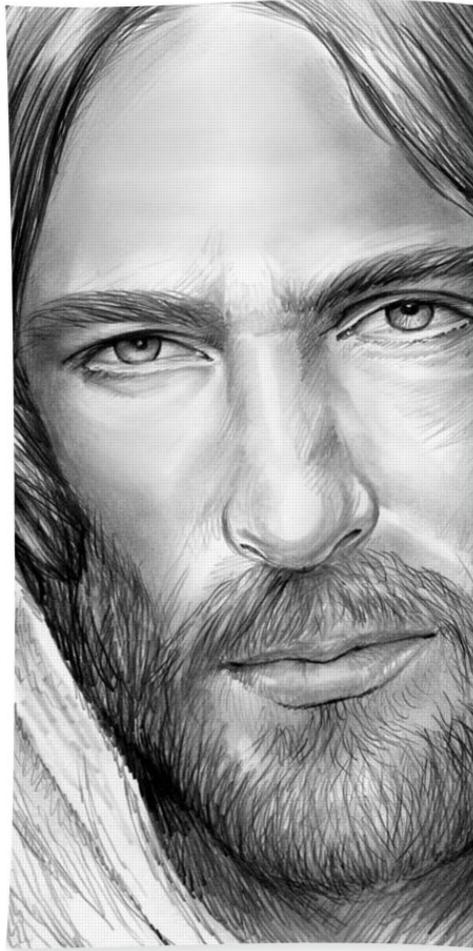


Encountering the God Who Loves You

“All Christians are invited to a ‘renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ.’ Christ calls all people to himself in his Body, the Church, through the workings of the Holy Spirit, so that we can enter into a personal relationship with God the Father.”

Living as Missionary Disciples: Page 31



*A 10 – Week Experience of Personal Prayer
based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*

WEEK ONE

Day One: Love

We begin the retreat by reflecting on God’s faithful, unconditional love for each of us. We consider who we are most fundamentally – or rather, Whose we are. Each one of us is God’s beloved son or daughter: this is the core of our identity.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: to be more aware of how God is near; to trust in God’s personal care and love for me.

Read Isaiah 43:1-7

Pray slowly over the verses. What words or images move you? Consider: *Who is God for me? How does God see me?*

For Reflection

Prayer has far more to do with what God wants to do in us than with our trying to “reach” or “realize,” still less “entertain,” God in prayer. This truth eliminates anxiety and concern as to the success or non-success of our prayer, for we can be quite certain that, if we want to pray and give the time to prayer, God is always successful and that is what matters. . . . What we think of as our search for God is, in reality, a response to the divine Lover drawing us to himself. There is *never a moment when divine Love is not at work*. . . . This work is nothing other than a giving of the divine Self in love. The logical consequence for us must surely be that our part *is to let ourselves be loved, let ourselves be given to, let ourselves be worked upon by this great God and made capable of total union with Him*.

– Ruth Burrows, *Essence of Prayer*

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Two

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: to be more aware of how God is near; to trust in God's personal care and love for me.

Read Psalm 139:1-18

Consider: *How does God gaze upon me? How open am I to receiving this intimacy?*

For Reflection

As we enter into the Spiritual Exercises, we retreatants find ourselves sometimes doing much thinking and reasoning things out. At other times, we experience far more the response of our hearts, with little or nothing for the head to be concerned about. It is good to remember that we are always in the context of prayer, whether the prayer is more meditative or affective. We should always try to maintain a spirit of deep reverence before God, especially when our affectations are involved.

– Kevin O'Brien, SJ

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Three: Spiritual Freedom

Spiritual freedom is an interior freedom, a freedom of the mind and heart. People who are spiritually free know who they are – with all of their gifts and limitations – and are comfortable with who they are.

However, we have numerous preoccupations that get in the way of our hearing and responding to God’s call: fears, prejudices, greed, the need to control, perfectionism, jealousies, resentments, and excessive self-doubts. These tendencies bind us and hold us back from loving God, ourselves, and others as we ought to. They create chaos in our souls and lead us to make poor choices.

