IMAGINING IGNATIAN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Robert R. Marsh

I USED TO BELIEVE that, if I only looked carefully enough, there would be enough guidance embedded in the various annotations and additions of the Spiritual Exercises to amount to a model for a truly Ignatian spiritual direction. After all, the annotations and additions are there principally to tell the one giving the Exercises how to go about it, and it seems reasonable to suppose that giving spiritual direction is not *completely* different from giving the Exercises.

But every time I have looked to the annotations for a guide to spiritual direction I have come away disappointed. There *are* all sorts of gems to be mined there—about compassion, balance, giving the priority to God, keeping quiet and so on—but these are more about dispositions in the director than what might go on in direction. They are almost more about what a director should *avoid* doing than what the director might actually *do*. In fact there is a long tradition of 'training' spiritual directors by giving them the Exercises and then letting them direct by instinct: if they feel they need more they can do a course in listening skills or counselling.

It is clear from my tone that I think there is a better approach. I believe we *can* use the Spiritual Exercises to develop a very clear characterization of a specifically Ignatian model of spiritual direction—a model that translates readily into practice and is easy to teach. We just have to look in an unlikely and underappreciated place: the highly structured Ignatian 'hour of prayer'.[1]

[1] An alternative approach to the same issue can be found in Brian O'Leary, 'What is Specific to an Ignatian Model of Spiritual Direction?' *The Way*, 47/1–2 (Jan/April 2008), 9–28.

The Way, 48/3 (July 2009), 27–42

The Structured Hour of Prayer

When I first made the Spiritual Exercises as a Jesuit novice I really did not get on well with all the fussy structure. I loved the vast vision of the transforming project of God unfolding before me day by day, but I struggled to remember to get in my preludes, to ask for the grace, wondering whether that came before or after the 'composition of place'—whatever that was supposed to mean—getting distracted by keeping tabs on my time, then—damn!—forgetting the colloquy. Where in all that structure was the room actually to *pray*? I answered my own question by simplifying: just doing what seemed to flow and not worrying about the rest. It seemed to work. Since the experience had not been a complete shambles I found myself being very 'flexible' when I gave the Exercises the first few times. I presented the pattern of the hour, explained it a little, and offered the good Ignatian maxim, 'use what helps and throw away the rest'. On the whole my retreatants made the same kind of adjustment I had done.

But why, I wondered, would Ignatius include all that structure if it could be jettisoned so lightly? There is a common opinion that Ignatius was just fussy by nature, 'SJ' in the terms of the Myers-Briggs test as well as by religious affiliation,[2] and a *man* to boot, locked into hierarchical and 'left-brain' ways, maybe even neurotically so.[3] Such an attitude frees those of us with other temperaments to try things our own way, adapting the Exercises to suit our own practices of prayer. It shifts the focus of the Exercises onto the 'filling' in the structural sandwich: the meditations and contemplations and the dynamic process they propose and present.[4]

I could never quite sign up to this view, since I believe the Exercises bear all the marks of careful construction. Moreover, in thinking about what makes anything 'Ignatian', many of the elements of the structure emerge as important. What, for example, would Ignatian spirituality be without cherishing desire or trusting imagination? So, maybe there is more going on in the Ignatian structure than first meets the eye.

[2] The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a method of personality assessment based on Jungian categories. 'SJ's, 'Sensing Judgers', can be caricatured as conservative and or even rigid.

[3] William Meissner has discussed Ignatius' hang-ups at length in *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994).

[4] Peter-Hans Kolvenbach makes a similar distinction between the dimensions represented by the words *spiritual* and *exercises* in a discourse, 'The Practice of Ignatian Spirituality', given to the Rome Consultation, 16 February 2003.

The Shape of the Hour

Here is the shape of an hour of prayer as Ignatius prescribes it:[5]

1. considering how God looks at me (Exx 75);
2. a preparatory prayer (Exx 46);
3. recalling the history (Exx 102) (from the Second Week onward);
4. 'a composition [of] the place' (Exx 47);
5. asking God for what I desire (Exx 48);
6. the points for prayer;
7. colloquy (Exx 53–54);
8. concluding prayer (Exx 54).

