spiritual journey, it is good for me to feel unconditionally loved by God. At its heart, this retreat brings me into a lover’s relationship with God, where each desires to give and receive from the other. Beginning with my own experience of love, I contemplate all the gifts I have received from God. This leads into movements of love, gratitude, and service.

The second retreat is for those living in some form of darkness—a serious disorder in life, a long period of suffering, sinfulness, chronic illness, or a driven lack of freedom. God comes to me in that darkness and gives me life there or leads me into the light. This retreat also awakens me to the God who lives in the light of my life, found in love, reconciliation, healing, and freedom. In content, this retreat begins with love, covers the first week of the Full Spiritual Exercises on mercy, gives parallel exercises for healing, and ends with the freedom exercise from the Exercises known as the “First Principle and Foundation.”⁷

The third retreat deepens my friendship with Jesus. Since Ignatius builds the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus into the Full Spiritual Exercises, he does not do so in the First Spiritual Exercises. Yet, he lived in deep friendship with Jesus, as his companion, disciple, and mystic. He often directs that prayer should end formally in conversation with Jesus as “if with a friend.” Indeed, he and his early companions named themselves “Friends in the Lord.” For these reasons, a modern reading of the First Spiritual Exercises may happily include a retreat to nurture friendship with Jesus.

The fourth retreat is for peace in the service of God.⁸ It offers exercises to find meaning and relish in my relationship with God, my faith, the Christian community, and social service. It begins with profoundly beautiful ways of praying using breath and body. Deeper into the retreat, I pray the Beatitudes, the gifts of the Spirit, and the works of mercy, and I conclude by creating a program for active and faithful life.

The First Spiritual Exercises were intended from the beginning to serve three needs: to give me the retreat I desire now, to provide me with spiritual exercises I can use for the rest of my life, and to teach me these exercises so that I may teach others. This is very different from the Full Spiritual Exercises, which are usually made once in a lifetime for one

purpose. Indeed, I may make the First Spiritual Exercises as many times as I wish.

How did Ignatius himself give the First Spiritual Exercises? Between 1526 and 1527, he gave them in Alcalá and Salamanca. Trying to live the actual life of an apostle, Ignatius made a strange sight in these sophisticated university cities, begging in bare feet and dressed in sackcloth. With four companions, he taught anyone who would listen about the love and service of God (cf. Lk 10:1–16).

He gave the First Spiritual Exercises to a noble woman and her daughter, to the baker and baker's wife, to a hospital orderly, and to university professors and students among others. Young or old, educated or illiterate, male or female, poor or rich—Ignatius saw the First Spiritual Exercises as being useful for everyone. But his dress and long spiritual conversations with people soon caught the attention of the Spanish Inquisition. He was arrested, jailed, and brought before them.

I can get an idea of how Ignatius was giving the First Spiritual Exercises to these people because the Inquisition transcripts of their interviews still exist. To them he was known as Iñigo or Yñigo. Remarkably, I can still hear their voices:

She said that what she knew of Yñigo was that she had seen him many times come to the house of Mencia de Benavente, who is aunt of this witness; and they spoke in secret many times, and this witness asked her aunt and her aunt's daughter what he talked to them and other women about; and they told him the afflictions they had and he consoled them.

She told Yñigo that she would like to speak with him, and so she did speak with him and asked him to explain the service of God. And Yñigo told her that he would have to talk with her over the period of a month; and during that month she was to confess weekly and receive Communion; and that at first she would be very happy and would not know where the joy came from, and the next week she would be very sad, but that he hoped in God that she would profit a great deal from it; and that if she felt happy during the month, she should not go back over the past. And he said he would explain the three powers, and he did so, and the merit that was gained in temptation, and how venial sin became mortal, and the Ten Commandments and circumstances, and mortal sins and the

five senses and the circumstances of all this. . . . And he told her how she should love God.

Maria de la Flor, May 10, 1527⁹

And with all these Yñigo has conversed, teaching them the commandments and mortal sins, and the five senses, and the powers of the soul; and he declares this very well, and declares it all through the gospel, and through Saint Paul, and other saints; and tells them that each day they should examine their conscience twice a day, bringing to memory what sins they have committed . . . and he advises them to go to confession every eight days, and to receive the sacrament at this same time.

