

ENCOUNTERING GOD IN OUR LIFE EXPERIENCES: THE GIFT OF IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY

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Recently, I went to get a medical check-up with a doctor who treats many Jesuits. Because she knew that I was a Jesuit priest she felt free to share some aspects of her spiritual life with me. She said that as a young girl growing up in a Catholic family she went to Mass every Sunday, but she did not have a deep relationship with Christ. Her life centered on her accomplishments. As an excellent student, her life was one achievement after another. However, all that changed when she got married and discovered that she and her husband were not able to have children. That was the first time she experienced weakness in her life. She did not know whom to turn to. In her desperation, she turned to God, praying intensely especially to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Her relationship with Jesus Christ became much deeper, and her life began to be centered on that relationship. After several years of trusting in God, she and her husband finally achieved their goal. She conceived and gave birth to a beautiful baby girl who is a teenager now. This experience transformed her life. She developed spirituality. Sharing in the Cross of Christ opened her to a much deeper relationship with the Lord.

God has created us in such a way that we have restless spirits and hungry hearts that yearn for him. As we consult our experience we see that nothing ever fully satisfies us. Especially in our knowing and loving, we continually want to know and love more and more. We

have this drive towards the transcendent as part of our very nature. Yet so many people in today's world live without God, forgetting him while being mired in the things of the world. This is precisely why so many experience emptiness and meaninglessness in life. St. Augustine came to realize this when as a young man he sought meaning, first in his sexual relationship with a concubine and then through his study and learning. Through the prayers of his mother, St. Monica and the influence of St. Ambrose, he found Christ and was converted. He proclaims in his *Confessions*, "For Thou has made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee."¹ All men and women have this hungry heart and restless spirit, yearning for God. Unless they come to grips with this mystery, there will be something missing from their lives.

Karl Rahner has raised the question, "Have you ever experienced the spiritual element in man?" He answers it so beautifully.

Have we ever kept quiet, even though we wanted to defend ourselves when we had been unfairly treated? Have we ever forgiven someone even though we got no thanks for it and our silent forgiveness was taken for granted? Have we ever obeyed, not because we had to and because otherwise things would have been unpleasant for us, but simply on account of that mysterious, silent, incomprehensible being we call God and his will? Have we ever sacrificed something without receiving any thanks or recognition for it, even without a feeling of inner satisfaction? Have we ever been absolutely lonely? Have we ever decided on some course of action purely by the innermost judgment of our conscience, deep down where one can no longer tell or explain it to anyone, where one is quite alone and knows that in taking a decision which no one else can take in one's place and for which one will have to answer for all eternity?²

¹St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Translated by F.J. Sheed. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943, 3.

²Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Experience of Grace," *Theological Investigations, Volume III: The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, Translated by Karl H. and Boniface Kruger. Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1967, 87.

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius

Many in today's world, especially lay men and women, are coming to a deep encounter with the Lord through an experience of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. The full *Exercises* is usually done during a thirty day retreat. All members of the Society of Jesus make this thirty day retreat at least twice in their lifetimes: during their Novitiate at the beginning of their Jesuit lives, and during their Tertianship, their final formation, years later. This is their basis for their Jesuit lives. Many religious and some lay men and women have had the opportunity to make this thirty day retreat. However, most people neither have the time nor money to go away for thirty days of retreat. St. Ignatius was aware of this. In Annotation 19, one of the notes he makes at the beginning of the *Exercises*, St. Ignatius suggests those too busy to go away for a thirty day retreat may make these *Exercises* in the course of one's everyday life.³ During the course of his regular daily life, the person will pray for about an hour or more a day and write down his reflections, which he will share with a spiritual director who will guide the person through the entire *Exercises* during weekly meetings. I have given it many times this way, and I find it an amazing experience because the prayer at times becomes dramatically actualized in the life of the exercitant. This prayer experience is especially appropriate for today's world. The goal of Ignatian spirituality is a response of the heart, the transformation of the deepest core of our being.

This great spiritual masterpiece is the fruit of the conversion experience of St. Ignatius transforming him from a vain and proud soldier into a prayerful pilgrim. His leg was shattered by a cannon ball in the Battle of Pamplona. The French carried this courageous Spaniard back to his castle at Loyola where he convalesced for months on a bed of pain, even having his leg reset so that he would walk without a limp. He wanted to read romantic novels, but there were none in the castle, just a life of Christ and a life of the saints. In reading these books again and again, Ignatius was slowly but surely transformed. When he got better, he left his sword at the Monastery of Monserrat and became a

³David L. Fleming, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Literary Translation and a Contemporary Reading*, St. Louis, Missouri: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978, #19, 16-17.

pilgrim. He spent several months at the caves of Manresa where his movements ranged from deep mystical union with God to desperate despair, almost to the point of suicide, because of his scrupulosity over past sins. God healed him, and he became free of these sins. These experiences became the basis for his *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius became such a sensitive and perceptive spiritual director because of what he himself experienced.

