

The Use of Scripture and Imagination in the Ignatian Exercises

Phil Le Cheminant

In this article, I will describe and analyse the use of Scripture and imagination in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, paying attention to the role, benefits, dangers and safeguards regarding the use of imagination in prayer. Then I will comment upon the impact of Ignatian exercises as a component of spiritual formation.

Briefly, I will explore the role of pilgrimage in Ignatius's life. Ignatius refers to himself as "the pilgrim" throughout his autobiography.¹ Ignatius made a physical pilgrimage to Jerusalem which was cut short, and years later, commenced a second trip with a group of fellow pilgrims. John Olin elaborates,

They awaited a ship to the East, but none sailed... Late that year they set out for Rome and ... put themselves at the disposition of Pope Paul III. The pope, it appears, urged them to give up any thought of a Jerusalem apostolate and remain in Italy serving the church there.²

While Ignatius and his friends never made it to the Holy Land, reportedly Pope Paul III told them, "Italy is a good and true Jerusalem."³ Rome, then, became the substitute destination of Ignatius's pilgrimage, where he established the Society of Jesus.

In Ignatius's Exercises, the Spiritual Director encourages the participant to behold, with the mind's eye, the object of contemplation. Ignatius writes, "the composition will be to see with the sight of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing is found which I want to contemplate."⁴ I propose that these contemplations are a form of mental pilgrimage. Olin agrees:

The *Spiritual Exercises* consists in large part of meditations on the life of Christ in which the exercitant is instructed always to envision the place mentally and to apply the senses to the scene: these are prayers based on a mental journey to the Holy Land. ... The sacred scenes come alive in the imagination, and one is "as though present" in the holy places.⁵

Ignatius structures his Spiritual Exercises in such a way as they can be completed in roughly four weeks arranged thus:

First week. ... We see that our response to God's love has been hindered by patterns of sin. ...

¹ John C. Olin, ed., *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola*, trans. Joseph F. O'Callaghan (New York, 1974), cited by John C. Olin, "The Idea of Pilgrimage in the Experience of Ignatius Loyola," *Church History* 48 (1979): 387–397, p. 387.

² Olin, "Pilgrimage," *Church History* 392.

³ Javier Osuna, S. J., *Friends in the Lord*, trans. Nicholas King, S. J. (London, 1974), cited by Olin, "Pilgrimage," *Church History* 392.

⁴ Elder Mullan, *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola* (Pickerington, OH: Beloved Publishing, 2015), 18.

⁵ Olin, "Pilgrimage," *Church History* 394.

Second week. ... We reflect on ... Christ's birth and baptism, his sermon on the mount, his ministry of healing and teaching, his raising Lazarus from the dead. ...

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. ...⁶

The first week of meditations deals with the issue of sin. Ignatius has the exercitant contemplate, "the sin of the angels, the sin of Adam and Eve, the particular sin of one person who went to hell because of it, the sins of his own life, and on hell."⁷ Hugh Kelly proposes that the meditations in the first week represent a record of Ignatius's own conversion, explaining, "by them the soul is led upward through shame, confusion, fear, sorrow, to a resolution, strongly shored and buttressed, to give God His full place in life for the future."⁸ It is a week of dismantling one's self, laying down of ego, and lying prostrate before a holy God, spiritually, if not physically. Ignatius describes a goal of the exercises as being "to conquer oneself", which strongly echoes the apostle Paul's calls to die to self, and Jesus' exhortation to deny oneself (Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23).

Among Ignatius's proposed "Additions" to the first week are exterior penances, including fasting, sleep deprivation, and physically chastising the flesh.⁹ As the first week ends, considering the extreme nature of such punishments, it seems not before time that, "dramatically Jesus Christ is introduced into the *Spiritual Exercises*, and from this point on holds the central place."¹⁰

Throughout the rest of the exercises, Scripture and imagination are intertwined, as the exercitant is invited through contemplation to behold, touch and taste the experiences of Jesus, from his nativity to his departure. David L. Fleming offers:

The best-known example of this use of the imagination in the *Spiritual Exercises* is the contemplation on Jesus' birth in the second week. Ignatius suggests that we imagine "the labors of the journey to Bethlehem, the struggles of finding a shelter, the poverty, the thirst, the hunger, the cold, the insults that meet the arrival of God-with-us."¹¹

The grounding of the contemplations in scripture reflects Ignatius's spirituality, which Catherine Looker, quoting George E. Ganss, comments is "firmly based on the chief truths in God's revelation, with a particular focus on God's plan for the creation,

⁶ Loretta Pehanich, "What are the Spiritual Exercises?," *Ignatian Spirituality*, September 2016, <<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/what-are-the-spiritual-exercises>>

⁷ Harvey D. Egan, "Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism," *Theological Studies* 39 (1978): 399–426, p. 415.

⁸ Hugh Kelly, "St Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 45 (1956): 275–284, p. 278.

⁹ Mullan, *The Spiritual Exercises*, 25–26.

¹⁰ Kelly, "St Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 279.

¹¹ David L. Fleming, *What Is Ignatian Spirituality?* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2010), 57–58.

redemption, and spiritual development of the human beings who use their freedom wisely—that plan of salvation which St. Paul calls ‘the mystery of Christ.’”¹²

Ignatius was not the first to engage contemplation as a form of spiritual exercise. Moshe Sluhovsky offers that the Spiritual Exercises were shaped by Ludolf of Saxony’s *Vita Christi*, which “promoted the notion that activation of the imagination by means of meditative prayer intensifies the affective life of the soul and enhanced self-examination,” as well as other writings including Thomas à Kempis’s ‘The Imitation of Christ’.¹³ Sluhovsky also lists Abbot García Jiménez de Cisneros’s *Ejercitatorio de la vida espiritual*, suggesting, “both the vocabulary and order of Loyola’s *Exercises* follow Cisneros’s texts closely...”¹⁴ Kelly is careful to defend Ignatius’s originality, suggesting, “the essential and principal source was [Ignatius’s] own experience.”¹⁵ He later states:

Making full allowance for what he learned from these books, it is clear that the *Spiritual Exercises* in their essence, in their individuality and power, are his own discovery, are the result of his own experiences, the fruit of his own observation and of the way of life he himself walked.¹⁶

It can be stated that a goal of the Spiritual Exercises is a form of inner peace and awareness of the divine – a Christlikeness which frees the exercitant from disorderly inclinations. Sluhovsky offers, “once we humans acquire the ability to place the self beyond the control of disorderly emotions and desires, we are liberated to fine-tune our own actions so we can recognize both the purity of our own hearts and God’s love toward us.”¹⁷

Ignatius makes a bolder claim still, that, as Egan writes, “through the *Exercises* one can actually seek and find God’s will for him.”¹⁸ These are not merely peace-finding exercises, but those of allowing the exercitant to find and identify their purpose.

Ignatius’s Exercises are unparalleled in their effectiveness and reach. Hans Urs von Balthasar reflects, “Who could count how many hundreds of thousands of vocations were inspired over the centuries and continue to be inspired by this book?”¹⁹ It can be without question that Ignatian spirituality is a good pursuit. However, imaginative contemplation is an activity which could lead to narcissism. It may be a risk that an exercitant might pursue the activity of contemplation for its own end, rather than for the

¹² George E. Ganss, introduction to *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 9, cited by Catherine Looker, “‘Living with the Lord Always Before Them’: Considerations of Spiritual Guidance Offered by Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 3 (2010): 181–205, p. 187.

¹³ Moshe Sluhovsky, “St. Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises and Their Contribution to Modern Introspective Subjectivity,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 99 (2013): 649–674, p. 649.

¹⁴ Sluhovsky, “St. Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 650.

¹⁵ Kelly, “St Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 275.

¹⁶ Kelly, “St Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 277.

¹⁷ Sluhovsky, “St. Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 654–655.

¹⁸ Egan, “Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism,” *Theological Studies* 415.

