

All My Liberty

Theology of the Spiritual Exercises
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Introduction

Three kinds of books have been written on the Spiritual Exercises, each with a different purpose and reading public in mind. Most numerous are the commentaries for retreat masters that offer a series of mediations in outline to be given to others. Another type is the familiar manual which develops all the reflections and practically supplies for the retreat master. Combinations of both types have also been published. Finally there are studies on the Exercises themselves, their history, theology or psychology, which aim beyond the immediate function of making or giving a retreat to discover ascetical values that are hidden beneath the surface.

The present volume belongs to the third class, as a modern theological appraisal of the

Spiritual Exercises intended to facilitate their use in giving retreats, and to give retreatants, whether priests, religious or the laity, a deeper insight into the treasures of the Exercises in order to make them more profitable. Also, retreats already made will take on a new and more incisive meaning. The need for such a volume appears from the practical absence, at least in English, of a professional study of the master-ideas around which the Exercises are built and in which their special value for sanctification reputedly consists.

Before entering into the analysis, however, it will be useful to examine a few preliminary facts and ideas. The Spiritual Exercises have a long and celebrated history that may be traced to apostolic times. Yet their existence in the present form and the universal acceptance of a closed retreat as an institution in the Catholic Church are due to St. Ignatius. Another book could be written on the historical antecedents and subsequent influence of the Ignatian Exercises. But even a short review of the background may explain why a closer study of their contents should be made. Any instrument or practice which the highest authority in the Church placed "in the front rank of all the means that help towards Christian perfection" deserves our careful investigation.

Origins and Scope of the Spiritual Exercises

In a popular and general sense, the term "Spiritual Exercises" refers to all the practices of piety that are commonly used to foster personal sanctity. But more specifically it means a period of time, of varying length, during which a person devotes himself exclusively to prayer and meditation and, as

far as possible, in seclusion from other duties and cares.

The example of Christ in the desert and the Apostles in the cenacle waiting for the Holy Spirit inspired the custom among the early Christians of selected groups retiring into the wilderness for prayer and fasting during the season of Lent. Outstanding among the early promoters of these lenten retreats was St. Euthymius (377-473), whose feast is celebrated on January 20. Historians of the patristic age believe that the practice was quite universal from the sixth to the eighth centuries. In the Middle Ages most of the monasteries had special rooms set aside for retreatants, who were lay people from the world or hermits dedicated to a life of solitude, until the general decline of monasticism also affected these “spiritual vacations” and suspended a movement that was in operation for more than a thousand years.

As a reaction to the religious upheaval of the fourteenth century (the age of Wyclif and Hus), high-minded persons like Gerard Groot (1340-1384) betook themselves for a week or more to some monastery and there inaugurated what has since become known as the *Devotio Moderna*, which identified spiritual perfection with the imitation of Jesus Christ. St. Ignatius Loyola inherited the spirit of this *Devotio*, which he personalized by his own reflections and mystical experience and reduced to a set of definite meditations and organized into a logical synthesis which he called the Spiritual Exercises. Another feature he added was to prescribe that this ascetical experience be made under the guidance of a competent spiritual director.

“There is no other work of Catholic literature,” says the Protestant Fülöp-Miller, “which, for its historical effect, can be compared with Ignatius’ little book of the Exercises.” Yet its strategy is very simple. In the first stage, called the First Week, after studying the Principle and Foundation as the norm by which all human actions must be judged, the exercitant is faced with the spectacle of sin and inspired with a horror for anything which could hinder his journey to God. Following on this spiritual purgation, Ignatius presents Jesus Christ as the perfect model of God’s service, in the act of calling others to follow Him; at the same time he disposes the retreatant to set his affections and all other things in order after the example of his Master. In the Third Week, the author of the Exercises seeks to deepen the union of the soul with her Lord by penetrating her with the sentiments which He felt in the Passion and thus preparing her, in the last Week, for the “Contemplation to obtain Divine Love.” The experience has been compared to reliving the life of Christ in miniature by passing through the same sequence of suffering, crucifixion and death which He endured, and finally entering with Him into everlasting joy.

St. Ignatius wrote the Exercises with this purpose in mind and organized its contents accordingly. Consequently it is not a book to be read, and less still a systematic exposition of ascetical principles. The structure of the book was outlined at Manresa (1522), where his mind was so enlightened on the truths of revelation that, in his own words, “he seemed to be possessed of a new intellect, with such conviction that, from what he had seen, it would be his duty to lay down his life for the mysteries of faith even if the Scriptures did not bear witness to them.” Further experiences and more study served to develop the outline.

