What are the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises?

Iñigo López de Oñaz y Loyola, also known as Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556 A.D.), was a man’s man, a Spanish knight from a noble family who loved a good war and wooing women. That is, until God captured his imagination. Ignatius was fighting the French-backed Navarrese in the Battle of Pamplona when he refused to retreat and was rewarded with a cannonball in the leg. He was forced into bedrest for several months. Bored, he asked for reading material. The only thing available was a book on the Christian saints and a book on the life of Jesus. When he wasn’t reading he passed the time fantasizing. Ignatius alternated between imagining himself as a heroic saint like the ones he read about and daydreaming of being a macho knight who wins a lady. As the days went by he began to notice that after daydreaming about doing the work of Jesus he felt invigorated, the positive feelings persisted long after. But when he imagined exploits of bravado and romance, the good vibes soon dissipated, leaving him feeling discontent. From this experience he realized the power of spiritual influences and their impact on our moods, desires, emotions, and imagination. Ignatius soon committed his life to Jesus.

Ignatius lived many years in poverty, endured interrogation by Church authorities for starting his ministry without proper credentials, and went through years of schooling, all for the sake of encouraging people to follow the ways of Jesus. He lived a celibate life and devoted himself to helping others. Ignatius went on to found the Society of Jesus, also known as the Jesuits. His primary contribution was the development of the Spiritual Exercises. He designed this manual for leaders so that they might replicate his process. The Spiritual Exercises were developed out of Ignatius’s own spiritual life and what he learned could help people become more fully devoted to God.

Ignatius recommended that a person go away from the world for thirty days, away from any distraction in order to pray and discern one’s God-given vocation. During this time the person would be helped along by someone knowledgeable in the Exercises. However, Ignatius realized not everyone could retreat for thirty days. In his notes or “annotations” he said a person could also do the Exercises by retreating in daily life for a set period of time (he suggested 1 ½ hours a day). Since he addressed this in his 19th annotation, the Spiritual Exercises completed over a period of 8 or 9 months are typically called a “19th annotation retreat.”

The Spiritual Exercises teach various ways of reading Scripture, praying, and discerning, all while taking a person through “Four Weeks” (originally the literal four weeks of the thirty-day retreat). The Four Weeks are built upon the Principle and Foundation of the Exercises. Today, the Principle and Foundation is usually addressed in preparation days prior to starting the First Week:

1 In some circles, a “19th Annotation retreat” is treated as something distinct from the Spiritual Exercises, as though one should only call the 30 day retreat the “Spiritual Exercises.” But Ignatius does not see the 19th annotation as something alternative to the Exercises, only an adaptation of them to meet the needs of the retreatant.
**Principle and Foundation.** The heart of the Exercises is affirmation of who we really are and our life purpose: human beings have been created to love and serve God, who is love and invites us to love. During preparation days, time is spent on the good character of God, our status as beloved created beings, and our relationship to the rest of creation. The Principle and Foundation emphasizes inner freedom to live wholeheartedly into our created purpose.

**First Week.** After coming to a greater understanding of God as loving creator and our life purpose as beloved creatures, we discover that certain things hinder us from loving well and, therefore, embracing our created purpose. The First Week helps us to reflect on the reality of sin and the magnitude of God’s mercy in light of our faults. This Week is designed to cultivate mourning of sin, awe of God’s kindness, and a hunger for freedom from all that entangles so we can embrace God’s intent for our life.

**Second Week.** With a new hunger for freedom from sin, we more readily hear and respond to Jesus’s invitation to follow him. The Second Week focuses on meditations of Jesus’s life from birth to ministry days. As we get to know Jesus personally, we learn from and strive to imitate his way of life. During this time we grow in practices of discernment and how to make concrete decisions that reflect our increasing desire to live fully for God.

**Third week.** Having made a decision to respond to Jesus’s invitation, we are given the opportunity to follow him all the way to the cross. The Third Week emphasizes compassion as we grow in our ability to empathize with the suffering of another. It also requires us to consider the cost of being a disciple and our own potential suffering and death, with the result that we are confirmed in our decision to follow Jesus’s example.

**Fourth week.** The last Week is one of joy. We spend time meditating on the many interactions Jesus had with people after the resurrection and before his ascension. We contemplate Jesus’s active presence and power in our lives today. The retreat ends with the Contemplation to Attain Love where all the threads of the Exercises are brought together and contextualized in the mutual love between God and us.