



DAY # 1: Conference

500 YEARS OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF ST. IGNATIUS: *STILL RELEVANT IN THE MODERN WORLD?*

Welcome

Welcome to the online Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius! What a grace it is to devote time each day to prayer, to meditation, to grow in holiness, that is, to grow closer to our Lord.

St. Ignatius wrote the spiritual exercises over 500 years ago, with the original plan as a 30-day silent retreat. He was also a very practical man, and knew that not everyone would be able to do this, and writes in point #19:

One who is educated or talented, but engaged in public affairs or necessary business, should take an hour and a half daily for the Spiritual Exercises. [19]¹

This is the basis of making the spiritual exercises available online, in a modified version. On our website (spiritualexercises.online), you can find options for '[In-Person Exercises](#)' (usually a 3 day retreat) which are an incredible, life-changing experience for those who are able to take it. However, in the hustle and bustle of life, that may not be possible, and hence, we have these exercises available as well.

The Proper Disposition

A crucial element of the spiritual exercises that you are beginning today, is one's 'disposition of soul'. St. Ignatius writes:

*It will be very profitable for the one who is to go through the Exercises to enter upon them with **magnanimity** and **generosity** toward his Creator and Lord, and to offer Him his entire will and liberty, that His Divine Majesty may dispose of him and all he possesses according to His most holy will. [5]*

In other words – in a theme that we will discuss and dive deeper in each day – that of desiring to be a saint, to desire to be holy. Because we are so great and awesome? No. But rather, because God wills it! *For this is the will of God, your **sanctification*** (1 Thess. 4:3).

¹ Note that all translations come from the Louis Puhl Edition of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola.



So, the exercises are not something merely ‘speculative’ that is, we aren’t here merely to ‘learn about good and holy things’ (we will do that); the point is to move our will to **do** and **desire** the good. So – as we will repeat often – the real work comes in the time of ‘prayer’ (that is, you, alone with God in your time of meditation).

Some Practical Notes

As discussed in some of the introductory videos, the idea is to – as St. Ignatius says – take an hour and a half daily for spiritual exercises, beginning today (Ash Wednesday will be the first release, but you can take these later as well). Each day we will have a Points for Meditation or Conference² of about 30 to 45 minutes, which is to be followed by a time of prayer and reflection.

Each of you will need to accommodate this commitment of prayer and meditation to your own schedules. It is always desirable to pray in a chapel, although this is not always possible. Find what works for you, to take time to consider the ‘Points for Meditation’ or ‘Conference’ and then pray and reflect accordingly. As you listen, it can be very helpful to take notes, but also be aware we will have handouts available to help guide your meditation.

We begin with a few introductory conferences to help prepare us for this wonderful journey, this time to draw closer to our Lord in prayer, to grow in holiness and the love of God. With that said,

Let us begin with prayer: *Hail Mary, Glory Be, Our Lady, Help of Christians...*

Introduction

St. Ignatius wrote his famous “Spiritual Exercises” shortly after his conversion in 1522, making the exercises over 500 years old. The world was a very different place then – are they still ‘relevant’ or ‘current’ in today’s world?

It’s important that we are committed as we start the SE, so let’s understand their place in our own times:

What do we mean by “relevant” or “current”?

“**Current**,” as the Meriam Webster indicates, is an adjective applicable to time; literally: “occurring in or existing at the **present** time.” It can be understood as something that is

² Note that “Points for Meditation” or “Conference” refers to the points given by one of the preachers, that is, in the video or audio file. Here one is supplied the *material* for the meditation. Then the one taking exercises goes off to pray and meditate, based on the content of the “Points for Meditation” or “Conference”.



happening at this **very moment**, something manifest, visible, etc. Thus, we can affirm that, at the present moment—or *currently*—people generally do not travel on horseback, or that Latin is not currently spoken, etc. (**Relevant** = having significant and demonstrable bearing on or relation to the matter at hand)

Following this same sense, “current” can be understood as “the latest thing present,” “the **new**,” “the most recent,” and always in a **positive** sense. Thus, a “**non-current**” or “outdated” person is someone “old-fashioned,” “out of touch” with the world, who **does not understand** what is happening in the present and therefore cannot contribute much to his contemporaries. Likewise, a computer program or an app, if not updated, may not function properly.

