

DINING WITH ST IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA

Rules for Regulating One's Eating

Philip Shano

ST IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA had a habit of making lists of guidelines or rules. They appear in various places in his writings and in collections of his thought.¹ Some people see them as one more manifestation of an obsession with the trivial things in life. However, when we look closely at his guidelines and rules, we see more of the spiritual genius of Ignatius. Underpinning those lists is a strong intentional or focused approach to both the inner life and the exterior life. *How* we live is a manifestation of the inner perspective. According to the *Imago primi saeculi Societatis Iesu*, the epitaph intended for the tomb of Ignatius was, 'Not to be limited by the immeasurable, and yet to keep oneself concerned with the tiniest is something divine'.² Gilles Cusson quotes Jean Daniélou to point out that the *immeasurable* is the divine inspiration that leads one into the abyss of the wonderful works of God. The *tiniest* is fidelity in little things, attention to detail. Nothing should be neglected, but this should not imply a meticulous manner in which one's entire focus is on what is least. 'Yes, there is the meticulousness, and this meticulousness is attention to what is least. But to be attentive to little things when one is engaged in important matters, there is the divine.'³

¹ See, for example, *Remembering Iñigo: Glimpses of the Life of St Ignatius of Loyola: The Memoriale of Luís Gonçalves da Câmara*, translated by Alexander Eaglestone and Joseph A. Munitiz (Leominster: Gracewing, 2004). Among the offerings of rules are Ignatius' 'Rules of Modesty' (nn. 21–22) and 'Rules Which Ought to Be Observed by Those Who Go to Villa' (n. 174).

² *Non coerceri maximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum est.* The *Imago primi saeculi Societatis Iesu* (1640) celebrates the first centenary of the founding of the Society of Jesus. It is a 952-page book, published in Antwerp by the Society. At least 1,050 copies were produced. It gives an account of the first one hundred years of the Society, especially in the Low Countries. The epitaph can be found at p. 280; see <http://archive.org/stream/imagoprimisaecul00boll#page/280/mode/2up>.

³ Gilles Cusson, *Biblical Theology and the Spiritual Exercises*, translated by Mary Angela Roduit and George E. Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1988), 117. He is using a 1956 article by Jean Daniélou from the French periodical *Études*.

All is material for the revelation of the divine presence. The nineteenth-century Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, says it well: ‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God’.⁴ Even the lists show that, once again, Ignatius is inviting us to find God in all things. The rules are simply ways of helping us to do this with more ease.

Several sets of rules are included in the *Spiritual Exercises*. The Rules for the Discernment of Spirits for Weeks 1 and 2 are the most useful in an experience of the Exercises. The most controversial of the rules are those for Thinking and Feeling with the Church.⁵ Three sets are often sidelined in the experience of the Spiritual Exercises. One deals with almsgiving, one with scruples and the last with eating. It is important to remember that these rules were not necessarily given to all exercitants. The *Official Directory of 1599* points out the reason for the rules. They are placed at the end of the *Spiritual Exercises* ‘to be given not universally but in accord with individual persons’ needs or even wishes arising from their particular devotion’.⁶ It is also important to stress what Ignatius meant by *rules*. They are not regulations or obligations. Rather, they are guidelines, norms or suggestions. The rules need to be viewed in light of the First Principle and Foundation’s reminder that we use things in so far as they help us attain our desire to be with the Lord. Presumably, if the rules would prove to be a hindrance, the exercitant ought not to see them.

I would like to focus on the rules regarding eating, the Rules for Regulating One’s Eating (Exx 210–217). These have new relevance in light of our contemporary obsession with food and drink. We also have increasing knowledge about nutrition and eating disorders, and awareness of the modern food industry, with its ways of enticing us with foods laden with salt, sugar and fat.⁷ Our options in eating and drinking have changed considerably since the days of Ignatius. He could never have imagined the things that we take for granted in the developed world. The intentionality of an Ignatian diet might well be much more useful for health than many of the fad diets that pop up with increasing frequency. The discipline of these guidelines is valuable in a culture of so much excess

⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, selected by W. H. Garner (London: Penguin, 1953), 27.