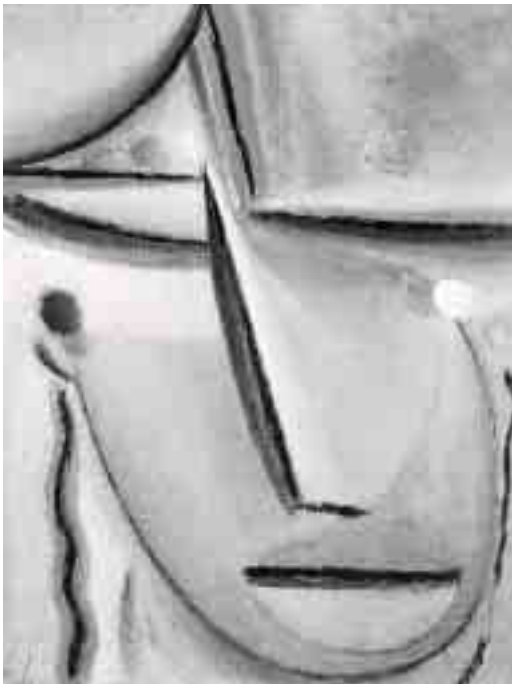
What we usually think of as 'the prayer' (step 6) is carefully prepared for (steps 1 to 5) and then digested and developed (steps 7 and 8). I hope to show that this preparation and digestion craft a 'space' for prayer with a very specific focus.

Considering How God Looks at Me

This focus is made explicit in the first aspect of the hour, the initial pause, 'for the length of an Our Father', to consider how God is looking at me. As I have noted elsewhere this is not a matter of cogitation—not how God might be looking at me, or ought to be looking at me, or how God looks upon people in the abstract—and not simply a matter of reminding myself that God is always present.[6] Ignatius is telling me to begin my hour by *looking in God's direction* to see how God is already looking back. It is an *imaginal* reorientation that is being called for, a shift of inner attention away from self 'toward' God to catch a glimpse of how God gazes at me right now. I use the word 'imaginal' because the imagination is involved in this shift of attention without it being either 'imaginative' or 'imaginary'. It is imaginal because it is full of metaphor,

[5] Where does the hour begin and end? In one sense the delineation is sharply marked by the sign of the cross and the tick of the clock but Ignatius also blurs the line by anticipating the hour in various ways and then, once it is over, by review and repetition, feeding into the matter and orientation of the hour to come.

[6] Robert R. Marsh, 'Looking at God Looking at You: Ignatius' Third Addition', *The Way*, 43/4 (October 2004), 19–28.



Meditation (Prayer), *by Alexei Jawlensky*

in this case sensual or sensory analogy. Consider how God is looking at you now. If you can 'turn' your 'gaze' in the right 'direction' you will probably have found an answer to that question. The quotation marks speak of the imaginal nature of the experience: whatever is going on involves something metaphorically related to ordinary modes of perception.[7] Ignatius almost always expresses himself in visual language—look, see, gaze—but the imaginal exercise can be carried out using our other internal senses.[8] How is God listening to you now? How is God present to you now? How is God feeling about you now? Even, how is God smelling or tasting you now? Whichever way your imagination works, Ignatius uses it to craft an encounter with the living God.

An encounter is more than a noticing, though. Ignatius makes this explicit when he expects and invites us to be moved by the God looking at us, and moved to respond with 'an act of reverence or humility' or whatever feels appropriate (Exx 75). The colloquy (step 7) which follows later in the hour is, in a sense, already begun here: the whole Ignatian hour is embedded in mutual response, communication, conversation.

[7] In a sense answers come from nowhere but we have a felt sense of their 'fittingness' or of when more needs to be 'discovered'. In fact I prefer to define the imaginal as the nowhere from which answers come to such questions.

