

THE STORY OF THE FIRST SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

This is a story you need to know, for you are a part of it. It all began in 1521, at Loyola, a fortified tower in the Basque country. Ignatius read and daydreamed during months of recuperation from a near fatal war wound. It becomes a time of conversion; he desired to give everything away, go to Jerusalem as a penitent pilgrim, and imitate the great saints of the desert. At this time, he wondered at the spirits moving in him, and gave himself over to spiritual conversations with his family.

The next year he sets off to the Black Madonna in the mountains of Montserrat where he spent all night in prayer and conversation with her, offering his sword like a knight to become her knight of God. The monks gave him a small book of exercises to help prepare for his confession.

He walked down to Manresa, where he experienced great trials and mystical graces. God taught him about prayer, good and bad spirits, scruples, true desires, creation and much else. Ignatius wrote his own exercises and discovers that what helps him can help others. He said people “wanted to talk to him, because even though he had no knowledge of spiritual matters, yet in his speech he revealed great fervor and eagerness to go forward in God’s service” (*Autobiography* 21). So began the great Ignatian connection between personal relationship, spiritual conversation, and spiritual exercise.

After this, he sailed to Jerusalem but could not stay, so he returned to Barcelona learning Latin for future study. Polanco, an early Jesuit, says that during this time Ignatius did not stop helping many people through his conversations and spiritual exercises.

This continued at Alcalá and Salamanca during his university studies. His conversations attracted the Inquisition, who twice put him in jail, but judged him innocent. He gave exercises from what he now called his little book of Spiritual Exercises, named in this book the FSE, to a noble woman and her daughter, to a baker and his wife, to a hospital orderly,

to university professors and students. Young or old, educated or illiterate, poor or rich, Ignatius felt the FSE was for all.

He then started serious studies at the University of Paris. After a year, he also began “to give himself more intensively to spiritual conversations than he normally did, and he gave exercises to three people,” At once the three “gave all they had to the poor, even their books” and began begging in the Paris streets (*Autobiography* 77). This caused great commotion at the university and strictures by the authorities. Later a teacher remarked to Ignatius his surprise that no one was causing him trouble anymore. Ignatius answered, “The reason is because I’m not talking to anyone about the things of God. But when the course is over we’ll be back to normal!” (*Autobiography* 82).

At this time, Ignatius gave the Spiritual Exercises in a longer form than the FSE, intensively over many months, to his college roommates, Francis Xavier and Pierre Favre. This form of the Exercises, named in this book the Full Spiritual Exercises, had new exercises on decision making, and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Through conversations and regular enjoyable meals, this group of three became a group of seven companions, who all desired to go to Jerusalem and live as actual apostles.

Arriving in Venice, Ignatius “busied himself giving the Exercises and in other spiritual contacts” (*Autobiography* 92). The now nine companions joined him later and while they all waited for a ship, they begged and served in the hospitals. After most were ordained, they went out into the towns, to beg for food, preach on street corners, and engage in spiritual conversations.

When their Jerusalem plans were ended by war, they returned to Rome to offer themselves to the pope. In the end, they became a new religious order, the Society of Jesus. In their Institute, a foundational document for the Pope and their new order, they describe their purpose. Not surprisingly, spiritual conversation and giving exercises stand proud in the short list, for these had not only helped so many people but also made them who they were.

Ignatius writes later, “Endeavor to be profitable to individuals by spiritual conversations, by counseling and exhorting to good works, and by conducting spiritual exercises.” Again, “The exercises of the first week can be made available to large numbers; and some examinations of conscience and methods of prayer can also be given far more widely,

for anyone who has good will seems to be capable of these exercises" (*Constitutions* 84, 649).

In 1548, the pope approved the Spiritual Exercises, and they are printed. In this book were complete instructions and material for giving the Spiritual Exercises in its two full forms, thirty days enclosed from normal life, and thirty weeks in daily life. The book also included instructions for the FSE, given for four weeks in daily life. So there is one book, but three forms of giving the Exercises, which use all or part of the exercises within. Ignatius also includes ways to apply the exercises to different people, their desires, and life situations.

Both the Full and the First Spiritual Exercises were then taken out into Europe and the New World, the FSE being given to greater and greater numbers of people. The early Jesuits record this: Nadal says how different parts of the Exercises helped different people with different needs. Polanco insists the Exercises were intended for every class of society, and in fact had helped every class, in ways that preaching, exhortation, and fear of damnation did not.

Ignatius wrote that the FSE can be extended to large numbers of persons, including women and married ladies. Domenech gave the FSE to orphan boys in Messina. Broet often gave them to young women in Bologna and Landini gave them to priests and young women.¹ Favre saw the FSE ripple through Palma and out into the countryside. As lay and church people received them, then they enthusiastically gave them to others, and these receivers in turn gave them to more others.

One pastoral strategy in a new city seems to have been to give the FSE, then form a lay sodality or confraternity, whose rule of life was a way to live out the exact exercises they had learned and the graces that had been given in the FSE. These sodalities, involving huge numbers, spread like wild fire and today, 450 years later, they continue as the worldwide Christian Life Community.