⁵ A great deal has been written about the Rules for Thinking and Feeling with the Church. A talk by Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, is quite helpful. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, ‘The Rules for Thinking, Judging, Feeling in the Post-Conciliar Church’, *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* (CIS), 105 (2004), 19–27.

⁶ Dir 43:269.

⁷ See Michael Moss, *Salt Sugar Fat—How the Food Giants Hooked Us* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2013).

and ease, both within and outside the context of making the Spiritual Exercises.

I will start by saying a few things about the rules in the context of the Third Week and about Ignatius' complicated relationship with food. Next I will offer some commentary on the specific rules. I also offer a few thoughts on how the rules for eating can be used with exercitants and those who come to us for spiritual direction.

The Rules in the Context of the Third Week of the Spiritual Exercises

Most of the rules in the Spiritual Exercises are offered after the material on the four Weeks. An exception is the set of Rules for Regulating One's Eating. They are presented immediately after the Third Week material. Commentators have wondered why Ignatius placed these rules for eating there, since they are applicable to any of the four Weeks. The *Official Directory* suggests that they are placed here because there was more room for them, and also so as not to 'overburden the exercitant during the earlier Weeks with excessive amounts of instruction'.⁸ George Ganss, Michael Ivens and others think that they were placed in the Third Week because of the connection with the Last Supper and to encourage mortification during the contemplations on the passion. Ganss also suggests that the rules make sense in the Third Week because, by this time, the exercitant is 'growing in eagerness to serve God well' and 'is aware that the human appetites for food and drink are good but tend towards excess, a disorder that must be controlled by the virtue of temperance'.⁹ Thus Ignatius offers guidelines for an examination of our situation and the correction of disorders, and plans for a more appropriate use of the appetites. Ignatius stresses that his rules should be adapted to the needs and circumstances of each exercitant. The *Official Directory* explains:

A more appropriate use of the appetites

Specifically, the Rules for Regulating One's Diet placed at the end of this Week should only be explained orally and not given in writing, since they ought not to be given to all persons in the same way but adapted with discretion to each individual's character as well as to his physical and mental strength.¹⁰

⁸ Dir 43:252.

⁹ *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, translated by George E. Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 181 n.111. See also Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998).

¹⁰ Dir 43:251.

The general purpose of these rules is to make sure that the uses of food, drink and the appetites are in harmony with the overall objective of the Exercises. That objective is clarified in the First Principle and Foundation. We are created to praise, reverence and serve God. Ignatius is hoping for indifference regarding all things on the face of the earth, our appetites included. Thus, we are to make use of these appetites in so far as they help us attain our end, and we must rid ourselves of some of them if they prove to be a hindrance. Temperance regarding the appetites will also help us to be contemplative towards our eating and drinking habits. Ignatius is concerned with an ordered approach to eating.¹¹ It must be stressed, though, that Ignatius is also trying to avoid the exercitant becoming scrupulous. How do we find the mean between being scrupulous and lax about our eating habits? That mean is being intentional and focused—what the seventh rule calls being masters of our own faculties.

Ignatius and Food

Ignatius had a complicated relationship with food. During his time in the cave in Manresa, he was strict with himself with regard to the care of his body. His *Autobiography* says,

He used to ask for alms in Manresa each day. He wouldn't eat meat or drink wine even if they gave it to him. On Sundays he didn't fast, and if they gave him a little wine he would drink it. And because he had been very careful about keeping his hair as was the fashion at the time (and he had it nice), he decided to let it grow just anyhow as nature took it, without combing it or cutting it, nor covering it with anything by night or by day. For the same reason he was letting the nails on his toes and fingers grow, because on this point too he had been careful. (n.19)

Later he speaks of a period in prayer when he became quite scrupulous and suicidal. He decided that he would neither eat nor drink until God granted him the grace he was seeking, or until he was near death. He went an entire week without nourishment and only broke his fast when his confessor ordered him to stop what he was doing.¹² This strict attitude

¹¹ Marc David, a nutritional psychologist, has written a book called *Nourishing Wisdom—A Mind-Body Approach to Nutrition and Well-Being* (New York: Bell Tower, 1991). It is not Christian in focus. However, at one point he offers twenty principles of what he calls ordered eating (170–173). They are not that radically distinct from the eight Rules for Regulating One's Eating. For instance, ordered eating is: *intentional, conscious, reflective, transformational, nourishing, strategic, communal, intimate, connected, mindful*, and so on.

