

‘WHAT I OUGHT TO SAY TO THE ETERNAL WORD’

The Four Authors of the Spiritual Exercises

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WHEN WE ARE LISTENING OR READING, God is speaking to us: when we are praying we are speaking to God.¹ Christian prayer is expressed in words; it is a dialogue, an act of love mutually shared. Our conversation with God in the Exercises is personal and rests upon a process of communication involving several partners. A tourist who admires the beautiful buildings of a famous city easily forgets that all this magnificence would not be there were it not for the bricks and the mortar which binds them together, unshaken subsoil and strong foundations. The aim of the present contribution is to remind ourselves of the foundation stones and the master-builders of the edifice of the Exercises. In so doing we wish to express our thanks for the experience of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises, by trying to rediscover their fundamental structure—their infrastructure—which transmits this experience to us even after more than four hundred years.

The Text of Ignatius

The basis for this study is primarily to be found in the little book containing the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Even leafing through the pages is enough to make it clear that we are not dealing with just any old book. One cannot simply read the text as one might read the life of a saint or a book on spirituality. With all the remarks on method, the preparations for meditation, the rules and annotations, this little book comes across as a complex and many-sided document. It is not that

¹ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 85.7, ‘oratio tua locutio est ad Deum; quando legis, Deus tibi loquitur; quando oras, Deo loqueris’ (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina volume 39 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1956], 1182).



*The title-page of the first print edition of the
Spiritual Exercises*

the plethora of prayers and instructions reflects any lack of organization: quite the contrary, it imposes a strong and very precise division into days and weeks, exercises and contemplations. It is not a text simply to be skimmed through, nor was it assembled and put together to be read. It is a text to be experienced and, with the assistance of the person giving the Exercises, *acted upon*. Indeed, Ignatius' intention was that the text should vanish behind the person who is giving the Exercises and allowing them to be acted upon. For this reason,

Ignatius did not want his book to appear on any bookseller's shelves. In fact, when the book left the press of the printer Antonio Bladio in Rome on 11 September 1548, it was not put on sale. Ignatius wanted the text to be entrusted only to Jesuits who had themselves made the Exercises, and whose personal experience enabled them to give the Exercises to others.

The Exercises can never be based simply on a reading of the little book—on the text and the reader—but on the living encounter between the person giving the Exercises and the person receiving them (Exx 15). Thanks to the long chain of people who have experienced the Exercises down the centuries, problems about presenting them in an up-to-date and inculturated manner should not arise, since each person receives them from a contemporary.

Ignatius wishes to keep the person making the Exercises away from any contact with the text. The Eleventh Annotation presupposes that exercitants do not have the book available while they are in the First Week: '... it will be helpful not to know anything of what is to be done in the Second Week' (Exx 11). In line with the Second Annotation, the person giving the Exercises should content him- or herself with a brief and summary explanation, without any elaboration of the history. This

remark is especially necessary for the Second Week, when the Exercises reach the time of the election. In a letter of 18 July 1556, Ignatius himself writes,

To give them in full form, one needs to find subjects who are capable and suitable for helping after being helped themselves; otherwise one should not go beyond the First Week.²

It is also significant that Ignatius encourages us to read the Bible, the *Following of Christ* or lives of the saints during the Exercises (Exx 79, 127, 100), but never recommends reading his own little book. Even more significant is the fact that Ignatius does not prescribe any one of the four existing versions of the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In order to have them accepted by the Holy See he presented two by no means identical Latin translations of the *Spiritual Exercises* for approval. One of these texts gives a word-for-word translation of the Spanish original in a fairly stiff and awkward Latin, while the other has—particularly through its more nuanced choice of words—aimed at a more cultured and elegant Latin.

The author of the *Exercises* seems to make no effort to check the accuracy of these translations: he puts his trust much more in a spiritual adventure communicated by one person to another, and not in a definitive version of his *Exercises*. This relative distance of Ignatius from his own text underlines and endorses his wish to make every effort to allow our Creator and Lord to work directly (*immediate*)—not through any intermediary—with his creation (Exx 79, 127).³ The person giving the Exercises is by no means superfluous when it comes to achieving this immediacy; nevertheless he or she must withdraw at the crucial moment, since, as Ignatius writes, ‘the more our soul finds itself alone and isolated, the more apt it makes itself to approach and to reach its Creator and Lord’ (Exx 20).

