

# Ignatian Spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises

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Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, articulated an experience and approach to life and God, a spirituality, which continues to thrive after hundreds of years. Ignatian spirituality:

- **Is centered around the belief that God can be found in all things**

Taking time each day to reflect upon God's moment-by-moment presence builds this amazing awareness.

- **Is action-oriented**

God invites the person to grow increasingly competent, caring, and loving, to relieve injustices and suffering in our world "for the greater glory of God."

- **Engages and builds self-awareness**

The person enlists affect, imagination, and intellect to know how greatly God loves her or him and how she or he might respond to that love. The person grows in freedom to discern and choose actions or directions of greater value and potential for good.

- **Honor differences**

Ignatius valued differences in relation to times, culture and each individual. Thus, adaptation to widely varied situations is respected, indeed expected. Ignatian spirituality provides a foundation and framework that can support accommodation to varied settings.

- **Experiential**

Ignatius developed a method to experience Ignatian spirituality. He called this method the "Spiritual Exercises." He and his early companions found that the Spiritual Exercises helped to re-order and re-direct their lives to praise and serve God. Today, people seek to "make the Spiritual Exercises" for various reasons: to form a closer relationship with God, to consider vocational or other life choices, to be a better person (e.g., parent, spouse, colleague, neighbor, global citizen) or to more fully understand Ignatian spirituality and Jesuit identity.

The process of "doing" the Spiritual Exercises involves prayerful reading and reflection. For Christians, this involves prayer and contemplation upon Biblical passages, primarily from the Gospels, in order to understand oneself and the life of Christ, including God's love (called "Week One), discipleship/servant leadership (Week Two), compassion and commitment (Week Three) and God's presence in daily life (Week Four).

For instance, while attending prayerfully to the passage (Matthew 7: 7-9):

*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.*

I might prayerfully imagine Jesus speaking this directly to me and consider with him reflections such as:

What do I request and seek? Why?

What might prevent me from asking, seeking and knocking?

What will be on the other side of the door?

Or I might do something similar with this passage (Jeremiah 29:11):

*For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not your woe!*

With my own thoughts or openness to God's touch:

What fills me with hope?

What worries might be relieved?

Ignatius intended this spiritual process to take one's exclusive attention for 30-days or to be modified and extended over months for those with familial and professional responsibilities. While elements of the *Spiritual Exercises* can be experienced privately, utilizing print or electronic resources, it is most fruitful to couple personal prayer with regular meetings with an experienced companion or director.

In the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius also outlined a prayer of five brief steps for daily awareness of God's presence and help in my activities, called the *Examen*.

The Examen can be adapted according to the needs and style of the person who prays it. A modern adaptation can invite reflection with God's help upon questions such as the following:

- *What am I thankful for today? How have I been blessed?*
- *As I review my day, when did I feel close to God? When did I feel more distant?*
- *What have I learned about myself today? Am I pleased with this insight?*
- *Who do I want to BE tomorrow? How can I BE that person?*
- *What do I look forward to in my day tomorrow?*

There are many helpful descriptions of the Examen, including the short book *A Simple Life-Changing Prayer*, by Jim Manney (Loyola Press).