

EXERCISES, EXPERIMENTS AND EXPERIENCES

Tools for Ignatian Formation

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THE FIRST GENERATION TO ENCOUNTER the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius was greatly impressed by the effects that they could produce. This is true both of those who directed others through the Exercises, and of those who were themselves directed. In a short instruction on giving the Exercises, almost certainly composed by the fourth Jesuit General, Everard Mercurian, and dating from the 1570s, the author writes:

Today, wherever the use of these Exercises flourishes, great results are visible among the people and among our own men. By means of these Exercises hundreds, not to say thousands, of persons have entered other religious orders and large numbers have entered our own. Of those who remained in the world, many hundreds also have ordered or improved their lives.¹

Bartolomé de Torres, a younger contemporary and friend of Ignatius who made the Exercises under St Francis Borgia, and who later became Bishop of the Canaries, considered that 'a few days spent in making the Exercises will teach one more real theology than thirty years of reading and studying scholastic theology'.²

Similar results have been noted more recently, particularly since the practice of individual guidance through the Exercises was rediscovered

¹ Dir, 18:8.

² Hugo Rahner, *The Spirituality of St Ignatius Loyola: An Account of its Historical Development* (Chicago: Loyola UP, 1953), 91.

in the 1970s. Two contemporary writers who are also skilled directors (and, incidentally, both former editors of this journal) testify to this:

Making the Exercises in the full form over a period of thirty days is a profound experience which affects and influences a person at different levels of the personality.³

Many people, nowadays, experience the Spiritual Exercises as a highly effective instrument for spiritual growth. For some, exposure to the Exercises has been akin to a conversion experience.⁴

It can come as something of a surprise, then, to find that in initial Jesuit formation the full Spiritual Exercises are regarded simply as one of six *experiencias* (normally translated as ‘experiments’) through which the applicant should pass. Admittedly, they are given pride of place. But they are also seen as incomplete without the other five. This article looks at the six experiments taken as a whole, and asks whether they have a broader relevance than to Jesuit formation alone. It considers the relationship between the Spiritual Exercises and the other prescribed experiments, and finally looks at other contemporary Ignatian formation programmes, such as that of the Jesuit Volunteer Communities, which offer similar kinds of experience.

Experiments

In the Jesuit *Constitutions*,⁵ Ignatius stipulated that within the two years of the initial formation (the novitiate) which the aspiring candidate receives, six *experiencias* should take place. These carefully supported and reflected-upon short-term placements are a novel feature in the form of religious life that he was concerned to establish. Most of them occupy a month or so of the two years, and they are interspersed with more contemplative periods within the novitiate house. The experience of the full Spiritual Exercises, given in an enclosed retreat setting over a

³ David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 130.

⁴ *The Way of Ignatius Loyola: Contemporary Approaches to the Spiritual Exercises*, edited by Philip Sheldrake (London: SPCK, 1991), 1.

⁵ *Constitutions, Examen* 4.8. [64]–4.24. [79]. The most readily available edition is that produced by the Institute of Jesuit Sources in St Louis in 1996, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and their Complementary Norms*.

period of around thirty days, is the first of these. It is regarded as foundational for the rest.

Ignatius laid down that the Exercises were to be followed by another five experiments. Initially the novice was to work in a hospital—these would not have been like the aseptic well-run institutions that are familiar in our own time, but dirty and ill-managed hostels where the sick were frequently abandoned, without care or treatment, either to recover or to die. Then he was to undertake a month-long pilgrimage on foot,



without money or lodging procured in advance, begging for food and shelter as he went. Another experiment was to teach the rudiments of Christian doctrine to (no doubt frequently uninterested) children or uneducated adults; and another, for those already priests, was to offer sacramental services without charge—something not always usual at the time of the Reformation. Finally the novice was to carry out simple household tasks such as acting as a kitchen assistant—a severe trial of humility for an upper-class aspirant to Jesuit life in the sixteenth century. Only once he had completed these six testing experiences (or other similar ones, if his superior judged this a better option), to the satisfaction of those charged with overseeing his formation, was the novice thought ready to make the commitment of his first vows.⁶

⁶ For a fuller discussion of the place of the experiments in early Jesuit formation, see Philip Endean, 'Origins of Apostolic Formation: Jerome Nadal and Novitiate Experiments', *The Way Supplement*, 39 (Autumn 1980), 57–82.