This discretion can be seen also in the language which Ignatius chose to use. Castilian Spanish—the Spanish of Ignatius’ time—is used in all and only those places where specific things need to be expressed

² Ignatius of Loyola, letter to Fulvio Androzzi, in *Letters and Instructions* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 694. (MHSJ ME 12, no. 6692, 141–143.)

³ ‘So, the one who is giving the Exercises should not turn or incline to one side or the other, but standing in the centre like a balance, leave the Creator to act immediately with the creature (*immediate obrar al Criador con la criatura*), and the creature with its Creator and Lord.’ (Exx 15)

as unambiguously, crisply and precisely as possible. Many mystics—and Ignatius himself was a mystic—have employed the beautiful language of poetry and literature to express their experience of God. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross did just that. But the preface to the 1548 edition leaves us under no illusion that the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* might be savoured as literature. The very first line makes it clear that it is not intended to be read but put into practice—*non tantum lecturi sed facturi*.

The style is laconic: it is characterized by brevity, sobriety and power. In a few images and striking words it presents the great mysteries of our faith and introduces the decisions which will affect the rest of our lives. Hardly concerned to write well or beautifully, Ignatius nonetheless always considers what he says and gives every word its proper weight. According to Pedro Ribadaneira's account, Ignatius took a great deal of time to go over what he had written; he reread letters which he had just written and then reread them again, checking every word and scoring out or correcting whatever he thought necessary.⁴

If in editing the *Spiritual Exercises* not a single word came spontaneously from Ignatius' pen and everything was carefully considered, several questions suggest themselves. Ignatius reveals himself as a man of few words, each of them carefully chosen. The text of the *Exercises* is well ordered, crisp and succinct, giving us the impression that it does not contain a single superfluous word. What then are we to make of more than four hundred places in which the author places one word alongside another almost as if he uses two words to express just one idea? Everyone who has made the *Exercises* is familiar with the phrases 'Principle and Foundation' (Exx 23) and 'love and serve'. Ignatius is certainly not influenced by considerations of style or rhetoric; rather these doublets are the result of his desire to express himself with precision. If, for example, one considers the phrase 'Principle and Foundation' it will immediately become clear that in the *Exercises* the word 'principle' always has a temporal sense; that is to say, it always means 'beginning'.⁵ Ignatius does not regard his text as an explanation of 'first principles'. In using the phrase 'Principle and Foundation' he makes it clear that the beginning of the *Exercises* is more than just a starting point; it is also their spiritual foundation. Not

⁴ Pedro Ribadaneira, *Dicta et facta sancti Ignatii*, 5, 83, in MHSJ FN 2, 494.

⁵ See Exx 105, 239, 333 and 334.

many translators allow themselves the freedom to translate the phrase as ‘Beginning and Foundation’, and so fail to point out that from its Latin root it can mean not only ‘norm’ but also ‘origin’.

In two places Ignatius uses the phrase *amor y servir*, ‘love and serve’. Exx 233: ‘to ask for what I want. It will be here to ask for knowledge from within of such great good received, so that recognising this entirely, I may be able in all to love and serve His Divine Majesty’⁶ And Exx 363, ‘to move the heart to love and serve God our Lord in everything’.⁷ One might think of this pair, ‘loving’ and ‘serving’, as two parallel activities, two realities. But linking them semantically suggests another interpretation. Ignatius is only too well aware that the word ‘love’, is ambiguous, and so he might give the impression of calling for nothing more than beautiful words and pleasant feelings. So he employs it rarely and with great care. Has he not made it sufficiently clear that ‘love ought to be put more in deeds than in words’ (Exx 230)? In combining ‘love and serve’ into a linguistic unity, he is underlining the impossibility of truly loving unless that love is incarnated and brought down to earth.

The impossibility of truly loving unless that love is incarnated

This is also true of the pair ‘love and follow’, which he uses to capture the longing ‘that I may more love and follow Him’ (Exx 104).⁸ The person who does not follow does not love. On the other occasions when he uses the word ‘to love’, Ignatius emphasizes how valuable it is when someone loves ‘no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but in the Creator of them all’ (Exx 316), and that the longing for God’s will must shine forth in our manner of loving (Exx 338). In all other cases, Ignatius does not use ‘love’ but prefers ‘serve’ and ‘follow’. No doubt these are matters of detail. Still they show how carefully Ignatius has polished his book of the Exercises, in order to make his spiritual adventure comprehensible to us.

