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THE SPIRITUALITY OF ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA

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**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2011
October, 2011
Pittsburgh, PA**

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North American Christians in Social Work 61st Annual Convention

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ABSTRACT

St. Ignatius of Loyola is best known for his Spiritual Exercises and the founding of the Society of Jesus in 1540, better known today as the Jesuit order. This practical workshop will present an overview of the “Exercises” and the key elements of Ignatian Spirituality to deepen our spiritual lives by finding God in all things. The Spiritual Exercises are a four week retreat, meditating on the life of Jesus. St. Ignatius exercises pay special attention to God’s work in our lives, our experiences, our imagination and our feelings leading to contemplative prayer, discernment, disciplined reflection on God’s work in the world and dynamic involvement in service. Ignatian spirituality is about being a contemplative in action, an ideal for the faith of the social worker.

KEY WORDS

St. Ignatius, Society of Jesus, Jesuits, Spiritual Exercises, Ignatian Spirituality,
Contemplative in Action

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ST. IGNATIUS

St. Ignatius was born in 1491 in Basque Country of northern Spain. His parents died before he was sixteen. His early years were given over to the vanities of the world including his appearance, gambling, dueling, and being a ladies' man (Martin, 2006; Link, 1993). He later distinguished himself as a valiant soldier in the Spanish / French wars of the 16th century. During combat his hip, leg, and knee were shattered by a cannonball during battle in Pamplona in 1521.

St. Ignatius recovery was the beginning of a long convalescence, reflective discernment, conversion and a new life. Ignatius spent many months immobile "daydreaming and fantasizing" (Link, 1993). He requested books of chivalry and romance but was given books on the life of Christ and the lives of saints. As he read these books he was struck by the sacrifices that the saints made for God and their love for Jesus. Ignatius began pondering a life of service to God and others. His prayers were filled with God's peace and consolation. His imaginative thoughts and daydreams were filled with desolation. His own experiences of consolation and desolation helped him define a new direction and purpose in life. He later referred to this process as discernment; or being attentive to the desires of the heart and recognizing God's will within. He recognized the choices he made either pushed him away from God (desolation) or drew him closer to God (consolation). Prayer and reflection on God lifted his heart, generated new purpose and inspiration, and allowed connection and community.

Slowly, he recognized that these feelings of dryness and consolation were God's ways of leading him to follow a path of service. He perceived the peaceful feeling as God's way of drawing him closer. This realization also marked the beginning of his understanding of

“discernment” in the spiritual life, a way of striving to seek God’s will in one’s life, a key concept in Ignatian spirituality. (Martin, 2006, p. 77)

Ignatius, following his recovery, made a pilgrimage to a monastery in Montserrat, Spain, and spent several months in seclusion. At the monastery, he moved from desolation to a “mystical sense of union with God” (Martin, 2006, p. 77). St. Ignatius describes in detail these mystical experiences in his autobiography translated by George Ganss (1991). Link (1993) provides a compelling yet brief summary of these mystical experiences:

When peace returned to his tortured soul, Ignatius began having mystical experiences. Once as church bells pealed, his soul soared skyward like an eagle, and “in the imaged harmony of three organ keys he contemplated the mystery of the trinity. Tears of joy ran down his cheeks.” On another occasion, at Mass, he says he saw “how Jesus Christ was there in the most holy sacrament.” And once, at prayer, “he saw with his inner eyes the humanity of Christ.” About these experiences, he says in his autobiography (in his usual third-person style), “The things he saw . . . gave him such strength in his faith, that he often thought to himself: if there were no Bible to teach these truths, he would be resolved to die for them, only because of what he saw.” (p. 18)

This pilgrimage made him certain he was called by God for a life of service. Ignatius’ mystical experiences continued throughout his life. He journeyed to Jerusalem where he decided to become a priest. He humbly began his studies in Paris by learning Latin in a classroom with ten year old boys. In Paris, he wrote the *Spiritual Exercises*, a handbook of practices on prayer and led his friend, St. Francis Xavier through these exercises. Ignatius studied and gathered together a group of friends who eventually formed the “Company of Jesus,” that later evolved into the “Society of Jesus,” for the purpose of “helping souls” (Martin, 2006, p. 78). Ignatius

received papal approval for this new order, The Society of Jesus, and wrote the Jesuits' constitutions. The nine founding members used their talents as missionaries, living among the poor and as teachers, founding universities to "help souls for the greater glory of God." Ignatius was known to be intelligent, prayerful, and ambitious for the greater glory of God. Jesuits are still known as intellectual, serious, austere, and mystical (Martin, 2006).