[8] The phrase 'internal senses' roughly parallels what neuro-linguistic programming calls 'representational systems': the different ways we represent the outside world inwardly. See for example, Joseph O'Connor, *NLP Workbook* (London: Element, 2001). I refrain from any judgment about connections to the 'spiritual senses' and their history.

Cross-currents of Discernment

Already, after only 'the length of an Our Father', the space for prayer has been given a definite shape: a space prepared not for introspection but for encounter with the living God. It acknowledges the priority of God's action and initiative rather than emphasizing my own; and it demands discernment. We are used to our senses showing us reality, and we are fully aware that our imagination can lead us into fantasy. Yet, just as our senses can deceive us, our imagination can be revelatory. Here is the task of discernment: telling apart the imaginal constructions that keep us on the path from those that lead us astray and then acting accordingly.

Ignatius expresses a clear preference for the aspects of experience that come from the good spirit rather than the bad spirit.[9] It is a preference that has to be learnt, since human beings (and spiritual directors) tend to find themselves fascinated over and over again by the work of the bad spirit and a little embarrassed by the work of the good.[10] When this unfortunate fascination is given free rein it leads into what Ignatius calls desolation: 'darkness of soul, turmoil within it, an impulsive motion toward low and earthly things, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations' which 'move one toward lack of faith and leave one without hope and without love', so that 'one is completely listless, tepid, and unhappy, and feels separated from' God (Exx 317).

The Exercises, however, contain a number of practices that work together to 'train' the one making them to recognise and distinguish the fruits of the good spirit from those of the bad, and to choose to receive the former and reject the latter. Review, repetition and the meeting with the one giving the Exercises work *between* the hours of prayer to develop the skill of discernment. It is as if two dynamics intersect and work together: the intense focus of the hour on living encounter and the slower rhythm from hour to hour and day to day of discerning reflection.

After each hour the ones taking the Exercises should take some time to notice what happened in the hour and where it took them, and then to make notes. They learn neither to capture a blow-by-blow account nor to analyze and interpret but rather to notice *motions*—the

[9] Exx 313 describes the rules for discernment of spirits as 'rules to aid us toward perceiving and then understanding, at least to some extent, the various motions which are caused in the soul: the good motions that they may be received, and the bad that they may be rejected'.

[10] See Robert R. Marsh, 'Receiving and Rejecting: On Finding a Way in Spiritual Direction', *The Way*, 45/1 (Jan 2006), 7–21.

to-ing and fro-ing of affect, desire and understanding—as the raw material for discernment.[11]

A second practice is brought to bear as those making the Exercises approach thee hours of prayer which consist of repetition. Ignatius gives explicit instructions to return to places where they were previously most moved by spirits, both good and bad. Repetition can act as a kind of *amplifier*: you either follow the bad spirit deeper into desolation or the good spirit into consolation. It can also be an occasion of contrast when returning to one spirit provokes the action of the other. Either way, repetition is a school of discernment, an opportunity to get the 'taste' for the action of the good spirit, the 'feel' for the encounter with God.[12]

A third opportunity for training in discernment comes in the meeting with the one giving the Exercises. Here the interplay of the various spirits can be made explicit and the fruits of repetition can be judged. The one making the Exercises can then apply and deepen the learning in the use of repetition and, at the micro-level, in the moment-by-moment choices that are made within each hour: as I consider how God is looking at me, is my imaginal perception genuine or misleading? Sometimes the answer is obvious and sometimes it takes further evidence to be confident, but either way the one making the Exercises slowly grows in the capacity to discern spirits and learns to prefer the good spirit to the bad.

Preparatory Prayer

It seems appropriate that there now follows a preparatory prayer (step 2) 'to ask God our Lord for the grace that all my intentions, actions, and operations may be ordered purely to the service and praise of his Divine Majesty'. It is a prayer that captures the characteristically Ignatian poise between human and divine action: all that intending, acting and operating suggest a very active, muscular kind of prayer—indeed a spiritual *exercise*—and yet one in which the reins have been surrendered to the God who has just been encountered.

