

## IGNATIAN EXPERIMENTING

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WHEN IGNATIUS ENVISAGES how the Spiritual Exercises might help a new Jesuit recruit, his language is both expressive and revealing. The candidate is to be occupied in,

... making spiritual exercises for one month or a little more or less; that is to say, in examining his consciousness, turning over his whole past life and making a general confession, meditating upon his sins, and contemplating the steps and mysteries of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ our Lord, exercising himself in praying vocally and mentally according to the capacity of the persons, as will be taught him in our Lord etc.

Much is lost when we interpret this paragraph as enjoining simply a 'long retreat' or 'the full Spiritual Exercises'. For a start, Ignatius does not directly prescribe the use of his own book: it is the fruit that matters, not the process by which that fruit is attained.<sup>1</sup> The hope is that the candidate's personal history should somehow come into contact with the movement—the 'steps and mysteries'—of Christ's mission. It is important, too, that the candidate's personal capacities be respected. How revealing those final phrases are, culminating as they do with a typically Ignatian 'etc.'—an acknowledgment that the needful can never be fully specified, and that no two candidates will have this experience in quite the same way.

This foundational text surely raises questions about contemporary practice. That the full Exercises are made by groups for a fixed number of days, with relatively little scope for variation as to which exercises

<sup>1</sup> Ignatius' detachment from his own programme here echoes the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The first note 'to give some understanding of the Spiritual Exercises which follow' begins by stating that 'spiritual exercises' denotes 'every way'—not just, therefore, the ways in the book—of examining consciousness, of meditation, contemplation and the like (Exx 1).

are done when, is perhaps as foreign to Ignatius' own practice as the preached retreat.

But more importantly, Ignatius understands the Exercises as part of a wider scheme involving six *experiencias principales*.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Ignatius' dominant concern in this context is flexibility. He admits that there is more to an individual's formation than the list he gives; we can acknowledge that candidates have already had these experiences, or defer them till later; they can be altered or in some cases replaced by an alternative, if the one responsible decides in the light of 'persons, times and places, and what arises from these'. But clearly these six experiences are somehow normative, and a case needs to be made for any departure from them.

### ***Ignatius' Text***

Here is Ignatius' programme in his own words.

*... before he enters into the house or college, or after having entered into it, there are required six principal experiments [experiencias principales], not to mention many others that will be spoken of further on. Experiments of this kind can be anticipated and postponed and moderated, and in some particular case can be replaced with others, by virtue of the Superior's authority, according to persons, times and places and what arises from these [sus occurencias].*

*The first is making spiritual exercises for one month or a little more or less; that is to say, in examining his consciousness, turning over his whole past life and making a general confession, meditating upon his sins, and contemplating the steps and mysteries of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ our Lord, exercising himself in praying vocally and mentally according to the capacity of the persons, as will be taught him in our Lord etc.*

<sup>2</sup> *Examen* 4.9-15 [64-70]. For further information, see Philip Endean, 'Origins of Apostolic Formation: Jerome Nadal and Novitiate Experiments', *The Way Supplement*, 39 (Autumn 1980), 57-82; for a particularly striking early text in connection with the pilgrimage experiment, see Simão Rodrigues, 'Guidelines for Pilgrims: Coimbra 1546', *The Way*, 42/1 (January 2003), 58-70.

2<sup>nd</sup> Serving in hospitals or in some one hospital for a further month, eating and sleeping there, or serving for one or more hours in the day, depending on the times, places, and persons, helping and serving all, sick and well, in conformity with the directions they receive, in order to lower and humble themselves more, thus giving a full demonstration about themselves [dando entera señal de sí] to the effect that they are completely breaking with the world and with its pomps and vanities, in order to serve in everything their Creator and Lord, crucified for them.

3<sup>rd</sup> Making a pilgrimage for a further month without money, or rather in begging from door to door at appropriate times, for the love of God our Lord, in order to get used to poor eating and poor lodging. Also so that abandoning all the reliance which he could have in money or other created things, he should put it entirely, with genuine faith and intense love, in his Creator and Lord. Or the two months in hospitals or some one hospital; or the two months making a pilgrimage; according to what seems best to his Superior.

4<sup>th</sup> Having entered the house, exercising himself with complete diligence and care in various low and humble offices, in all of them giving a good example of himself.