Mencia de Benavente, March 6, 1527¹⁰

It was a source of wonder to the early Jesuits, on visiting Alcalá and Salamanca many years later, to find that many of these people who made the First Spiritual Exercises were still serving others when Ignatius was an old man. They remembered him very well because through the First Spiritual Exercises they had been personally touched by God. They found their life story treasured and had been given a practical, realistic way to live and serve with God. All this struck deep roots in the lives of these first Ignatian exercisers.

In later centuries, the First Spiritual Exercises were cherished as a great gift for bringing a person into relationship with God for love and service. This was the form of the Exercises most given to others. The Ignatian Congregations, international meetings called for matters of great moment, “vigorously support . . . to the greatest extent possible” the First Spiritual Exercises being given to men and women, ecclesiastics, workers, and the poor. In more recent times the Spiritual Exercises have been promoted as a source of inspiration, so that “our deep love of God and our passion for his world should set us on fire—a fire that starts other fires.”¹¹

How did Ignatius himself feel about the Spiritual Exercises? Nine years after being examined and freed from jail at Alcalá, he writes to a friend:

Still, let me repeat once and twice and as many more times as I am able: I implore you, out of a desire to serve God Our Lord, to do what I have said to you up to now. May His Divine Majesty never

ask me one day why I did not ask you as strongly as I possibly could!

The Spiritual Exercises are all the best that I have been able to think out, experience and understand in this life, both for helping somebody to make the most of themselves, as also for being able to bring advantage, help, and profit to many others. So, even if you don't feel the need for the first, you will see that they are much more helpful than you might have imagined for the second.

Ignatius to Rev. M. Miona, 16, 1536¹²

INNER PEACE IN DIVINE LOVE

[I]

created you. . . .

[I] formed you. . . .

Do not fear,

for I have redeemed you;

I have called you

by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you;

and through the rivers,

they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am

the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. . . .

Because you are precious in my sight,

and honored, and I love you.

—Isaiah 43:1–4a

The culminating exercise of the Full Spiritual Exercises is the “Contemplation for Attaining Divine Love.” It begins with the note that love consists in mutual communication. St. Ignatius continues, “The lover gives and communicates to the loved one what they have, or something of what they have, or are able to give; and in turn the one loved does the same for the lover. Each gives to the other” (*Spiritual Exercises* 231).

This giving and receiving relationship of love cradles my retreat. It goes to the very roots of who I am. The Trinity, loving communication personified, shows me that I am created for eternal communion. Jesus means it when he says to his Father, “All mine are yours, and yours are mine” (see Jn 17:10).

On the road to Emmaus, the unrecognized risen Jesus talked to two of his disciples and helped them to remember his loving actions and promises. At the end of the day, Jesus breaks and shares the evening bread with them, and reveals the very roots of who he is. Reflecting later on their conversation with Jesus, the disciples realize he had led them through a contemplation of divine love. No wonder they exclaimed, “Were not our hearts burning within us?” (see Lk 24:13–35).

This retreat, like the journey on the road to Emmaus, is essentially my opportunity for one long conversation with Jesus, to remember the history of loving action between me and the Trinity. In the first week, I pray with my own experience of being loved and bring it into the present. In the second week, I accept the invitations of God the Father, Jesus, and Spirit to abide in their love.

In the third and fourth week, I move slowly and lavishly through each point of the “Contemplation for Attaining Divine Love,” the last exercise in the Spiritual Exercises. I will see the traces of divine love burning its way through my life. As I clothe myself in this love, I may seek Christ’s inner peace and the burning desire to put our love into action.

Clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. . . . And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:14–17)

THE RETREAT STRUCTURE

This retreat is a twenty-two-day retreat in daily life. Prayer is made four days a week, preferably Monday to Thursday, for four weeks. Each prayer day includes a time for prayer and reflection after prayer. Together they add up to a daily commitment of about fifty minutes. There are some weekend exercises, and Sunday Eucharist is recommended.

THE RETREAT DYNAMIC

My retreat is to be experienced as a whole, with a dynamic that moves through all four weeks. The daily prayer texts of each exercise have been carefully chosen, as single texts and as an ecology of texts. As single texts, they are part of the spiritual exercise. They provide the content and context of my exercise and my relationship with God. They also shed light on central elements of my faith.

As an ecology of texts, where there is more than one text, each text illuminates the others, offering a progression of meaning, or a contrast of content, or a balance of masculine and feminine experience.

Furthermore, the daily texts provide a meaningful progression throughout the week. They are balanced as a weekly group and are to be prayed in a weekly dynamic. Certain images, actions of God, or sets of grace and desire are developed throughout a week.