[11] George E. Ganss describes motions inclusively as 'acts of the intellect (e.g., thoughts, lines of reasoning, imaginings, etc.); or of the will (such as love, hate, desire, fear, etc.); or of affective feelings, impulses, inclinations, or urges (such as peace, warmth, coldness, consolation, desolation, etc.)' (*The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* [St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992], 191).

[12] For a more nuanced treatment of repetition and discernment see Marsh, 'Receiving and Rejecting'.

It is a challenging poise, which we shall see maintained throughout the hour, and an apparently paradoxical one. We are used to imagining our own desire and freedom being in competition with those of others—perhaps especially where our relationship with God is concerned. Ignatius sees the opposite: the more I intend, act and operate the more God can act in and through me. My desire can be God's desire. My imagining can be God's imagining. I carefully craft an intensely focused space for prayer and I let God take care of what happens there.

The History of the Mystery

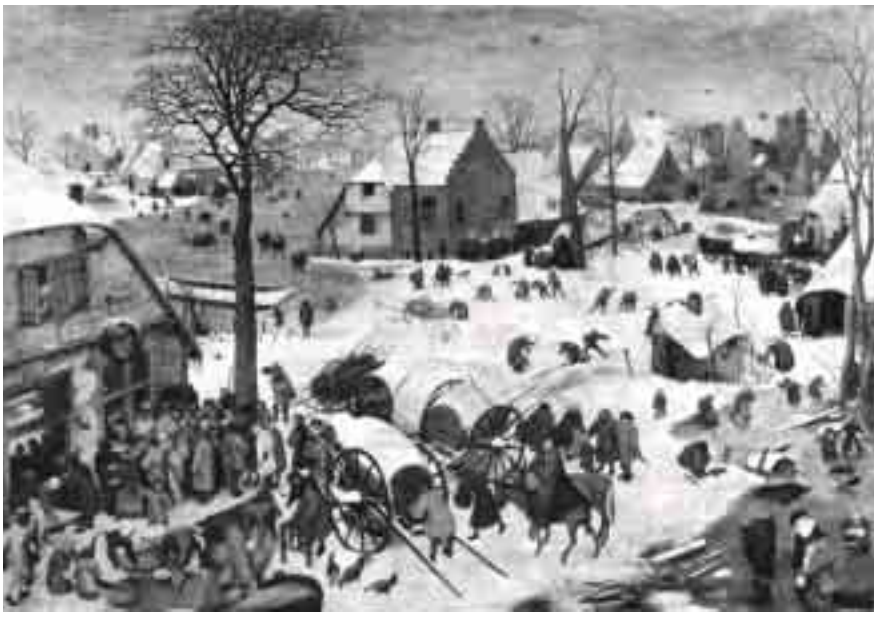
The hour continues with two or three *preludes*, as Ignatius calls them. From the Second Week onwards the first prelude is to survey or consider the *history,* the story behind the prayer to come.[13] Tersely, Ignatius begins 'here it is how …' or 'here it will be to recall …'. It is a brief look at the nub of the exercise which, in the bulk of cases, consists in bringing to mind a gospel story. Grasping our Bible in hand as we prepare for prayer, this prelude may not seem necessary, but it is. The aim is to begin to fill the 'space' we have been talking about with the mystery to be contemplated—so that it ceases to be words on a page but begins to take up residence *within us* to give the imagination something to work on.[14]

Composing

How much the space of the Ignatian hour is shaped by imagination is brought home by step 4 'composition seeing the place'. Interpretations have varied as to just what Ignatius is inviting us to compose—is it ourselves being drawn together or the stage being set in the theatre of the mind? I think, rather, that Ignatius is continuing to compose or shape the space for prayer, which includes both self and stage—in fact it brings them together. What is clear is that the composition is explicitly imaginal.

[13] Ignatius holds off this prelude until the Second Week since he has no need to get us to internalise an external history during the First Week: there the history is the story of our own lives.

[14] Ignatius' use of points given aurally (and tersely [Exx 2]) engages the imagination in a way that a personal perusal of scriptural texts does not. See Antonio T. de Nicolás, *Ignatius de Loyola, Powers of Imagining: A Philosophical Hermeneutic of Imagining through the Collected Works of Ignatius de Loyola* (Albany: State U. of New York P, 1986).