Still, not everything that is “**current**” or “**updated**” is better; ‘newer is not always better’

The Actuality of God and the Divine

Nothing is more actual, more present, more *operative* than God. In fact, as you know, God has no time; He is in an **eternal present**.

“O Lord, You have been our refuge from generation to generation. Before the mountains were born, and the earth and the world were brought forth, from eternity to eternity You are God.” (Ps 90:1–2)

“For His mercy endures forever.” (1 Chr 16:41)

And all things and persons that participate in the divine share in that “**actuality of God.**”

Jesus Christ: God Himself made flesh.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (Rev 1:8)

Can we say that Jesus is not *current*, that He does not *act*? How many thousands of people are, at this very moment, before the Eucharist, adoring the Lord? There are **more than 3,000 chapels of perpetual adoration** in the world—and how many more tabernacles besides! We are here because of Him...

The Word of God:

“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Heb 4:12)

Holiness:

“Indeed, holiness never loses its power of attraction, it does not fade into oblivion, it never goes out of fashion; on the contrary, with the passage of time it shines out ever

more brightly, expressing man's perennial effort to reach God." (*Benedict XVI, July 4, homily*)

Truth and goodness: they never pass away... from the simplest truth (2+2=4) to the truth about man—his origin and his end—the truth about God... truth is always “*current*”, “*relevant*”. The same can be said of the **good**. The contrary would be to fall into ***relativism***—(whether of a personalist, historicist, or nationalist sort).

Beauty: no matter how much modern art tries to change the canons, the most beautiful works of art in history remain such—the most visited, the most valuable, etc. The same can be said, for example, of literary classics: *Don Quixote* will always be *current* for its literary beauty.

Why the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Are Still Relevant

According to what we have said, we can now ask whether the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are or are not ***current or relevant***—that is, how effective they are, how much they act, how much they operate within the soul of the Christian.

And together with that, we can ask: how much **of the *divine*** do they contain? How much do they participate in that “*perennial operative actuality*” of God, of the Lord Jesus?

To answer this, we will briefly respond to these four questions:

1. Who wrote the Spiritual Exercises.
2. What end the Exercises pursue, and how they accomplish it.
3. What efficacy and influence they have had in history.
4. What the Church thinks of them.

And in all this, we will emphasize what we have already said: how much there seems to be of God—how much participation in “the divine”—in these four points.

1 - Who wrote the Spiritual Exercises?

While one cannot compare one saint with another, we can say that among the **numerous canonized saints**, there are some **more *well known than others***, who have had a **greater influence** on history, and to whom God **granted graces** more ***particular*** than those of others—at least those graces that are “noticeable,” that is, that we have come to know of.

Thus, for example, the work of **St. Thomas Aquinas**—or rather, what God did *with* him and *through* him—is (and with the clarifications already given) **unsurpassable, irrefutable, and unrepeatabe**. That’s it. There will be no other like him, nor is there need for another; truth is one, and whoever reaches it teaches it to others, and the others try to benefit from his teaching.

We can affirm the same of **Don Bosco**, with his special charism for working with children and youth—from which was born his great novelty in those areas (the *preventive method*). And the same we can say, then, with regard to **St. Ignatius** and the **holy Exercises**.

The Personal Testimony of St. Ignatius³

But before giving the opinions of others about St. Ignatius, let us say something about what he himself recounts concerning the graces he received that are directly related to the Spiritual Exercises which bear his authorship.

The majority of those graces were received by him in **Manresa**, where he experienced and composed the substance of the holy Exercises. To situate ourselves in that moment of the Saint's life, let us recall **why** he went to Manresa.

