

THE FIRST METHOD OF PRAYER

Prayerful Self-Monitoring

Luis Raúl Cruz

IGNATIUS USES THE WORD 'EXERCISE' to cover a wide range of spiritual activities. He is particularly concerned with prayer and its practical implications, and he is highly methodical in offering us various forms of prayer. In his definition of 'exercises' he implies a distinction between 'meditating', 'contemplating' and 'praying vocally and mentally' (Exx 1). When, at the end of the *Spiritual Exercises*, he presents the three 'Methods of Prayer', he combines vocal and mental prayer; vocal prayers from the liturgy and from basic catechesis serve as a basis for mental prayer. This article is an attempt to unpack something of the rich significance of the First Method of Prayer (Exx 238-248), and to show how it can both deepen the examination of consciousness and enrich the life of prayer more generally.

The First Method of Prayer and Christian Instruction

Ignatius envisages that the First Method of Prayer should be part of a process of Christian formation, whether for people receiving basic instruction or for those seeking to make progress in a deeper identification with Christ after the full Exercises. This First Method of Prayer is mentioned in the 'light Exercises' (Exx 18) that Ignatius developed out of his experiences in Manresa and Montserrat.

Living in a culture that is no longer explicitly Christian, but still influenced by the memory of Christianity, we need to think carefully about some of our basic assumptions. To say 'I know the Ten Commandments' can be made to mean just 'I don't do anyone any direct harm'. This then soon becomes 'I'm kind to everyone'. Before we know where we are, we are giving ourselves the benefit of the doubt to the extent of avoiding Christian commitment altogether.

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238 THREE METHODS OF PRAYER AND FIRST ON THE COMMANDMENTS

The first Method of Prayer is about the Ten Commandments, and the Seven Deadly Sins, the Three Powers of the Soul and the Five Bodily Senses. This method of prayer is more to give form, method and exercises—how the soul may prepare itself and benefit in those things—and so that prayer may be acceptable, rather than to give any form or way of praying.

239 First there should be made the equivalent of the second Addition of the Second Week: that is, before entering on the prayer, the spirit should rest a little, the person being seated or walking about as may seem best to them, considering where and what I am going to. And this same addition will be made at the beginning of all Methods of Prayer.

240 *A preparatory prayer*, as, for example, to ask grace of God Our Lord that I may be able to know in what I have failed as to the Ten Commandments; and likewise to beg grace and help to amend myself in future, asking for perfect understanding of them in order to keep them better, and in order for the greater glory and praise of His Divine Majesty.

241 For the first Method of Prayer, it is well to consider and think about the first Commandment, how I have kept it and in what I have failed, having it as a rule as regards the length of time how long it takes to say the Our Father three times and the Hail Mary three times; and if in this time I find faults of mine, to ask pardon and forgiveness for them, and to say an Our Father. And this same way should be followed with each one of the Ten Commandments.

Perhaps the very fact that no one talks about the First Method of Prayer any more might make it quite useful as a tool in Christian formation. It might serve to establish the basic sense of the law of God that should inform any Christian life. People today take a great deal for granted, unreflectively and undiscerningly. The result can be a quite inadequate, empty form of Christianity: subtly, we make idols of our own egos, imagining that this is the way to become like God, when the reality is quite different.

²⁴² *First Note. It is to be noted that when a person comes to think about a Commandment on which they find they have no habit of sinning, there is no need for them to spend so much time; but according as the person finds in themselves that they stumble more or less on that Commandment so they ought to detain themselves more or less on the consideration and examination of it. And the same is to be observed on the Deadly Sins.*

²⁴³ *Second Note. After having finished the run-through just mentioned regarding all the commandments, accusing myself about them and asking grace and help so as to amend myself hereafter, one should finish with a colloquy to God our Lord, according to the subject matter.*

²⁴⁴ **II. ON DEADLY SINS**

About the Seven Deadly Sins, after the addition, the preparatory prayer should be made in the way already mentioned, the only change being that the matter here is of sins that have to be avoided—before it was of Commandments that have to be kept. And one should keep the order and rule already mentioned in the same way, and the colloquy.

²⁴⁵ **In order to know better the faults committed in the deadly sins, one should look at their contraries; and similarly, to avoid them better, the person should take as their purpose, and with holy exercises take care, to acquire and possess the seven virtues contrary to them.**

²⁴⁶ **III. ON THE POWERS OF THE SOUL**

Method. On the three powers of the soul the same order and rule should be kept as with the commandments, making its addition, preparatory prayer and colloquy.