The Census at Bethlehem, *by Pieter Bruegel the elder*

First, Ignatius employs the same technique as in step 1: he asks questions that only the imagination can answer. Is the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem wide or not? Is it level or does it wind through valleys and hills? And the place of the nativity: how big is it? How high is it? How is it furnished? The bare bones of the history are fleshed out by a process of directed noticing which is neither cogitation nor fantasy but a turning of the inner self in a particular direction to perceive an answer. Bit by bit the scene is set: part will be expected and part surprising; some details will be stubborn and some malleable; all will be shaped by the discerning sense of what seems to fit.[15] The act of composing thus might employ all the imaginal senses, not just the vision, which is always Ignatius' first resort. Indeed, when Ignatius gives worked examples of how to use the imagination in prayer he always sends the imagination back and forth, using each imaginal sense *in turn* repeatedly to compose and inhabit as complete a world as possible.[16]

[15] Richard Kearney's account of the Hellenic and the Hebraic imaginations and their respective emphases on beholding and forming is enlightening: *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P, 1988).

[16] For example the Meditation on Hell (Exx 65), the Contemplation on the Incarnation (Exx 101) and the Contemplation on the Nativity (Exx 110).

Now all this use of imaginal preparation for prayer would not be at all surprising if the prayer that followed were always this kind of imaginative or Ignatian contemplation. But Ignatius proposes these aspects of the hour even when he describes the exercise as meditation.[17] Ignatius seems to envisage such meditation as being more discursive than his contemplative approach, using all the resources of memory, intellect and will, but focused through the imagination. The composition for meditation involves 'seeing' the abstract matter for meditation, composing it in an imaginal way; and the prayer itself takes place, as it were, in an imaginal arena. We are not, for example, meditating on sin in the abstract but through the medium of story, image, metaphor and symbol.

The praying self is also composed in this process, brought together within the 'place', its particular history gathered and inserted into the mystery, so that the mystery begins to *matter*. I come into the presence of the material to be prayed with the gathered sense of who I am and who I have been, with the echoes of all that has made me and the resonance of all the previous spiritual exercises so far, and I come expectantly and purposefully.

Desire

Brought to such a focus in such a space, I ask for what I desire (step 5). Ignatius insists that this be in keeping with the matter for prayer and is not above telling me what it should be ('here it is to …'); but fundamentally *id quod volo,* that which I want, must be honest and arise from real desire. Ignatius places this prelude to the prayer here and not earlier because it takes encounter with God and with my composed self to begin to know what I desire. The desire is evoked by the preceding aspects of the hour, refined by repetition and focused in the meeting with the one who gives the Exercises. It too, I begin to realise, is in need of discernment. According to Ignatius' subtitle for his Exercises (Exx 21), the purpose of the whole process is to discern and find order in the chaos of conflicting desires to which all souls are prone. The emerging desire bears the Ignatian hallmark: it is not simply something I find in myself, certainly not something I set myself to obtain, but something

[17] For example the Two Standards of the Second Week (Exx 136) or the various Exercises of the First Week.

that brings me face to face again with the God who gazes on me to ask, to lay open my need, even to beg for what God has shown me I desire.

Points and Colloquy

At this point the 'prayer' can begin![18] It takes place in a space that has been carefully prepared for imaginal encounter. Indeed the space is shaped from the other end as well. How does Ignatius want the hour to conclude? I said above that there is a sense in which the whole Ignatian hour is colloquy: throughout I am looking to see how God is looking at me and I am responding, and my response in turn modulates God's gaze. Ignatius expects every hour at least to conclude by making this communication explicit (step 7) in a conversation, 'the way one friend speaks to another' (Exx 54). His first description of the process shows it to be explicitly imaginal—'imagine Christ our Lord suspended on the cross' (Exx 53)—but all the colloquies are implicitly imaginal in the sense that they go beyond an introspective rehearsal of thoughts and feelings before an abstract God and turn all the imaginal senses to notice how what we say is received, to intuit how God feels about what we say, and to 'hear' God's response. As usual this interplay may move between a spontaneity that surprises us and an effort to find the response that seems to fit. The subject matter of these colloquies is the whole of the preceding hour and its purpose is the digestion and development of the encounter with the living God.