Being the thirteenth son, after living his childhood and youth in the courtly milieu as a gentleman—that is, a knight in the service of a king or viceroy (in this case, he served Antonio Manrique de Lara, Viceroy of Pamplona)—he fought against the French, and in the only fortress that had not yet been taken by the enemy, which refused to surrender under his encouragement, a cannonball struck between his legs, shattering one and wounding the other. Because he fell, they surrendered, and the French carried him to Loyola. There, in his ancestral home, he asked for books of chivalry, but since there were none, they brought him **lives of the saints** (*Flos Sanctorum*) and the **Life of Christ** by **Ludolph of Saxony**, the Carthusian. And there...

“For, while reading the lives of Our Lord and the saints, he would stop to think, reasoning with himself: ‘How would it be, if I did this which St Francis did, and this which St Dominic did?’ And thus he used to think over many things which he was finding good, always proposing to himself difficult and laborious things. And as he was proposing these, it seemed to him he was finding in himself an ease as regards putting them into practice. But his whole way of thinking was to say to himself: ‘St Francis did this, so I must do it; St Dominic did this, so I must do it.’”

Those holy thoughts were what brought about his conversion and made him decide to set out as a penitent pilgrim toward Jerusalem, in order—if possible—to imitate Jesus even in the very places where He lived. And to go to Jerusalem he had to obtain permission from the Pope; for that, he needed to take a ship from Barcelona to Rome. For that reason, he passed first through Montserrat, and then through Manresa. At Montserrat he kept vigil with his arms before the the Black Madonna, to become a *soldier of Christ*; and so, dressed as a pilgrim and constantly thinking of God and of the feats he would do for Him, he arrived at Manresa on **March 25, 1522**.

What were to be a few days became, for various historical reasons that need not detain us, **almost eleven months**—providential months, without a doubt, that transformed him completely.

Of those months in Manresa, the Saint would later say:

³ The majority of this comes from *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius of Loyola*.

“At this time God was dealing with him in the same way as a schoolteacher deals with a child, teaching him. Now, whether this was because of his ignorance and obtuse mind, or because he didn’t have anyone to teach him, or because of the resolute will that same God had given him to serve him, it was his clear judgement then, and has always been his judgement, that God was dealing with him in this way. On the contrary, were he to doubt this, he would think he was offending his Divine Majesty. Something of this can be seen in the following five points.”

Visions and Graces Received in Manresa

Vision of the Most Holy Trinity:

“First. He had much devotion to the Most Holy Trinity, and thus each day he made prayer to the three Divine Persons separately... And one day, while praying on the steps of the same monastery the Hours of Our Lady, his understanding began to be elevated, as though he saw the Most Holy Trinity in the form of three keys; and this with so many tears and so many sobs that he could scarcely contain himself. And as he went that morning in a procession that was leaving from there, he could never restrain his tears until the meal; nor after the meal could he speak of anything except the Most Holy Trinity; and this with many comparisons, very various, and with much joy and consolation; so that all his life there remained with him this impression of feeling great devotion whenever he prayed to the Most Holy Trinity.”

Vision of the Creation of the World:

“Second. Once there was represented to his understanding, with great spiritual joy, the manner in which God had created the world. It seemed to him that he saw something white, from which some rays were coming forth, and from which God was making light. But these things he neither knew how to explain nor did he remember altogether well those spiritual illuminations that at that time God imprinted in his soul.”

Presence of Christ in the Eucharist:

“Third. ...While in this town, in the church of that same monastery, hearing Mass one day, and as the *Corpus Domini* was elevated, he saw with the eyes of the soul something like white rays that came down from above; and though after so much time he could not explain it well, what he clearly understood then was that in that Most Holy Sacrament was Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Vision of Our Lord:

“Fourth. Many times and for a long while, while in prayer, he saw with the eyes of the soul the humanity of Christ, and the figure, which seemed to him like a

white body—not very large nor very small—but he saw no distinction of members. He saw this many times in Manresa: whether twenty or forty, he would not dare to judge that it was false. He saw it again once in Jerusalem, and again while walking near Padua. He also saw Our Lady in a similar form, without distinguishing the parts.”