Initially the First Method of Prayer seems rudimentary, basic, something for beginners. It can thus often be undervalued, unappreciated and forgotten. We think we already know everything it has to say, thanks to our first religious instruction and the Christian routines that we have always followed. It seems that there is nothing new here. It seems dry and moralistic: here the gospel seems to have lost its savour and fruitfulness.

Perhaps, however, the truth is different. Perhaps, indeed, as we set about evangelization today, this First Method of Prayer—however risky

247 **IV. ON THE FIVE BODILY SENSES**

Method. About the five bodily senses the same order always will be kept, but changing their matter.

248 **Note.** Whoever wants in the use of their senses to imitate Christ Our Lord should in the preparatory prayer recommend themselves to His Divine Majesty; and after making consideration about each individual sense, they should say a Hail Mary or an Our Father. And whoever wants in the use of the senses to imitate Our Lady should in the preparatory prayer recommend themselves to her, that she may obtain for them grace from Her Son and Lord for it; and after making consideration about each individual sense, they should say a Hail Mary.

or inconceivable this claim might seem to some—can become a way of really assimilating the Christian life, a way in which Christian instruction can avoid getting lost in sheer vagueness and fostering a style of faith dissociated from real life. In Ignatius' time, people made their confession either once a year or more sporadically. The practice was quite similar to what occurs today, except that then people were obsessive and insistent about the reality of sin, whereas today we hardly speak about it. For both of these extreme positions, sin is something that cannot be coped with: it is something painful, lethal.

Vatican II taught us that sacramental practice should be intimately connected with the living out of faith. The sacraments are 'sacraments of faith'; they 'nourish, strengthen and express faith'. The grace which they impart should have effect in the lives of believers, disposing them 'to receive this grace in a fruitful manner'.¹ We might well ask ourselves how far this vision has become a reality.

Ordinary catechesis in preparation for the sacraments involves a kind of giving of the Exercises—one that should not be despised on the ground that it does not even involve the full First Week, and is directed at people who are straightforward and without refinement. Normal people are quite capable of taking on board, with a healthy realism, the basic questions about the Commandments that we find in the First Method of Prayer, and they find this kind of reflection a support to their faith life. Meanwhile the learned and the clever of this

¹ *Sacrosanctum concilium*, n. 59.

world can be led by their learning to despise what is most central to faith; they can be cut off from real knowledge of it and regard it as somehow unworthy of their academic training.

The First Method of Prayer provides a way of speaking about what is most central in life with a simplicity and straightforwardness that is truly of God, and it has its place in Ignatius' definition of Spiritual Exercises:

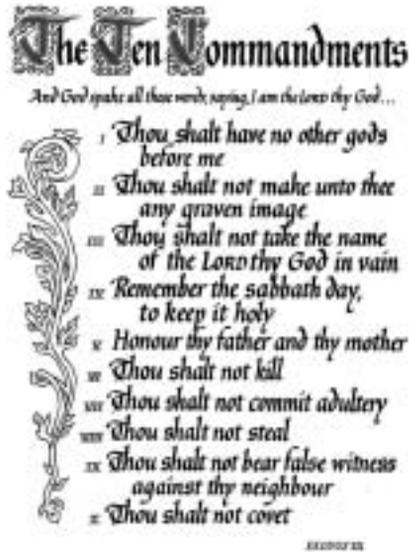
... every way of examining one's conscience, of meditating, of contemplating, of praying vocally and mentally, and of performing other spiritual actions(Exx 1)

Whether you are following in full Ignatius' systematic treatise on the spiritual life, or whether you are simply looking for first steps that can lead you gently to peace of soul, what this First Method of Prayer contains—the examination of consciousness, both general and particular, and the sacramental life of eucharist and reconciliation—remains solid and worthwhile.

In this First Method of Prayer, indeed, we find the whole Exercises in microcosm. It may consequently turn out to be very useful for people who are nominally Christian, but who, for whatever reason, find themselves becoming conventional, lukewarm and resistant to the action of God in their lives. It can spur such people to begin or to resume a genuine life in the Spirit. Perhaps, too, it can serve as a way of finding out whether people are genuinely open to the full Exercises, and of developing for them the capacity that Ignatius demands: the desire really to be initiated into Christianity, and the recognition that there is more to Christian commitment than a certain level of religious culture.