There is a notable accumulation of these two-word phrases in a key passage where even the title contains two pairs: ‘To Amend and Reform one’s own Life and State’ (Exx 189). Ignatius does not content himself simply with urging an alteration in one’s lifestyle—*emendar*—but insists that this must involve as a follow-up a genuine reform of our habits and

⁶ From the Contemplation to Attain Love.

⁷ Rules for Thinking with the Church, no. 11.

⁸ Meditation on the Incarnation.

ways of behaving, which is why he calls it *emendar y reformar*. The same precision can be understood in the expression 'one's own life and state'. Doubtless one's style of life must be changed, but in accordance with the demands of one's station in life, which can be that of a lay-person or of a religious or priest. The election leads to a reform of our manner of life but always in accord with the particular circumstances of our station.

Through the quantity of such semantic pairings—there are more than four hundred of them—Ignatius expresses a kind of passion to miss no opportunity to remove every spiritual unclarity in order to avoid his text being misunderstood. With his word-pairs, doublets—and sometimes triplets—he wants to support the person giving the Exercises in trying to make each instruction in the Exercises concrete. The spiritual goal of Ignatius is a project without limits—a *magis* ('more')—which could easily take refuge in what is undefined and vague; and that is exactly why precise clarification is needed.

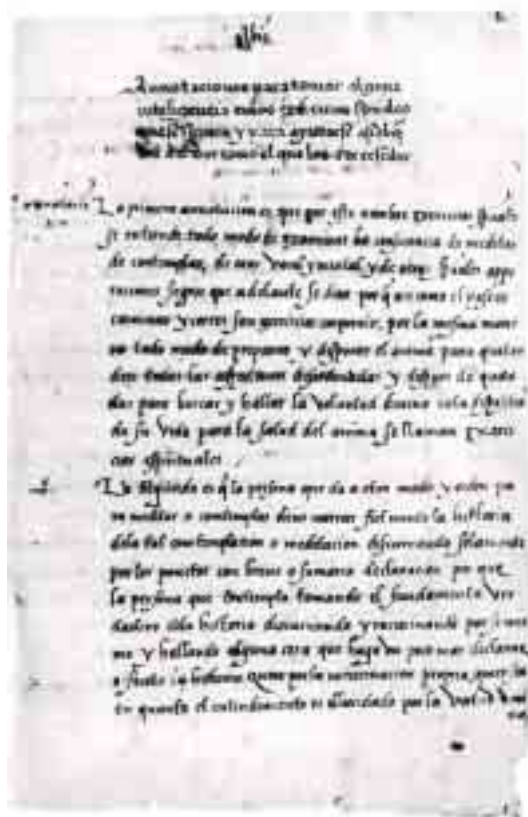
The Text of the One Who Gives the Exercises

Ignatius' text does not remain the only text. What we mostly hear and receive is a 'second' text, namely, the text of the person who is giving us the Exercises and who, through these Exercises, creates his or her own text (see Exx 5–15). What is written in the book of the Exercises can be extended or shortened, softened or strengthened by the person giving the Exercises, who can select one thing and leave out another, using personal experience to make it accessible to others. In this way, he or she can present a text which has been modified specifically with regard to the person making the Exercises. There can hardly be any doubt that the knowledge of theology and biblical exegesis which has developed since Vatican II—to say nothing of our knowledge of the human sciences—enormously enriches the ministry which the giver of the Exercises can offer.

But then, how is it possible to be sure of remaining faithful to Ignatius and to his text, if a literal fidelity is not intended by the author himself? To be sure, the task of the person giving the Exercises is by no means an easy one. Should he or she keep strictly to the Annotations, Directives, Additions, Instructions and detailed Rules on which the Exercises rely? If someone by and large stays strictly within the Ignatian boundaries, will this not stifle the Spirit and hence also the surprises

and unforeseen moves which the Spirit produces and which does not so much call us to order as to develop our human freedom? Must the person giving the Exercises not first submit to being grasped by the freedom of the Spirit, who alone makes it possible to experience and inwardly taste the things of God (Exx 2), and so meet the Lord in person? Only in this way can that person help the devout soul to set out on the way on which he or she can better serve God in future (see Exx 15).

