

What are the Spiritual Exercises?

“For just as strolling, walking and running are exercises for the body, so ‘spiritual exercises’ is the name given to every way of preparing and disposing one’s soul to rid herself of all disordered attachments, so that rid of them one might seek and find the divine will in regard to the disposition of one’s life for the good of the soul.”

St. Ignatius Loyola

During the 1530s, St. Ignatius Loyola began writing about the emotions that took hold of him — feelings of gratitude and anguish, consolation and sadness — while encountering the scriptures. Those meditations eventually became the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, first published in 1548.

The Spiritual Exercises is a compilation of meditations, prayers, and other contemplative practices. It is not like other classics in Western spirituality that are typically read from beginning to end. It is more like a handbook, especially for use by spiritual directors who accompany and guide people through this dynamic process of reflection.

And while the Spiritual Exercises is a book, it is also a series of exercises developed by a man who believed that stretching oneself spiritually is as important as an athlete's conditioning routine.

The object is to help people develop their attentiveness, their openness, and their responsiveness to God. In other words, the exercises embody the characteristic themes of Ignatian spirituality. They are organized into four sections or "weeks." These are steps along the path of spiritual freedom and collaboration with God’s activity in the world.

Here is one helpful summary of those stages, offered by Ignatian Spirituality.com, a service of Loyola Press in Chicago.

First week. The first week of the Exercises is a time of reflection

on our lives in light of God's boundless love for us. We see that our response to God's love has been hindered by patterns of sin. We face these sins knowing that God wants to free us of everything that gets in the way of our loving response to him. The first week ends with a meditation on Christ's call to follow him.

Second week. The meditations and prayers of the second week teach us how to follow Christ as his disciples. We reflect on Scripture passages: Christ's birth and baptism, his sermon on the mount, his ministry of healing and teaching, his raising Lazarus from the dead. We are brought to decisions to change our lives to do Christ's work in the world and to love him more intimately.

Third week. We meditate on Christ's Last Supper, passion, and death. We see his suffering and the gift of the Eucharist as the ultimate expression of God's love.

Fourth week. We meditate on Jesus' resurrection and his apparitions to his disciples. We walk with the risen Christ and set out to love and serve him in concrete ways in our lives in the world.

Jesuits do the exercises in literally four weeks, during what is known as the 30-day retreat or simply "The Long Retreat." And they do so typically at a retreat house with a spiritual director. But with the growing interest in Ignatian spirituality, many people are practicing the Exercises in other ways.

One popular version is known as the "Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life," which someone can do while continuing his or her daily responsibilities. This approach (which Ignatius spelled out in his manual) often involves an hour each day of prayer and reflection for several months, with regular guidance from a spiritual director.

Part of his Spiritual Exercises is the five-step reflection, the Examen, designed to help people discern God's activity during

specific moments of their lives. Ignatius believed the Examen was so important that even if Jesuits neglected all other forms of prayer, they should never miss a day without spending a few minutes praying the Examen.

Imaginative Prayer

Among other forms of prayer, the Spiritual Exercises presents an imaginative way of placing yourself within the biblical stories.

"We see the fishermen hauling in their nets on the Sea of Galilee, hear the smack of waves against the boat's hull, feel the sunshine on our skins, smell seaweed and brine, taste the water we scoop up in our palm," Santa Clara University literature professor Ron Hansen has explained. "With all five senses wholly engaged, we become part of the scene and can be as shocked and happy as Peter was when he recognized that it was the risen Christ who was roasting a fish on a charcoal fire on the shore and plunged into the sea to wade to him."

All of these techniques are geared to nurturing the habits of spiritual discernment — among those who are ready to see God at work "in all things."