



# What Are the Spiritual Exercises?

The Spiritual Exercises grew out of Ignatius Loyola's personal experience as a man seeking to grow in union with God and to discern God's will. He kept a journal as he gained spiritual insight and deepened his spiritual experience. He added to these notes as he directed other people and discovered what "worked." Eventually Ignatius gathered these prayers, meditations, reflections, and directions into a carefully designed framework of a retreat, which he called "spiritual exercises."

Ignatius wrote that the Exercises: "have as their purpose the conquest of self and the regulation of one's life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment." He wanted individuals to undertake these exercises with the assistance of an experienced spiritual director who would help them shape the retreat and understand what they were experiencing. The book of *Spiritual Exercises* is a handbook to be used by the director, not by the person making the retreat.

## The Structure of the Exercises

Ignatius organized the Exercises into four "weeks." These are not seven-day weeks, but stages on a journey to spiritual freedom and wholehearted commitment to the service of God.

**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.

## Prayer in the Exercises

The two primary forms of praying taught in the Exercises are meditation and contemplation. In **meditation**, we use our minds. We ponder the basic principles that guide our life. We pray over words, images, and ideas.

**Contemplation** is more about feeling than thinking. Contemplation often stirs the emotions and enkindles deep desires. In contemplation, we rely on our imaginations to place ourselves in a setting from the Gospels or in a scene proposed by Ignatius. We *pray* with Scripture. We do not study it.

The **discernment of spirits** underlies the Exercises. We notice the interior movements of our hearts, and discern where they are leading us. A regular practice of discernment helps us make good decisions.

All the characteristic themes of Ignatian spirituality are grounded in the Exercises. These include a sense of collaboration with God's action in the world, spiritual discernment in decision making, generosity of response to God's invitation, fraternity and companionship in service, and a disposition to find God in all things. Spiritual integration is a prominent theme of the Exercises: integration of contemplation and action, prayer and service, and emotions and reason.

Source: <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/what-are-the-spiritual-exercises/#sthash.voKdyYxq.dpuf>