The recommendations of the Twelfth Annotation show that Ignatius was conscious of this tension between keeping to the letter and the reception of the Spirit.⁹ The person giving the Exercises must be quite clear in his or her own mind that it is possible to say too much and in so doing deprive the exercitant of the opportunity to discover anything. Even the most competent guides must limit themselves to a short and summary presentation which leaves the exercitant the greatest freedom to discover the true meaning of the history which is proposed for meditation. A balance has to be found here. Juan Polanco, in the *Directorium* of 1599, requires that the Exercises should not be given in too short and schematic a manner.



A page from Ignatius' manuscript of the Spiritual Exercises

⁹ See Exx 12: 'As the one who is receiving the Exercises is to give an hour to each of the five Exercises or Contemplations which will be made every day, the one who is giving the Exercises has to warn them carefully to always see that their soul remains content in the consciousness of having been a full hour in the Exercise, and rather more than less.'

Of course the way to God should be opened, obstacles removed, and experiences deepened. But this dynamic gets impeded by too many detailed suggestions.

Ignatius' text itself bears witness to this paradoxical clash. The person giving the Exercises must definitely require a precise adherence to the details—how the exercitant is to pray, eat, sleep and meditate on the Scriptures, for example. But equally, he or she must open the horizon wide, constantly urging the greatest possible openness to God, and providing inspiring hints on how to make sure that the way to travel towards and with God is not predetermined or restricted. If one looks at the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a whole, approximately a third of it suggests a perspective of the widest possible openness—as for instance 'offerings of greater value and greater importance' to the call of the King (Exx 97), or to join the Holy Trinity in looking down upon the whole globe of the Earth (Exx 102), or to offer one's whole freedom and entire self to the Lord (Exx 234). Two thirds appear to take the concern for detail to extremes—as, for instance, the mathematical method for the quicker eradication of some sin or fault (Exx 27), or the division of the Exercises into weeks, days and hours, or the mysteries of the life of Christ into 'three points'.¹⁰

Nonetheless there is a link between the all-embracing standpoint—the word *todo* ('all', 'whole') occurs frequently and throughout the text—and attention to the tiniest details. The task of the person giving the Exercises does not consist in choosing between a free and a literal interpretation, but in taking care that the exercitant remains with the tension between the experience of the wider universality of God, on the one hand, and the smallest, concrete details on the other. This was the inspiration for the celebrated inscription on Ignatius' tombstone: 'Not to be constrained by the largest, but yet to be immersed in the smallest thing—that is the characteristic of God'.¹¹

Ignatius has no time for any kind of 'Teach yourself spirituality' technique, still less will he lend any support to a dreamy religiosity. Given that he relies throughout the Exercises on God's entire plan of salvation, he cannot pass over the fact that God's salvific will must be

¹⁰ See the Mysteries of the Life of Christ, Exx 261–312.

¹¹ 'Non coerceri maximo, contineri tamen a minimo divinum est.' See Hugo Rahner, *Ignatius: The Man and the Priest* (Rome: Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis, 1977), 124.

incarnated in the concrete reality of everyday life. He allows himself to be guided by the Incarnation in all its mysterious character and its completely human realism. The methodical development which Ignatius outlines in order to dispose us to work for the greater glory of God is immediately linked to the daily routine of our existence and to the structure of human beings, with our memory, understanding and will (Exx 50–52, 206 and 334).

None of the elements in this totality is static. Everything is subject to the impulse of the Holy Spirit or moved by the various 'spirits' (*motiones spirituales*). Although everything ought to be in movement from here towards God, Ignatius prefers to use emphatic comparatives like *más* and *mejór* ('yet more' and 'even better'). In the open-endedness of the comparative, what is characteristic of God is expressed better than by a static superlative.

It is enough to collect all the passages in which Ignatius uses the word *mudar* ('change') to demonstrate this his 'system' is not unalterable. If the exercitant has not found any answer in the Lord, the person giving the Exercises must help, bringing him or her to change the way of meditating or sleeping, doing penance or fasting. This is not a matter of a practical or technical alteration, but of allowing ourselves to be taught by the Lord whatever will most help us to become one with him. For God 'knows our nature infinitely better, often in such changes He gives each one to perceive what is suitable for him' (Exx 89).