Lacking spiritual freedom, we become excessively attached to persons, places, material possessions, titles, occupations, honors, and the acclaim of others. These things are good in themselves when ordered and directed by the love of God. They become disordered attachments when they push God out of the center of our lives and become key to our identity.

A Prayer for Spiritual Freedom:

A Prayer for Spiritual Freedom (Prayer Before a Meeting)

O Spirit of God, we ask you to help orient
 all our actions by your inspirations,
 carry them on by your gracious assistance,
 that every prayer and work of ours may always begin from you
 and through you be happily ended.

– Excerpt from *Hearts on Fire: Praying with Jesuits*, edited by Michael Harter, SJ.

This prayer is frequently used by Jesuits to begin classes and meetings.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: to grow in interior freedom; to become more aware of disordered attachments that get in the way of loving God, others, or myself.

Read Luke 1:26-38

Pray over the story of the Annunciation and marvel at Mary's freedom to say, "Yes!" Notice how she deals with her fears and keeps her focus on God. Pray over the words of the Gospel slowly, meditatively, or use your imagination to place yourself in the scene.

For Reflection

Mary at Her Annunciation as a Model for Growing in the Virtue of Faith



Mary at her Annunciation models faith for us. She shows us that faith is more than assent, but is also trust, commitment, obedience, and submission. Mary trusted in God's promises, was obedient to God's word of invitation in her life, surrendered to the mystery before her, and committed herself to be part of God's plan of salvation in Jesus.

At the same time, we can easily romanticize the Gospel scene – Mary is at prayer, an angel appears, and she says a faith-filled yes. The Scripture also tells us that she was deeply troubled and wondered what the angel's greeting meant. Certainly, the angel's explanation only left her with more questions and concerns. She did not say yes because she fully understood or had all her questions answered. She said yes in faith and trust. We do Mary a disservice to think she had some infused knowledge that dispelled all her doubts. She was a young woman of extraordinary faith. The "yes" at the Annunciation was not the first "yes" in her life, nor would it be the last.

The significant yeses in our lives also demand a great deal of trust and openness. We cannot know all the implications of them. We respond to the gift of God's call in our lives. We say yes in hope and trust. Like Mary, we say "yes" to something being born in us that must grow and mature and take a shape we cannot predict. We are called to that depth of faith as we contemplate the story of the Annunciation and all the stories of the life of Jesus in the rest of the Spiritual Exercises. We are called to trust, obedience, surrender, and commitment in our own lives. We will hear an invitation to share in the work of Jesus and respond and live in faith.

Living in faith demands surrender to the stories of God and Jesus recorded in the Scriptures. Christian faith especially demands that we let the stories of Jesus shape our minds and hearts. Paul Wadell says that to live in faith means that we “appropriate these stories, striving to embody their viewpoints, values, and vision as our own. To assent to the truths of faith portrayed in the Scripture is to allow them to become the interpretative framework for our world.”

Wadell feels we need these narratives “to mold and shape us, especially in the attitudes and virtues of Jesus.” Ignatian imaginative prayer on the Gospel stories is a powerful way to grow in faith by putting on the heart of Christ. As Jesus trusted, obeyed, surrendered, and committed his life to the Father, we are to respond in the same way. All the contemplations on the Gospels throughout the Exercises foster growth in the virtue of faith that empowers us to trust God and commit ourselves to service.

– Excerpt from *Putting on the Heart of Christ: How the Spiritual Exercises Invite Us to a Virtuous Life*, by Gerald M. Fagin, SJ.

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Four: Spiritual Freedom (Continued)

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: to grow in interior freedom; to become more aware of disordered attachments that get in the way of loving God, others, or myself.

Read Philippians 3:7-16

Pray for St. Paul's single-minded and single-hearted focus on Christ. Ask: *When have I experienced or witnessed such focus, such freedom in my life?* We always need to pray for more spiritual freedom; we cannot become free on our own.