The Exercises as the Foundational Experiment

According to the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, their purpose is to enable the one who makes them 'to overcome oneself and to order one's life without reaching a decision through some disordered affection' (Exx, 21). In other words, they aim to bring people to a point where they can freely serve God⁷ without being distracted or misled by competing influences. This goal is reached by a number of paths. Those making the Exercises are taught techniques of practical discernment, in particular that of the daily examen, so that they can better recognise God at work in the diverse circumstances of everyday life. It is also presupposed that, through their prayer, they will hear a call to use their talents for the service of God, in many cases by dedicating themselves to the most needy. And the director will help the exercitants progressively to focus on and purify whatever response they are making to what they are experiencing in this prayer.

This helps to explain why the Exercises are for Ignatius the first and foundational experiment in Jesuit formation. Only a man who has thus learnt the practical art of discernment, and been freed, at least to some extent, from influences that would lead him in other directions, is in a position fully to benefit from those other experiences that the novitiate programme proposes. A novice who does not know how to go about 'finding God in all things' (to use Ignatius' phrase) may well do good work in a hospital or by catechizing youth. He may even grow through what he does in these situations. But the experience will not provide the specific test of a vocation that Ignatius hopes to provoke.

But this also begins to make clear why the Exercises themselves are not enough, and need to be complemented by the other experiments. Within the context of an enclosed, month-long retreat there is very little chance to try out the aspirations that may be surfacing. A director will do all that he or she can to test their genuineness, encouraging exercitants to take them back into prayer and notice the interior effects (technically known as 'movements of spirits') produced when they are repeatedly brought before God. The exercitants will be invited to consider these hopes and intentions in the context of the way in which,

⁷ Ignatius would have regarded it as inconceivable that one could complete the Exercises without desiring to devote oneself to God's service in some way.

through the Exercises, they have come to understand the whole of their faith-history, and to try and judge for themselves how realistic the hopes and intentions appear in that light. They will be cautioned not to make rash or precipitate plans:

If the one giving the Exercises sees that the exercitant is proceeding with great consolation and great fervour, he or she should warn the person not to make some promise or vow which is unconsidered or hasty (Exx, 14).

Yet even after all these precautions have been taken, it is only when the retreat is finished and the one who has been making it returns to a more usual pattern of life that it will become apparent how effective whatever transformation the Exercises have brought about has been.

It needs to be acknowledged, furthermore, that this transformation of outlook need not coincide with the experience of the Exercises which is part of the novitiate programme. An individual candidate may have made some, or all, of the Exercises as part of his preparation to enter the Society; he may have otherwise come to habits of prayerful reflection on his experience; or he may only come to appreciate what



the Exercises are really about at some later date in the course of his formation. Jesuit formation personnel need to be flexible enough to adapt themselves to all of these possibilities.

Characteristics of the Other Experiments

The other experiments, then, are intended both to test how far, in practice, the novice has succeeded in appropriating the outlook he grew in during the course of the Exercises, and to help this outlook become a more habitual one in the context of the rest of his life. To this end, although the experiences they offer are diverse, they share a number of common features:

- *The experiments are expected to be difficult.* The most recent instruction guiding Jesuit novitiate formation, written by the former General, Fr Kolvenbach, in 1998, states that,

The experiments should place the novices in *limit situations* so that, by coming through them successfully, they may be in a position to give a more conscious, free, and definitive ‘yes’ to the Lord.⁸

An experiment through which the novice sails effortlessly with little experience of being challenged is, to that extent, useless, even if good work is done during the placement itself.

