

The Dynamics of the Exercises
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Lecture 3: The First Week [45] to [72]

Introduction. The man or woman who enters the First Week of the Exercises should be ready to pray

- more methodically and yet more freely,
- with deeper contrition but also with more wonder at the mercy of God,
- with experiences of recoil [desolation] and attraction [consolation].

Consequently, the man or woman entering into the prayer of the First Week ought to be able to see the paradox, the great Christian irony, **that without sin we would never know the mercy of God.** This realization enters as grace not as the fruit of study or as some kind of reward or merit but as gift. Moreover, without sin we would never know the meaning of these words from John's Gospel, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" {3:16}. So the First Week is a call to live the life won for us by Jesus the Christ, the Father's great gift to us.

Text. The title of the exercises [i.e., the five presentations for prayer] of the First Week of the Exercises refers to each of them as a **meditation**, i.e., "a prayer in which material thought out or mentally processed in the light of faith and in the desire to hear and respond to God's word to oneself" [Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, p.46]. On the other hand, **contemplation** "is a prayer characterized by an affective quality and by receptiveness and simplicity" [Ivens, p.46]. But this distinction should not be too rigidly emphasized because meditation frequently moves towards affective prayer, e.g., the colloquies of the First Week meditation and contemplative prayer contains reasoning. An easy distinction is one that sees meditation as focused on ideas and truths of the faith, while contemplation focuses on scenes from the gospel and people.

The subject matter of the five meditation of the First Week center on the history of sin represented in [1] the sin of the angels [50] to [52], [2] in one's personal participation in the history of sin [55] to [60], [3 & 4] in two repetitions, which call for an individualized response to where one has felt recoil [desolation], attraction [consolation], or a "greater spiritual experience, and, finally, [5] in a meditation on hell, which engages an imaginative engagement of the five senses [65] to [70]. Notice that these responses propose some movement, some affectivity, some imaginative involvement, not just understanding or intellectual appreciation on the part the one making the Exercises.

The dynamics of these five exercises—the history of sin and its consequences—lie not in the subject matter but in the **colloquies** of each of the exercises. These colloquies suggest where grace resides; and they provide the one giving the Exercises with an authoritative sense of where to move and what to look for as he/she guides another through this difficult week. **Let us look at these colloquies.**

Number [53] is a colloquy to the image of Christ, suspended on the Cross, before the one making the retreat. Then the one making the retreat is guided into a conversation with the Crucified Christ, asking questions that are answered in the great hymn from Philippians 2:6-11. Note that the inquiry is threefold: Why did you become human? Why did you, an immortal one, die? And if you had to die, why in this way of ignominy? And then the one making the retreat asks him/herself three questions What Have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What will I do for Christ? And the colloquy ends with the presumption that heart and head will soon want to speak “whatever comes to your mind.”

In the second colloquy [61], following the consideration of personal sin, the response is one to mercy [given]. It is a response of thanksgiving “to God our Lord for giving me life until now, and proposing with his grace, amendment for the future”. Note how these three responses in the colloquy answers also the three questions proposed in the earlier colloquy [53]: gratitude and reorientation.

The internal structure of these exercises—Preparatory prayer, two preludes, three points, and a colloquy yield to a less structured approach in the third and fourth exercises [62] and to a different kind of prayer in the meditation on hell [65] to [71]. How do these elements of prayer fit together? The intent is to appropriate a stance before God which is reverential. Therefore, every meditation begins with the same preparatory prayer, directing the one making the Exercises to the fundamental thread that binds the four weeks of the Exercises, a desire to find God’s will. Within that basic and over-riding quest there are immediate responses that those making the First Week exercises can offer:

- [47] they can situate themselves in awareness of their estrangement and distance [“exile”]
- they can ask for what appears as a “progressive grace”: shame and confusion [48], and [50] and [74] before a situation that logic will not untangle but can be seen from God’s viewpoint
- they can note in themselves a developmental interiority that accepts the religious power of the history of sin, as an inheritance
- they will note a deeper awareness of what God is revealing to them, a process caught in the triple colloquy of # [63], [1] an interior knowledge of why their sins are sins & an abhorrence of them; [2] then a perception of the basic disorder in the sin, the basic lack of love and with this a desire to bring love back into their lives; and then, finally, [3] a knowledge of the world as the culture that is not redemptive.

This is a complex and rich process. **What holds it altogether?** Let’s try to address the unity within this diversity of ends and goals. The first prelude of every meditation presents a scene of imprisonment and exile and every meditation ends with the Our Father. The comparatively recent discovery of the role of Scripture in our Christian life has had prompted us to review the Exercises against a norm older and more distinguished than the Ignatian text. The first prelude, used throughout the First Week, is a psychological portrait of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Earlier in this series I offered that

same parable as the Ignatian portrait of God, which we can employ in the P & F [23]; now I would return to that parable, asking the one making the retreat to see him/herself as the “soul, imprisoned” and exiled.” Every prayer of the First Week begins by accepting the position of the Prodigal Son and moves towards the reconciliation offered in the “Our Father.” There is a progressive movement from the history of sin to the history of my own sin, to a deepening awareness of my life as a struggle between life and death, love and estrangement, and the reality that I can choose to be permanently outside the friendship of God. But relentlessly Ignatius guides the one making the Exercises to “return to the Father about whom Jesus taught you to pray.” **Thus the First Week of the Exercises is set in the form of an “inclusio,” a literary device that brackets the material in a frame, placing similar material at the beginning and the end of a section.** Here the portrait of the prodigal son in exile at the beginning of each prayer session and the prayer the Our Father at the conclusion of each session represents a pilgrimage from death to life, from exile to homecoming, from estrangement to the celebration of daughtership or sonship.

Pastoral adaptation. I think that the First Week is the most difficult to guide. The **one guiding the retreat** has to have a keen eye on the dispositions of **the one making the Exercises**, a respect for the individual movements of the First Week, and a sense of the grand design which gradually reveals what it means to hear the words, ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that anyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.’ The First Week is more about God than about the one making the retreat. Perhaps it is better to say that the **First Week is about the relationship between God & and the one making the retreat.** That relationship is grounded on the everlasting love of God through all the corridors of social, communal, and personal sin. It is a time for accepting that revelation not for introspection.

While we must honor the importance Ignatius places on the subject matter and processes of the First Week, I agree with Michael Ivens that “[T]oday ways of presenting the First Week cover a wide range, and many go well beyond the limited flexibility of the early practice. Among these it is impossible to pick out a single ‘right way’ of giving the First Week to contemporary exercitants; it is for the director to decide how best to help an individual realize its objectives” [p. 45].

An article that influenced my understanding of the First Week was that of Winoc de Broucker, S.J. (*Christus* 21 [January, 1959], pp. 22-30), which was translated and distributed by the late Thomas Burke, S.J. as “The First Week of the Exercises.”