The *Spiritual Exercises* is divided into four weeks. Prior to the First Week is the Principle and Foundation.⁴ “God who loves us creates us and wants to share life with us forever. Our love response takes shape in our praise and honor and service of the God of our life.... Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God’s deepening life in me.” Furthermore, “all the things in this world are ... presented to us so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily.” The Principle and Foundation asks “what is life all about?” It directs us to the source of life.

The Shack: Where Tragedy confronts Eternity

This truth is expressed very well in a novel which has captured the interest of so many in today’s world, William Paul Young’s novel, *The Shack, Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity*.⁵ It has been #1 on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for many weeks with more than three million copies in print. I believe this novel has become so popular precisely because it strikes a chord within humanity’s hungry heart and restless spirit, yearning for God. The main character, Mackenzie Allen Phillips had a difficult childhood suffering such physical abuse from the hands of his drunkard father that he ran away from home at the age of thirteen carrying a hatred for his father with him. After years of wandering, he came back to the States, made peace with his mother and sisters, eventually married a wonderful women named Nan and had five children settling in Oregon, the great Northwest. However, his life was radically changed when he went on a camping vacation

⁴Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises*, #23, 22-23.

⁵William Paul Young, *The Shack, Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity*, Newbury Park, California: Windblown Media: 2007.

with his three youngest children. At first, they had a wonderful time communing with nature. However, tragedy struck when two of his children went canoeing on the lake. When Kate the elder of his daughters waved with the paddle to her Daddy, the canoe capsized and both children were thrown into the water. The girl bobbed up quickly, but the boy didn't. The straps on his life vest got caught in the webbing of the canoe, and he couldn't get it free. Mack, the father, jumped into the water, and after several efforts was able to loosen the straps to free his son who was able to rise to the surface.. While all this was happening, his youngest daughter, Missy, was left unattended. After rescuing his two older children, Mack could not locate Missy when he came back from the lake.. He looked all over the campsite. Soon, everyone was looking for her. The police authorities, even the FBI, were called in, but no one could find her. There were reports that a young girl was seen in an old military, green truck driven by a man. Days later they found her torn and blood-soaked red dress in a run down shack. They could not find the body. Thus, a great sadness fell over the family. Four years later, Mack received a note, apparently from God, inviting him back to the shack for a weekend. When Mack arrived at the shack, he did meet God, who is portrayed as a Trinity of Persons: God the Father who appears as Papa, a large black woman who loves to cook; Jesus, portrayed as a Middle Eastern laborer; and the Holy Spirit who appears as Sarayu, an Asian woman who seems to phase in and out of Mack's vision. In the course of the weekend, Mack was gifted with a vision of his daughter, Missy. When he saw her, he exclaimed, "She's really okay, isn't she?" Jesus responded, "More than you know. This life is only the anteroom of a greater reality to come. No one reaches their potential in your world. It's only preparation for what Papa had in mind all along."⁶ During his encounter, Mack met his father and was finally reconciled with him when he put his arms around him in forgiveness. Where Missy's body was buried was also revealed, and Mack was even moved to forgive her killer. At the end of his three day encounter with God, Mack was transformed. All his hatred and bitterness was drained from him. He became filled with love and joy. When Mack began his drive home, his car was hit by a drunken driver at an intersection and was critically injured. He woke

⁶Young, 169.

up at the hospital with his family around him. Mack thought that the accident happened on Sunday evening after three days at the shack, but Nan, his wife, told him that the accident happened on Friday evening, after the first day of his being at the shack. Did the three days of encounter with God actually take place, or did it just happen within his consciousness in the process of recovering from the accident? How could all of these realizations have been possible? Mack's life is now filled with love and joy. There is no more great sadness. Something definitely happened at the shack.

The Examen of Consciousness

Returning to Ignatian spirituality, another important aspect is the Examen of Consciousness, which St. Ignatius held so important that he would allow his Jesuits to miss praying on occasion but never allowing them to miss this Examen of Consciousness. A good time to do so would be at the end of the day, spending about ten to fifteen minutes in prayer. The Examen contains five elements: 1) gratitude for God's blessings, 2) self-awareness, what did I learn of myself today, 3) a review of the day, being aware of its positive and negative experiences, 4) expressing sorrow for one's failures during the day, and finally 5) looking forward in hope to a new day tomorrow. As Jesuits have prayed this over the course of the years, many versions have arisen, but this is the general outline of the Examen. Praying this every day gives one the gift of discerning God's Spirit and will in one's life.