- *The experiments are unlikely to be highly esteemed by others.* It is immediately noticeable to anyone who encounters the list of Ignatian experiments for the first time that most of them involve the novice in work with little status in society, whether sixteenth-century society or our own. To beg for food and shelter on a pilgrimage; to try to teach the lowest stream in a classroom; to feed and bathe down-and-outs in a night shelter: none of these carry the *kudos* that the novice’s previous experience might have led him to expect. The hope is that, through this process, he will grow both in humility and in *disponibility*, that readiness to go wherever he is sent without demure that Ignatius wanted to be a prime characteristic of his new order.

⁸ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, *The Formation of Jesuits* (Rome: General Curia of the Society of Jesus, 2003), 21 (italics mine).

- *The experiments purposely do not employ the novice's more obvious gifts and talents.* Ignatius was hoping to attract men to the Society of Jesus who were talented, ambitious and highly motivated. Yet he then subjected them to a series of thankless tasks which in no way made full use of their gifts and talents. To experience the helplessness of trying to carry out a task for which you feel ill-prepared and unskilled is often a key part of the experiment. At its best, this can lead to a deepened trust in the providence of God, going beyond a simple reliance on one's own skills and abilities.
- *The experiments are to be carefully monitored and evaluated.* Of the sixteen paragraphs which the *Constitutions* dedicate to this topic, no fewer than eight concern the testimonials which a novice is meant to bring back, commenting on his conduct and its impact on those with whom he lived and worked. In addition to these external assessments, it is fundamental to each experiment that the novice himself is monitoring his own progress, and adjusting his behaviour accordingly, as he goes along. It is in this way that the reflective practices which were learnt or honed during the Spiritual Exercises begin to find a practical application in shaping the fledgling Jesuit's apostolic life.
- *The experiments are cumulative.* Taken together, the six experiments constitute an integrated formation programme, leading the novice into ever deeper self-knowledge and enabling those responsible for his formation to see how he responds to a variety of situations. It is noteworthy, for instance, that priest-candidates are only allowed to practise the relatively high-status ministries of preaching and reconciling after they have spent time serving in the kitchen. By the end of this process, the hope is that the novice and his superior will together be able to come to a clear assessment of whether he is suited to this particular way of living the Christian life.

Two Examples

I offer two examples of the kind of experience that the Ignatian experiments represent. These are composite examples, drawn in each case from the experience of more than one novice; and the names used

are not those of actual individuals. I have not downplayed the challenging nature of these experiences here. In practice, therefore, the director of novices needs to be highly supportive in the way in which he assists those making the experiments to face these challenges. Ignatius himself is very clear on this point.⁹

Gary went, for his first experiment after the Spiritual Exercises, to work in a hospice in the north of England. He approached the experiment with some nervousness. This would be his first experience of living and working as a Jesuit outside the relatively structured life of the novitiate house. He wasn't sure how he would get on; and was very conscious that he had never seen a dead body before. Within the hospice he worked alongside a full-time chaplain, with whom he was able to reflect on the experience as he went along. At the same time he lived in community with a group of Jesuits doing diverse work in the town. As it turned out, he found the hospice work deeply fulfilling, discovering a real empathy for the patients and got on well with the staff. Each day was very busy, and at first he found it difficult to make time for prayer; but by the end of the month he was beginning to establish a routine. Because the Jesuits of his community were working to very different timetables, and he initially knew no one in the town, he had to spend a good part of his recreation time alone. This deepened his understanding of some aspects of the vow of chastity, and he returned to the novitiate knowing that he would have to look more closely at whether this was something God was truly calling him to. The chaplain wrote a very positive assessment of Gary's placement. He pointed out, however, that he would have to be careful that he did not become too attached to the patients if he was to do similar work in the future.