¹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *You Have Words of Eternal Life: Scripture Meditations* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), 82.

pursuit of purity. Matthew Warner writes, “Red-light sins are easy to fall in to, but hard to worship. It’s the good pursuit that ends up as the golden calf.”²⁰

Another danger of the contemplation might be as a result of the intensity of introspective examination. Ignatius warns against a fearful obsession over whether or not something is sinful. Kelly illuminates, “he went through a searing attack of scruples ... which caused him such agony of soul that he was tempted to suicide.”²¹

A further concern is found in Ignatius’s writings. We should not be surprised to read various exhortations which are typical and specific to the Roman Catholic Church in the ‘Rules’ that conclude his Exercises. One troublesome example can be found in the Thirteenth Rule, which states:

To be right in everything, we ought always to hold that the white which I see, is black, if the Hierarchical Church so decides it, believing that between Christ our Lord, the Bridegroom, and the Church, His Bride, there is the same Spirit which governs and directs us for the salvation of our souls.²²

I would argue that it is a dangerous position to allow the ‘Hierarchical Church’ to dictate that ‘white is black’. I suggest this gives an unbiblical degree of authority to the established church to mandate truth, and a believer would be wise to exercise discernment.

The engagement of emotion in our worship is sometimes viewed with suspicion. Numerous books, articles and blog posts exist guiding ministry leaders on how to avoid emotional manipulation and emotionalism.²³ Yet Ignatius encourages us to engage with and seek out emotions. We find instruction in the Exercises, Egan expands, to “specifically ask for tears, shame, sorrow, confusion, horror, detestation, amazement, affectionate love, joy, gladness, peace, and tranquillity. ... Emotional conversion is a key factor in the Ignatian *Exercises*.”²⁴ By way of contrast, Bob Kauflin offers, “Emotionalism pursues feelings as an end in themselves. It’s wanting to feel something with no regard for how that feeling is produced or its ultimate purpose.”²⁵

It could be argued that Ignatius’s Exercises contributed towards a seed change in the accessibility of personal spirituality, or mysticism, as a challenge to conservative Catholicism. For many, Sluhovsky explains, the Exercises were so dangerous that they had to be censored, as they “could lead individuals to escape control, to gain too much self-confidence in their own spiritual capabilities and in their own ability to make sense of their interior movements.”²⁶

²⁰ Matthew Warner, “How Good Things in Life Can Be Dangerous,” *Matthew Warner*, September 2014, <<http://matthewwarner.me/how-good-things-in-life-can-be-dangerous>>

²¹ Kelly, “St Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 277.

²² Mullan, *The Spiritual Exercises*, 82.

²³ Examples of such resources are:

Dan Lucarini, *Why I Left the Contemporary Christian Music Movement: Confessions of a Former Worship Leader* (Darlington UK: Evangelical Press, 2002)

Share Faith, “How to Avoid Emotional Manipulation During Worship”, *Daniel Threfall*, January 2014, <<https://www.sharefaith.com/blog/2014/01/avoid-emotional-manipulation-worship/>>

²⁴ Egan, “Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism,” *Theological Studies* 417.

²⁵ Bob Kauflin, *True Worshipers: Seeking What Matters to God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 108.

²⁶ Sluhovsky, “St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 674.

What precaution exists to safeguard this practice, with its inherent risks? Ignatius's exercises differ from traditional meditations by their very nature. Sluhovsky notes, "in the Middle Ages, the practitioner chose what to read and what to meditate on or contemplate. But in a major break from this tradition, Loyola's *Exercises* were addressed to a director rather than to the practitioner."²⁷ It is this inclusion of a Spiritual Director that permits the exercitant such vulnerability in his introspection. Ignatius builds accountability into the relationship between the Spiritual Director and his disciple:

When he who is giving the Exercises sees that no spiritual movements, such as consolations or desolations, come to the soul of him who is exercising himself, and that he is not moved by different spirits, he ought to inquire carefully of him...²⁸

The practitioner's progress through the Exercises is also measured and circumscribed by the Director, so that the exercitant might progress at a rate individually suited to him. Sluhovsky notes, "[The practitioner's] self-development is mediated through another person, who totally controls their ascent toward a spiritual destiny through the control over the dispensing of exercises."²⁹

Application as Spiritual Formation

The apostle Paul implores us to "grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ." (Eph 4:15) Perhaps we could take this as our definition of Spiritual Formation, and our journey then becomes a pilgrimage akin to Ignatius's own. Ignatius's Exercises are significantly Christocentric, and thus, imbued with a high Christology. Kelly observes:

At the beginning of ... the "Second Week", St Ignatius puts the meditation *The Kingdom of Christ*, in which he expresses his interpretation of Christ's words—"I am the way and the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father, but by Me." Hence, in Jesus Christ man will find the unique and the perfect way of fulfilling his purpose in life.³⁰

I posit that the life and mysteries of Christ seem a right and worthy focus for personal, spiritual development. Both the Psalmist and the prophet Isaiah encourage us to lift our eyes to the heavens, necessarily averting our gaze from our circumstances. Yet Ignatius begins with the focus inwards, having the practitioner deal first with his own mind:

The exercitant must recall the history of the present mystery (*Sp. Ex. 2, 50–52, 111, 137, etc.*). He must recall the sins of his past life (*Sp. Ex. 56*). He should examine his conscience twice daily through a methodical memory method (*Sp. Ex. 25–31*). He must often recall, review, or repeat a previous exercise, to "dwell upon the points in which I have felt the greatest consolation or desolation, or the greatest spiritual relish" (*Sp. Ex. 62, 118, 227, 254, etc.*)³¹

²⁷ Sluhovsky, "St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises," *The Catholic Historical Review* 657.

²⁸ Mullan, *The Spiritual Exercises*, 7.

²⁹ Sluhovsky, "St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises," *The Catholic Historical Review* 658.

³⁰ Kelly, "St Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 279.

³¹ Egan, "Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism," *Theological Studies* 417.

This process is resonant of what one might undertake with a counsellor, and allows for significant healing, cleansing and preparation before filling one's mind and soul with Jesus Christ. Moreover, the exercitant is trained to "take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ." (2 Cor 10:5) This process, which Ignatius refers to as the discernment of spirits, Sluhovsky describes as "the cultivation of a mechanism of permanent self-scrutiny of the train of one's thought".³²

Ignatian spirituality is an undertaking of restriction and deprivation, deference and reverence, within exacting parameters—which ultimately leads to a spiritual life of freedom in Christ Jesus. As the exercitant matures, the role of Director becomes unnecessary, and the practitioner gains autonomy in their spirituality:

What started as following the spiritual director's assignments and developed into a dialogue between director and practitioner matures into a constant internal dialogue of the self with itself. Obedience to the director leads to ... personal self-control and self-realization, which is liberty, which is maturity, becoming a subject.³³

The Ignatian approach undoubtedly has merit on the journey of spiritual formation.

³² Sluhovsky, "St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises," *The Catholic Historical Review* 662.

³³ Sluhovsky, "St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises," *The Catholic Historical Review* 662–663.

Bibliography

- Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *You Have Words of Eternal Life: Scripture Meditations*. Translated by Dennis Martin. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004.
- Egan, Harvey D. "Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism." *Theological Studies* 39, no. 3(1978): 399–426.
- Fleming, David L. *What Is Ignatian Spirituality?* Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2010.
- Kauflin, Bob. *True Worshipers: Seeking What Matters to God*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.
- Kelly, Hugh. "St Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 45, no. 179(1956): 275–284.
- Looker, Catherine. "'Living with the Lord Always Before Them': Considerations of Spiritual Guidance Offered by Ignatius of Loyola and Dallas Willard." *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 3, no. 2(2010): 181–205.
- Mullan, Elder, trans. *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola*. Pickerington, OH: Beloved Publishing, 2015.
- Olin, John C. "The Idea of Pilgrimage in the Experience of Ignatius Loyola." *Church History* 48, no. 4(1979): 387–397.
- Pehanich, Loretta. "What are the Spiritual Exercises?" *Ignatian Spirituality* September 2016. <<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/what-are-the-spiritual-exercises>>.
- Sluhovsky, Moshe. "St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises and Their Contribution to Modern Introspective Subjectivity." *The Catholic Historical Review* 99, no. 4(2013): 649–674.
- Warner, Matthew. "How Good Things in Life Can Be Dangerous." *Matthew Warner* September 2014. <<http://matthewwarner.me/how-good-things-in-life-can-be-dangerous>>.