The First Method of Prayer and Self-Examination

Ignatius encourages us not only to move beyond ourselves and help others, but also to work on our own selves. Perhaps the best known means he proposes are the so-called Examens. But there is also another means hidden within the First Method of Prayer: here too, in a situation that is explicitly prayerful, a person can review how he or she is behaving.



This self-examination (a very Ignatian word)² can set off in each individual a distinctive process of improvement, touching both on aspects of conduct and on the very heart of the individual. More is involved than mere piety. Moreover the growth in sensitivity here—to the commandments, to sins, to the powers of the soul, to the senses—is not a matter of simple observation. It remains elusive, especially to the person concerned.

It is well known that evil strategies, complicities and collusions operate within our thought-processes without our being fully aware of what is happening, or, rather, without our being willing to admit to it. We are in need of grace if we are to have our eyes open, grace operating amid the dis-grace that cannot, thanks to the subtle work of the evil spirit, be seen clearly for what it is.

² The evaluative connotations of this word can seem off-putting, but any alternative comes up against the same problem. What is at stake is not a problem of language, but the challenge of responding well to what God is wanting and desiring from each of us.

Ignatius, as we know, wants people to move out from their self-love, their self-centred desires, their self-interest (Exx 189), and to work hard at overcoming themselves and setting their lives in order, to become free of disordered affections. The aim is that we become interiorly open to love and service in every dimension of our lives, constantly moving forward in ways befitting our vocation to become the likeness of God. But there is always the risk that our freedom will be trapped subtly by the evil spirit that cannot leave our desires and actions in peace, but is always disturbing us, impeding us, paralyzing us. We are thus always having to work at discernment—discernment which inevitably involves self-examination.

Discernment is the quest for knowledge about which spirit is moving us. It involves self-analysis, and makes us more sensitive to the action of the spirits. The Examen is another evaluative activity which helps people to become self-aware. Discernment and self-examination are two inescapable and permanent tasks, because our liberty is never definitively guaranteed, and it is always conditioned by both internal and external factors. Attentive examination serves to help us become aware of where our thoughts are leading us, so that we can know from which spirit they proceed.

We need, therefore, to regard discernment and self-examination as inseparable activities that are intimately related as part of the same process. Self-examination can go wrong, and in quite a decisive way, if we try to do it independently of the more fundamental activity of discernment, which actually identifies the voice of the evil spirit speaking from within. Without that discernment, it is obvious how easily our freedom and our desire, operating on their own, can misinterpret the voices which come 'from outside'. Without that discernment, we can also fall into mere psychologizing, into a feel-good narcissism, leading to a subtle self-idolatry that puts the ego on a pedestal and dethrones the God of life. Like Israel in the desert, we can construct our golden calf, even when we know full well that God is descending towards us.

The First Method of Prayer is about taking on board what is obvious: what we claim already to know and be living out of, perhaps even what we think we have moved beyond. Everyone knows the commandments—they are part of every Christian's mental furniture. But ... how are we living them out? We might well say naïve things such as, 'I'm not a thief; I don't go round murdering people; I'm a nice, peaceful

person'. Or 'my faults are just the normal ones'. But what, here, do we mean by 'normal'? And are we not neglecting the need to transform the world in which we live? The truth is that we need to get beyond the verbal justifications in which we indulge for our behaviour, protesting our excellent intentions. We can then let this First Method of Prayer lead us in a similar process with regard to sin itself, to the powers of the soul, and to the senses. What is involved is so obvious—but also so rarely acknowledged.

Ignatian self-examination is never just a matter of scrupulously counting up faults in the hope of attaining a self-justifying perfection that might satisfy my narcissism. The task is rather to take stock of the poor response I have made to the opportunities for salvation that I have received, and of how I might make amends in the future if I count on the gracious action of God. It is not, therefore, a matter of merely knowing the Commandments, but of sensing and relishing God's hidden action within my history, and of making myself ready to move in accordance with it. It is also a matter of knowing the snares and deceptions of evil in order to become more attentive against them.

***The First
Method of
Prayer
enriches
the Examen***

The First Method of Prayer can serve as a fuller alternative to the method which Ignatius gives in the Examen proper. It can lead to something more than the scrutiny of specific behaviours in the light of the commandments, something more than an assessment of how I am counteracting the sinfulness within myself. It can help me think about how I am using and guarding my own senses, how I am using my intelligence, my memory, my will. It can lead to a wide-ranging self-awareness, and to a deeper sense of how my life is moving, both objectively and subjectively. It can help in the quest for integrity and harmony already begun with the interior watchfulness of the Examen.

