

THE EXERCISES IN DAILY LIFE

TWO PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

Jim and Lis McIntyre live in Crawley, England and have two young children. They met and married in Zambia, Africa. They both worked in the airline world and Jim is now manager of a cargo/travel agency. They are very committed to their parish.

IN TRYING TO relate the experience of making the Exercises, so many thoughts and memories flood back. To try and relate my 'experience', as the story-book says, 'let's go back to the very beginning'.

There came a time in the lives of my wife Lis and me, when it was fast becoming apparent that in our relationship with our Church, indeed with our faith, there was a void — occasioned by a lack of understanding of so much in our faith.

We had the traditional dumb acceptance attitude, 'it's another mystery; neither question it nor try to reason it out — just accept — isn't that what we've always been taught?'

Mass was a service to be attended, in some ways a duty (dare I say at times — a chore!) But where was the participation? Where did duty end, and longing/belonging begin?

Cutting a long story short, enter one Sister Joan Brown.

After much discussion there came her suggestion that we make the Exercises.

Our first reaction was neither about our lack of understanding, nor our participation at Mass, but total consternation!! The length of the course, weekly, over about nine months — or as long as it takes!!! — the discipline, only she would allow us to stop, once started. The commandeering of our/my time, the need to devote a given period daily/weekly to the Exercises.

Could I handle it, where would I do it/them, what about my normal routine daily life, the continual interruptions, the telephone? It was such a daunting task.

Then, perhaps, there came enlightenment; our Father had decided the time was right. Had we not asked ourselves all those

searching questions seeking understanding? Was this then not an answer from him?

In the early part it was so very, very difficult, my worst fears were being realized — I didn't have the time, couldn't create a routine; total lack of privacy — I began to crave solitude.

For both of us it was difficult to concentrate on the Exercises, until we established a daily routine, and then it all began to fall into place.

So many places were tried: the office, the train, our home, various churches; and I began to get a phobia about the invasions of my privacy. In the end God gave me the answer, the perfect place. In our local parish church, we have a very small Lady Chapel, slightly detached from the main church; there I found the peace and solitude that I wanted. To be able to sit there, in the semi-darkness, to 'feel' one's emotions flowing — the oneness that one felt with our Father is almost indescribable.

The Exercises began to take on a new meaning — an experience — at times far from pleasant. As Sister Joan had warned, and as we found in the Exercises, there would be difficult times ahead — was that ever an understatement! Though, again and again, at the end of each such experience — it would be like a new dawn, another hill conquered. At times, when we were in the depths of despair, of personal rejection, it was only the knowledge and the beginning of the realization that at the end there would be this beautiful feeling, this feeling of oneness, of understanding, of knowing that pulled us through!

Our void now was overtaken by frustration when we had difficulty in coping and relating the Exercises to our daily life, but as we progressed there came such peace.

In so many ways we led a life of double standards. How, when studying, reading, indeed participating in the passion of our Lord, the feelings one had — the world coming to an end, sitting there, supposedly having finished that daily exercise, and then to be approached by our son asking about football, homework, games — how did one cope?

For me the passion was a very depressing time, it began to affect our home life, and it was difficult not to let it upset our children, but attitudes to 'God' were changing, he was becoming my best friend.

At first I thought 'I need a bridge, just so I can cross from one bank to the other as the need takes me'. How naïve I was. Just how does one leave one's faith behind, and pick it up at will? Is it a tap, does it have a thermostat, can I turn it up or down as it pleases me?

No, no, no; now I have the beginnings of understanding; my faith; my Church is not only alive, but alive and vibrant and living in *me*!

How I now believe, accept, how I now try to pray and communicate! Take an age to say one prayer — now it all has so much meaning. To be able to 'feel' our faith; again I find it difficult to relate just how much the Exercises have changed my understanding. Now there is so much more meaning to it all. Our need to love and serve him. It is still difficult to come to terms with this love for us, and the way in which we lead our daily lives.

My learning process has begun, may I try to live my life by this example. This journey through our lives has been a most wonderful experience, we are more at peace with ourselves.

How very fortunate it is that we 'lay people' are being given this opportunity to make the Exercises without having to go away on a retreat.

Don and Julia Harvey live in a village near Crawley, Sussex and have four young children. Don works for Barclays Bank in the computer centre. Both are involved in the parish catechesis programmes and the Marriage Encounter movement.

Julia

DOING THE 'Exercises in daily life' helped to make the Father, Son and Spirit more real for me. I began to pray to them as people I knew and was getting to know better. I felt warm and secure and buoyed up by God's love. I began to be more able to let go and to put myself in his hands, to trust and accept whatever happens and be ready to turn to him for guidance and strength. I am more eager to choose his way, even when it is hard and I know in my heart the truth that I can do nothing of myself, but anything is possible if I let the power of his Spirit into my life.

Doing the Exercises on a daily basis meant that this experience and growth was able to become a part of my life step by step. God's word came alive for me as I listened in the scripture passages, and I heard his voice at other times during the day as I tried to live what I heard him saying to me.

As I related my daily prayer experience to specific circumstances, I found myself gradually changing. I was letting God, bit by bit, move into my life and taking small steps out of my self-centredness, my wanting to be in control and my tendency to self-pity. I was

moving towards my Father with Jesus in a practical and achievable way, whereas I think I should have found this more difficult if I had experienced the Exercises in the more concentrated form of a thirty day retreat and then tried to put it all into practice back in the outside world, rather like trying to take an enormous leap and perhaps falling short.

Not that there weren't times of failure, of course, and indeed there still are. On days when I do not manage to give him my time or heart in prayer, I get caught up in the turmoil and pressures of the materialistic world. Then I feel lost and empty, but knowing what is missing I am inevitably brought back to God in prayer. Then I find again the inner peace, the joy for life, the love and acceptance of other people and the confidence and hope of God's living presence and power always with me.

Don

For me the most significant thing from making the Exercises in my daily life was a greater trust in God. In fact, letting go . . . letting God . . . was the way I saw it. I somehow felt at peace and sort of blown along by a steady breeze. No worries or concerns about what was going to happen to me. I felt calm and confident and almost as if I was being controlled by somebody else.

I also gained great insight into the life of Jesus and was able to appreciate him as a man really living and present on earth . . . and so real as to be actually with him in various episodes from his life.

I also appreciated how special I am and how I was known to God from the beginning. I revelled in his great power, in the wonders of creation. I had a great awareness of all the people in my life who have helped me to reach where I am now.