The preached Spiritual Exercises, annual retreats for religious, exercises and catechesis, renewal programs, detailed retreat books applying the Exercises to new groups, directories for eight day versions, drama, music, street processions, art and architecture, devotional books, local language translations, engraved gospel contemplations, visual exercise handouts, the illustrated Exercises and best selling spirituality books all grew naturally from the seedbed of the Spiritual Exercises. Many of these were locked into the life of Jesuit institutions and missions, which

protected the form of the Exercises. Others were creative forms that have flourished and passed, rightly as times, needs, and the world changes.

In the last fifty years, the Spiritual Exercises has seen a new growth of individual spiritual direction in the full Spiritual Exercises, lay people receiving and giving them, new forms of street, youth, and guided retreats in daily life. Now the FSE, applied today in full exercise and retreat form, is gathering momentum. In fact, you are a part of it. This is happening now.

Jesuit Congregations, formal international meetings to keep the direction and ministries of the Jesuit order responsive to the greatest needs worldwide, met in 1890 and 1920, and vigorously supported, to the “greatest extent possible,” giving the FSE especially to men, ecclesiastics, the workers, and the poor. So too, they encouraged forming sodalities for students, young people, workers, and the poor. Both works, likely in turn, were to “imbue an interior spirit of the Christian life, strengthen in solid virtue, train in love and the works of mercy, and inflame with zeal for souls.”²

Today the Spiritual Exercises are promoted as a source of similar inspiration, so that “our deep love of God and our passion for his world should set us on fire, a fire that starts other fires.”³ The FSE needs you to take it to wider groups of people again, to new places, to train new givers and recover the great good they can do. In short, use the FSE to light a fire that starts other fires.

In the new millennium, the First Spiritual Exercises is defined again here, to help you describe it to those interested in becoming your receiver of it, and to help you to apply it to her or him in the giving of it.

The Forms of the Exercises

An Ignatian “spiritual exercise” is a five-part structured prayer with a particular aim to bring one into relationship with God. The “Spiritual Exercises” are a set of spiritual exercises, structured in a four-week retreat, with a particular dynamic written by St. Ignatius and developed by his experience, the experience of the first givers, and the experience of those who received it. They are a single, progressive and powerful experience of grace, built around prayer and spiritual conversation or direction.

The Spiritual Exercises take two forms, the “First” Spiritual Exercises and the “Full” Spiritual exercises and. As noted already, the Full Spiriti-

tual Exercises are given for thirty days in seclusion or thirty weeks in daily life. The First Spiritual Exercises are given for four weeks in daily life. The First Spiritual Exercises, formally called the 18th Annotation Exercises, are “first” in four ways:

1. First in the spiritual journey. They are the first spiritual exercises learnt by the pilgrim Ignatius seeking God’s will. They are the first spiritual exercises he gave to others. They are the first exercises you might give to a searcher today.
2. First in content. They contain many “first” exercises: the first principle and foundation, first Christian prayers, first virtues, first morning thoughts, first creation, first sin, first methods of prayer, first fruits of the Spirit, first rules of discernment, etc. These can be applied in many ways to a receiver’s life.
3. First in the dynamic of the Exercises. One of the First Spiritual Exercises retreats includes all of the First Week of the Full Spiritual Exercises. These and other first exercises must be made first before all the rest.
4. First in use. It is the first form of the Spiritual Exercises ever given. It can be given immediately to everyone. It is a complete form of the Spiritual Exercises in its own right. In Ignatian spirituality, it is the best place to begin.

The FSE offers a choice of four retreats to meet different desires. Applying the Exercises to needs and situations today, each retreat guides a person or group through four weeks of prayer in daily life, Monday to Thursday, and includes a Sunday Eucharist and exercise. Fourteen methods of prayer are taught, usually three new methods each retreat. Four Examen prayers, the mini-discernment of spirits, spiritual conversation and a Program for Life are also received.

While these elements are common, the purpose, content and dynamic of each retreat is different.

Inner Peace in Divine Love. This retreat expands the spiritual exercise called the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love (*Spiritual Exercises* 230–37). In content, it explores a lover’s relationship, where each desires to give and receive from the other. It begins with the receiver’s experience of love and moves into the gifts of God’s love.

Inner Peace in Darkness and Light. This retreat is for those living in some form of darkness, a serious disorder in life, suffering, sinfulness, chronic illness, or lack of freedom. In content, it begins with love, covers the first week of the Full Spiritual Exercises on mercy, gives parallel exercises for healing, and ends with the freedom exercise known as the Foundation (*Spiritual Exercises* 23, 45–90).

Inner Peace in Friendship with Jesus. This retreat deepens a friendship with Jesus. While it is not from Ignatius, a modern reading of the FSE includes this retreat.

Inner Peace in the Service of God. This retreat begins with profoundly beautiful ways of praying using breath and body. Then it considers service, through the beatitudes, new commandments, virtues, senses, gifts of the Spirit, and works of mercy. It uses the three methods of prayer at the end of the Exercises (*Spiritual Exercises* 238–60).

The FSE story continues today with you and your receiver. It all begins with receiving and giving, as written in the Letter of 1 Peter:

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. (1 Pt 4:10–11)