¹² *Autobiography*, nn. 24–25.

moderated over the years, and during his time as general of the Society of Jesus he was compassionate towards those who had a delicate constitution. Yet he remained fairly strict with his own use of food, partly because of the delicate nature of his stomach, caused by damage he had done to his body earlier in life. He ate sparingly. Luís Gonçalves da Câmara tells us,

Everyone who dealt with him was astonished at the great mortification he displayed in his eating habits. For far from making any comment or showing any satisfaction about what he ate, either during the meal or afterwards, he did not even show the slightest sign of liking anything, however exquisite it might be; simply, having risen from the table, if his companion referred to the meal, he used to repeat the simple expression: 'It suited me' In all the time I was in Rome I do not remember him ever ordering anything special to eat, or giving any hint as to how he would like his meals to be cooked.¹³

Yet, towards others, especially young or fragile Jesuits, he was understanding, even warm. In a letter of January 1556 he urges a fellow Jesuit to care for his health.

To be better able to attend to the above-mentioned tasks, you should take care to keep hale and strong, and for this purpose to eat and dress however you know to be best for your bodily well-being.¹⁴

Ignatius understood the body's needs. In the case of a novice who was questioning his vocation Ignatius instructed that he be allowed to sleep in and be given whatever foods he asked for. Ignatius' method was to remove any obstacles when someone was experiencing desolation. His attitude towards the needs of others was very understanding.

The Father ordered that a good reprimand should be written to Sicily because they had allowed the boys to fast for the whole of Lent; he usually disapproved of making all the novices fast simply because they were novices.¹⁵

Several of the letters of Ignatius offer commentary about eating and drinking. One of his clearest directions on this subject was written just two months before he died. On 12 May 1556, Ignatius wrote to Adrian

¹³ Da Câmara, *Remembering Inigo*, 189.

¹⁴ Ignatius to Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, 15 January 1556, in *Ignatius of Loyola, Letters and Instructions*, edited and translated by Martin E. Palmer, John W. Padberg and John L. McCarthy (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 626.

¹⁵ Da Câmara, *Remembering Inigo*, 212.

Adriaenssens, the rector at Louvain, advising him on the problem of providing the proper food for Jesuit scholastics of different nationalities and physical constitutions. Ignatius recommends that all should get used to the local diet, but he is clear about providing generous exceptions for those in poor health. He begins by acknowledging that the Society is all for frugality, for economy and for edifying others in matters of food, but ‘we do not think it good to cut back from what the physician prescribes as necessary for the recovery or preservation of health’.¹⁶ He says that it is good for one who is healthy to get used to ordinary and more easily obtained foods. His main point is:

As long as these men treat their frail bodies well, they will have enough strength for works of piety and charity in the help of souls and edification of their neighbour; if they do not, they fall sick and prove of little benefit to their neighbour. Indeed, they can become a burden.¹⁷

This is close to the spirit that lies behind his rules. Our habits concerning eating and drinking should be what are most conducive to helping us serve and honour God.

A few years earlier, Ignatius wrote a letter to the members of the Society throughout Europe. It was a warm and fatherly encouragement to Jesuits who were suffering the effects of poverty, mostly owing to operating colleges where students could not afford to pay. Ignatius suggested that the European Jesuits compare themselves to the Jesuits in India and they would discover that their suffering was not severe. However, he showed his usual concern for the ill and says that special efforts must be made to help them with the food they need. ‘The sick should not lack for anything; the healthier will be better able to practice patience.’¹⁸

The Rules for Regulating Eating

There are eight rules for ordering ourselves in the taking of food. Rules one to four deal with what one actually eats or drinks. Rules five to eight suggest ways of gaining greater spiritual profit from eating and drinking. Ignatius is focusing on temperance, not on penance. He refers to food and penance much earlier in the *Spiritual Exercises*. ‘If we do away with

¹⁶ Ignatius of Loyola, *Letters and Instructions*, 661.