A merely moralistic spirituality bears no long-term fruit—we need something that opens our spiritual horizons. The First Method of Prayer is relational. It allows people to review *before God* how they are dealing with reality: their values, their habits, their attitudes, their thoughts, feelings and perceptions. It invites us to embark on a process of exodus. We are to leave our old selves behind, and take a step out into a new reality. We are to conquer ourselves, and set our affections in order. We are invited to take seriously the ambiguity of our lives, and clarify our real attitudes, discerning the influences that come to us from outside, and recognising whether their origin is in the good or evil

spirit. This becomes a continuous, lasting activity, even when clarity is not to be had.

The moment of truth is one of confrontation with the richness and forcefulness of the Word. Are we or are we not in harmony with the Kingdom of God? It is also a moment when we ask how far we have assimilated the gospel, and how far we are resisting it. 'You will know them by their fruits' (Matthew 7:16) is an important criterion for judging the effectiveness of any practice of Examen. With the First Method of Prayer, Ignatius seems to be creating a relational context for assessing our behaviour that gives the process vitality and freshness, and moves it beyond the coldness of a simple examination.

Ignatius evidently wants those making the Exercises not to neglect even the smallest aspect of their way of life, whether as regards the interior roots of behaviour or external comportment. He is inviting us to live to the fullness of our potential. He is also asking that we open ourselves, as we come to see our powerlessness and ignorance, to the light and grace that can come to us only from God.

The First Method and Growth in Prayer

The benefits which come from prayer, and from the expansiveness it gives to our spirits, are all the greater if we are living in a situation which fosters intimacy with God. This First Method of Prayer is about strengthening this context; in one sense, it is not a method or technique of prayer at all:

This method of prayer is more to give form, method and exercises—how the soul may prepare itself and benefit in those things—and so that prayer may be acceptable, rather than to give any form or way of praying. (Exx 238)

The aim is to enrich our self-awareness so that our prayer—in a more narrow sense—can become more zestful. Ignatius is hinting at some of the ways in which we can prepare and dispose ourselves for prayer, and thus helping us make these more robust. He is also nourishing our inner life by sharpening our inner sensitivity, our power to *sentir y gustar* (Exx 2).

What is central here is the human person and his or her attitude towards God. Christian perfection is aimed at fidelity to the double command of love. Ignatius is schooling us in prayer by getting us to pay

attention to our personal lives: how we are coping with our own selves, with society, with the world at large, and with God. We are being encouraged to think both about our inner lives—how we are dealing with what comes into our psyches through the senses—and also about our external behaviour in deeds of love and service. The whole is an aid to self-knowledge, and to an awareness of how far our lives are on the divine wavelength.

It is striking how Ignatius presents the organization of a good encounter with the Lord. Even in this First Method of Prayer he suggests an ‘addition’ that we should bear in mind: a moment of calm, focusing on what we are about to do (Exx 239). And as a final step before beginning the exercise proper, Ignatius has us make a preparatory prayer for the right dispositions (Exx 240). The Kingdom and its *magis* have always to be present, in the form of our desire to give ourselves to God as God’s own possession and to divest ourselves of all selfishness.

Ignatius presents this First Method of Prayer as a process. It begins with a preparatory prayer that involves not only a compressed version of the Principle and Foundation, but also a petition densely expressive both of risk and commitment: our lives are to be in continual harmony with an attitude of prayer. Then comes the actual work of meditation (Exx 241): a prayerful reflection that should move the will and the affections, and also enable us to draw strength for making our daily lives a true reflection, in today’s world, of the life that is God’s. Ignatius also gives directives about how long we should spend on this. Finally, he issues an invitation to colloquy, to an intimate conversation arising from the prayer, in the hope of heightening our awareness of what we are living out before the Lord (Exx 242). Ignatius suggests that this First Method of Prayer be focused chiefly on the commandments, while also mentioning the Seven Deadly Sins, the three powers of the soul, and the five bodily senses.

