

## 2

# Preliminary Profound Practicalities

Where and how an experience of the Exercises begins is an important matter. The twenty prenotes and comments at the beginning of the book help us to appreciate this. They are practical annotations that Ignatius probably included as notes about what he was learning in his experience of giving the Exercises. The practicality of these prenotes is deceptive, however, because hidden behind some straightforward advice are profound implications about faith, prayer, and God's generosity.

The focus of these notes is on adaptation of the Exercises. John O'Malley, S.J., sees accommodation to the particular situation of individuals as central to the early Jesuits' way of proceeding,<sup>1</sup> and indeed from the first page the adaptability of the experience of making the Exercises is clear. If these prenotes are lightly passed over, one misses both the flexibility of the Exercises and profound insights into the spiritual dimension of the experience. Most of these prenotes contain advice for the one giving the Exercises, but some are also directly applicable for the retreatant. I will not make an in-depth treatment of each note, but I want to highlight the way they create a necessary attitude at the outset of the experience.

### The Twenty Prenotes

1. *The First Explanation.* By the term Spiritual Exercises we mean every method of examination of conscience, meditation, contemplation, vocal or mental prayer, and other spiritual activities, such as will be mentioned later. For just as taking a walk, traveling on foot, and running are physical exercises, so is the name of spiritual exercises given to any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God's will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul.

The comparison between physical and spiritual exercise is helpful. Physical exercise involves stress and strain of muscle to develop and tone the body. In spiritual exercise the stress and strain is on the spirit in order to "shape up" the soul to seek and find God's will as unique for oneself.

Though it is not Ignatius's image here, the experience of sails unfurling, straining, cracking in the wind makes possible a deceptively quick glide of a sailboat. As wind stretches and increases the size of drooping sails, so these exercises of the spirit stretch your soul to a greatness that directs the glide of your life in the wind of God's loving spirit. This greatness of soul and directional glide of life are magnificent to behold but cannot be achieved on your own. They are works of God.

2. *The Second.* The person who gives to another the method and procedure for meditating or contemplating should accurately narrate the history contained in the contemplation or meditation, going over the

points with only a brief or summary explanation. For in this way the person who is contemplating, by taking this history as the authentic foundation, and by reflecting on it and reasoning about it for oneself, can thus discover something that will bring better understanding or a more personalized concept of the history—either through one's own reasoning or insofar as the understanding is enlightened by God's grace. This brings more spiritual relish and spiritual fruit than if the one giving the Exercises had lengthily explained and amplified the meaning of the history. For what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savoring them interiorly.

In making the Exercises you will be taught by God much more than by the one who gives the Exercises to you. The director or guide must explain a number of things, but always briefly and to the point. You will be introduced to various meditations and passages from Scripture. The art of a good director involves welcoming you into God's word and then leaving you alone with the One who wants to address you personally and uniquely. A good director neither explains at great length nor simply assigns the passage without comment but welcomes you into the mystery in a way that invites prayer. This will always involve adjusting to whatever background of familiarity with the Scriptures a retreatant may have. Scripture study is not the point; rather, a profoundly interpersonal encounter provides the time and space for seeing, tasting, and relishing the truth.

A personal assimilation of the truth being revealed requires time and focused simplicity of heart. Letting things sink into that

deepest, most personal part of yourself makes this experience very different from classroom learning and much more an encounter with God in Jesus. This note, together with the following one, says much about the nature of the experience and the level within the exercitant where this experience is to happen.

3. *The Third.* In all the following Spiritual Exercises we use the acts of the intellect in reasoning and of the will in eliciting acts of the affections. In regard to the affective acts which spring from the will, we should note that when we are conversing with God our Lord or his saints vocally or mentally, greater reverence is demanded of us than when we are using the intellect to understand.