¹⁷ Ignatius of Loyola, *Letters and Instructions*, 662.

¹⁸ Ignatius of Loyola, *Letters and Instructions*, 405.

what is superfluous, it is not penance, but temperance. We do penance when we deny ourselves something of what is suitable for us.' (Exx 83) The sense of taste is important for Ignatius. His notion of the application of the senses reminds us about what José García calls a contemplative gaze on the real. 'This kind of contemplative gaze depends on our senses. We only approach things by seeing them, listening to them, touching them, smelling them, tasting them.'¹⁹ García is pointing out that contemplation happens through the senses. It can be a challenge to explain the application of the senses to exercitants. But many years ago one of them listened to my description of it and she said, 'Oh, you mean full body prayer'. Exactly! By the time exercitants have made it to the Third Week they are usually able to use their senses in prayer. The exercitant is growing in intimacy with Christ. These rules are designed to deepen our reflective approach even to everyday activities such as eating. As St Paul reminds us, 'whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God' (1 Corinthians 10:31). Let us take a closer look at the eight rules.

The First Rule. *In regard to bread there is less need to abstain, because it is not a food to which the appetite ordinarily urges us in a disordered way, or to which we are tempted as strongly as we are to other foods.*

With his first rule Ignatius is stressing abstinence. He is not advocating avoidance but, rather, limitation. In the 1500s, bread was the staple diet of the poor and was considered sufficient for nutritional needs. We are accustomed today to much more variety and richness in our diet and



¹⁹ José A. García, 'The School of the Heart', *The Way*, 42/2 (April 2003), 12.

would not rely so much on bread. We also know much more about nutrition and balanced diets. Essentially, we can choose what we eat, rather than be content with what is on offer. Also, regarding bread, we could walk into a bakery, or even our local grocer, and be confronted by a wide variety of breads. So, in many ways, Ignatius' advice about less abstinence regarding bread needs adaptation today. Perhaps it is good to give thought to items that we consider staples in our own culture and time.

***The Second.** In regard to drink there seems to be more need of abstinence than about eating bread. Therefore, we ought to consider much more carefully what is better for us, in order to accept it, and what is harmful to us, to reject it.*

In the second rule he refers to abstinence in relation to drink, and stresses that we ought to observe carefully what is beneficial and to be admitted, and what is harmful and to be cut out. In other words, he is not unaware of our need to care for ourselves. Just as he wanted self-care for his Jesuits, so he wants it for exercitants. Contemporary exercitants need to take stock of what drinks they are consuming and pursue what is moderate, so as to avoid excesses on either side. It may be good to think of our consumption of soft drinks, beer, wine, coffee and so on. Even these seemingly simple rules and guidelines are helps for us to give greater glory to God.

***The Third.** In regard to foods greater and more complete abstinence ought to be practised. For in this area just as the appetite is more prone to become disordered, so is temptation more likely to assail us. Hence, toward avoiding what is disordered in the taking of food, abstinence can be practised in two ways. One is to accustom oneself to eating ordinary foods, and the other, if the foods are dainties, to take them in small quantity.*

With his third rule, Ignatius is urging a stricter and more complete abstinence in relation to foods other than the staples. He mentions delicacies because it is here that we may be more prone to excess and temptation. Unless we have incredible discipline, it is not easy to resist extra helpings of such things. These foods are varied and plentiful for most of us in the West today. He also mentions coarser or ordinary foods. Given the choice, most people now will tend to want plenty of variety rather than just what is ordinary. We live in an age when we can get items from the other side of the world while they are still fresh. We can walk into a restaurant with an all-you-can-eat buffet offering every kind



of food imaginable. Each time we go in, we need to be discerning about which dishes we will have and which we will avoid.²⁰ And we need to be strict in our abstinence or we will find ourselves returning several times to fill our plates.

