

The Ignatian Adventure

By Kevin O'Brien SJ (Published by Loyola Press)

Ignatius of Loyola as a young man left his family home in Spain to embark on an adventure that would transform countless lives, beginning with his own. Travelling across Europe and the Mediterranean, he would learn that the greatest adventures in life were not always geographic.

The adventure that God had in store for Ignatius was about travelling the distance between the head and the heart and about inspiring in Ignatius bold, holy desires for God's greater glory and the service of others.

Ignatius gave the church the Spiritual Exercises as a testament to God's gentle, persistent labouring in his life.

Over his lifetime, Ignatius became convinced that the Exercises could help other people draw closer to God and discern God's call in their lives, much as they had helped him.

Ignatius crafted the Exercises as a layman, and he intended them to benefit the entire church. Inspired by the Second Vatican Council, the Society of Jesus has continued to offer the Exercises in varied and creative ways to ever-increasing numbers of people. This is especially important as laypersons assume more active roles in Jesuit universities, schools, parishes, and other works. This book offers one way that the Exercises may be offered to individuals and groups.

Spiritual Exercises

People interested in the Exercises may be familiar with other spiritual classics, such as those by John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Thomas Merton, or Dorothy Day. Such books can be read privately and prayerfully: Their style may be mystical, poetic, or descriptive. The books have the form of narrative or exhortation. The Spiritual Exercises is nothing like those works.

Ignatius's Exercises makes for very dry reading - it's more like reading a cookbook or how-to guide. The retreatant need not even read the book of the Exercises because Ignatius intended the book as a manual for spiritual directors or guides to lead others through the Exercises. In one sense, there is nothing new in the Exercises: Ignatius relied on prayer forms and spiritual traditions deeply rooted in the church.

What is distinctive is how Ignatius artfully weaves them together and how much he emphasizes the experiential and practical in the life of prayer.

Thus, the purpose of the Exercises is very practical: to grow in union with God, who frees us to make good decisions about our lives and to "help souls." Ignatius invites us into an intimate encounter with God, revealed in Jesus Christ, so that we can learn to think and act more like Christ. The Exercises help us grow in interior freedom from sin and disordered loves so that we can respond more generously to God's call in our life. The Exercises demand much of us, engaging our intellect and emotions, our memory and will. Making the Exercises can be both exhilarating and exhausting; it's no wonder that Ignatius compared making the Spiritual Exercises to doing physical exercise, such as "*taking a walk, travelling on foot, and running*".

The Exercises are a school of prayer. The two primary forms of praying taught in the Exercises are meditation and contemplation.

In **meditation**, we use our intellect to wrestle with basic principles that guide our life. Reading Scripture, we pray over words, images, and ideas. We engage our memory to appreciate the activity of God in our life. Such insights into who God is and who we are before God allow our hearts to be moved.

Contemplation is more about feeling than thinking. Contemplation often stirs the emotions and inspires deep, God-given desires. In contemplation, we rely on our imaginations to place ourselves in a setting from the Gospels or in a scene proposed by Ignatius. Scripture has a central place in the Exercises because it is the revelation of who God is, particularly in Jesus Christ, and of what God does in our world. Although Scripture study is central to any believer's faith, *in the Exercises, we pray with Scripture; we do not study it.*