Ignatius does not say that that is unimportant whether someone prays sitting or standing, or lying on the ground, or on their knees, or with their gaze fixed upwards



(Exx 76); rather it is essential to learn from experience which bodily position is the one that the Lord has selected for me, in which I can best find out that which I desire. The success of the Exercises is not due to an efficiency which is peculiar to their means and methods; far more important is that these things are chosen for us by God who knows us better than we believe we can know ourselves.

A superficial reading of the text might give the impression that Ignatius is forcing us into a narrow tunnel of Additions and Rules. True, Ignatius does erect barriers in places where he is aware that there are dead ends, for he knows from his own experience that the exercitant without discipline is simply dreaming of God rather than actually encountering God. This wisdom Ignatius expresses in the contemplations of the Second Week, where he says that their number can be increased or lessened 'according to the time each one wants to spend, or according as he gets profit' (Exx 162).

From this we may conclude that the responsibility of the person giving the Exercises is to maintain an attitude of readiness, so as to choose from the suggestions Ignatius offers in the text only what the Lord would wish to choose for the person making the Exercises, and indeed to do so in such a way that the choice is of what is both most

**What is both most
down-to-earth
and most
spiritual**

down-to-earth and most spiritual. Consequently the director must be sure that the exercitant is following the path that Ignatius has provided. So he or she must carefully inquire about the exercitant's style of prayer and observance of the appointed times (Exx 6); and on the other hand when the exercitant experiences spiritual movements, the person giving the Exercises 'should not turn or incline to one side or the other' (Exx 15), so that the Lord can take the initiative and the exercitant 'but standing in the centre like a balance', ready to follow that direction which he or she senses would be more to the glory and praise of God our Lord' (see Exx 15 and 179). The director should not differentiate, but should remain 'indifferent', so that the Lord himself can make the difference and settle the matter.

This way of handing on the Exercises depends upon the development of a strong personal relationship between the person giving the Exercises and the person making them. It is also the reason why Ignatius never speaks of someone 'preaching' a retreat, nor of a 'leader' or a 'master', but always uses a subordinate clause 'the one who

gives the Exercises'; what that person has to offer is not a sermon, nor advice, nor a simple sympathetic presence. Ignatius expects such people in the Exercises to make themselves, with all their experience of God, available in such a way that God can in full freedom work directly with the creature.

Since here we are concerned with the foundation stones that bear the weight of the edifice of the Exercises, the question arises whether there is any structure to be discovered in the activity of the person who gives the Exercises. The text of the *Spiritual Exercises* consists largely of leading the exercitant into a way of asking questions, an interplay of questions and answers (*colloquium*). Ignatius is not much concerned with discovering the being and essence of God, but much more with discovering the will of God for a human life. It is not a question of seeking a vision of God (*visio*); he is looking for a sign from God which will enable someone to know whether a chosen path really is God's path. This corresponds to the attitude described in Psalm 123:

As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, until he has mercy upon us.

We must therefore ask questions, and it is with the help of the person who gives the Exercises that the right questions need to be put to the Lord so that, in an attitude of readiness, we can receive a sign from God: God's answer. There is no lack of explicit questions to ask. The most familiar questions are those which bear upon 'what I have done for Christ, what I am doing for Christ, what I ought to do for Christ?' (Exx 53). The great majority of questions are, however, implicit in this: 'to ask God our Lord for what I want and desire' (Exx 48), 'to consider that all those who have judgment and reason will offer their entire selves to the labour' (Exx 96).

Everything is open to question, and the crucial question is the one which enables my individual freedom to be united to the will of God, not just in the abstract, as a kind of pious wish, but in the concrete circumstances of my life through a spiritual choice (*electio*), a decision which has to be made—priesthood or marriage (see Exx 135), to accept a sum of money or to dispose of it (Exx 150). It is impossible to pose these questions without bringing oneself into question, so that God may truly answer. Of course, a question that is accurately put is already on

the way to receiving a decisive answer from God. Because the Ignatian mystic is orientated towards ever greater service for the greater glory of God, the question posed by the Exercises is not so much 'Who is God for me?' but more 'What is it that God wills for a human life which in the loving eyes of God should have a calling and a mission; and that not just because God loves such a life, but also because He wills to make use of what is His own?'