The Fourth. *Provided care is taken not to fall into sickness, the more one abstains from what is ordinarily sufficient, the sooner will one find the right mean to keep for oneself in eating and drinking, for two reasons. First, by making this progress and disposing oneself through it, on many occasions one will more clearly perceive interior lights, consolations, and divine inspirations which guide one to the mean suitable to oneself. Second, if in abstinence of this sort one finds oneself lacking in the physical energy and disposition to carry on the present spiritual exercises, one will soon be able to judge what is more suitable to one's own bodily sustenance.*

In the fourth rule, Ignatius is encouraging the exercitant to find the mean between two extremes. He may also be thinking of the principle of *agere contra*, deliberately going against our disordered tendencies. In the exercise on Christ the King, Ignatius speaks of those who wish 'to give greater proof of their love' and how they 'will act against their sensuality and carnal and worldly love' (Exx 97). So, if I know that I have disordered

²⁰ In his *Autograph Directory*, Ignatius makes a point that could be used in conjunction with the 'second way of making a good and correct choice of a way of life in the third time' (Exx 184–187). He speaks of the exercitant presenting one side of the Election to God on one day and the other on the next. He describes this method as being 'like someone presenting various foods to a prince and noting which of them is to his liking' (Dir 3: 21).

tendencies around fine chocolate or single malt Scotch, my spiritual welfare would tell me that I should avoid overdoing it. Note that this fourth rule is explicit in stating the purpose of all the rules—disposing oneself more abundantly for the state of consolation and having sufficient strength for the Spiritual Exercises. I need to sustain myself for the marathon of the thirty days. Those who fast for regular periods have to learn what is excessive and what is conducive to the spiritual life. It is all about discerning the patterns that are most suited for my spiritual life.

***The Fifth.** While one is eating, it is good to imagine Christ our Lord eating in company with his apostles, and to observe how he eats, how he drinks, how he looks about, and how he converses, and then to try to imitate him. In this way one's mind will be occupied chiefly with the consideration of our Lord and less with the sustenance of the body. Thus one gains a better method and order in regard to how one ought to conduct and govern oneself.*

The fifth rule contains a phrase that sums up Ignatius' sense of what should happen when we ensure that our eating and drinking is focused and intentional, and is in harmony with our hopes in the Exercises: 'Imagine he sees Christ our Lord at table' (Exx 214). Remember that these rules are first introduced in the Third Week. The exercitant is contemplating the Last Supper. The exercise on the Kingdom of Christ had already suggested an imitation of Christ regarding eating. The human king says to his subjects, 'Whoever wishes to join with me in this enterprise must be content with the same food, drink, clothing, etc. as mine' (Exx 93). This fifth rule suggests that the exercitant should strive to imitate Christ. Striving implies that this is a growing grace. The growth involves self-knowledge about what works best for each of us.

***The Sixth.** At another time, while one is eating one can use a different consideration, drawn from a life of the saints, or some pious contemplation, or some spiritual project at hand. When the attention is thus directed to some good object, a person will be less concerned with the sensible pleasure from the bodily food.*

With the sixth rule Ignatius is once again urging us to contemplate spiritual matters so that less pleasure and sensual enjoyment gets in the way of our contemplation and being with Christ in his passion. It is about staying disposed. If we let our minds wander, we risk being less attentive and focused on Christ and his passion. Most retreat houses tend to play reflective music during meals, to help the exercitant stay focused and be

less distracted by others who are making the usual sounds that accompany eating—the crunching of carrot sticks, the clatter of cutlery, and so on.

The Seventh. Above all, one should be on guard against being totally absorbed in what one is eating or letting oneself be completely dominated by the appetite. Rather, one should be master of oneself, both in the manner of eating and the amount one takes.

