

Christof Wolf, S.J.

The Moment Is For Me

An Ignatian Guide to Prayer

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Much has been written about “The Power and Secret of the Jesuits.” But perhaps not everything is secret, because what constitutes the Jesuits above all is their common spiritual foundation, the Exercises of Saint Ignatius (1491-1556), who founded the Jesuit order.

Every Jesuit makes the so-called “Full Spiritual Exercises” twice in his life, at the beginning and end of his formation. He spends thirty days in silence and prayer, centered on his relation to God and Jesus. He ponders the decisive question: what is God’s will for me and my life? Am I called to be a Jesuit, a companion of Jesus?

Silence is more than mere not-speaking: it opens a man to a new dimension in his life. Extended silence enables one to hear. Forty days before his public appearance, Jesus himself was led into stillness and solitude in the desert. His desert experience with the three temptations is certainly a key event in his life. All three temptations concern the first commandment: “I am the LORD your God. You shall not have other gods beside me! You shall not make for yourself an idol to worship.” For Jesus God alone counts, not the apotheosis of earthly power and whatever accompanies it. A human who can turn stone into bread can also rule the world with “bread and circuses.” Jesus had the ability to do so, but he refused to use it, even for his own hunger. True bread, true security, comes from God alone. Knowing this, Jesus proclaims: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the good news.” People who heed this call and reorient themselves accordingly feel an inner freedom, liberated from every dependence and compulsion.

In the Spiritual Exercises, we share this basic experience of Jesus in the desert. The gift of inner freedom expresses itself as gratitude, kindness, patience, perseverance, generosity, and affability. That inner freedom is the foundation for seeking and finding God in all things. It enables us to work “Ad majorem Dei gloriam” (“For the greater glory of God”) with “indifference,” which means not that everything is of no interest to me, but that everything is of equal interest for me. I meet everything with the same openness. If I lose my soul to something other than God, in the end I lose my inner freedom.

For Ignatius the key to keeping that freedom is the virtue of humility. He distinguishes three kinds of humility. The first is to live so that I keep all of God’s commandments, even if I were offered power over the whole world. I resist temptation as Jesus did, when Satan offered him all the kingdoms of the world if he would only worship him instead of God. The second kind of

humility is complete indifference: wealth or poverty, health or sickness, a short or long life — I do not strive for one more than for another. Fanaticism and fundamentalism have no place here, because they lack this indifference. The third kind includes the first and second: I always try to become more like Jesus, even when the world considers me foolish or crazy for doing so. At no time was the following of Jesus easy. Many turned away from him, even in his lifetime, because following Jesus means a radical orientation for God.

The community that Ignatius founded with his companions has more than spiritual exercises for its foundation. Along with the vows of poverty and celibacy, obedience above all is central for every Jesuit. The key is again the model of Jesus, who learned obedience by facing the cross: “not my will, but your will be done,” says Jesus. Many interpret this passage as the greatest abandonment by God that Jesus experienced in his life. But God was never closer to him as in Gethsemane. Only in his decision was Jesus alone. His Father could not make it for him, just because he had to take the suffering upon himself. Jesus could have run away from it, but he accepted his Father’s will.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The question of a radical following of Jesus is central for a novice who thinks about entering the Jesuit order. Nevertheless, the Exercises are not only for Jesuits, but are also offered to anyone seeking religious experience. In general, they help us reorient our lives to God. They are no abstract theory, but are grounded in Ignatius’s life experience. In 1521, he was wounded by a cannonball while serving as a soldier in a battle in Pamplona. During his convalescence, he read about the life of Jesus and the lives of saints. After his recovery, he began to lead a strict ascetical life, wanting to imitate Saint Francis and Saint Dominic. He then had an experience that marked and changed his entire life. He later wrote about this experience in the third person:

This event was so powerful ... it was as though he became a different man and acquired an understanding entirely different from what he had possessed earlier. Illuminated by God, he began to view the things of God with entirely different eyes — learning to discover the good and the evil spirits. Tasting the things of God within, he wanted to impart them to his fellow humans.

He now realized that we can find God in all things. His experiences led to an “instruction” for prayer, the “Spiritual Exercises.” They assume that God is

immediately accessible to his creatures — not only to a saint, but to everyone. Also new was the type and method of religious experience that they promote: Ignatius calls it “praying with all our senses.” He thus developed further the method of meditative prayer known since the Desert Fathers as the “Lectio Divina.” This method consisted of four steps: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). After an attentive reading of a Bible passage, we select a verse that especially speaks to us and meditate on it, by reflecting on it repeatedly. For Ignatius, the reflective meditation makes use of all the senses in prayer: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Reflecting on the word of God leads to the prayer, and in the stillness of the contemplation the person praying experiences communion with God.

IGNATIAN WAYS OF PRAYER

In the Exercises, the exercitant is invited to pray for an hour four times during the day. Ignatius developed a precise method for prayer, illustrated by the following texts in italics from his book of Exercises. For contemporary readers, they may sound harsh, but they give us a good impression of his style.

It [the exercise] comprises a preparatory prayer and two preludes, three main points, and a colloquy.