Confirmation of Revelation:

“These things that he saw confirmed him then, and have always given him such confirmation in the faith, that many times he has thought within himself: if there were no Scripture to teach us these things of the faith, he would still be determined to die for them, solely because of what he has seen.”

And as if this were not enough, the last of the things he relates perhaps surpasses the four previous ones together, and as far as we know, there is no saint who has received a grace from God, in that kind, so remarkable.

Extraordinary Illumination of the Cardoner:

“Fifth. Once he was going, out of devotion, to a church that was a little more than a mile from Manresa, which I believe is called Saint Paul’s, and the road runs along the river. And as he went on his devotions, he sat for a while with his face toward the river, which was deep there. And while sitting there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened. He did not see any vision, but he began to understand and to know many things—both spiritual things and things of faith and of learning—and this with such great illumination that everything seemed new to him. He could not describe in detail the particular things he understood then—though they were many—but he received a great clarity of understanding, in such manner that in all the course of his life, even after sixty-two years, considering all the helps he had received from God, and all that he had known, even if he were to gather them all together, it does not seem to him that he ever attained as much as on that one occasion. And this illumination was so great that it seemed to him as if he were a new man and had a new intellect, different from the one he had before.”

There, **St. Ignatius** received the **most important meditations** of the Exercises—the **substance**—which he first meditated upon himself, and then began **to write down** and to teach to others. He began to give the Exercises there in Manresa, with a certain amazement at the fruit they produced in souls.

The **Spiritual Exercises** have a deeply divine character.

St. Ignatius received a **“theological charism”** entirely particular.



What Has Been Said About St. Ignatius

The Loyolas were “a race of titans, with immense earthly ambitions” (García-V.), but he *supernaturalized* that ambition, and thus became a saint in whom “the heroic ideal acquires a reality and a pathos of greatness.” He attained such continual mystical union that “without that divine contact, Ignatius affirmed that he could not live even a single instant.”

A Protestant historian, **Everard Gothein**, called him “a true microcosm of Spanish religious culture.” **Menéndez y Pelayo** said that Ignatius of Loyola is “the most living personification of the Spanish spirit in its Golden Age. No leader, no sage has ever exerted a more powerful influence on the world.” And **Unamuno** added: “The greatest man our race has produced is Iñigo de Loyola.”

The Protestant psychiatrist **Dr. Roger Vitzo** felt great admiration for St. Ignatius of Loyola, saying that he was “three centuries ahead of his time in the keen psychological introspection and sound pedagogy shown in his Exercises and Examinations.”

Another Protestant, **Carl Ludwig Schleich**, Professor of Medicine at the University of Berlin, declared:

“With complete certainty and conviction I say that with those norms and exercises in our hands [the Ignatian method], we could still today transform our asylums, prisons, and mental hospitals, and prevent two-thirds of those confined there from being locked up.”

The Jesuit scholar **Fr. Iparraguirre**, a great student of St. Ignatius and of the Exercises, after citing several praises of the Ignatian text, wrote:

“After all we have said, it will not seem exaggerated that a Protestant theologian and historian, **Heinrich Böhmer**, should have said that this small and simple book belongs among the books that have marked the destiny of humanity, and that a Hungarian writer as little Catholic as **Fülöp-Miller** should write that ‘no other work of Catholic literature can compare to it in historical influence. The conquering power of the Exercises soon extended throughout the entire Catholic Church.’”

2 - What End the Exercises Pursue, and How They Accomplish It

The end they pursue is very concrete and precise. St. Ignatius repeats the end goal often:

*“Which 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**”* [21].

