

What Are the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius?

by Joe Paprocki, D Min

It's a well-known fact that we need exercise to maintain our physical health. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) recognized the need for exercise in order to maintain our spiritual health as well. In fact, around the years 1522-1524, St. Ignatius composed a retreat handbook titled *Spiritual Exercises*.

Ignatius was a Spanish soldier wounded in battle in 1521. During his long and painful recovery, he reflected deeply on his ultimate desires, learning to discern between desires that were grounded in vanity and those that were grounded in holiness. After coming face to face with his own sinfulness and God's grace and mercy, he left behind his life as a soldier and dedicated his life to God. He concluded that this personal experience of God could be experienced by all people through the practice of the spiritual exercises he himself had engaged in. The result, of course, is the *Spiritual Exercises*, designed to help people to experience a deepening experience of God in their daily lives.

The *Spiritual Exercises* begin with what Ignatius calls his Principle and Foundation which states that our purpose in life is to be with God forever, living with profound gratitude for the gifts of God and holding ourselves in balance so as not to displace God with any one of his gifts. The exercises, designed to help us achieve and maintain that balance, were originally designed to take place over a 30-day retreat, with each of the 4 weeks (stages) focusing on a specific goal:

Week one: to “reform the deformed”—the focus of the first week is to recognize God's unconditional love and to come to terms with our failure and the failure of all of humanity to respond generously to that love.

Week two: to “conform the reformed”—the focus of the second week is to reflect on the person and life of Christ so that we may freely choose to love him and follow him more closely and faithfully.

Week three: to “confirm the conformed”—the focus of the third week is on the Passion and death of Jesus so as to share in and identify more closely with his suffering and to deepen our commitment to him.

Week four: to “transform the confirmed”—the focus of the fourth week is to grow in desire for Jesus to reveal the joy of his Resurrection and to embrace this joy as the foundation of our call to share in Christ’s mission.

The exercises themselves consist of meditations on Scripture passages as well as prayers, considerations (imaginative mental exercises), and contemplative practices, all designed to allow Christians to learn how to see God’s grace active in their everyday lives. While a 30-day retreat is not in the cards for most of us, today many retreat centers offer much shorter retreats that follow the pattern of the Spiritual Exercises. Likewise, we can benefit from the wisdom of the Spiritual Exercises by practicing what Ignatius called a daily Examen—a prayerful review of our day to discern how God’s grace is present in our daily activities and how we are responding.