Further Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises

The *Spiritual Exercises* begins with a focus on God's love. It is essential that the retreatant experience this love in order for him to go on. All is bathed in God's love. If he is not able to experience this love, he can not proceed to the other meditations of the *Exercises*. Some people suffer poor self images; they find it difficult to experience God's love. The prayer must continue to focus on God's love until one finally does experience it. Then, one may proceed to the First Week which focuses on sin and God's mercy. It is important that one gain a full knowledge of the depth of sin present within him. From that realization, he is ready to experience the compassion of God made present through Jesus

Christ. William Paul Young has a great line on sin in his novel. God the Father, Papa, says, "I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it."⁷ In his prayer for the First Week, the retreatant is asked to compare himself with the rebel angels, Adam and Eve, and someone who has been condemned to hell for one sin. Why has not God condemned me? He is then asked to have a Colloquy, a deep prayer before Jesus Christ suffering on the Cross not only for sin in general but for my sins and is asked to respond to three questions: If Christ has suffered so much for me: What have I done for Christ?, What am I doing for Christ?, and What will I do for Christ? The best way to end the week is to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, to complete the process of conversion. When one goes deeply through this process it is already an experience of the Paschal Mystery, dying to self and rising to Christ. It is a very liberating experience. One is filled with gratitude, and is anxious to respond with great generosity to God's invitation.

Before the beginning the Second Week, there is a meditation which focuses on Christ the King and His Call.⁸ Ignatius proposes that we think about Jesus after the model of a king to whom we owe reverence and obedience. "I want to overcome all diseases, all poverty, all ignorance, all oppression and slavery – in short all the evils which beset humankind." "Whoever wishes to join me in this undertaking must be content with the same food, drink, clothing, and so on that comes with following me." Try to imagine that a charismatic political leader emerging in the Philippine situation calling upon Filipinos to follow him in establishing a just government free from corruption and injustice. It will be a great struggle, but the leader promises to be with us in all things, and in the end we will triumph. What would any good person do? This is what Christ our Lord is inviting us to, to be with him in promoting the Kingdom of God, where God reigns, a Kingdom of Justice, Peace, Love, and Community.. The meditation ends with a prayer which sets up the great challenges of the Second Week, inviting those of great generosity to follow Christ completely: in poverty, humility, and in suffering to point of sharing in the Cross.

⁷Young, 122.

⁸Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercise*. #91-100, 64-68.

The Second Week deals with the great Mysteries of the Life of Christ.. by praying these meditations, the retreatant gains a con-naturality with Christ, to be totally one with him. The prayer also moves into contemplation to use our imagination in picturing Jesus in the various scenes of the Gospels. To the Gospel stories, Ignatius adds three distinctive meditations. The first one is a Meditation on Two Leaders, Two Strategies.⁹ Both Satan and Jesus Christ are trying to get men and women to follow them. Satan is attracting them by riches, honor and pride. Satan very subtly attracts men and women to work under his Standard, even under the guise of good. Jesus is attracting them by poverty, self-emptying, and humility. The retreatant is asked to reflect which Leader is he following. The retreatant must carefully discern the movement in his or her life. The next Ignatian meditation is that of the Three Types of Persons¹⁰. One knows that one must take an action. The first type of person is “a lot of talk, but no action.” He says he will do it tomorrow or next week, or next year, but never actually doing it. The second type is “to do everything but the one thing necessary.” The third type of person is the one who says “to do Your will is my desire.”

The Third Kind of Humility

The third of the Ignatian meditations of the Second Week is that of the Three Kinds of Humility.¹¹ The First Kind of Humility would want me to do nothing that would cut me off from God – not even were I made head of all creation or even just to save my own life on earth. I know that grave sin in this sense is to miss the whole meaning of being a person – one who is created and redeemed and is destined to live forever in love with God my Creator and Lord. In the Second Kind of Humility I would not want to turn away from God even in small ways, because my whole desire is to respond ever more faithfully to his call. The Third Kind of Humility is the actualization of the prayer of Christ the King and His Call meditation. Here one is united with Christ poor, humble, and suffering. One does this not because one desires to suffer,

⁹Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises*, #136-148, 86-91.