*“We call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and **finding the will of God** in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul”* [1]



(Principle & Foundation): *Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul... Our **one** desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the **end** for which we are created [23]*

To remove what is disordered would be, as it were, a preliminary or “negative” step toward reaching the will of God, which is the most important thing and what we ask for every day in the *Our Father*.

And doing the will of God produces has been beautifully summarized:
“What is holiness? It is precisely the joy of doing the **will of God.**”

The **objective**, then, is that the one making the Exercises come to know **the will of God in his life**—both in transcendent matters, such as the vocation to which he is called, and in smaller things of daily life.

How does St. Ignatius make us reach this goal?

Fundamentally, by teaching us ***how to pray***.

Although they involve other aspects, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius have **prayer** as their principal element. In fact, he defines *Exercises* as:

*“is meant every method of **examination of conscience**, of **meditation**, of **contemplation**, of **vocal and mental prayer**, and of other spiritual activities.” [1]*

All of which can be summarized and condensed in the word “**prayer.**”

*“To make the Exercises is primarily and principally to **experience** within oneself the **power of prayer,**”* says Fr. Casanovas.

In fact, the opposition and misunderstandings the Exercises provoked when they first appeared came precisely from proposing a “**singular and new method of prayer.**”

All the other annotations and additions that, with heavenly knowledge of human psychology and of the laws of the spirit—with the precision of a surgeon and the repetition of a master, with scrupulous respect for the mysterious relationship between nature and grace, and with the wisdom born of experience—the Saint gives in the Exercises, have no other purpose than to help one “*pray well,*” or better said, *to transform the exercitant into a man or woman **of prayer.***

3 - What Efficacy and Influence They Have Had in History?

The **Society of Jesus** counts among its members hundreds of martyrs and apostolic feats such as Christendom had perhaps never seen before.

It has been said that if all of Europe did not become Protestant, it was thanks to the Society of Jesus, which Divine Providence raised up contemporaneously with the so-called Protestant Reformation. Well then, everything that the Society accomplished is inseparable from the **Spiritual Exercises**.

The Jesuits were as great as they were *because of* the Exercises, and they also used this great apostolic weapon to convert and sanctify hundreds of thousands of souls throughout the world. **St. Francis de Sales**, who died in 1622, is said to have claimed that the Ignatian book had already “brought about more conversions than it contains letters.”

What then should we say today, after more than four centuries in which it has never ceased to produce “great fruits of holiness”?

Fr. Jean-Pierre De Causette⁴ has beautifully said:

“The Exercises are among the most venerable books ever to come from human hands; for if *The Imitation of Christ* has dried more tears, the *Exercises* have produced more conversions and more **saints**.”

And this keen observation can be verified by a simple look at the canonizations of the past centuries. Beginning with the patron of the missions, **St. Francis Xavier**, who converted while listening to the Exercises preached by St. Ignatius himself, there are innumerable saints who have used this method to reach the heights of spiritual life.

In light of these data and considerations on the exceptional influence exercised by the Exercises, the truly extraordinary testimonies that have been given by people of the most varied conditions and times will not seem exaggerated.

Perhaps the most important and significant of all, both for the authority from which it proceeds and for the weight of its content, is that expressed by **Leo XIII**, repeated and confirmed by **Pius XI**—anticipating the next point, let us transcribe these words of the Magisterium:

“In this arena, all who have flourished greatly in ascetical doctrine or in holiness of life during the last four centuries have acquired or increased their virtues.”

St. Ignatius himself, so opposed to vain praises, made, with exceptionally meaningful words, the most exalted defense of his method.

We **quote** only one paragraph from what he wrote to his confessor in Paris, Dr. Miona:

“The Spiritual Exercises are all the best that I have been able to think out, experience and understand in this life, both for helping somebody to make the most of themselves, as also for being able to bring advantage, help and profit to many others.”