In like manner, the exercises of each week as a whole are chosen to guide me through certain movements that are only experienced when I make the full four-week retreat. They deliberately introduce me to many different images of God, inviting a variety of divine relationships and giving me a taste of the extraordinary richness in knowing and loving God.

SPIRITUAL JOURNALING

Ignatius directs: "After finishing the exercise I will either sit down or walk around for a quarter of an hour while I see how things have gone for me during the contemplation or meditation" (*Spiritual Exercises* 77).

For the First Spiritual Exercises, a special journal called the Listening Book is used. It will be essential for remembering and discerning the graces I receive in prayer. The Ignatian Guide to Spiritual Journaling (page 349) outlines how to do this.

SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION

Spiritual conversation, personal or group, is very highly recommended. See the Ignatian Guide to Spiritual Conversation found at the end of this book.

Retreat Map**WEEK ONE**

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Sunday

WEEK TWO

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Sunday

WEEK THREE

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Saturday

Sunday

WEEK FOUR

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Saturday

Sunday

Inner Peace in Divine Love**REMEMBERING LOVE**

I remember being loved.

I remember being loved and grateful.

I remember being loved and responding.

I remember a loving friendship.

Action in memory of love

DWELLING IN LOVE

I abide in the love of Jesus.

I dwell in the love of the Father.

I remain in the love of the Spirit.

Inseparable from God's love

Action in union with love

LOVE AT WORK

I remember the gifts I have received.

I see how God dwells in creation.

I see how God dwells in me.

I see how God works in creation and me.

Reconciliation Examen

Action in gratitude of love

LOVE IN SERVICE

Every gift descends like the sun's rays.

Every gift flows like water.

Give me only the grace to love you.

Awareness Examen

Program for Life

Action in peace with love

Week One**Remembering Love**

Monday

I remember being loved.

Tuesday

I remember being loved and grateful.

Wednesday

I remember being loved and responding.

Thursday

I remember a loving friendship.

Sunday

Action in memory of love

Eucharist

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

The first half of my retreat is about love in relationship. It is easy to forget that I have a great gift in the joyful memories of my life. This week I bring them into my day. I remember experiences of being loved that have been lost, forgotten, or simply relegated to the past.

Building on an awareness exercise created by Anthony DeMello, S.J., the exercises of this week have the following movements: I remember being loved, and remembering, I feel loved. Then returning to the present I bring the feeling with me. With the experience of being loved in the present, I feel more alive and grateful.

The prayer method is the same each day, so once learned, I can relax into the week. Each daily spiritual exercise ends with a short conversation with God and closes with the Our Father. I conclude my week with Sunday Eucharist. If I am unable to celebrate the Eucharist, I may fruitfully make the alternative exercise.

The daily prayer texts reveal different expressions of God's love—passionate love, steadfast love, tender love, renewing love, and life-giving love.

Monday I Remember Being Loved.

Preparation I take a relaxed position with a straight back, my body poised for prayer. I make a gesture of reverence and humility. I read the prayer text about passionate love.

Opening Prayer I ask for the grace to direct my whole self toward God.

Desire I desire to feel the love in my life.

Prayer Using my imagination, I remember an experience of being really loved.

I go back in time to re-create this experience as best I can with the details of place, weather, conversation, actions, and people. I relive the experience with all my senses—I touch, smell, hear, and feel being so loved.

I remain in this place for a few minutes.

Now, eyes still closed, I come back into the room where I am now. I remember the details of place here. How do I feel? I remain here for a few minutes.

I return again to the place where I was loved. I relive being loved. Do I feel any different than the first time I came here? I remain for a few minutes.

I come back into the room where I am now. How do I feel? Different? Now I move back and forth between both places, spending a minute or so in each.

I note any change of feelings. I do this for five minutes.

Conversation I end my prayer in a short conversation with God, talking as to a friend, about what I have just experienced.

Our Father.²¹

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

For this exercise, and in the following exercises this week, I may choose the same experience to return to when I remember, or I may choose a different experience.

This exercise reveals that when I remember how I have been loved I reexperience the feeling. I can bring that feeling back into the present, and the feeling is as real now as it was originally.

SUGGESTED PRAYER TIME: 25 MINUTES

Preparation: 5 minutes. Opening Prayer: 1 minute. Desire: 1 minute.
Prayer: 15 minutes. Conversation: 3 minutes. Listening Book after
prayer: 10 minutes.

PRAYER TEXTS

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love
all the wealth of his house,
it would be utterly scorned. (Sg 8:6–7)