Let us not overlook step 8: the Ignatian hour has an end! The intensity of focus on imaginal encounter cannot and should not be maintained throughout the whole day. It is hard work—exercise—and it needs its complement in rest and reflection. Occasionally we encounter a retreatant who wants to eschew hours of prayer to pray 'all the time' instead. Though Ignatius provides practices to keep the space between hours directed towards the matter of the 'day' and its tone, the *only* way to keep alive the space of encounter is to refashion it afresh in each exercise through the structural aspects of the hour.

Laid out in such a fashion the Ignatian hour might sound like a technique to be mastered in order to achieve a desired effect. In fact

[18] Lots of questions arise here but space and focus demand they be merely mentioned and deferred. What does the very specific 'shape' of the space for prayer 'do' to the way of praying the points? Are some methods of prayer inappropriate to the Exercises? Does the space lend an imaginal slant to otherwise non-imaginal prayer modes? How is prayer in the Exercises related to ways of praying before and after? Etc.

Ignatius expects the opposite. Be faithful to the hour and its structure and if you are lucky you will encounter God and all hell will break loose! The hour is designed to facilitate an encounter which stirs up both consolation and desolation, all the mixed motions that Ignatius sees as coming from the action of good and bad spirits. Once they are there the engine of the Spiritual Exercises is running and the process of review, repetition and spiritual direction can guide it to completion. The sixth Annotation (Exx 6) reminds the one giving the Exercises that if all appears smooth sailing and there is no agitation something is missing and the one making the exercises 'should be questioned closely', specifically about his or her faithfulness to the structure of the hour and to the various additional directives.

From Exercises to Direction

Now why, if this is an article about Ignatian spiritual direction, have I written at such length about the structure of the Ignatian hour? Simply because I believe that the Ignatian hour displays a *focus* and a *preference* which can be carried over to help us imagine what Ignatian spiritual direction might be like. The Ignatian hour focuses prayer on a transforming encounter with the living God: Ignatian spiritual direction should refine a focus on encountering the God implicit or explicit in a person's experience.[19] The hour is 'crossed' by the quest to learn and put into practice a discerning preference for the action of the good spirit over the bad spirit: that same preference should typify Ignatian spiritual direction.

A transforming encounter with the living God

Ignatian spirituality is often characterized in terms of its emphasis on reflective living, yet that is only half the story. Too sharp a focus on review and examen in the Spiritual Exercises, to the detriment of those aspects aimed at provoking living encounter, can give that impression. However the focus and the preference I have described intersect in such a way that both are essential. Discerning reflection is the steering wheel and imaginal encounter is the engine: together they drive the Exercises forward. And not just the Exercises: that same interplay should also characterize Ignatian spiritual direction.

[19] Focusing on God in experience does not mean paying attention only to explicitly 'pious' experiences since Ignatian direction seeks the God found in all things.

I presume that most spiritual directors who identify themselves as Ignatian already consider reflection and discernment to be at the heart of their practice. The model I describe here nuances such practice in two ways. First it couples discerning reflection to living encounter so that, in addition, for example, to discovering patterns, achieving insights and making practical decisions, it brings the basic task of discernment—receiving and rejecting various threads of experience—into focus. As I listen to a directee narrate experience I am constantly discerning where the moments of encounter with God might be, which trains of thought seem to come from the good spirit, and where we might profitably linger. Hence there is a second nuance: the preference for the good spirit over the bad. It can be difficult to maintain with the same clarity as Ignatius that the purpose of discernment is to receive motions from the good spirit and reject those from the bad spirit (Exx 313).[20] It is difficult for the recipient of spiritual direction to learn that lesson but it is also very tempting for the director to abandon the principle by following threads from the bad spirit that seem fascinating for other reasons. Fascination with desolation is not an Ignatian trait.