Ignatius also expanded the original form by reshaping the points of meditation and adding directives to help others use the book as a retreat manual. In this stage of revision we can trace the influence of the *Imitation of Christ*, of the *Life of Christ* by Ludolph of Saxony, of the *Golden Legend* by Jacopo de Voragine and certain manuals of devotion like the *Ejercitatorio* of the Spanish Benedictine, Cisneros. But in all these the influence is seen to be psychological rather than literal, with the possible exception of the *Imitation* which Ignatius is known to have treasured next to the Bible.

Papal Approval and Diffusion

By a strange coincidence, the Exercises were first solemnly approved by Pope Paul III on July 31, 1548, just eight years, to the day, before the death of St. Ignatius. The papal brief *Pastoralis Officii* thus began a series of more than six hundred testimonials by thirty-five sovereign pontiffs, notably the late Pius XI, whose devotion to the Exercises dated from his earliest days in the priesthood. He had seen their effectiveness during his thirty years' association with a lay retreat house, and later on, as Pope, declared that he was led by the Exercises "to adopt a more perfect way of life." In answer to the request of more than six hundred bishops, in 1922 he appointed St. Ignatius "the heavenly patron of all Spiritual Exercises," and identified him as "the first to begin to teach a certain system and special method of going through spiritual retreats." Since the terms of the apostolic constitution are similar to those which Leo XIII had used in declaring St. Thomas patron of Catholic schools, some commentators conclude that St. Ignatius enjoys a preeminence in the science of spirituality comparable to that of "the

universal and common doctor" in the field of theological science.

Although the original Spanish text of the Exercises is lost, we still have an authentic copy, annotated by Ignatius, which goes by the name of "autograph." Present estimates show that the Exercises have been translated into twenty-two languages, running into more than three hundred editions. There is a current listing of over eight hundred authors who have written one or more volumes of commentary, so that the average output is calculated at one edition of text or commentary every month for the last four hundred years.

Originally the Exercises were given to private individuals. Jesuit colleges in the sixteenth century had special rooms reserved for visiting retreatants. But almost from the beginning separate retreat houses were also in operation, of which the first on record was in Siena, opened on a temporary basis in 1538. The first permanent institution was opened at Alcalá in 1553, followed soon after at Cologne (1561), Louvain (1569), and Val de Rosal (1570). A famous retreat house for deaf mutes was built at Milan in 1579 by St. Charles Borromeo, who made Ignatian asceticism the spearhead of the Counter-Reformation which he promoted during the reign of his uncle, Pope Pius IV. Already in the sixteenth century, the Exercises were used in all the countries of Europe, and introduced to America and the Far East. Among the retreatants were priests and religious in every grade of the hierarchy, including members of the oldest orders in the Church, and the laity from all classes of society.

Group retreats, which began in the 1500's among priests and religious, were developed

still further in the next century by men like Vincent de Paul and Francis de Sales, who extended the concept of Christian perfection beyond the cloister and through the Exercises placed it within the reach of all the faithful. St. Vincent de Paul is known to have given the Exercises personally to more than 20,000 people.

An important contributing factor to the popularity of retreats in the eighteenth century was the high commendation they received from successive Roman Pontiffs. Benedict XIV, for example, prescribed the Exercises for young men entering a seminary, for all clerics before their ordination, for monks and hermits during canonical visitation, for missionaries in England and the Orient; and in a long papal document, he observed that “since the time when St. Ignatius composed the marvelous Book of the Exercises, there is scarcely a religious order in the Church that has not adopted this salutary practice,” for its own members and as a “fruitful instrument” in the apostolate.

The suppression of the Society of Jesus did incalculable harm to the retreat movement and might have injured the cause irreparably except for the zealous promotion by men and women who had previously made the Exercises and recognized their high potentialities. Thus St. Alphonsus Liguori and the Redemptorists in Italy, Bishop Johann Sailer in Germany, and Mary Antonia de la Paz in South America kept the movement alive and ready for its unprecedented expansion in the last century. Religious congregations were even started for the sole purpose of directing or assisting with retreats for the laity, like the Society of Our Lady of the Cenacle, founded at La Louvesc in 1826. It was at the Cenacle in Milan that the convent

chaplain, Achille Ratti, came to appreciate the extraordinary value of the Exercises and later on, as Pius XI, promoted them to the limit of his papal authority.

Three names that stand out for their contribution to the theory and practice of the Spiritual Exercise are Roothaan, Ravignan and Watrigant. As twenty-first general of the Society of Jesus, John Roothaan published a Latin translation and commentary that have become standard sources; moreover, his insistence on the true Ignatian spirit in giving retreats merited him the title of “restorer of the Spiritual Exercises,” following the obscuration of this spirit during the suppression of the Society. Pére de Ravignan, who succeeded Lacordaire as preacher at Notre Dame, used the Exercises to transform the spiritual life of the French élite, and thus proved their effectiveness even among the sophisticated classes of society. The Belgian Watrigant spent a lifetime assembling the world’s largest library on the Exercises, over 8000 volumes, and in 1906 founded the periodical *Bibliothèque des Exercices* devoted to a study and popularization of the accumulated riches of four centuries since Manresa.