THE PREPARATORY PRAYER IS: to ask God our Lord for the grace that all my intentions, actions, and activities be purely directed to the service and praise of his divine majesty.

THE FIRST PRELUDE IS: composition of place, by imagining the scene. Here note: ... when one considers Christ our Lord ... the composition will consist in seeing the physical place with the eye of imagination ... for example, a temple or mountain where Jesus is.

THE SECOND PRELUDE IS: to ask God our Lord for what I want and wish. The request must correspond to the underlying material of the meditation.

This means: when the meditation concerns the resurrection, to ask God for joy with Christ joyful; when it concerns the Passion, to ask for anguish, tears, and torment with the tormented Christ.

THE MAIN POINTS ARE: to see, observe, and consider what the persons

are saying. And then to reflect on myself and draw some profit from it. See and consider what the persons are doing: for example, Mary and Joseph wandering and taking pains for the Lord to be born in the greatest poverty, and all this for me. And then, by reflecting on myself, draw some spiritual profit from it.

AT THE END A COLLOQUY SHALL BE MADE by reflecting on what I should say to the three divine persons or to the incarnate Word or to our Lady and Mother. Then, according to how one feels [it] within, ask our Lord, who became human for me, [to let me] follow and imitate him more closely. Then pray an Our Father.

Let us review the structure we have just described. After selecting a Bible passage, one begins with the preparatory prayer, asking for an appropriate inner orientation to God. Making up one's own preparatory prayer can be a small initial spiritual exercise. The prayer doesn't always have to be completely new, as long as it continues one's path of prayer. In this dynamic, our own limitations might get a new perspective: something new and unexpected can be given to me. I should also ask for that and be ready for it.

I then compose the scene, furnished like a stage or a film set. I imagine a concrete place corresponding to the content of the selected Bible passage. Each place has its own atmosphere: it feels wide or narrow, comfortable or threatening, warm or cold, and has its own distinctive odor.

Using this method, it is easy to get lost in one's fantasy, since Ignatius brings us actively into the scene. I should not ask for just anything, but for the gift of feeling the scene. Real empathy with it involves my emotions and has the potential to change me and give me new perspectives.

Once the stage setting or film location is ready, I consider who is there to see. What are the actors saying? What especially speaks to me?

After the words comes the action. Now begins the inner film, the main part of the exercise. Like a director or cameraman, I shape my own film. I let myself speak with the persons, interact with them, grasp them, touch them, or just let myself observe them. Ignatius's recommendation to "reflect on myself" means that I let my emotions really encounter the story, which can make me laugh or cry. And in spite of precise planning, surprises keep coming up, just as in a real filming where the story might get a completely new ending.

Every prayer exercise closes with a short colloquy. One reviews the just-completed prayer and puts into words what the heart says, as though one

were speaking to a good friend. As Ignatius recommends, one can speak to the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Mary, or even to a person who was on the stage or film set of your imagination. It's almost like what Heinrich von Kleist writes in his essay "On the Gradual Production of Thoughts While Speaking": "there is a strange source of inspiration for a speaker in the human face of the listener: a glance telling us that a half-expressed thought has already been understood often provides us the expression for the other half." One does not yet know exactly what to communicate, but the benevolent listener helps me formulate insights, desires, and requests that I would never come upon on my own. That's exactly what happens in conversation.

The conclusion is an "Our Father" — perhaps the oldest prayer of the church, taught by Jesus to his disciples. Praying from the heart also means praying with the words of Jesus.

After the time of prayer, Ignatius recommends a short period of reflection, lasting about fifteen minutes. I review and reflect on what has happened, on what has been given me. What were the good experiences in the prayer? The irritating ones? It is helpful to keep a spiritual diary, lest nuances get forgotten. With a diary I can more easily recognize my life themes, and even discover a central thread.

A vivid analogy to the structure of Ignatian prayer is the invitation to a party. The preparatory prayer is my thinking about what to wear, an outfit that suits the occasion and the host. After my arrival I first look around the place and orient myself. Now I have to decide what to do first: go to the bar and order a drink, or greet friends, etc. Then the party begins for me. I listen, converse, and laugh, until the party ends. On the way home I speak with my best friend about the party. Together we consider what we experienced, what especially touched us, what went especially well. At home I write down the most important experiences in my diary.

EVERYTHING WITHOUT PRESSURE

Ignatius's instructions may seem somewhat complicated; they do demand some time for practice. Not for nothing are they called spiritual *exercises*. But an exercitant is also freed from the pressure that every effort must immediately be crowned with success. In the Exercises there are times of consolation, and times of dryness. Ever optimistic, Ignatius advises me in times of dryness to remember the times of consolation. People who see only the negative side

of things will hardly ever experience a change for the better. A good thing needs exercise, time, and patience: that is an old piece of folk wisdom, and also typically Ignatian. The “Full Exercises” are a classic example.