For Reflection

These prayer practices teach us what it means to be free. This freedom is counter-cultural — not freedom *from*, but freedom *to* do something, for the greater glory of God, which will always lead us to helping people. It is a freedom bounded by God's love, and that love will make demands on us. It's a freedom from the baggage of distractions in life that prevent us from loving God, others, and ourselves as we are called to. Removing the clutter of those distractions frees us to love, and to serve. It's a pivot from what weighs us down to a freedom to serve, to love, and to give back. Loving and serving and giving back to God and others is joyful. This freedom means sacrificing something of ourselves in a way that makes us more happy, holy, and alive. That's the great mystery of our encounter with God in these Exercises.

— Excerpted from Kevin O'Brien, SJ, conversation with Vinita Hampton Wright on
Interior Freedom

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Five: The Principle and Foundation

Holy desires are at the core of the first key meditation of the Exercises, the *Principle and Foundation*. It reads like a mission statement for the human person: “I am created to praise, love, and serve God.” Of course, this vocation is specified in each unique human life. When we live out of this vocation, we are truly happy and fulfilled. When we allow disordered loves and self-preoccupations to clutter our lives, we find ourselves out of balance, unhappy, and discontented.

The grace we seek is indifference. In Ignatian vocabulary, this term does not mean an unfeeling lack of concern. Instead, indifference means that we hold all of God’s gifts reverently, gratefully, but also lightly, embracing them or letting them go, all depending on how they help us fulfill our vocation to love in everyday, concrete details.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: a deepening awareness of my fundamental vocation to praise, love, and serve God and others; a desire for greater indifference in my life; a willingness to embrace who I am before our loving God.

Read

Prayerfully read the traditional translation of the Principle and Foundation:

Principle and Foundation (SE 23)

Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save their souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for the human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created. From this it follows that we ought to use these things to the extent that they help us toward our end, and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it. To attain this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things, in regard to everything which is left to our free will and is not forbidden. Consequently, on our own part we ought not to seek health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long life rather than a short one, and so in all other matters. Rather, we ought to desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created.

Ask: How do I concretely praise, love, and serve God? What activities, people, or material things help me achieve this end?

For Reflection

It is true to say that for me sanctity consists in being myself and for you sanctity consists in being *your* self and that, in the last analysis, your sanctity will never be mine and mine will never be yours, except in the communism of charity and grace.

For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.

– Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Six: The Purpose of My Life

Indifference is another way of describing spiritual freedom. It is a stance of openness to God: we look for God in any person, any situation, and any moment. Indifference means that we are free to love and serve as God desires. Spiritual freedom or indifference is a gift from God; we can't make it happen. But we can, over time, foster indifference by developing good habits of thinking, choosing, and acting.

Consider it an invitation for you to experience more deeply how intimately related you are to God and to all of God's creation (including persons, other creatures, and the natural world). In so doing, certain fundamental truths about our existence come alive: God creates me out of love, in a particular time and place, with particular talents and temperaments, strengths and limitations. God continues to create and to reveal who God is to me and who I am before God. God invites me to partner with God to build a more just and gentle world. I learn that the best way to praise God is to be who God made me to be and to honor the uniqueness of other creatures.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: a deepening awareness of my fundamental vocation to praise, love, and serve God and others; a desire for greater indifference in my life; a willingness to embrace who I am before our loving God.

Read

Prayerfully read the contemporary translation of the Principle and Foundation:

The First Principle and Foundation

The Goal of our life is to live with God forever.
 God, who loves us, gave us life.
 Our own response of love allows God's life
 to flow into us without limit.

All the things in this world are gifts from God,
 Presented to us so that we can know God more easily
 and make a return of love more readily.
 As a result, we appreciate and use all these gifts of God
 Insofar as they help us to develop as loving persons.

But if any of these gifts become the center of our lives,
They displace God
And so hinder our growth toward our goal.