Ignatius developed a theory of Christian education that had a vision of its benefits to the Society, students and the nation. This vision lives on today in the over 700 schools, universities, and seminaries across 112 countries. He wrote in one of his letters regarding the founding of colleges:

From among those who are now merely students, in time some will emerge to play diverse roles – some to preach and carry on the care of souls, others to the government of the land and the administration of justice, and others to other responsible occupations. Finally, since the children of today become the adults of tomorrow, their good education in life and doctrine will be beneficial to many others, with the fruit expanding more widely every day. (as cited in Ganss, 1991, p. 48)

Ignatius died in 1556, at which time The Society of Jesus had about one thousand members in Portugal, Spain, India, Italy, Sicily, Brazil, France, and Germany. There were thirty-three colleges with approval for six more. Three Jesuits participated in the Council of Trent in 1546. Today there are over 25,000 members of The Society of Jesus that educate and serve millions of people across the globe annually.

THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Ignatius saw how the risen Jesus is present among us today and experienced the struggle between good and evil. Ignatius wrote *The Spiritual Exercises* to engage others in an experiential

journey that replicated his own spiritual process in the monastery in Montserrat, Spain and allowed him to recognize God's presences in the world. This small book is a synthesis of his principles (Ganss, 1991, p. 50). *The Spiritual Exercises* are a manual for a retreat director to be carried out with a retreat participant in a 30 day format. Ignatius used the Exercises to train the first followers of the Society of Jesus. Jesuits continue to utilize the Exercises in their early training. Today, there are many revisions of the Exercises that can be followed over a ten month period in a group process, alone or with a spiritual director (Alexander, A., 2009; Barry, W. A., 1991; Link, M., 1993; Muldoon, T. 2004).

The experience in the first week leads one to gratitude for God's gifts and recognition of God's love despite one's sinfulness. The second week is a series of meditations on Jesus' birth, ministry, preaching, healings and miracles. The third week is a meditation on the suffering and passion of Jesus, the Last Supper, his trial, crucifixion and death. The fourth week is a meditation on the Resurrection and God's love. In many respects these meditations remind me of the joyful, luminous, sorrowful and glorious mysteries of the Rosary (Trouve, M.L., 2004). Ignatius also provides meditations on humility, discernment, and good and evil. The meditations will be further explored in the section of this paper under Ignatian Contemplation.

THE DAILY EXAMEN IN FIVE STEPS

I assume that there are three kinds of thoughts in myself. That is, one kind is my own, which arises strictly from my own freedom and desire; and the other two come from outside myself, the one from the good spirit and the other from the evil." (St. Ignatius as cited in Ganss, 1991, p. 132)

The daily examen is a simple prayer, with five steps, to examine your day for signs of God's presence (Martin, 2010). The prayer is about finding God in your life and letting God find

you. The first step is giving thanks for the good things in your day – gratitude. Savor the moment: the sunshine on a cold winter snowy day, the giggle of a child, the bloom of a flower, the kind word from a colleague, the unexplained and unexpected resolution to a difficult situation. To stop, notice, enjoy, savor and show gratitude slows us down. Martin (2010) quotes Anthony de Mellow, “You sanctify whatever you are grateful for” (p. 89). The second step in the examen is to ask for the grace to know where you acted contrary to better judgment. Martin (2010) states, “Today guilt may be undervalued. The voice of our conscience, which tells us we did something wrong and moves us to make amends, is a voice that can lead us to become more loving and ultimately, happier” (p. 89). He goes on to recognize that sins of omission or failing to bother to help another may be insights into a lack of responding to God’s invitation to grow. The third step of the examen is to review your day. Recall everything, thoughts words, and deeds. The fourth step of the examen is to ask for forgiveness from God for sins or omissions of the day. Decide if you will reconcile with anyone you have hurt. The fifth step is asking for the grace of God’s help in the next day. There is no one right way to pray the examen. Dorothy Day revised her daily examen to the following steps: thank God for favors, beg for light and grace to see clearly, survey, repent, resolve (Ellsberg, 2008).

The examen helps you to realize the presence of God...by asking you to notice where God already exists in your life, where your yesterdays were beautiful. With that awareness you will begin to notice God’s presence more and more in your day. (Martin, 2010, p. 102)

IGNATIAN TRADITIONS OF PRAYER

“God looks at me, and I look at God” (Martin, 2010)

Barry (2008), a Jesuit Priest, describes prayer as a conscious and personal relationship with God (p.100). He goes on to state that God is present and at work in everyone leading to fulfillment regardless of one's conscious awareness. The goal is to become conscious of God in all things and all things in God. Aware or unaware, we are praising God when we are conscious of the wonder of a new born grandchild, gratitude for a friend's support, a hot cup of tea, a beautiful sunset, a rainbow, the beautiful changing foliage in the fall, and we whisper, "Wow." Martin (2010) notes one of the most direct roads to the awareness of God is in the faces of poor and struggling people. The challenge is to pay attention to these experiences – these communications with God. Martin (2010) identifies several ways to develop this friendship with God: spending time with God, reading Scripture and the lives of saints, listening to the message of scripture, talking honestly with God about your life, listening to God speak to us, imagining what God would say, listening to our insights, memories, feelings and desires, sitting in silence and contemplation. God meets you where you are, wherever you are comfortable, no one way of being with your friend is better than another. Traditional Ignatian prayer includes Ignatian Contemplation, Lectio Divina, and Centering Prayer.