The experience of the Exercises is not simply a matter of intellectual understanding; rather, it is the development of an interpersonal love relationship with Jesus, always the heart of faith. Since irreverence interferes with any interpersonal encounter, Ignatius cautions us about this right from the beginning. The external expression of reverence is culturally determined and therefore always diverse. But unless external reverence, in all its diversity, is rooted in a genuine reverence of the heart, it is worthless. Reverence had become an essential element of Ignatius's own daily encounter with God. Peter Canisius, who observed him sometimes at his daily morning prayer on the roof of the Jesuit generalate in Rome, tells us: "He would stand there and take off his hat; without stirring he would fix his eyes on the heavens for a short while. Then, sinking to his knees, he would make a lowly gesture of reverence to God. After that he would sit on a bench, for his body's weakness did not permit him to do otherwise. There he was, head

uncovered, tears trickling drop by drop, in such sweetness and silence, that no sob, no sigh, no noise, no movement of the body was noticed."<sup>2</sup>

4. *The Fourth.* Four Weeks are taken for the following Exercises, corresponding to the four parts into which they are divided. That is, the First Week is devoted to the consideration and contemplation of sins; the Second, to the life of Christ our Lord up to and including Palm Sunday; the Third, to the Passion of Christ our Lord; and the Fourth, to the Resurrection and Ascension. To this Week are appended the Three Methods of Praying. However, this does not mean that each Week must necessarily consist of seven or eight days. For during the First Week some persons happen to be slower in finding what they are seeking, that is, contrition, sorrow, and tears for their sins. Similarly, some persons work more diligently than others, and are more pushed back and forth and tested by different spirits. In some cases, therefore, the Week needs to be shortened, and in others lengthened. This holds as well for all the following Weeks, while the retreatant is seeking what corresponds to their subject matter. But the Exercises ought to be completed in thirty days, more or less.

Though this note about the parts of the Exercises seems clear and straightforward, it underlines the adaptability of the whole experience as discerned in light of the grace sought and received. It also sets the length of the whole experience at thirty days, more or less.<sup>3</sup>

5. *The Fifth.* The persons who make the Exercises will benefit greatly by entering upon them with great spirit and generosity toward their Creator and Lord, and by offering all their desires and freedom to him so that His Divine Majesty can make use of their persons and of all they possess in whatsoever way is in accord with his most holy will.

This is one of the two most important prenotes and invites your serious prayer at the very beginning. It is obviously the fruit of Ignatius's own experience and his direction of other people.

Generosity and magnanimity are important graces at the beginning. Your own willpower cannot produce these graces. You must search your heart's desire and expose that in prayer to God. Then you must wait in patient hope for graces to be given.

The real start of the Exercises coincides with a generous abandonment of the thirty days for whatever God intends. This involves more than moving into the retreat house and emptying your bags. Oftentimes such an abandonment is born of days of pondering the cost and the risk. The "control artist," who is always fearful of letting go, must pray fervently at the beginning for this grace. To entrust yourself totally to God in the face of the month's inevitable risk of an uncontrollable and unpredictable outcome is the real beginning of the experience. But as the experience deepens, a central realization keeps the generous abandonment engaged: God's generosity toward you will *always* surpass your own.

*Divine Majesty*, one of Ignatius's favorite titles for God, occurs here for the first time in the *Exercises*. Clearly, it springs from the culture of chivalry and knighthood that formed Ignatius. It rings with reverence, loyalty, and generous love. George E. Ganss, S.J., says, "This title sprang spontaneously from his heart and with

lapidary brevity expressed the deep reverence he habitually felt for his Creator."<sup>4</sup> Though this title is not familiar or endearing for most people today, I am maintaining its usage in this book because of its central importance to Ignatius. Therefore, I invite readers to try to free themselves of any contemporary prejudice and to enter the strong affective content of the term.