The seventh rule shows Ignatius as very much a man of self-control and mastery. This is the principle at play here. He would probably react quite negatively to super-sized hamburgers and all-you-can-eat restaurants. Of course he would also have the discipline to resist that second and third plate. He would likewise react negatively to those who rush through their meal and bolt from the table, thinking that meals are all about eating. Accounts of Ignatius eating with his companions suggest that, however little he ate, he took his time and never finished before his companions. He paced himself in harmony with the conversation and with the eating habits of those around him, ‘giving the impression that all along he had been eating with them’.²¹ In other words, it is not just about the amount of food, it is also about how it is consumed.

The Eighth. To rid oneself of disordered excess it is very profitable, after dinner or supper or at some other hour when the appetite to eat or drink is



²¹ Da Câmara, *Remembering Iñigo*, 190.

not strong, to settle with oneself how much food is to be taken at the next dinner or supper, and further, to do this every day. Then one should not exceed this amount either because of appetite or of temptation, but overcome every occurrence of disordered appetite and of temptation from the enemy, whether his temptation is to take more food or less.

With the eighth rule it may be helpful to think of the last step in the contemporary Examen of Consciousness. Having reviewed the day just ended, we are invited to look at what we hope for tomorrow. This same principle is operative here. We should be focused on what we will have at the next meal. Ignatius is the opposite of those who stumble from one meal to another, just eating as much as they want. Ignatius himself had the discipline to plan. In one of his early directories for giving the Spiritual Exercises, he offers a glance into how he uses this rule.

How one eats and drinks contributes greatly to the elevation or lowering of the mind. Hence, so that the exercitant's sobriety and abstinence will be voluntary and adapted to his particular nature, the one giving the Exercises should tell him that after supper he is to request what he wants prepared for his supper The server should be told that when clearing away after dinner he should ask the exercitant what he wants for supper that evening. He should bring exactly what was requested, whether he asks for ordinary fare or even something better, or just bread with water or wine. The one giving the Exercises, however, should take care to know what he is doing in this matter of diet so that excesses in either direction can be avoided.²²

Note that the director's role is not just about asking after prayer, but also meals, sleep, exercise and so on.

Use of These Rules with Exercitants

There are a few practices I have found helpful with exercitants. For example, I try to have a broader scope than just food and drink. David Townsend's 1987 piece in this journal puts it well when he asks why the rules are centred on food and drink, and answers that it is because 'food and drink are the areas where "spiritual" people are most likely to be intemperate'.²³ He suggests that Ignatius is, in fact, interested in more than food and drink. There is also one's lifestyle. I suggest that exercitants

²² Dir 3: 15.

²³ David Townsend, 'Digesting the Rules for Eating', *The Way Supplement*, 58 (1987), 99.



consider the other appetites and urges. Some common ones are sleep, sex, relationships, shopping, the internet, access to instant communication, television and the need to be up to date with the latest news. I find it a good practice to ask people when they misuse these appetites. Having prayed with the Two Standards, exercitants should have self-knowledge about the patterns by which they live out the standard of Christ or that of the enemy of our human nature. What do they learn about themselves when they look at their patterns? Some find that they oversleep to escape boredom. Others consume too many biscuits when a deadline is looming. Still others escape their difficulties into alcohol or food. What do we use to disguise the pain of loneliness, boredom or apathy?

Antonio Guillén points out that the rules for eating complement the Election and are ‘intended to help when the discernment of a desire is difficult’.²⁴ He says that this set of rules is aiming to strengthen the exercitant’s freedom, precisely in Ignatius’ suggestion in the seventh rule that we should be in control of ourselves.

The discipline offered by the Spiritual Exercises has been helpful throughout the centuries for those who desire to advance in the spiritual life. There is helpful advice in the rules for all of us, whether we are

²⁴ Antonio Guillén, ‘Imitating Christ Our Lord with the Senses’, *The Way*, 47/1–2 (January and April 2008), 237–238.

making a vocational discernment or a career change, or deciding how to distribute alms, how to deal with the subtle movements in our spiritual life, how to understand our relationship to the Church, or simply planning the evening meal. The discipline behind the Rules for Regulating One's Eating is a help to people who struggle with our culture's excess and ease. *Bon appétit!*

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