

THE IGNATIAN EXERCISES IN DAILY LIFE: Some Problematic Issues

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THE FOCUS OF THIS ARTICLE is to be the problematic issues that arise from the Ignatian Exercises 'in daily life' (Exx 19). Thus it may appear that in this article I am discouraging involvement in this form of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. This however is not the case. Spiritual Exercises in daily life is a very fruitful and beneficial method for giving and receiving the Exercises. But to be aware of some of its shortcomings helps both retreatant and director understand issues or problems which may surface and more effectively handle and grow from these situations.

Loss of momentum

Spiritual Exercises in daily life demands a nine-month to one-year commitment of time, both for the director and retreatant. As we all know, in this life, change is certain. Therefore a commitment, particularly with regard to time, that is feasible in September may become very difficult when February comes. The retreatant may be hired for a new job and be moved to a new area. A parent, spouse, friend or child may become ill and require extra time and care. None of these changes make it impossible to pray the Spiritual Exercises in daily life, but any change that is not anticipated does complicate our time commitment and requires adjustments and renewed commitment. The director may also find that his or her life situation has changed in the nine-month to one-year time period. For example, I did not realize when I said that I would write this article that my 83-year-old mother would be in a car accident and live with us for two months. The article has still been completed but certainly with more stress and effort.

Another cause of loss of momentum is simply a reduction in the initial enthusiasm that usually accompanies a new endeavour. When implementing any new task, there is a corresponding loss of enthusiasm and vision as we begin to realize more hard work and commitment is involved than we originally envisioned. It is important at this time to assess also if the loss of enthusiasm and commitment is a result of the

retreatant wanting to avoid a difficult situation in the Exercises. The retreatant may be saying, 'I am too busy to pray every day because work is too demanding'. The reality may be that the retreatant cannot face the past sins in her/his life—they are too painful. Discernment is vital at this time to come to a real understanding of the possible underlying reason why the person is avoiding his/her prayer time and commitment. A retreatant I directed some years ago lost momentum and commitment during the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises. As we began to discuss this, it became clear that she had a problem with intimacy, particularly with men, because of past hurtful memories. Thus the very grace she was requesting, of increased love and knowledge of Jesus, was in itself a terrible struggle. Once she could understand this, in time she gently came to a greater trust and healing. She was then able to proceed.

Sometimes when this loss of momentum or commitment occurs it is helpful to encourage the retreatant to take a weekend retreat of two or three days. This intense time of prayer often helps the retreatant re-enter the experience renewed and more committed to continue. If this is not possible then the director must continue to encourage and challenge the retreatant to a renewed dedication. I have on occasion asked the retreatant to take a week out of the Exercises material itself and pray on the question of whether he/she really wants to continue the Spiritual Exercises in daily life, reminding her/him that if the answer is yes then he/she must recommit herself/himself to the prayer time necessary to complete the Exercises. This time out from the Ignatian material often helps the retreatant refocus and re-prioritize their life. This then enables him/her to continue with a renewed sense of vision and commitment. Sometimes, however, a retreatant does not regain the momentum, for whatever reason. When this occurs the director needs to decide in conjunction with the retreatant whether he/she should continue at this time, even though as a director you realize the experience may not be as fruitful as it could be. The other option is to discontinue the Spiritual Exercises in daily life at this point in time and perhaps consider the Exercises of St Ignatius at another time.

The director also can lose momentum as time goes on. Perhaps the life situation has changed and the commitment to direct becomes a problem. I think too that this is one of the times that Christian community becomes so important. The experience of directing the Spiritual Exercises in daily life is very different depending upon whether the director is doing the direction alone, or whether the director is part of a support group or community. This group or community can be invaluable in helping the director discern and maintain a healthy focus

and perspective when guiding others. Often when the director is alone, he/she can lose sight of the broader picture of the people of God and become more easily discouraged. Christian community helps draw her/him out of herself/himself to a more universal perspective.

Decision-making and discernment

There are some problematic issues which arise during the Spiritual Exercises in daily life, pertaining to decision-making and discernment.

Some of these problems arise simply because of the very nature of our lives. Practically speaking the period of time needed to make a decision in the Spiritual Exercises in daily-life format may be too long. Often decisions are presented to us and they demand a more immediate answer. I would like to give a word of caution here. Certainly there are times when a deadline must be given for an answer to a decision. But if our decisions are too rushed with no time for reflection and discernment, then we need to try to slow down the process and seek an extension of time. Sometimes, however, in the Nineteenth Annotation retreat, the time it takes to make the decision is clearly going to be too long. For example, a retreatant I directed was offered a job and needed to notify the employers within a two-week period if she would accept or refuse the position. This can be another time when it may be wise to encourage the retreatant to enter into a two- to eight-day retreat. Here he/she can focus on the prayer material and decision to be made and spend the time reflecting and discerning God's call to him/her.