The Focus of Ignatian Spiritual Direction

We have seen how in the Exercises a very specific focus is supported by the structure of the hour of prayer, and Ignatian spiritual direction maintains that same focus. Our desire as Ignatian directors is to keep the focus wherever the person is encountering the living God, and we can achieve this in much the same way that the hour achieves its focus. Each of the steps in the structure of the hour can be considered to correspond to a *mode of interest* that the Ignatian director can have: a way the director shows interest in particular aspects of the directee's experience and so 'trains' the directee to develop that focus as well. There are many ways directors can show such focused interest—body language, selective interventions, questions—but to some degree the interest will be shown automatically if the director is *actually* interested and fascinated by the directee's experience of God.

Perhaps the clearest way to exhibit the Ignatian modes of interest is to map them onto a series of questions which parallel aspects of the structured hour.

[20] See Marsh, 'Receiving and Rejecting'.

Structure in the Spiritual Exercises	**Spiritual Director's Questions**
The History	What's been happening? What's been going on?
Composition of Place	What more do you notice? See, smell, hear, feel? What are you doing?
How is God looking at me?	How is God looking at you? What is your God like? Is God there?
The Grace	What do you want? What do you find yourself desiring?
Colloquy	Have you talked about it with Jesus/God? How does God respond?

I have listed the modes of interest in a different order from the corresponding aspects of the hour because the different nature of spiritual direction suggests they be employed differently. Each question can be asked in an infinite number of ways appropriate to the context as long as we always seek to maintain the proper focus; they can also be implied with a nod and a wink. They are not meant to be hauled out in sequence but at the service of the recognition of experiences of God within a person's life, the opening up and deepening of such encounters, and the 'real-time' development of the encounter with God. Notice the progression from implicit to explicit encounter with God alongside the parallel progression from remembered experience of God to the encounter with God within the spiritual direction.

For example, the beginning of a session of spiritual direction might be taken up with recalling and recounting aspects of a month's experience in which encounters with God are initially more or less implicit. The director listens with a discerning ear for the relatively more available experiences of encounter and maybe earmarks them to be returned to later or tries to mine one of them for gold, helping the person recompose himself or herself in the 'place' and notice new facts about the experience in question. In the process the person becomes more present to the encounter and the encounter moves more explicitly into the present. With help the person notices more and more of significance about the experience recalled, and notices things about the God he or she was encountering. More and more, the session shifts from remembering meeting God three weeks ago to the presence of the same God now, active and available for colloquy and conversation.

A Worked Example

I suspect this will make a lot more sense if I give a brief example. In the verbatim account that follows Mel is a chemistry student in her early twenties.[21] She has been feeling overextended, scattered, and out of touch with God. We begin about fifteen minutes into the session. She has been lamenting a loss of 'balance' in her life, including a sense that her prayer has been hurried and unsatisfying. This is the *history:* the director has been helping her speak about her recent experience and lay out her concerns about it. The director is also keeping a discerning ear open for hints of the good spirit but finding rather more evidence of the bad. The exchange opens with an implicit invitation to discernment.

> ***Director (1):*** This balance you're looking for is clearly very important to you, Mel, and as we talk you've mentioned a number of things that have pulled you away from it. But let me tell you what I think I notice: the more we follow that line of thought the more dejected you seem to get and the more out of touch with God. Does that sound right to you?
>
> ***Mel (1):*** I certainly don't feel any better!
>
> ***D2***: I was wondering if it would be OK instead to focus, just for a while, on any things that have drawn you *towards* that balance? … [*she hesitantly nods assent*] …. Have there been any moments like that?
>
> ***M2***: There haven't been many—I've had no time ….
>
> ***D3***: There've been one or two though? … [*she nods*] …. What's it like when you're in them?
>
> ***M3***: Oh … they're like a *promise* of balance … of being relaxed … [*pause*] …. God I want that! … [*she leans back and closes her eyes, remembering, imagining … she seems to relax a little*] …. It's weird … I'm, like, in my room and I'm alone but it feels great … peaceful … [*she rouses herself*] …. Weird isn't it?
>
> ***D4***: Sounds like a good place to be. Why don't you stay there for a bit and tell me what it's like?
>
> ***M4***: [*she settles back, pause*] … Yeah, well, it's silent … and quiet …. There's sunlight and it's warm … it's like I've got nothing to do—everything's done—I can relax. No worries.