In everyday life, then, we must hold ourselves in balance
Before all of these created gifts insofar as we have a choice
And are not bound by some obligation.

We should not fix our desires on health or sickness,
Wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one.
For everything has the potential of calling forth in us
A deeper response to our life in God.

Our only desire and our one choice should be this:
I want and I choose what better leads
To God's deepening his life in me.

— St. Ignatius of Loyola, as paraphrased by David L. Fleming, S.J.

Ask: How have I been a "good steward" of the gifts God has given me, including created things, my talents, and my abilities? From my own experience, what gets in the way of my praising, loving, and serving God? How do the following influence my choices and actions: titles, honors, possessions, career, opinion of others, lifestyle? Be as concrete as possible.

For Reflection

The Meaning of Detachment



Ignatius urges us to seek the freedom of detachment or *indifference*. Neither of these words carries weight in today's language or culture. Both sound cold and uncaring, which is far from the spirit in which Ignatius used them. A better word might be *balance*.

In his *First Principle and Foundation*, Ignatius talks about "making use of those things that help to bring us closer to God and leaving aside those things that don't."

At first this notion seemed rather exploitative to me, as if the whole of creation were only there for us to select from it the bits that seem to serve our purpose. It didn't come to life for me until one day when I was sitting on a bench in a quiet, sunny courtyard, looking at a fuchsia bush. It was late August, and the bees were constantly visiting the fuchsia. They would land very gently on those flowers that were fully open to receive them. They made no attempt to enter a closed flower or to force the petals in any way. When they found an open flower they crept into its depths to extract the nectar. In doing so, of course, they also carried the pollen from flower to flower, bush to bush, thus ensuring further fruitfulness.

As I watched them, I realized that although the bees were choosing the fuchsia flowers and disregarding other plants growing in the courtyard, other insects were seeking their nourishment from different sources. In choosing what was exactly right for them, they were not only receiving their own nourishment but were also playing an essential role in the fruitfulness of their environment. And in choosing one plant rather than another, they were in no way rejecting or denigrating the others. The secret of this harmonious, cooperative life seemed to lie in each creature's being true to its own essential nature. Each gained what it needed for survival and growth from the source that was right for it, and it did so without harm either to itself or to the flowers. In fact, after each encounter, both insect and flower were left in a richer state than before: the insect had been nourished and the flower had been pollinated.

I found this picture to be a very vivid illustration of what it might mean to "make use of what leads to life" and to leave aside what, for each individual, does not lead to life. It was a truly creative kind of "detachment." It helped me to understand what God might be calling us to when he asks us to let go of our attachments. The bees, I noticed, made no attempt to "possess" the flowers, nor did the flowers attempt to trap and hold the bees. This was a free interchange, perfectly fulfilling the needs of the bees, the fuchsia, and the wider circle of creation around them.

– Excerpt from *Inner Compass* by Margaret Silf
Image by blodgett esq. under *Creative Commons license*.

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Seven

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: a deepening awareness of my fundamental vocation to praise, love, and serve God and others; a desire for greater indifference in my life; a willingness to embrace who I am before our loving God.

Read Exodus 3:1-15

Consider how God calls Moses to partner with God in the work of liberation: “I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” Reflect on your own life: *How have I partnered with God to help people, to build a more just and gentle world, to care for creation?*

For Reflection

A Work in Progress

God has begun a work in me, I’m told.

I want to believe, but I hope God is better about finishing what he starts than I am. I’ve got that half-read novel lying around somewhere, and then there’s that basket of laundry I’ve been meaning to fold.

Or for that matter, that online retreat I started...

Actually, what I really need to believe – and on my best days, what I do believe – is that God is not just better at finishing things, but better at beginning them. I may struggle to get up in the morning and find time to pray, but it’s not because God is procrastinating about deciding to show up in my life.

God’s work in me is in progress, and that calls for patience. But the work is in progress because God has already begun it – and that’s reason for hope.

– Sam Sawyer, SJ

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