5<sup>th</sup> Exposing Christian teaching or a part of it to children and other unlettered persons in public, or teaching it in private, following what offers itself and seems more appropriate in our Lord, and in keeping with the persons.

6<sup>th</sup> Having been proved edifying, he will move forward, preaching or hearing confessions or working at all of this, following times, places, and everyone's dispositions.

## **The Fruit Sought**

What, then, are *experiencias principales*? The only real option for a translator is to resort to convention and jargon: 'principal experiments'. One of their purposes is to test the candidate; they are experiments to see if the candidate is really suitable for the way of life Ignatius envisages. But another nuance that is surely present is that of a 'formative experience'. Like the time of retreat in which the Exercises are made, these other human situations foster in a particular way human openness to God's touch as it deepens and specifies our

discipleship. Ignatius' usage is not far from that of Tate and Brady's metrical version of Psalm 34 more than a century later:

O make but trial of His love,  
experience will decide,  
How blessed they are, and only they,  
who in his truth confide.

The crucial point is that Ignatius' programme of growth in familiarity with God is not confined to what might conventionally be thought of as prayer. The programme also involves time on the margins of society, as a worker in the kind of rough hostel that a sixteenth-century hospital would have been, and as a poor pilgrim on the road. For well-born recruits in a stratified culture, there might also have been an element of social dislocation in performing ordinary household chores. Another element is that of communicating the faith, of helping souls by educating the young and by preaching. Finally, there is an element of simply settling down into the routines of ordinary living, whether domestic or professional. And perhaps the force of *principales*—though this can only be conjecture—is that no programme will be complete unless all these aspects are somehow honoured.

Clearly, Ignatius was writing with budding Jesuits in mind. What he says needs to be applied, not just to the different cultures of five centuries later, but also to the diverse life-situations of the far wider range of people who follow his spirituality. And it seems implausible simply to say that everything apart from the time in retreat is somehow specifically Jesuit. The spiritual formation of the Exercises needs to be complemented with an exposure to God's Spirit speaking through our daily routine, though the experience of trying to communicate our faith to others, and through the questions which arise when we take up a standpoint on society's margins.

### **Experiments Today**

All of which brings us, imperceptibly, to this present issue of *The Way*. The articles which follow look at different aspects of contemporary experience which might today realise the concerns underlying Ignatius' *experiencias principales*. We begin with 'retreats on the streets', an initiative from Berlin which seeks to incorporate the experience of life in a modern city, especially of the conditions under which its poor live,

into the processes of prayer and reflection characteristic of a retreat. In different ways Tony O’Riordan, a priest working in Dublin, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founding father of liberation theology, model the stretching of the ethical and theological imagination that such experiences can provoke; and Kathleen Fischer explores the forms of prayer that arise in situations of massive need.

Ignatius’ keenness that his followers should instruct children is well documented. This symbolic commitment has several significances. At one level, teaching children and the poor is an exercise in humility. But, just as the contemplations on the Lord’s infancy at the beginning of the Second Week can often bring to consciousness hidden material from our own childhood, so the experience of teaching younger people can become, paradoxically, a moment of deep personal learning, as they provoke us to face our own unfinished business. And young people have needs and experiences which simply do not fit within a culture determined by their elders. It is not surprising that Ignatius’ attraction for uncharted worlds beyond conventional boundaries led him into a particular care for youth. That concern is represented in this collection by a piece on BustedHalo.com, a project sponsored by the Paulists in the United States that uses the resources of the internet innovatively to reach out to today’s young adults.

The fruits of a good retreat manifest themselves in everyday life. Virginie Lecourt and Margaret Benefiel both write on how spirituality might influence daily tasks in the workplace, while Marion Morgan writes movingly on how there are also Ignatian moments in the experiences of retirement and domestic caring.

Ignatius sketched his ideal in his account of the Jesuit superior general: a man ‘very united and familiar with God our Lord in prayer and all his activities [*operaciones*]’.<sup>3</sup> There is an echo here of the preparatory prayer that he has us make before every time of prayer in the Exercises: ‘that all my intentions, actions and operations may be directed purely in the service and praise of His Divine Majesty’ (Exx 46). This reality goes beyond what is conventionally called prayer. We need to discover it in the regularity of our routines, and in the inarticulate calls that come to us from the margins and from the future.

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<sup>3</sup> *Constitutions* 9.2.1 [723].