⁴ Author of the spiritual classic *Abandonment to Divine Providence*

From the **hundreds and hundreds of testimonies** from people who have done the Spiritual Exercises *online*⁵; let us quote only two:

“These Exercises, from the very beginning, make you meditate and ask yourself questions you had never asked before, with incredible answers—a moment where you find yourself in the mystery of God. I had always wanted to make the Spiritual Exercises, but never felt like it (I admit it, hehe). But I resolved, once and for all, to do them—I wanted to live this Lent well, from the heart, and what better than with the Exercises? To tell the truth, I cannot be in a silent retreat because of the quarantine, but I would love to. However, I think this is a grace from God—to give me the effort to find a space of silence and to meditate together with God. Beautiful! And me—a fifteen-year-old girl!—but with my heart in my hand, ready for anything for the Lord.” (*María Teresa*)

“To God I am very grateful for having granted me the grace to do these Exercises through this website. It has been an unforgettable experience that has helped me greatly to improve my prayer, to visualize more clearly the mysteries of faith, to discern, to discover the purpose of my existence, of other things and beings, of God’s love and His Infinite Mercy. Until very recently, St. Ignatius was totally unknown to me; today he is one of the saints whose protection I ask and from whom I seek guidance in the noble fight for the cause of Christ. I think I will repeat the experience, if God grants it, by making more of the Exercises available on this page. May the peace of the Lord always be with you, and may many more apostolic initiatives like this one continue!” (*Juan*)

4 - What the Church Thinks About Them

There is, without doubt, no other book of spiritual doctrine in the Church’s entire history that has received such solemn and continuous praise from the **Roman Pontiffs** as the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

The Venerable John Hardon, S.J., writes in the introductory chapter of *All My Liberty*:

By a strange coincidence, the Exercises were first solemnly approved by Pope Paul III on July 31, 1548, just eight years, to the day, before the death of St. Ignatius. The papal brief *Pastoralis Officii* thus began a series of more than six hundred testimonials by thirty-five sovereign pontiffs, notably the late Pius XI, whose devotion to the Exercises dated from his earliest days in the priesthood. He had seen their effectiveness during his thirty years’ association with a lay retreat house, and later on, as Pope, declared that he was led by the Exercises “to adopt a more perfect way of life.” In answer to the request of more than six hundred bishops, in 1922 he appointed St. Ignatius “the heavenly patron of all Spiritual Exercises,” and identified him as “the first to begin to teach a certain system and special method of going through spiritual retreats.” Since the terms of the apostolic constitution are similar to those which Leo XIII had used in declaring St. Thomas patron of Catholic schools, some commentators conclude that St. Ignatius

⁵ Translated from Spanish.



enjoys a preeminence in the science of spirituality comparable to that of “the universal and common doctor” in the field of theological science.

Conclusion

After everything we have seen, we can say that the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* are **current**—not in the superficial sense of “modern,” but in the deepest metaphysical and theological sense: *because they are **in act**, they **operate**, and they **sanctify**.*

They are **actual** because they contain **the divine**; because in them, **God Himself acts**, moving, enlightening, and transforming souls.

They are **perennially relevant**, because God is *perennially “in act”*.

He who makes the *Exercises* enters, so to speak, into that **divine action**, becomes participant in the living work of God, and receives the grace to be made new—to be set on fire by the same divine love that moved St. Ignatius to write them.

Perhaps we can say that because the heart of the exercises is the Gospel. And what is the Gospel? The Gospel, the good news, is the Person of Jesus Christ. Let us consider the words of St. Paul to Timothy (2 Tim 2:8)

*Remember **Jesus Christ**, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—**that** is my gospel*

Simply put, what are the exercises? They are a **method of prayer** from one of the great saints of the Church meant to **lead us into closer relationship with Jesus Christ**. All the things that come regarding method, how to pray, etc. these are all meant to help us clear the way of all the things that block or hinder Christ from my life.

While today we have a ‘Conference’ and not a ‘Points for Meditation’, it is recommended to take the time in prayer, to read sacred scripture (the Gospels, perhaps the readings from the day) to ask our Lord for the grace to take these exercises well.

May God bless you all.