6. *The Sixth.* When the one giving the Exercises notices that the exercitant is not experiencing any spiritual motions in his or her soul, such as consolations or desolations, or is not being moved one way or another by different spirits, the director should question the retreatant much about the Exercises: Whether he or she is making them at the appointed times, how they are being made, and whether the Additional Directives are being diligently observed. The director should ask about each of these items in particular. Consolation and desolation are treated in [316–324], the Additional Directives in [73–90].

One of the most frustrating experiences for the director of the Exercises is a retreatant's report that "nothing is happening." Ignatius's advice here gently challenges both you and the director. If you are truly engaged in prayer, he expects something to happen; he presumes a movement from thinking the material over, to personal prayer of your heart, and, finally, to your personal commitment. So if nothing *seems* to be happening, Ignatius invites the director to investigate the details of your involvement in the practice of prayer.



This is not a matter of a director's distrusting your report but an invitation to believe in God's faithful presence whenever you come to prayer. The "nothing happening" experience can sometimes be a symptom of a deeper resistance stirring beneath your consciousness, seeking the light of God's saving love. If God is always present, then when we engage that presence in faith, *something* is "happening." This quiet presence in faith is a prayer lesson that most people entering the Exercises must learn.

7. *The Seventh.* If the giver of the Exercises sees that the one making them is experiencing desolation and temptation, he or she should not treat the retreatant severely or harshly, but gently and kindly. The director should encourage and strengthen the exercitant for the future, unmask the deceptive tactics of the enemy of our human nature, and help the retreatant to prepare and dispose himself or herself for the consolation which will come.

Your director in this experience is a companion in faith and offers support accordingly. In a time of desolation and temptation, which can strangle the joy and obvious effectiveness of prayer, the director is gently and kindly encouraging. This involves much more than an embrace or a pat on the back (though these have their place at times). To help you recognize the temptations of the enemy of our human nature<sup>5</sup> and to remind you that consolation is sure to return are the most profound and faith-filled forms of encouragement for one involved in the battle of the inner spirits.

8. *The Eighth.* According to the need perceived in the exercitant with respect to the desolations and deceptive tactics of the enemy, and also the consolations, the giver of the Exercises may explain to the retreatant the rules of the First and Second Weeks for recognizing the different kinds of spirits in [313–327 and 328–336].

9. *The Ninth.* This point should be noticed. When an exercitant spiritually inexperienced is going through the First Week of the Exercises, he or she may be tempted grossly and openly, for example, by being shown obstacles to going forward in the service of God our Lord, in the form of hardships, shame, fear about worldly honor, and the like. In such a case the one giving the Exercises should not explain to this retreatant the rules on different kinds of spirits for the Second Week. For to the same extent that the rules of the First Week will help him or her, those of the Second Week will be harmful. They are too subtle and advanced for such a one to understand.

10. *The Tenth.* When the one giving the Exercises perceives that the retreatant is being assailed and tempted under the appearance of good, the proper time has come to explain to the retreatant the rules of the Second Week mentioned just above. For ordinarily the enemy of human nature tempts under the appearance of good more often when a

person is performing the Exercises in the illuminative life, which corresponds to the Exercises of the Second Week, than in the purgative life, which corresponds to those of the First Week.

These notes reveal that the experience is centrally concerned with discernment of spirits—the sensitive, faith-filled sorting out of spontaneous moods, impulses, and urges in order to see which are from God and which are not. Ignatius was intensely engaged on this curve of learning all through his time at Loyola and Manresa. As attested in his *Autobiography*, this “experience of the different spirits from the lessons he had received from God” provided guidance all along the rest of his pilgrim life.<sup>6</sup>

The two separate sections of guidelines about discernment have different concerns and are to be applied to you only when your experience demonstrates the need of one section or the other. The first section deals with gross and open temptations, whereas the second section treats temptation under the appearance of good. These rules are not studied for their own sake. They are properly learned from God when they serve as helpful commentary and explanation for the experience you are having. This subtle art of discernment can be misleading unless properly applied by the director; to misapply the remedies of these two sections may cause confusion and harm. In the closing chapters of this book I will comment on these two sets of discernment rules.