Towards the end of his second year in the novitiate, Joachim was told to work for three hours each day in the kitchen to assist the cook, a lay-woman employed by the novitiate, while his fellow novices were away. He peeled vegetables, washed the pots and pans and shopped for whatever provisions were not delivered. At first he was very angry at being asked to do this. He had been expecting to make a pilgrimage experiment, and was looking forward to the opportunity. None of the

⁹ See, for example, *Constitutions* III. 1. 12. [263].

other novices had been treated in this way, and he could not see why he was being thus singled out. The assignment ate into the daily time of quiet study to which he had become accustomed. He did not like the cook, and felt that she treated him like a servant.¹⁰ On two occasions he asked the director of novices to reassign him; but his requests were refused. Joachim had entered the novitiate with a doctorate in theology, and expected that he would eventually work in the university



college for which the Jesuit Province had responsibility. His prayer for the whole month he was in the kitchen focused on his struggle to accept the situation. By the end of the time he had reached some degree of peace, and somewhat grudgingly admitted that the experience might have done him some good. He did agree to spend some time before he took vows considering with the novice director what there was about the experiment that had so upset and unsettled him.

What the Other Experiments Add to the Spiritual Exercises

We can, then, begin to gain a clearer understanding of how the other experiments prescribed by Ignatius for the initial stage of Jesuit training complement the formation process begun in the Spiritual Exercises. A novice should emerge from this complex programme better able to

¹⁰ 'It is better that the cook should not request his helper to do this or that, but that he should modestly command him by saying "Do this" or "Do that" Thus the person who obeys ought to consider and heed the order which comes from the cook ... as if it were coming from Christ our Lord.' (Constitutions, Examen 4. 30. [85])

recognise 'movements of spirits' as these are experienced in a range of diverse situations, and so be more able to use them subsequently to discern how best to serve God. His desire to serve, which was expressed in prayer during the course of the Exercises, will have been stringently tested in a variety of settings, during which he was nevertheless carefully and gently supported. It is to be hoped that he will thus have grown in confidence, not only in his own abilities, but also in his sense of God's providential care for himself and for those he has encountered on the way. He should be able to recognise himself as acting with more freedom than he did at the start of this formation process—with the freedom that the Exercises promise. As a bonus, the experiments may well have offered a 'taster' of the kinds of thing that he might do later in his Jesuit life: teaching, working alongside the poor, or undertaking long missionary journeys, for example.

But today many people other than Jesuits experience Ignatian spirituality as their natural 'pathway to God'.¹¹ Some of them will have had the experience of making the full Spiritual Exercises. Others will draw more indirectly on methods of prayer and discernment which find their roots in the Exercises. Is there anything in the way in which the experiments supplement the Exercises that might be applied or adapted to the continuing spiritual growth of such people?

One example of such application in Britain is to be found in the Jesuit Volunteer Community, whose 21st birthday this issue of *The Way* marks. The JVC programme by design reproduces many of the aspects of the six-experiment package described above. It targets dedicated and generous young adults at a time in their lives when they are particularly likely to be considering major decisions, about relationships, work and faith. It places them into a structured programme and in a community setting, where challenges can be met and shared. The volunteers are offered, in the course of their formation programme, the tools of Ignatian spirituality to enable them better to recognise spiritual movements and to use these as the raw materials of discernment. And, in both their living conditions and the work that they do, they are pushed into 'limit situations' to test and strengthen their resolve to live according to the 'four values' of community, spirituality, simple lifestyle

¹¹ Formula of the Institute, 1.

and social justice. The programme itself is time-limited—volunteers usually do a single year—but the expectation is that the values which they have internalised and deepened during that period will continue to influence the choices they make in the years (and decades) after the JVC experience.

Promoting Ignatian Formation

We have seen, then, that the other experiments, which Ignatius invented as a novel feature of a Jesuit's initial formation, supplement and complete the experience of the Spiritual Exercises; and have considered how, in the case of the Jesuit Volunteer Community, a similar process might have a wider application. These reflections have implications for the retreat work undertaken by those spirituality centres that draw on the Ignatian tradition. It can appear that the work that they do today often fails to have the life-changing effects which were reported as commonplace in the sixteenth century, as I noted at the start of this article. One significant factor here may be the care taken originally in the selection of those who undertook the Spiritual Exercises. It is obvious that to offer these in their full, individually directed form is a highly labour-intensive occupation. Ignatius is clear, therefore, that selection is absolutely necessary. He writes in Annotation 18:

... should he who is giving the Exercises observe that he who is receiving them has little ability or natural capacity, from whom not much fruit is to be hoped, it is more expedient to give him some of [the] easy exercises ... but let him not go on into the matter of the election, or into any other exercises that are outside of the first week, especially when more progress can be made in other persons and there is not time for everything.

