

The Spiritual Exercises

for Busy People

by Kate Hildreth

When I accepted an invitation to be part of a 19th Annotation group, I had little knowledge of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. I was delighted to learn that the 19th Annotation allows a working person to complete the Spiritual Exercises in the midst of daily life instead of the traditional 30-day retreat. For nine months our group met for an hour once a week.

The four “Weeks” in the Spiritual Exercises represent stages in a spiritual journey. The weeks are not calendar weeks, and some last longer than others. When we were asked to commit to daily prayer, I thought, “How hard can that be?” I soon discovered that even a half an hour per day is a long time. I started out in the evening, but my darling husband and two attention-seeking dogs made this nearly impossible. So I changed my time to the early morning and enjoyed my first cup of coffee sitting quietly with Jesus.

The **First Week** centers on God’s ongoing creation of the world and each of us. The idea that God created me with a specific purpose was hard to get my head around and left me in awe. Through group readings, prayer, and discussions I found myself on a tearful and emotional journey as I opened my heart to God. After a lifetime of intellectualizing my emotions rather than feeling them, I was surprised at how easily I let go when the Holy Spirit moved my heart.

Next, we were asked to look at the sin of the world and in our own lives. It seems that we are constantly barraged by bad news. When newscasts get particularly gruesome, I typically stop watching. But in committing to observing the sinfulness of the world, I learned that if I truly believe “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” then I cannot be passive; I have to respond.

Facing my own sin—and then accepting God’s unconditional love for me—was even harder. Eventually I saw how arrogant I was to think that I, above all other sinners, could not be forgiven. It was a breakthrough to see how small I had made my



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“God,” and I was finally able to own up to my sinfulness and truly feel forgiven and accept His love. This alone was worth the whole retreat.

In the **Second Week** we are “called forth in love” to actively choose Christ and walk with him. We dwelled on Jesus’ childhood and public ministry, reading Bible passages repeatedly and noting which words or sentences stood out for us and why, which was an excellent introduction to *Lectio Divina* (sacred reading). We used our imagination to place ourselves in the actual story or scene. When I entered the scene of Jesus’ temptation, I let the power of evil frighten me into paralysis. But then I saw with my own eyes that because Jesus never lost his sense of self or his abiding faith in God, he was able to conquer evil.

The **Third Week** concentrates on Christ’s passion and asks us whether we have the strength to suffer with Christ. In walking with Christ to his death, I prayed for a greater ability to carry the cross and help others.

In the **Fourth Week** we focus on Jesus’ resurrection. As I imagined Jesus visiting me after the dramatic events of his passion and death, I was overwhelmed with gratitude. I realized that through the Exercises and prayer, God had helped me integrate so many loose ends in my life and bring me to greater wholeness.

After completing the Exercises, I took a break from praying. Quickly, I realized I was miserable! I missed God and the intimate friendship we’d formed, so I resumed my morning prayer routine. I know this relationship will have its ups and downs, but I know God loves me and has a plan for me. Now I pray to live out God’s dream for me. ■

To learn about more opportunities to experience the 19th annotation, please contact your local retreat house. A full list of Jesuit retreat houses can be found on page 12.