The Christian life is more than living morally; Christianity cannot be reduced to ethical obligations. The point of this prayer is to help us take a step forward in friendship with God. It provides an opportunity for sincere, profound exchange, and an invitation to confront ourselves with God’s living, effective word. We can review our response to the gospel’s call, in a spirit of renewal and with a desire for continued growth. The First Method of Prayer prompts us to make progress. It strengthens us in following Jesus Christ, and has us learn from Jesus



A Man Praying, by El Greco (1541-1614)

and Mary how they used their faculties and senses (Exx 248). There is a whole programme of learning here.

It is clearly important to bear in mind people's dispositions, according to which 'such exercises are to be applied' (Exx 18): questions of age, of education, of what is fitting at this point in the person's life. Ignatius believed that 'some examinations of conscience and methods of prayer' could be given widely,

... especially the first of the latter which is given in the Exercises
... for anyone who has good will is going to be capable of this
(*Constitutions* 7.4.F [649]).

In Ignatius' own life-story, this First Method of Prayer has strong links with his experience at Salamanca, when, on being commanded to talk about the first Commandments, he complied in such a way that they asked no further questions (*Autobiography* 68).

This First Method of Prayer can be helpful at any stage of the spiritual life. It helps us think about the obstacles we are putting in love's way, starting as it does from who we are and from what we are doing with the gifts of God's grace to us. It centres the heart on the self's deepest centre of unity, the wellspring of the will's desires. It concentrates our sense of our deeds, our memories, our words and our relationships, and thereby nurtures our interior life. Uniting as it does meditative and vocal prayer, it confronts us with the basic principles of the Christian life, it spurs us to continuing conversion, and it attracts us to 'the true life' (Exx 139).

Fixing the Attention

This aid placed at the end of the *Spiritual Exercises* does not presuppose any particular state of the spiritual life. It takes the fragile reality of human life as it is, and offers a pathway towards personal growth. It can serve both as a simple initiation into the spiritual life in the way that Annotation 18 describes, and as a help for the person completing the Exercises, as its position in the Fourth Week suggests.³

Like the Examen of Consciousness, this First Method of Prayer can be used in everyday life as a way of seeking God in all things. It can nourish an attitude of contemplation in action and of discernment amid life's options. As we encounter the Word in self-examination, this style of prayer opens up chances for change, for growth at the level of the heart. There are various reasons why this is so.

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Luke 12:34). What is at stake here is not just behaviour or morality, as the reference to the commandments might suggest. The aim is rather that we become truly new human beings by identifying ourselves with Jesus Christ, and by committing ourselves clearly and decisively to follow him. Whatever the difficulties, ruptures, changes, demands, we are to follow Christ as he carries his cross—we are his companions on the journey.

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. (Romans 8:15) When the Spirit leads us to cry, 'Abba! Father!', our sense of being daughters and sons of God in

³ See Exx 4: 'the Fourth (Week) the resurrection and ascension, which sets down three Methods of Prayer'.



Peter Penitent, by El Greco (1541-1614)

the Son, and hence brothers and sisters to each other, arises not from sociology, nor from the fact that we happen to be nice congenial people. It comes as a sheer gift from God living among us, a gratuitous action of God's Spirit continuing to transform us if we allow that Spirit to act in our lives in such a way as to make each of us 'another Christ'.

Followers and Servants. We are not deluded fanatics, under the sway of some theory or some guru. We are following a person who is both divine and human, a person who is inviting us to journey with him. By the work of his Spirit, the desire for identification with Jesus Christ is constantly growing—Christ who draws all people to himself (John 12:32) in such a way that we move out in love from our selfishness and manipulateness (Exx 189), indeed in such a way that we are sent

into today's world to be his witnesses, living presences stimulating new ways of acting, thinking and speaking.

'I have kept all these; what do I still lack?' (Matthew 19:20) The Christian life becomes credible if we live out a witness to what we are saying. What is the point of saying that we are Christians if we do not reflect this fact by lived actions of solidarity, justice, social change, generosity and non-violence? Christian commitment has to be reflected in deeds born of love, in the dedication and committed service proper to a servant and follower of Jesus. The test of a method of prayer is whether it fosters identification with the Christ who loved his own to the end (John 13:1).

This First Method of Prayer is a way of helping us move forward in our encounter with God. It is one of the Ignatian expressions of the experience of God, one of the means by which creatures are opened to the action of the creator. Though the means which it uses may be simple and humble, this form of prayer is not for that reason unimportant. And it might be particularly helpful in a world where all our values seem so often to be called into question, and where people are tempted to seek God in ways that are void of any serious commitment.

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