The modern development is without parallel in the history of the Church for the number and variety of persons who make annual retreats that are somehow inspired by the Ignatian Exercises. According to Canon Law, priests are obliged to “make the spiritual exercises at least every three years,” religious men and women once every year, and those preparing to receive Tonsure and Major Orders, for three to six days. Among the laity, the scope of the retreat movement is beyond calculation. The Society of Jesus alone gives

the Exercises in closed retreats to more than one million persons annually.

Comparable to the world picture, the Exercises have an American history that goes back to the earliest missionaries in the New World. What appears to have been the first lay retreat in North America was made in 1640 by a crippled Indian convert in French Canada whose retreat election, according to the *Jesuit Relations*, was to give up the practice of smoking. In three centuries, the use of the Spiritual Exercises has grown into a national movement that for large-scale efficiency and organization is probably unequalled in the Catholic Church. Four hundred institutions in forty-six States, operating on a permanent or seasonal basis, give retreats of three to eight days to an average of more than half a million men and women every year. During his visit to the United States, Cardinal Pacelli was so impressed that after his elevation to the papacy he told the American bishops how pleased he was to see “the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius followed with great devotion in your closed retreats,” which he assumed are mostly according to the Ignatian method.

Primary Sources of Interpretation and Doctrine

Since the turn of the century, the basis for any scientific study of the Exercises is the prodigious *Monumenta Ignatiana*, published at Madrid in twenty-two volumes and containing all but a fraction of the extant writings of St. Ignatius and about him by his contemporaries. The critical text of the Exercises, in four parallel columns, gives a synoptic view of the variants, generally minor, between the Spanish autograph and three Latin versions. St. Ignatius also left three sets

of instructions, called Directories, on how to conduct the Exercises; one set personally composed by him and the other two under his orders or dictation.

The editors of the *Monumenta* give the complete text of twelve additional Directories, written after the death of St. Ignatius and before the end of the sixteenth century. Of these the most valuable was made by John Polanco, the contemporary and confidant of St. Ignatius; the most widely known and currently used was published in 1599. Taken together these Directories established a tradition that is certainly unique in the history of ascetical writing. They insure to the modern student of the Exercises an authentic interpretation of their author’s mind and spirituality.

Another sixteenth century document of great interpretative value is the lengthy *Apologia* of Nadal, friend of Ignatius, who defended the Exercises against professional critics and in so doing elaborated on their whole theological structure. His defense of the Ignatian concept of indifference, spiritual consolation and predestination remains unsurpassed to this day:

When at Manresa he wrote a good part of the Exercises, Ignatius had not yet done any studying. Later he devoted himself to study with an incredible zeal, first in Spain and then at the University of Paris, which was then so celebrated throughout the Christian world. For several years he followed the course in arts and the course in theology with the greatest application, rare constancy and success. His studies finished, he gathered these early pages (of the Exercises), added a good many things and systematically arranged the whole.

From this Nadal argued to the supernatural assistance Ignatius received in the cave of Manresa and the years of studious reflection he gave to improving his spiritual classic.

Early in the seventeenth century, Francis Suarez again defended the Exercises for theological orthodoxy and, like Nadal, developed their implications in his treatise *De Religione*. “There is nothing doctrinal in the Exercises,” he wrote, “which can be called into question. Their content is either a restatement of certain and dogmatic principles, or derived from the more common teaching of theologians.”

Apart from the inspired books of the New Testament, the two principal sources of doctrine in the Spiritual Exercises were Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Ignatius’ reverence for the African bishop may be seen from the frequent quotations in his letters and the practical certainty that the Rule of St. Augustine was among the monastic models on which he built his own religious institute. In a sense, the whole tenor of Ignatian asceticism, with its accent on the conflict of good and evil and personal devotion to Christ, reflects Augustinian theology.

However the proximate source of doctrinal orientation in the Exercises was Thomas Aquinas. From his first contact with the *Summa* while studying with the Dominicans at Paris, Ignatius turned as by instinct to the Angelic Doctor. When writing the Constitutions of his order, he prescribed for the teaching of theology “the scholastic doctrine of St. Thomas.” This injunction anticipated by three centuries the present law of the Church on clerical and theological studies. It also simplifies the doctrinal analysis of the Exercises by revealing them as

an ascetical counterpart of the *Summa Theologica*.