Discernment can also become somewhat less clear in the Spiritual Exercises in daily life format. At times it is not always clear if the consolation or desolation a retreatant is experiencing is from the Spirit or from the events of daily living. For example, a retreatant may come to an interview appearing to be in great desolation. As the interview progresses the director may come to see that the apparent desolation is really anger or sadness relating to an argument the retreatant had with a friend or spouse. Conversely a retreatant may be feeling that he/she is in consolation, but upon further analysis it becomes clear that it is a result of a job promotion and it is not the movement of the Holy Spirit at that time. In both situations it is important for the director to help the retreatant understand the deeper meaning of consolation and desolation. A person can appear to be in deep sadness—perhaps desolation—but upon further insight realize that he/she has never experienced more faith and hope in God. He/she may also be experiencing a calling forth out of himself/herself to others. Thus he/she is really in spiritual consolation. By the same token a person may appear full of energy and

gladness—perhaps consolation—but on further insight be turned in on themselves with no vision of God, with little faith and hope in the Creator. Thus the retreatant is really in desolation. So in the Nineteenth Annotation retreat it becomes very important to take the time to evaluate all areas of life and realize that many factors take part in the unfolding of our faith journey. In the enclosed Thirty-day retreat setting these factors are reduced to some extent and there is somewhat more control on the exterior dimension of a retreatant's life. In daily life, the retreatant is open to all the multitude of interchanges that occur on a day to day, hour to hour, sometimes minute to minute basis. This clearly can create a great many distractions and these are bound to surface in the quiet of prayer. This can create problems of discernment for both the retreatant and director. If the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius are, however, a journey or door opening onto a way of life (which I believe them to be), then the grappling and struggling with these problems can be very fruitful. After all, the ongoing challenge of journeying the Christian life is to 'find God in all things'. Entering into this reality in a Nineteenth Annotation retreat is a great tool for learning this kind of daily spiritual awareness.

I believe that because of the increased complexity of events that occur when doing the Spiritual Exercises in daily life, the Awareness Examen is a tool of immense significance. When a retreatant has come to me in a Nineteenth Annotation retreat confused and not sure where God seems to be calling and leading him/her, the Examen is the prayer, if used faithfully, that helps him/her see the presence of God in many areas and ways that seemed devoid of God's presence previously. As a director it is important frequently to remind and encourage the retreatant to dedicate him or herself to this grace-filled exercise.

Other problems

Often people who come to make a Nineteenth Annotation retreat are married and live in a family setting. This is one of the tremendous gifts of the Spiritual Exercises in daily life. It makes the Spiritual Exercises available to married couples who are unable to leave work or family for a full month's time.

However, sadly, one of the problems that arises comes from the very setting the married person is in. It is of vital importance that a retreatant have the honest support of their spouse and family. At times it may appear that this support is present, until the reality of the Exercises sets in. When the partner realizes that the retreatant has committed herself/himself to one and a half hour's prayer time per day, resentment can

surface. This prayer commitment necessitates that the other family members have for a short while to increase their work load. For example, when the retreatant is praying the partner will need to care for the children. These logistical problems can all be worked out if there is a mutual understanding and commitment to spiritual growth. This is not always the case and family tension and turmoil can surface. Without that mutual support, keeping the commitment to the Exercises becomes almost impossible. Here discernment is crucial—perhaps the retreatant should wait until the other party is ready, or perhaps with some counselling and assistance he/she can proceed.

Another problem that can arise in the Spiritual Exercises in daily life is with problems themselves. Thank heaven for Ignatian repetition! I have sometimes found that because of the format of the Nineteenth Annotation retreat, where you see your retreatant only once a week, problems can begin to develop but as a director you do not always see them immediately. In a closed setting of a Thirty-day retreat this problem may take two to three days to be apparent. In the Nineteenth Annotation retreat it may be two, three or four weeks before you as a director become aware that a problem is present. An example of this could be an erroneous image of God. The retreatant may have been praying for three weeks on the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius when the director realizes that he/she has based his/her prayer on an image of God as a ruthless dictator. Being aware and gaining experience help the director to deal with the problems however long it takes for them to be apparent. Again belonging to a support group or community where the director can get supervision and encouragement can help him/her know what problems most commonly arise and then develop the skills to deal with these and help the retreatant grow.

Another problem I see present in the Nineteenth Annotation retreat is the lack of Christian community. This means that once the interviews with the director discontinue the retreatant is more or less left out on their own to live an Ignatian way of life. True, he/she has been given the tools (repetition, decision-making skills, Awareness Examen etc.) to live this way of life. But without the support of other Christian companions in community these tools are sometimes not enough. Ideally each retreatant would benefit from Christian community when the Spiritual Exercises are over.

Conclusion

As I began, so I will conclude. I believe the Spiritual Exercises in daily life to be an extremely valuable, blessed source of grace for the Church

and for the world. Particularly this is so for the laity for whom the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius can be so fruitful. 'Finding God in all things'—particularly out there in the market-place—is crucial to the life of the people of God. Many retreatants and directors have grown in their faith, hope and service of God as a result of the Exercises in daily life. Being aware of some of the inherent problems that can develop from this Exercise format, calls us to gain some understanding of how to overcome them with God's wisdom and help. This allows this form of prayer to become more rich and fruitful.

May God's love and goodness guide us as the people of God truly to find the Creator in all we do, in all we meet, in all we serve and in all who serve us.