The Text of the Person Who Receives the Exercises

In everything that has been said so far about the person giving the Exercises, the person to whom they are given has been included as well. Ignatius avoids using the word 'exercitant' and instead always uses 'the one who receives them'. This 'receives' seems intended to keep exercitants locked up in themselves. To describe them, Ignatius uses a large number of reflexive verbs, which denote an activity which subjects perform on themselves: 'he who is exercising himself' (Exx 130), 'to see myself ...' (Exx 151), 'let him perfect himself' (Exx 173). An even stronger version is to be found in 'looking at myself' (Exx 53), 'to reflect on myself' (Exx 114) and, more strongly still, when Ignatius explains that this work of God's is truly for our salvation: the Lord was born 'for me' (Exx 116), dies upon the cross 'for my sins' (Exx 53), and 'desires to give me Himself as much as He can' (Exx 234).

The Text of the One Who Instructs the Understanding and Urges on the Will¹²

Here once again we encounter the realism of the Exercises which confronts us with ourselves 'to conquer oneself' (Exx 21), as well as with the spiritual fulfilment to which this experience leads us: a personal participation in salvation history in handing oneself over to the will of God. Here we encounter the fourth 'author' of the Exercises—the Lord himself. This deepest of all personal events flows into a trusting dialogue, even when our part of the conversation is words whereas God's reply consists of non-verbal signs which God communicates to us in the conversation. Even the very silence of God is in and of itself a sign. This is not surprising, because we too can reply with silence and with signs. In the Old

¹² Exx 180, and more widely 'Three Times of Election', Exx 175–188.

Testament the silence of God is an integral part of God’s dialogue with God’s people: it indicates that God is not content with them. In the New Testament, Christ’s silence before Herod speaks eloquently.

If we reflect more closely on all this, we will see that even in its words our speech encloses a dimension of silence, as when we wish to express in words what in our faith is ineffable. When, in the Fifteenth Annotation, Ignatius attempts to express to us what



God’s love is like, he uses expressions which human beings use to express affection—speaking of being embraced and clasped by God—or uses the image of fire, as when he to speaks of being or becoming inflamed: ‘the Creator and Lord Himself should communicate Himself to His devout soul, inflaming it with His love and praise’ (Exx 15).

We can do no more than stammer—trying to find more or less suitable images and metaphors. Even when we talk of God speaking, we are well aware that we are unable to say anything about the reality which God has indicated to us. God has such respect for our freedom that through speech God will neither overwhelm us nor force Godself upon us like a clap of thunder. When God revealed Godself to the prophet Elijah, it seemed ‘like a still, small voice’ (1 Kings 19:12, King James version).¹³

Only in such speech, which Ignatius calls a ‘colloquy’, can it happen that the Word of God replies to our helpless words by producing spiritual movements in our souls: reactions of joy or pain, consolation or desolation. When these come from the Holy Spirit, they become a true

¹³ NRSV: ‘a sound of sheer silence’.

sign which causes us to be consumed in the fire of the Love of our Creator and Lord (Exx 316) and shows us the way we must follow and the choice we must make in order to do so. Ignatius explicitly indicates how these signs from God are to be interpreted and how this speech of God is to be translated into our words and our human decisions.

The conversation between human beings and God is therefore a true colloquy, and not a soliloquy—certainly not just talking to oneself. In an intimate conversation God's reply is no empty silence of absence, which is wordless. It is the divine reply which we can discover in consolation and in desolation since—as Ignatius says—'consider the office of consoling which Christ our Lord bears, and comparing how friends are accustomed to console friends' (Exx 224).

In order that we might experience and understand something of the signs of God in the various movements of consolation and desolation, Ignatius gives us a hint from his own experience: it is the Lord alone who can come in to us and leave us, in order to move us in such a way as to draw us into his love. In this conversation, the Lord is the fourth author of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Four Authors—a Single Ensemble

We wished to uncover the foundation stones which underlie the edifice of the Exercises, and have come across four agents—master builders—each of whom constructs his or her own Exercises: the Lord, who is at work in all things (Exx 236); Ignatius, who goes through his own experience point by point; the person who gives the exercises; and the one who receives them—four authors who bind themselves together for the greater praise and glory of his Divine Majesty (Exx 369). Perhaps we can now, with Ignatius, better reflect on 'what I ought to say to the Eternal Word':

Thinking what I ought to say to the Three Divine Persons, or to the Eternal Word incarnate, or to our Mother and Lady, asking according to what I feel in me, in order more to follow and imitate Our Lord, so lately incarnate. I will say an Our Father. (Exx 109)

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