11. *The Eleventh.* It is helpful for a person receiving the Exercises of the First Week to know nothing about what is to be done in the Second, but to work diligently during the First Week at obtaining what he or she is seeking, just as if there were no

anticipation of finding anything good in the Second.

This seems very practical and clear: do not run ahead of yourself in the experience. But this is more than just a caution against “reading ahead”; hidden in this practical advice is the essential value of a directed retreat experience. By letting your attention be focused ever more fully and trustingly in the present moment, you are developing a God-centered sensitivity. So often a person’s psychic energy is siphoned off by difficult memories of the past or by worrisome concern about the future. To live carefully attuned to the *now* of the present moment allows you to find and live an intimacy with God’s love in what is always its only real presence.

12. *The Twelfth.* The one giving the Exercises should insist strongly with the person making them that he or she should remain for a full hour in each of the five Exercises or contemplations which will be made each day; and further, that the recipient should make sure always to have the satisfaction of knowing that a full hour was spent on the exercise—indeed, more rather than less. For the enemy usually exerts special efforts to get a person to shorten the hour of contemplation, meditation, or prayer.

Here again discernment is the heart of the matter. The faith and prayer of human beings must always be incarnated in time. How long you pray should not simply be the result of some spurt of emotion or casual happenstance. A set length that you know you are capable of should be determined for each of the four or five

daily periods of prayer. To regularize this set length invites you beyond the superficial and fluctuating measure of “praying as long as you feel like it” and into the deeper interpersonal dimension of faith.

The issue, then, becomes one carefully discerned in faith. Consciously to offer the determined length of time as your gift to God will raise the question of why you would stop early and withdraw the gift offered. Sometimes it is better at first not to schedule your generosity beyond what is appropriate to you. A sixty-minute period is not endowed with any magical value. To start with the graced length of prayer you are being given provides leeway for the Holy Spirit to stretch your generosity and the length of time of each prayer period.

13. *The Thirteenth.* This too should be noted. In time of consolation it is easy and scarcely taxing to remain in contemplation for a full hour, but during desolation it is very hard to fill out the time. Hence, to act against the desolation and overcome the temptations, the exercitant ought to remain always a little longer than the full hour, and in this way become accustomed not merely to resist the enemy but even to defeat him.

At first glance this advice can seem tinged with the Pelagian error that we can attain knowledge of God through our own efforts. When the prayer is not going well, pray longer. When you feel like stopping early, continue even longer. It sounds like spirituality by your strength with a teeth-gritted compulsiveness.

Rather, the issue here is profoundly one of discernment. Consolation and desolation are faith interpretations of the movements of your heart. This is the scenario within which decisions

about prayer (even such an apparently slight matter as length) should be made. In consolation, the Holy Spirit is primarily at work absorbing you into the contemplation; whereas in desolation, the enemy of our human nature, that evil spirit opposed to God’s Holy Spirit, is distracting you with temptations or inducing a sluggishness of spirit. In the face of desolation what is needed is faith’s honest interpretation and courageous response. This is what Ignatius wants you to realize in the very beginning of the experience. Something much more than compulsiveness and Pelagian self-determination is at issue here.

14. *The Fourteenth.* If the one giving the Exercises sees that the exercitant is proceeding with consolation and great fervor, he or she should warn the person not to make some promise or vow which is unconsidered or hasty. The more unstable the director sees the exercitant to be, the more earnest should be the forewarning and caution. For although it is altogether right for someone to advise another to enter religious life, which entails the taking of vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity; and although a good work done under a vow is more meritorious than one done without it, still one ought to bestow much thought on the strength and suitability of each person, and on the helps or hindrances one is likely to meet with in carrying out what one wishes to promise.

To run ahead of grace is not generosity but foolishness. Consolation and fervor, just the opposite of sluggishness of spirit, can rush a person to promises and decisions unwarranted in the