¹⁰Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises*, #149-157, 92-95.

¹¹Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises*, # 165-168, 100-103

but because one loves Christ and is willing to be totally one with him to the point of the Cross. This is the pinnacle of Ignatian spirituality.

... I so much want the truth of Christ's life to be fully the truth of my own that I find myself, moved by grace, with a love and a desire for poverty in order to be with the poor Christ; a love and a desire for insults in order to be closer to Christ in his own rejection by people; a love and a desire to be considered worthless and a fool for Christ, rather than to be esteemed as wise and prudent according to the standards of the world. By grace, I find myself so moved to follow Jesus Christ in the most intimate union possible, that his experiences are reflected in my own. In that, I find my delight.¹²

One need not seek this out, but one will experience this in one's life, especially if one is actively involved in bringing about the Kingdom of God.

I believe all of us encounter experiences of this Third Kind of Humility in the course of our life. The critical question is how do we respond to it? As I reflect upon my experiences of this Third Kind of Humility in my life, I recognize it to be a gift. It is truly sharing in the Paschal Mystery, the Passion Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. One such experience which remains very vivid in my memory was my getting involved in a discipline case at the university I taught at to protect a student when I was convinced that the decision of the Administration was wrong. So, I fought it on every level: first talking with the Dean about it, then, bringing it up to the College Council, then, bringing it up to the level of the President of the University, and finally, up to the level of the Board of Trustees. I received no satisfaction until I brought it up to the level of the Board of Trustees who decided in my favor. I won the battle but lost the war. The administration of the university asked for my transfer after that experience. I remember praying to God. Where are you? I am doing this for you to promote justice, to promote the Kingdom of God. When will you come through for me? I remember talking with several Jesuit Spiritual directors

¹²Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises*, #167-168, 101-103.

to try to get some peace on this issue. No one was able to help me. Finally, during my one semester sabbatical, I talked this over with my brother, a married laymen. At last, I found some one who could give me consolation. He asked me why was I so upset? Is not this what you are supposed to do as a Jesuit? You responded to the challenge to help the person involved. As a Jesuit you had the freedom to do so. No one else could do so. You were free enough to do so and take the risk. Now, you are suffering the consequences of your action. You should expect that. You should be happy that you stood up for justice, and that the Board of Trustees supported you. You are sharing in the Cross of Christ. What he told me was so liberating. Isn't it amazing that the consolation would come from my brother, a layman and not from any Jesuit spiritual director. I reflected on what happened to me because of this experience. This is truly the experience of the Paschal Mystery. I was broken by the suffering, and the Holy Spirit entered into my life. I was purified by the suffering. I was strengthened by the suffering. At that time, I could only depend on God. It fostered my trust in him. I was transformed into the image of Christ. While the experience was one of suffering, I must admit that it opened up into the experience of the Resurrection. Many new opportunities opened up for me. I grew in so many ways. God finally did come through, but in his way and on his terms. I must say that that although there was suffering, this was indeed a life-giving experience.

We should not be afraid of such experiences. Ultimately, it is God sharing his grace with us. The one whom Jesus calls he calls to the Cross. The Cross does not stand by itself. It always leads to the experience of the Resurrection. This is the meaning of the Paschal Mystery. I must admit that this is not my only experience of the Third Degree of Humility. There have been several others. I am grateful for all of them. They are key points in my pilgrimage to the Father. When I give the Ignatian *Exercises* either as a preached retreat or a directed retreat, I often share this experience with the retreatants. Very often, they share similar experiences with me, revealing how much this is part of their lives. Very often, they are broken by the experience, condemning God for making them suffer. I try to point out to them that such an experience is not a curse but a blessing. In my experience I find that it is important not to be passive in encountering the Cross

but to be active in responding to whatever form the Cross takes in our lives. This will make the redemptive activity of Christ active not only in our lives but in the lives of the people we touch. Such is an experience of God empowering us.

Completing the Spiritual Exercises

The *Spiritual Exercises* is not merely an intellectual experience; it also involves the emotions, the feelings, the heart, the deepest part of our being. To understand this fully, allow me to explain the Ignatian concepts of “consolation” and “desolation.” “Consolation” is anything that leads us closer to God. “Desolation” is anything that leads us away from God. Ignatius distinguishes between the First Week and in the Second Week of the *Exercises*. In the First Week when the retreatant is dealing with his sinfulness, Consolation would result in feelings of shame, guilt, and confusion for our sins so that we would be converted from them. Desolation, on the other hand, would leave him happy and content in his sinful state. In the Second Week of the *Exercises* when the retreatant is progressing in union with Christ, consolation would leave him at peace and content in his spiritual life, while desolation would cause unrest, anxiety, and trouble is proceeding to union with Christ. Knowledge of how consolation and desolation are at work is very important in the discernment of spirits.