[21] Names and details have been changed to protect the innocent.

D5: It's quiet, you're alone and you're peaceful. Nothing to worry about ….

M5: [*surprised*] … I'm not alone … I thought I was … but I'm not …. God's here …. It's like I'm alone but God's with me. Weird! … [*pause*] …. There's this sunlight but it's golden and everything's lit up … and I'm lit up too … [*pause*] …. it's like being held.

D6: God's holding you?

M6: Yes, I guess God wants me to rest …. [*pause*]

D7: [*long pause*]… What's this God like? The one who's holding you?

M7: He's golden [*she smiles*] kind of warm and gentle … but strong …. Like I'm safe …

D8: You're safe … [*pause*] …. Is that what you want? To be safe?

M8: I thought I needed balance! … I guess I get so scared … that I'm going nowhere … that God will forget about me ….

D9: Has God forgotten you now?

M9: Oh God no … [*smiling*] … I don't think he could … I get scattered but I don't think God ever does … [*she checks*] … no God remembers me all the time. All the time … Wow!

Let's unpack the exchange in terms of what I am calling an Ignatian approach to spiritual direction. The director in D2 shows a preference for the movement from the good spirit, at least tentatively discerned, rather than, for instance, exploring strategies for achieving balance. It takes some effort (D3) to get Mel to go along, but when she does (M3) she spontaneously moves into something like composition of place. After a little while Mel seems to doubt herself and needs explicit encouragement (D4) to trust the unfolding movement and stay with composition of place. She notices more and more about the experience (M4) and a little echoing (D4) sends the process deeper as she notices that she is not alone. The recall of a past experience is shifting into the present and developing further than it did at the time. In D6 and D7 the director implicitly and then explicitly focuses on how God is present. Asking Mel what she desires (D8) elicits a corrective to her earlier sense of wanting balance (M3 → M8). From M5 onwards it could be said that Mel has been implicitly engaged in colloquy—responding to the God who responds to her. A nudge (D9) makes the colloquy briefly explicit (M9). Finally (for

this part of the session) Mel summarises (M9) what she has discovered from this encounter with God.

The session might well end there (though the colloquy could be profitably continued). Mel has had an insight into God and God's relationship with her. In the next days she will see what happens as she lives with that insight and the God who gave it. She also has a sense of how the other spirit might want to distract her (the worries about balance) which, again, should probably be made explicit before the session ends. And, above all, she has a sense of the locus of God's continuing activity and a place to return in prayer (repetition) so that God can continue to develop the movement.

Rather than being an irritation, the structured hour of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises turns out to be the place where two carefully constructed dynamics intersect: the intense focus on imaginal encounter with God and the ongoing quest to learn and apply a discerning preference for the good spirit over the bad. The interaction of these dynamics drives the Exercises forward and allows the 'Creator to deal immediately with the creature' (Exx 15). I have tried to show here how an Ignatian approach to spiritual direction might carry over the same focus and preference to much the same end.[22]

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[22] I make no claims for the originality of this approach to spiritual direction. Rather I believe it is in full continuity with the model presented years ago by Barry and Connolly (William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* [New York: Seabury, 1982]). Indeed I was rather tempted to reproduce and annotate their worked example (pp. 77–79) rather than my own. Though Barry and Connolly go to some lengths to present their approach to spiritual direction as generally applicable rather than specifically Ignatian, I hope I have been able to make explicit the strong links with the Exercises which they preferred to leave implicit. In part I have wanted to rescue their book from some of the bland misreadings which often make it appear dully generic by downplaying their central focus on living encounter with God.