Spiritual Efficacy

Among the hundreds of papal commendations, the most significant is the encyclical *Mens Nostra* of Pope Pius XI, issued in 1929 as a memorial to the Church on his golden jubilee in the priesthood. He gave several reasons why “of all the methods for making the Spiritual Exercises the one introduced by St. Ignatius has ever held the foremost place.” For our purpose these reasons may serve as an apologia for the present volumes.

Without implying the slightest reflection on other retreat methods “which laudably adhere to the principles of sound Catholic asceticism,” the Pope singled out as the first quality of the Ignatian Exercises “the excellence of their doctrine, which is altogether free from the perils and errors of false mysticism.” We shall later expand on this feature of ascetical security. Here it is enough to mention that wherever mystical doctrine departed from the path of orthodoxy it was in one of two directions, either so stressing the operations of grace as to fall into quietism which makes the human will completely passive in the hands of God, or at least so concentrating on direct inspiration as to obviate the need for external guidance from legitimate ecclesiastical authority. The Ignatian Exercises from beginning to end forestall both tendencies by their whole approach to the spiritual life. Their insistence on the autonomous power of human liberty and our capacity for high generosity precludes the danger of ascetical passivism which, for St. Ignatius, was almost a contradiction in

terms. And their devotion to the Church as the Spouse of Christ and infallible teacher of mankind, concretized the Rules of Orthodoxy, will not be lost on the most casual retreatant. In fact, Ignatius' requirement of a competent retreat master with elaborate directives on how to lead a person through the Exercises became essential for making a true retreat.

The second quality which commends the Exercises is their "admirable facility of being adaptable to any status or condition of men, whether devoted to contemplation in the cloister or leading an active life in the affairs of the world." Historical evidence supports this judgment, that every rank and level of society, in the priesthood, cloister and the laity, has followed the Exercises with great benefit to personal sanctity and apostolic work. Behind the adaptability was the rare insight that Ignatius had into the basic conflicts and aspirations of our nature, which he derived by going through almost every stage of human experience, from a dissipated youth during which he was once brought to trial for "grave and enormous crimes," to later conversion and spiritual maturity that culminated in the highest form of mysticism. Another reason was the care that Ignatius took over a period of twenty years to implement the meditations with copious directives, rules and practical suggestions for the retreat master. In other words, by the express intention of their author, the Exercises are not a rigid code but a flexible mod of spirituality. "They should be adapted," he tells the director, "to the disposition of those who wish to make them, depending on their age, education or capacity. In like manner, according to each one's desires and dispositions, he should be given what is most helpful and profitable to him." Thus if a retreatant has "not much strength of

character," only the early meditations on sin and hell are recommended. Or, if the director sees a person making the Exercises with great fervor, he must warn him against any rash promises that might later have to be rescinded.

There is also an "apt coordination of the various parts in the Exercises," and a "marvelously clear order in the meditation of truths that follow naturally one from another." The consequent appeal to the mind is spontaneous, and serves the double purpose of concentrating attention on a single object and integrating disparate elements in the spiritual life around the focal idea of loving God in the person of Jesus Christ. According to reliable testimony the Communists have adopted the structure and sequence of the Exercises, substituted Lenin for Christ, and are giving a Marxist "retreat" of forty days in silence on the principle and foundation of dialectical materialism. In making the Exercises, says the Protestant writer Evelyn Underhill, "we feel the drive and determination of the soldier, whose natural attitude is the attitude of attack, and who shirks nothing and forgets nothing which can contribute to the chosen end. It is a spiritual drill, directed to a definite result; but a drill which implies and rests on a profound and vivid understanding of the business of the soul."

But the highest quality of the Exercises is not their freedom from pseudo-mysticism, nor their logic and adaptability. Their greatest value lies in the power they have "to lead a man through the safe paths of abnegation and the removal of bad habits to the very summit of prayer and divine love." This is proved experimentally by the changes in moral conduct and spiritual conviction that a single retreat has effected in the lives of thousands of persons. Among the saints, Charles Borromeo

was led by the Exercises “to adopt a more perfect form of life,” Francis de Sales “to serve God with the greatest possible fidelity,” and Teresa of Avila to become “the mistress of lofty contemplation.” On the level of ordinary piety the experience of every retreat master shows the disproportion, sometimes nearly miraculous, between the time and human effort spent in making the Exercises and the marvelous results they produce. Contributing to this efficacy are many factors that the following pages hope to elucidate. But one thing hard to analyze and yet certainly operative is a mysterious element which Pius XI called “a divine instinct.” It explains the composition of what some have described as “a book of human destiny,” which drew on resources beyond the natural capacity of its author; it may also explain its influence in terms of a supernatural force that God reserves for the chosen instruments of His grace.

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