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After the Exercises: Translation and Transformation

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A growing number of faculty, staff, and students on Jesuit campuses have undertaken the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, often through a retreat in daily life offered over the course of an academic year. For many, the experience is profound, even life-changing. People who have gone through the Exercises develop habits rooted in prayer, meditation, and contemplation of Scripture. They practice the Examen, a prayerful review of their day’s thoughts and activities. They discern where the interior movements of the heart are leading. They are set on a path of awakening, discovery, and renewal. The Exercises provide a mechanism for responding to God’s invitation to make reasoned decisions, to move from contemplation to action, and to serve others.

The transformative power of the Exercises is uniquely manifested for each individual, yet deeply seated in the importance of community. The Exercises radically reshaped my relationship to Georgetown as I became acutely aware of the Jesuit values that underpinned the institution. I was filled with gratitude for being at a school where “women and men for others” is not a slogan but a call to action. I sought to discern how I might embrace the university’s mission in my teaching, scholarship, and service. I felt empowered to “come out” as a Catholic on campus and to reinvigorate my faith commitment; at the same time I became more attuned to the splendor of other faith traditions. Still, the translation of the lessons of the Exercises into action did not happen quickly for me, and it remains a work in progress.

When I was making the Exercises, I initially placed pressure on myself to discern my calling and then respond by the end of the retreat. My spiritual director wisely pointed out that the Exercises offer a structure and foundation for making choices and that there is no expiration date on the call to serve alongside Christ. Kevin O’Brien, S.J., reinforces the notion that we hear and answer the call on our own terms, in our own time. He states in An Ignatian Prayer Adventure, “we don’t have to make any offering or commitment if we’re not ready. For now, we just want to be open enough to hear the call and to get excited about Christ’s engaging vision for us and the world.” Similarly, Dean Brackley, S.J., who labored among

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the poor and oppressed in El Salvador, observed in 
_The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times_ that recognize
ing and answering the call is something that may
take time and patience. It can come to us in a “still
small voice” – a whisper, a nudge, a barely percepti-
able thought.

Jesuit institutions offer a variety of opportunities
for keeping people’s encounter with the Exercises
alive as they continue their journey and listen for the
call of that “still small voice.” Some schools provide
spiritual directors who guide people as they delve
further into the revelations of the Exercises. In fact,
after making the Exercises some people are called to
become spiritual directors themselves. There is an
increasing need for trained spiritual directors on our
campuses to accompany faculty, staff, and students
as they embark on the Exercises as well as to guide
people as they engage their faith and prayer life
more generally. Programs in spiritual direction that
range from noncredit seminars to certificate and
degree programs are offered through many of our
Jesuit schools.

Other resources on our campuses also encour-
age a sustained commitment to the Exercises.
Speakers who present perspectives on Ignatian spir-
ituality and the Jesuit mission can invigorate discern-
ment. All of our schools have rich retreat programs
that allow participants to reconnect with the
Exercises and to have time for peaceful reflection
and renewal. Online retreats also are available, like
the one offered by Creighton University (see following
story). Faculty and staff members can participate
in programs and retreats that allow them to relate
what they have gained through the Exercises to their
work life, such as the Ignatian Colleagues Program,
the AJCU Seminar for Leadership in Higher
Education, the MAGIS program of the Jesuit
Collaborative, and the Ignatian Leadership for
Mission Retreat. Some universities offer pilgrimages
where participants walk in the footsteps of St.
Ignatius in Spain and Rome. Schools also sponsor
domestic and international immersion experiences
where participants encounter poverty and injustice
firsthand and can engage in service activities. Travel
to places like Kenya, El Salvador, the Dominican
Republic, Appalachia, and the U.S./Mexico border
can be transformative as people consider their life
choices in light of the Exercises.

The support of a community of people who
share the gift of the Exercises can be instrumental in
helping individuals maintain their connection to
Ignatian spirituality over the long haul. Holding semi-
inars where people meet regularly to pray and dig
more deeply into the meaning and practice of the
Exercises is one way to create community. The semi-
nar may be focused around a book, videos, or other
materials that provide a starting point for discussion.
In addition to the O’Brien and Brackley works cited
above, _God’s Voice Within_ by Mark E. Thibodeaux,
S.J., and _Jesus: A Pilgrimage_ by James Martin, S.J., are
examples of texts that work well in this context. The
primary purpose of these seminars, though, is not to
cover the material but to bring people together for
fellowship and conversation. Small, less formal
groups that take place over breakfast or lunch may
be inviting to people who are more comfortable in
a relaxed setting. Groups can provide a safe haven
for those who wish to engage in deep faith sharing.
A strong sense of trust and camaraderie can build in
these communities that ultimately can translate to
greater harmony and cooperation in the workplace.

The Exercises provide a foundation for people
in diverse roles to work on behalf of a common mis-
sion and to put into practice the spiritual values that
animate Jesuit universities. For people who are used
to individual endeavors, which is common among
faculty and staff, this collaborative work can be chal-
lenging. As part of the community doing God’s
work, illuminated by the Exercises, we can follow
our hearts as we listen, learn, and act in concert.

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**Resources**

Quality online resources are available to acquaint people
with the Spiritual Exercises and to help people continue
on their journey after making the Exercises.

Creighton University Online retreats
http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/Collaborative
Ministry/online.html

_The Spiritual Exercises_, Loyola Press
http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-
spiritual-exercises/

_The Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius Loyola: Renewal and
Dynamics_, Institute of Jesuit Sources (video series)
http://www.georgetown.edu/content/124663501852.html

_The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius_,
Sylvester Tan, S.J., at Loyola University, New Orleans
(video lecture)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeysvzF8EJg

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