A particular danger of running residential retreat centres is that there is financial pressure to maximise room occupancy. One way of doing this can be by accepting less obviously well-qualified candidates too easily, which may in part account for poorer retreat outcomes than might have been hoped for.

Given that selection of candidates to make the full Exercises is important if their effect is to be most fully felt, who is it that should be selected? It is said that the paradigmatic exercitant in the sixteenth century was an ambitious and talented young cleric, desiring to decide

between following a career path within the Renaissance Church, which could lead him towards wealthy benefices and bishoprics, and dedicating himself instead to 'preaching in poverty', freely spending his talents for the benefit of the poor and being rejected within society.¹² Similar situations today might involve choosing between well-paid work in the private sector and work attracting fewer financial rewards in the public or charitable sectors, or considering a positive decision to put the needs of family before those of career advancement. Ignatius also recognised that the Exercises could benefit those who, having already made those major decisions that shaped their lives, nevertheless desired to 'amend and reform one's own state life and state' (Exx, 189), in a way that led to a refocusing and rededication to living Christian discipleship within relatively fixed circumstances. If a director is fortunate enough to attract such dedicated and talented individuals to make the Exercises, what then might correspond to the other *experiencias*, deepening and rounding off the retreat experience?

Factors to Deepen the Experience of the Exercises

One of the difficulties in trying to propose any kind of post-Exercises programme that might do for other contemporary exercitants something of what the experiments do for Jesuit novices is that the situations that exercitants come from and are returning to are so varied. For some the Exercises are made as a sabbatical from challenging work which will subsequently provide everything that a series of experiments might do and more. Others can complete a month-long retreat and be left unsupported, wondering how to carry forward the hopes and dreams that they have spent so long pondering. This article can do no more than suggest four factors that are certainly useful to have in place in the period after the Exercises, and offer some thoughts on the kind of formal programme that might supply them if they are not otherwise available.

The first factor is that people completing the Exercises will ideally move into a situation where they can find themselves challenged in a

¹² This understanding was first developed in Luis de Diego, *La opción sacerdotal de Ignacio de Loyola y sus compañeros [1515-1540]: Estudio histórico e interpretación teológico-espiritual* (Rome and Caracas: CIS and UCAB [Catholic University of Caracas] Press, 1985), 123–126. I am grateful to Philip Endean for providing me with this reference.

way corresponding to the Ignatian *magis*, the kind of limit situation to which Kolvenbach refers. If the Exercises have elicited desires to serve God to one's fullest ability, one needs a setting where the scope for that full service is offered. Clearly everyday family life, or a wholehearted commitment to scholarly research, for instance, may provide what is needed here. But it may also be that a radically new situation, with associated novel challenges, is what is required. Perhaps even a period of trial and error, trying out different things and noticing where the desires experienced in the retreat are most fully realised, could be advantageous—it is no mistake that five *different* experiments follow the Exercises in the Jesuit system.

A second factor is often the need to find a community within which living out the challenges of the *magis* can be supported. If I belong to a group who know and appreciate something of the Exercises, and who can thus empathize with the process that I am undergoing after completing them, it greatly increases the chances that the my retreat prayer will continue to put down deep roots in the rest of life. More than this, in fragmented societies like those of the Western world at present, the response for which the Exercises call may well be a communitarian one rather than something that is primarily individualistic. If my experience of the Exercises has inspired me to dedicate my gifts and talents to addressing some of the needs of those around me, it is natural to suppose that this may best be done in partnership with others.

