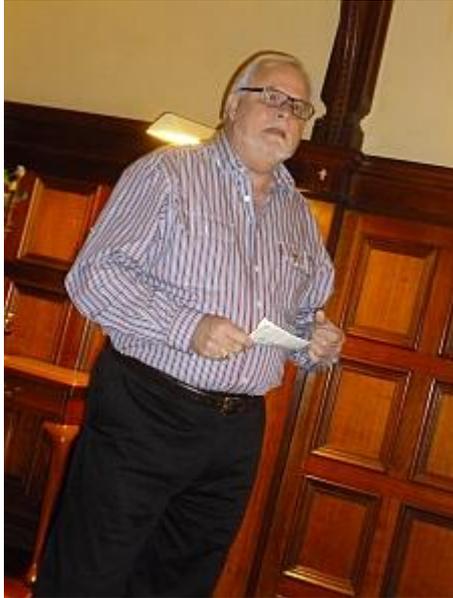


The First Spiritual Exercises hit the streets

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Fr Michael Hansen SJ says he hopes the launch of his new book will help open up even more people to a model of spirituality that harkens back to Ignatius' earliest ministry.



The First Spiritual Exercises: Four Guided Retreats, published by Ave Maria Press, was launched at Campion Retreat Centre in Melbourne on 24 May.

Speaking at the launch, Fr Hansen said the book was the result of not only his own research on the history of Ignatian Spirituality and consultations with experts around the world, but also the practical experiences of people giving the exercises in parishes and faith groups across Australia.

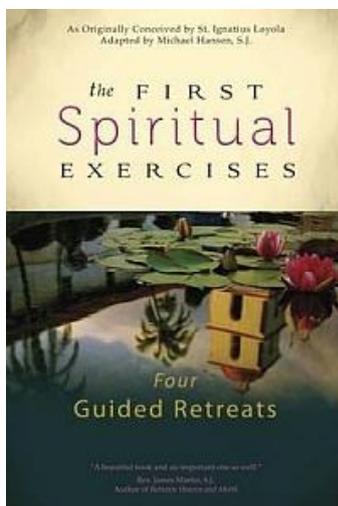
'This book has come about working with people, hearing back how the exercises are, and revising them', he said.

Fr Brendan Kelly said that the best description he'd seen for how the First Spiritual Exercises work came from Cardinal Bergoglio, now Pope Francis: "That child, and that youth, and

that adult that God puts in our path, is not a glass we must fill with content, or a person we must conquer. The Lord already dwells in their heart, but our task is to awaken them to this, and encourage a person's friendship with Christ."

'I can't think of a better description of what these Exercises are about – to awaken people to the God who is already with them', said Fr Kelly.

He passed on a story about a woman in his parish at Holy Family in Western Sydney who recently felt the nudge of her husband's elbow at her side as he whispered to her, "Stop gawking at the church and pay attention to your prayers".



'She replied staunchly, "I am. Pay attention to yours"', Fr Kelly said. 'What she was actually doing was an exercise from the First Spiritual Exercises, to do with the realisation that while attending Mass she was part of the Body of Christ.'

Fr Kelly said the story highlighted just how close to people's everyday lives these spiritual exercises were.

'They draw on and proceed from our human experience, however commonplace these experiences might be', he said.

With so much of evangelisation these days seeming to be about a 'top down' approach, Fr Kelly said the gift of these exercises is that they begin from the ground up.

‘This book, these Exercises, can be a real contribution to the Church in its evangelical thrust at its grass roots level, as it seeks to renew its identity to be what it has always been, since the moment of its inception, a praying and a prayerful Church’, he said.

Ruth Spierings, the co-ordinator of the Campion Retreat Centre’s outreach team, said they had been giving the exercises to communities around Victoria for some time. There are currently four parishes in the Sale diocese about to undergo training in giving the First Spiritual Exercises, with others expected to take up the opportunity soon.

Ms Spierings said she had led groups where people who were not speaking with each other became good friends, and had seen others make life-changing decisions as a result of their experiences.

‘These First Spiritual Exercises are really a great blessing for everybody, and I’ve seen that’, she said.

Christian Life Community (CLC) groups across Australia have also experienced the First Spiritual Exercises.

Chris Gardner, the Australian President of CLC, said that groups in New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia had spoken of the wonderful graces they have received through them.

This year is the 450th anniversary of the establishment of the lay spirituality community that became CLC. He said the heritage of CLC includes some powerful and formative events with the Jesuits. Because the First Spiritual Exercises are tied so strongly to the historical roots of Ignatius’ spiritual ministry, they are an ideal way to introduce people to the CLC way of life.

‘We will be able to use these as a source of formation, to enable us to be an apostolic body to continue that way of life’, he said.

Fr Hansen said when he first started working on the First Spiritual Exercises, he decided to use the terms ‘giver’ and ‘receiver’ to describe those who lead others on the exercises, and those who undertake them. However, the stories of people doing the exercises showed him just how much those receiving the exercises have to give.

‘What I’ve received is incredible life flowing back the other way. They are giving me life’, he said.

He said the power of the exercises was not so much in what they offered people, but what the people who experienced them could offer the Church, and the world.

‘They’re not going to change us and the Church and the world because of what’s in the book, they’re going to change us and the Church and the world because of what people send back to us’, he said.

Copies of The First Spiritual Exercises: Four Guided Retreats, by Fr Michael Hansen SJ, are available to groups and individuals through Jesuit Communications for \$19.95, plus \$10 postage and handling. To place an order, call 1300 72 88 46. Picture on homepage: Cory Templeton, via Flickr.