After this meditation on the Three Kinds of Humility, the Rules for Making a Choice of a State or Way of Life are introduced.¹³ The first time is when one has a dramatic spiritual experience like St. Paul on the road to Damascus. It is very clear what the will of God is. The second time is when one gains much light and clarity from our experience of consolation, anything that leads one to God, and desolation, anything that leads one away from God. This is clarity in this as well. However, the third time is when there is neither consolation nor desolation, no movement from God. Ignatius suggests we should then use our own reasoning process, try to be like a balance at equilibrium weighing the advantages and disadvantages for one’s decision and bringing it to prayer. He also suggests to consider what advice would one give to a person coming for advice, to imagine oneself at the moment of death,

¹³Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises*. #170-189, 104-115.

or to stand before Christ, the Judge when this life has ended. How would one's decision affect that? Throughout the reasoning process of the third time of making a decision, one continually begs God our Lord to bring him to the experience of the Second or First Time.

The Third Week focuses on the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ. What can one say in the face of suffering? One can only be with, to accompany. To pray with the suffering Christ to be with him in his Passion is the best way to do the Third Week. Any decision made during the Second Week can be tested and affirmed through my prayer of the Third Week.

The Fourth Week focuses on the Resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is an experience of joy and triumph. We are a people of hope; we live in the realization that all shall be well. It is important to realize that we can never come to the powerful experience of the Resurrection without first an experience of the Cross. When I prayed about the Resurrection during one of my eight day retreats, I was focusing on Luke 24: 13-35, the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus, and I had a deep insight about experiencing the Risen Lord. The two disciples are travelling to Emmaus from Jerusalem after the Crucifixion of Jesus when a figure comes up beside them and walks with them. He asks them why are you so sad? They responded by saying, Don't you know what has happened. We thought that he was the Messiah, but now he is dead and all his disciples have run away. As they continue to walk, the figure explains the scriptures to them, and their hearts burn within them. As they continue their journey. It is getting dark, so the two disciples turn in to an inn, but the figure goes on. The disciples reach out to him and ask him to spend the night with them. Then, in the breaking of bread, they recognize Jesus as the Risen Lord. My insight is that they would never have recognized him unless they went out of themselves to reach out to him to invite him to stay with them. Only when we reach out to others in relationship are we able to experience the Risen Lord in our midst.

The *Exercises* ends with the Contemplation on God's Love. Ignatius has two pre-notes to this meditation. One is that love is expressed not only in words but in deeds, and the other is that love consists in a true mutuality, sharing all that one has with the beloved. At the end, one's heart is filled with gratitude because of the generous gift of God's grace.

One truly becomes a Contemplative in Action, linking prayer and action, both feeding into each other. One finds God in all things. God is active and alive in the world with his loving presence in all things. The only response can be the great Jesuit prayer, Take and Receive:

Take, Lord and Receive all my liberty,
 my memory, understanding, my entire will,
 all that I have and call my own.
 You have given all to me.
 To you, Lord, I return it.
 Do with it as you will.
 Give me only your love and your grace:
 that is enough for me.¹⁴

Conclusion

This experience can be all summed up in this great passage from *Redemptor Hominis* where John Paul II proclaims:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not fully participate in it. This, as has already been said, is why Christ the Redeemer “fully reveals man to himself” ... the man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial and even illusory standards and measures of his being – he must with his unrest, uncertainty, and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter into Him with all his own self, he must “appropriate” and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find himself.¹⁵

In our lives, we must appropriate and assimilate the whole of the

¹⁴Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises*, #234. 141.

¹⁵John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*. Vatican City, 1979, #10.

reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find ourselves. This is the experience of the Paschal Mystery. This is the experience we gain through the making of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Karl Rahner expresses it so well:

The chalice of the Holy Spirit is identical in this life with the chalice of Christ. This chalice is drunk only by those who have slowly learned in little ways to taste the fullness in emptiness, the ascent in the fall, life in death, the finding in renunciation. Anyone who learns this, experiences the spirit – the pure spirit – and in this experience he is also given the experience of the Holy Spirit of grace.¹⁶

The *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola is not only for Jesuits. It is a gift to be shared with the Church and all Christians. It is particularly relevant for today's world, helping men and women of today to open up to the mystery of God's loving presence in their midst.

¹⁶Rahner, 89.