Following from this, a third factor is that the one living out the Exercises can be in real need of a context within which discernment is (and continues to be) supported. The primary mode



of decision-making in contemporary Western culture is that employed in business, orientated towards profit and loss, maximising gain and striving to eliminate whatever does not pay its way. By contrast the discernment processes encountered in the Exercises have a particular concern for the most needy, and stress the virtues of empathy and solidarity. Support is needed if someone who has begun to respond in the latter fashion is not to slip back into the former.

A fourth factor that is useful for those beginning to live out the aspirations elicited by the Exercises is the opportunity to receive feedback, to be able to experience their performance through someone else's eyes. Retreat direction provides this during the Exercises themselves. Each day exercitants will be given a sense of what their prayer experience sounds like to another person. The very act of putting my own experience into words in the hope that someone else might be able to understand at least something of it shapes my subsequent experience, whether or not the other person makes much in the way of comment. What is true during the retreat is no less so when I attempt to live according to what I have seen and felt. Apart from any other consideration, Ignatius is clear that to be open with another person is a prime means of avoiding being misled by the bad spirit.¹³

Practical Structures

As can be seen in a number of other articles in this issue of *The Way*, the Jesuit Volunteer Community offers a prime example of the way in which these factors might be combined to make up a practical formation programme. But this is not the only way in which this can be done. Two other organizations demonstrate alternative ways of integrating them.

The London Jesuit Volunteers offer the chance of 'engaging in part-time volunteering with a supportive and reflective community'.¹⁴ They provide opportunities to work alongside and on behalf of people suffering the effects of poverty and exclusion in a voluntary capacity for between two and eight hours weekly. The programme targets people who may well already have full-time professional and/or family

¹³ See for example Exx 17, 326.

¹⁴ See the London Jesuit Volunteers website at www.msjc.org.uk/ljv.php.

commitments. Engagement with the project may be for as little as six months. During this time the Volunteers are encouraged to reflect on their experience, and are guided in the use of scripture, church social teaching and similar resources to further this reflective process. They are offered individual spiritual direction throughout the programme, and also take part in monthly peer-group reflection with other members of the programme. The groups are facilitated by a 'spiritual reflector' trained in Ignatian spirituality.

The Christian Life Community¹⁵ aims specifically at providing longer-term support to those who are trying to live the kind of radical Christian commitment to which the Spiritual Exercises often lead. It is a world-wide organization, rooted in Ignatian spirituality, with members belonging to local communities near their own homes. Unlike the London Jesuit Volunteer programme, CLC does not offer its members any specific work. Rather, those involved are helped to grow as members of 'discerning communities for mission', recognising God's call in the circumstances of their everyday lives. In principle this becomes a lifetime commitment. It is a way of life available to laypeople which has its roots in the earliest attempts to put Ignatian spirituality into practice. In the decade after Ignatius' death 'Sodalities' had been formed with this aim, and CLC can trace its descent directly from these.¹⁶

LJV and CLC are just two examples of how institutions can be set up to support those who, having encountered God at work in the world through the Spiritual Exercises, are considering how to respond in the ways in which they subsequently live their lives. These two organizations offer them the experience of becoming part of supportive yet challenging communities of discernment. Members of these communities are able both to talk with and to hear from others who have made a similar commitment about their attempts to remain true to it. Christianity is a faith that forms communities, and it is to be expected that someone who is able to find a place in such a group after making the Exercises will be better able to hold to and deepen the

¹⁵ See the Christian Life Community website at <http://www.clcew.org.uk>.

¹⁶ See below, 93–98, for the Rules of one of these Sodalities.

outlook gained through the retreat experience than someone who is less well supported.

In placing the Exercises within a context of the other *experiencias* in Jesuit formation, Ignatius made provision for the continuing support and development of the hopes and plans with which novices who had been directed through a month of intensive prayer emerged. He recognised that without such a structure in place, much of the good that the Exercises had produced might prove fruitless. The challenge to those engaged in directing people through the Exercises today is to help them afterwards to find appropriate settings where they might be similarly challenged and supported.

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