Ignatian Contemplation

St. Ignatius utilized contemplative prayer and imaginative prayer in the Spiritual Exercises. In Ignatian contemplation you select a scene from the Bible and imagine yourself as taking part in it (Martin, 2010; Ganss, 1991; Traub, 2008; Muldoon, 2004; Fleming, 2008). You enter into the scene, in your imagination, as much as possible, allowing it to unfold in its entirety. You notice what you see, feel, experience, who is present, what you hear, smell and taste. You allow yourself to be drawn to whatever is attractive, the disciples or Jesus. This allows God to speak to you in your imagination. This idea is based on the premise that God speaks to us

through relationships with other people, daily experiences, desires, emotions and he can also speak to us through our imagination. This form of prayer was intended by Ignatius to help us enter into the events from the life of Christ. The following consolidated example is from St. Ignatius *Spiritual Exercises* (Ganss, 1991) to illustrate his directions:

Here it will be to recall how our Lady and Joseph left Nazareth to go to Bethlehem and pay the tribute which Caesar imposed on all those lands. She was pregnant almost nine months and, as we may piously meditate, seated on a burro; and with her were Joseph and a servant girl, leading an ox. . . . Here it will be to see in imagination the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Consider its length and breadth, whether it is level or winds through valleys and hills. Similarly, look at the place or cave of the nativity: How big is it, or small? How low or high? And how is it furnished? . . . This is to see the persons: that is, to see Our Lady, Joseph, the maidservant, and the Infant Jesus after his birth. I will make myself a poor, little, and unworthy slave, gazing at them, contemplating them, and serving them in their needs, just as if I were there, with all possible respect and reverence. Then I will reflect upon myself to draw some profit... (p. 149-150)

Muldoon (2004) provides numerous examples of Ignatian Contemplation including Jesus baptism, temptation in the desert, call of the disciples, the beatitudes, on the sea of Galilee, the raising of Lazarus, washing of feet, the last supper, Gethsemane, Peters denial, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and Emmaus. These examples in Muldoon parallel the directions in St. Ignatius *Spiritual Exercises* regarding the use of imagination in Ignatian Contemplation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Ignatian contemplation provides awareness of the life of Christ as an example for our lives, how God moves in our lives, walking with Jesus through his final days,

and how the resurrection changes the meaning of Jesus' death and the meaning of life. God calls us to greater life, passing through death.

Lectio Divina / Sacred Reading

Lectio Divina is a method to encounter God through Scripture. One selects a scripture passage. The passage is meditated up by using four questions: What does the text say? What is God saying to me through the text? What do you want to say to God about the text? What do you want to do based on your prayer? (Martin, 2004). Another variation of Lectio Divina is to dwell on a single word or phrase in the text. Martin (2004) provides the following example:

Let's take Psalm 23, which begins with the phrase "The LORD is my shepherd." The next line reads, "He makes me lie down in green pastures." Perhaps you might find yourself drawn to meditate on what it would feel like to rest in that "green pasture." If you're a busy person – or feeling swamped – you might simply rest with God. Maybe all God wants to do in that prayer is to give you rest. (p. 160)

HOW SOCIAL WORKER'S MIGHT BECOME CONTEMPLATIVES IN ACTION

At the heart of social work is the opportunity to respond to the awareness of God in all things and all things in God. As social workers we are thrust into a world of seeing the peace and happiness and the pain and sorrow in the eyes of our clients daily. The joys and sorrows experienced each day with clients, students, and colleagues offer the blessings of grace. The privilege of being present to our client's struggles helps us to trust the process of suffering as a passage to new life and become aware of the divine in all situations. Ignatian spirituality is about being a contemplative in action. Some questions we might want to ask our self: What has been one moment in which I was present to another today? Has God's wisdom spoken to me through

others today? Have I seen God in all things and all things in God? Am I aware of the sacred in my day?

Prayer helps us pay attention to what God is doing to us, with us and through us. By focusing our attention on the way God is present in our life we can more clearly serve our clients through justice, compassion and mercy. The following might be an outline for a social work examen:

God speaks through the wisdom of others

- Supervision / Consultation / Clients and Students
- Recognize God in all things

Solitude and reflection

- Invite God into difficult social work decisions

Talk to God

- facts, fears, desires, and difficult ethical choices
- Gratitude and grace

Listen

- Speak Lord, your servant is listening

God has a plan

- Thy will be done

Step back and wait - consolation

- The Holy Spirit inspires

Contemplative Action

- Working for justice, compassion, and mercy

A final insight from St. Ignatius that applies to the social worker: “With regard to any project, we must put ourselves in God’s hands as if our success depended on Him, but with regard to choosing the means and doing the work, we must labor as if everything depended on us” (as cited in Muldoon, 2004, p. 185)

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