No matter how dense the exercise, one does not have to accomplish anything in it. I can stop my interior film anytime, and take a rest — especially when I feel deep joy, beauty, harmony, consolation, sympathy, and love. In these moments, my soul is touched by God. For Ignatius, it comes down to intensity and fulfillment: it is not much knowledge that satisfies the soul, but feeling and tasting the things within, he says. Thus it is consistent for Ignatius to recommend the repetition of each exercise, which often becomes more simple and more intense the second time around. It’s like seeing a film for the second time: I get a broader view and notice many things that eluded me the first time.

A religious experience using all our senses opens the door to the deeper levels of our life. We are especially helped by imagining a scene where God is met. As Moses stood amazed before the burning bush, so can our imagination create places in which we encounter God. Consequently the first suggestion is always the invitation to create our own scene. I can concretely imagine a desert, in order to encounter Jesus there. First I ask myself: how does the desert look? Is it a sandy desert, a thorny cactus desert, or more of a steppe? Is the sun shining? Is there a shady spot? Is it unbearably hot? My sensitivity can see and feel the subtleties of a scene, and touch it with my own emotions.

Can I see Jesus? Perhaps he is only a small black dot on the horizon and I must open myself to seeking him. Do I even want to go into the desert with him, or do I feel inner resistance? Perhaps I also find myself sitting next to Jesus in the desert. I can lean on him, touch him, or let him touch me. I can begin a conversation with him, or perhaps ask Jesus what I always wanted to ask him. I can laugh and cry with Jesus or just be with him. Or perhaps walk together with him a bit, looking for water.

Before I dive into an exercise, I ask for the readiness to grow in my capacity for love, my capacity for sympathy. Opening myself up always makes me vulnerable and pliable.

In this way prayer is a creative, dynamic, and open process. “My entire life is a receipt without my signature,” writes the Portuguese author Fernando Pessoa. Prayer stretches one out towards a future that one would like to realize, and this can be experienced only by doing the exercise. In this way of prayer the person praying receives something that is accessible only to himself and God, and that cannot be predicted.

“THE FULL EXERCISES” IN DAILY LIFE

Ignatius divides the “Full Exercises” into four weeks, and gives them a thematic structure. The first week considers the Principle and Foundation; the second week, the life of Jesus; the third week, his Passion; the fourth week, his resurrection. The first week concerns me and my relation to God. In the second week, I try to find traces of my own life in the concrete life of Jesus. The third week invites me to accompany Jesus in the pain and suffering of his last hours, up to the cross. The fourth week, to share in the transformation from death to life, to experience joy and love in the new life of the resurrection. Moreover, the thirty days do not have to be divided into four equal periods of time; in practice, one or another week can take longer than seven days. The other weeks then become correspondingly shorter.

Ignatius’s book of Exercises is freely available, but the Spiritual Exercises can hardly be made alone; they need instruction and accompaniment. Nevertheless, anyone can integrate the inner creative process of the Exercises into daily spiritual life. The themes presented here are a “translation” of the “Full Exercises” for daily life, and can accompany and inspire anyone who wants to follow them.

In the following Exercises, each day in the individual weeks has a theme, which normally begins with a Bible text. A brief suggestion and concrete questions invite one deeper. They are somewhat unfinished, aiming only to be part of a process.

Of course the basic theme of each week is present in all the subordinate daily themes. One acquires a taste for the weekly theme only after sampling it in the daily themes. It is also not necessary to go through the Exercises in four calendar weeks. In daily life they may be extended into a longer time frame.

One should also be flexible about performing the daily Exercises. Resolving to do them on a regular basis can produce a guilty conscience if I soon become unfaithful to my resolutions — as will surely happen if my zeal has taken too much upon itself, and overloaded my agenda. For the Exercises in daily life one thing counts above all: what I undertake must be feasible for me. Less is often more in the spiritual life; a brief intense conversation with God can be more helpful than a prayer time completed according to plan.

Here too is the decision for a concrete place of prayer important. Where can I find a quiet break for a few minutes of silence away from the day’s

business? How much of the prayer can I bring back into my day? This all has to be tried out before settling on an appropriate routine.

One can probably schedule a longer prayer time in the morning, before work begins, and again in the evening, to review the day. Then the Bible text or a question from the morning meditation will stay with me during the day, now and then coming to the surface. Perhaps they will take on a new light in situations related to them. Ignatian spirituality sharpens our eye for what is essential in daily life. It teaches us to be alert in the here and now, so that we can say with Andreas Gryphius: “the moment is for me. I use it carefully, so it belongs to me: in time and in eternity.”

An introduction to a sensory experience of God can use more than language. The aquarelles by the artist Monika Gatt are therefore provided as an invitation to pictorial contemplation. Since they depict only excerpts from a larger whole, they loosen the imagination. They encourage us to grapple with an unfinished work, and to be creative with ourselves.

I have often referred to theater and film in order to describe praying with the senses. Although viewing a film is not prayer — my senses get overpowered by the director’s vision — I can let myself be touched by the characters and their stories, and often identify myself with them. I can also use my experience of them in prayer, as I do with a Bible passage. In the so-called “Film-Exercises,” films provide motifs for prayer. In this book, films are mentioned at the end of the daily meditations, to provide help and further stimulation to exercitants who love cinema.

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